

Commemoration of the First World War in Australia*

by Jeff Kildea

Unlike Ireland, for which remembrance of the First World War has always been problematical, Australia has had little difficulty in commemorating a war widely regarded as the crucible of the nation. According to that view, it was at Gallipoli in 1915, the first major campaign of the war in which the Australians fought, that the inhabitants of the six former British colonies that had federated in 1901 were forged into citizens of the Australian nation. At an Anzac Day lunch in London in 1919 Prime Minister Billy Hughes told his audience that Australia was “born on the shores of Gallipoli”, a view oft repeated since.¹

While most of Australia’s First World War allies set aside 11 November to commemorate those who fought and died in the war, Australians have chosen to commemorate not the day the killing stopped, but the day on which for them it began with the landing at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915.

What criticism has been voiced of Australia’s commemoration of the First World War has tended to be directed at what some regard as an obsession with a war in which Australians fought and died not to repel an invasion of our homeland but to assist the “mother country” in an imperial war in far off battlefields. One such critic is former prime minister Paul Keating who in 2008 described Hughes’ idea of the nation born at Gallipoli as “utter and complete nonsense”.² In the 2013 Remembrance Day address he said, “There was nothing missing in our young nation or our idea of it that required the martial baptism of a European cataclysm to legitimise us”.³

Many such critics would prefer to see Australia’s war remembrance focus on the Second World War, for in that war Australians did fight and die to repel an invader, following the Japanese thrust into New Guinea and the islands to Australia’s near north in 1942. After all, as they point out, Japanese bombs fell on Darwin and other urban centres on the north coast of the Australian mainland and Japanese submarines shelled the east coast cities of Sydney and Newcastle and infiltrated mini-submarines into Sydney Harbour.

Other critics, although comfortable with the mainstay of Australia’s commemoration being the First World War, object to Australia’s pre-occupation with the Gallipoli campaign in which 8700 Australians died over a period of 8 months instead of the Western Front in which more than 46 000 Australians died over a period of 2 years and 8 months.

Such criticisms, however, relate to the focus of Australia’s commemoration rather than to the commemoration itself of Australia’s participation in war. Nevertheless, from time to time some critics have expressed concern that the manner and extent of commemoration in Australia may serve to militarise Australian society thus making it more amenable to military adventurism in support, for instance, of the United States.⁴

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¹ *The Mirror* (Sydney) 27 April 1919, p. 1.

² *The Age* (Melbourne) 31 October 2008.

³ *The Australian* 12 November 2013.

⁴ See, for example, Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds (eds), *What’s Wrong with Anzac: The Militarisation of Australian History*, New South, Sydney, 2010.

Despite the passion and cogency of the arguments advanced by the critics, they have not gained much traction, judging by the extent of public expenditure on the centenary commemorations and the exposure given, and to be given, to them by the broadcast media. Both sides of politics and the mainstream media are strong supporters of Australia's commemoration of the First World War and it is not just a recent phenomenon stimulated by the onset of the centenary. In 1990 Labor prime minister Bob Hawke led a group of veterans from Australia to Gallipoli to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the landing. In 2005 Liberal prime minister John Howard went to Gallipoli on the 90th anniversary of the landing and gave the Anzac address there at the dawn service.

But the anniversary of the Gallipoli landing is not only an occasion for politicians to grandstand. Each year on Anzac Day, which has been a national public holiday since the 1920s, thousands march in cities, towns and villages all around Australia and thousands more turn out to watch them. The marches, which last for many hours, are shown live on television across the nation and are widely reported in the media. In addition, for the past two decades thousands of Australians, mostly young backpackers, have gathered each year at Gallipoli for a dawn service and a series of other services during the course of the day. In other parts of the world, where ever Australians live in numbers, Anzac Day commemorations, both official and unofficial, are held, including here in Ireland.

The centenary of the First World War has seen a ratcheting up of commemorative activity. The recent Labor government committed \$140 million (€97 million) towards Australia's centenary commemorations, about 50% more than the United Kingdom, a commitment confirmed by the current Coalition government, which, despite a cost-cutting budget, has increased the figure to \$150 million (€104 million). That is the amount which the federal government will spend. The six Australian states and business together are expected to expend an equivalent amount.⁵

Given the bipartisan and media support for the centenary commemorations, the size of the financial commitment has not been a matter of public debate, let alone controversy, though some critics have voiced disapproval. A former captain in the Australian army James Brown, a veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, recently told the *Financial Times*, "This has become almost an Anzac arms race with politicians competing to find bigger and better ways to commemorate our sacrificed soldiers. But our obsession with dead soldiers has caused us to neglect our serving armed forces." In the same article military historian Peter Stanley is quoted as saying, "There has been wave after wave of immigration since the war and I would question whether these new communities have an attachment to the Anzacs. The government is spending a vast amount of money on events that may be relevant to just a fraction of the population."⁶

The "new communities" to which Stanley refers are the product of waves of immigration since the Second World War, as a result of which Australia has become home to migrants from southern Europe, south-east Asia and the Middle East. In 1914 Australia's non-indigenous population was almost entirely made up of people from a British or Irish

⁵ Paul Daley, "Australia spares no expense as the Anzac legend nears its century", *The Guardian* 14 October 2013 (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/14/australia-anzac-legend-centenary-war> (accessed 6 May 2014); Jamie Smyth, "Australia's first world war commemorations raise questions", *Financial Times*, 30 July 2014 (<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/971309d8-171c-11e4-8617-00144feabdc0.html> (accessed 2 August 2014)).

⁶ Smyth, op. cit.

background. But it is not only the descendants of the 1914 generation who have an interest in the First World War. After the Second World War the majority of migrants continued to come from Britain and Ireland, and do therefore have a familial connection with the war. So, it is not entirely correct to suggest as Stanley does that the centenary commemorations will be relevant to “just a fraction of the population”.

In 1918 few families in Australia would have been untouched by the war. Out of a population of 4.9 million, about 379 000 enlisted and 324 000 served overseas. More than 62 000 were killed or died as a result of their war service. Very few survived the war without being wounded or suffering a battle related injury or illness.⁷ The nation’s grief was palpable and one way to express that grief was through the erection of war memorials. There is hardly a city, town or suburb in Australia that does not have some form of war memorial. Many are monuments in the form of an arch, an obelisk, a captured German field gun or machine gun or a statue of a soldier. Some are community halls. Some are war memorial hospitals. A tourist travelling around Australia would be hard pressed to avoid seeing such memorials. In country towns many are in the middle of the road and need to be carefully negotiated when driving. On plaques erected in or on these various memorials you can read the names of the men (and sometimes women) from the local area who took part in the war, not only those killed but also those who served – with those who died being indicated by a cross next to their name.⁸

While the Irish in Ireland may have had difficulty in coming to terms with the First World War, this was not the case with the Irish in Australia. Generally speaking, they participated in the war in proportion to their numbers in the population and, with their fellow Australians, they have commemorated it without reservation, even if in some cases they did so separately for reasons of religious sensitivity when prayers were included in the ceremonies.

At the time Catholics were forbidden by church teaching from attending interdenominational religious services of any kind, and the main Anzac Day ceremonies usually included such a religious service led by a Protestant minister. In the case of Sydney, for instance, this meant that Catholic ex-servicemen would start out marching with their units but would then proceed to St Mary’s Cathedral to attend mass while their Protestant comrades continued to Hyde Park or the Domain for the official ceremony there. It was not until 1962 that the issue was resolved by a compromise which, though simple, illustrated the absurdity of the stand-off. The ceremony would include a religious service, but the prayers would be said by leaders of the armed services and the veterans’ organisation, while a religious leader would give the Anzac address, which would be patriotic and not religious.⁹

It needs to be understood that in postwar Australia sectarian discord between the British Protestant majority of about 75% of the population and the Irish Catholic minority of about 25% had been chronic in Australia in the 19th and early 20th

⁷ David Noonan, *Those we forget: Recounting Australian casualties of the First World War*, MUP Academic, Melbourne, 2014. Noonan’s research has called into question the figures normally quoted in official sources, such as 416 809 for enlistments, 331 781 for embarkations and 58 132 for deaths. See, for example, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War 1914-1920*, HMSO, London, 1922.

⁸ For a detailed review of Australia’s war memorials see KS Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2001.

⁹ John Luttrell, “Cardinal Gilroy’s Anzac Day Problem”, *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol 85, June 1999, pp. 1-19.

centuries. This division played its part in shaping how remembrance occurred, particularly in rural areas with tight-knit communities. In such places sometimes two commemoration committees would be formed, one Protestant and one Catholic. Sometimes they would reach an accommodation and erect a monument that satisfied both sides. But in some towns you will find two memorials, one erected by the Catholics and one by the Protestants. In one town on the south coast of NSW where sectarian tensions were particularly high, it was decided for the sake of harmony to dispense with a monument altogether.¹⁰

While there was widespread support for commemoration, some individuals did disapprove and either stayed away from events or remained silent if they were obliged to attend as part of their official duties. An example of the latter is Joseph Lyons, son of Irish-born Catholic parents, who had led the Tasmanian anti-conscription campaign in 1916 and who as premier of his state sat on platforms at the unveiling of monuments but did not speak. (Lyons later became prime minister in a non-Labor government during the 1930s.) Jack Bailey, a Labor member of the NSW parliament and a wartime anti-conscriptionist, absented himself from remembrance ceremonies. But opposition of this kind was not united and motives were mixed: some were pacifists, some socialists, some Irish nationalists, while some simply believed the money would be better spent on those who had returned and were now in need.¹¹

Such examples are the exceptions that made the rule that Australians tended to look positively on the sacrifice of the soldiers of the Great War. Partly this was because both Empire loyalists and Australian nationalists could interpret the war to suit their own preconceptions: it was either a wonderful victory for the British Empire or it was an experience out of which the Australian nation emerged. Either way, it was something to be remembered.

In recent years scholars have taken an interest in the phenomenon of war commemoration. Such research has included commemoration in Australia, which has been the subject of a number of books and articles.¹² In 2007 Martin Crotty and Craig Melrose of the University of Queensland looked at the nature of commemoration between the wars, using Anzac Day in Brisbane as a case study. They argue that, while private memories have tended to concentrate on sacrifice and bereavement, triumph and pride have also underpinned the commemoration of Anzac. They observe that “The

¹⁰ Jeff Kildea, *Anzacs and Ireland*, Cork UP, Cork, 2007, pp. 215-218.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See, for example: G. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1990; Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995; B. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering*, Open University Press, Maidenhead, 2003; J Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2006. As regards Australia, see, for example: A Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994; J Damousi, *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999; K Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 1998; T Luckins, *The Gates of Memory: Australian People's Experiences and Memories of Loss and the Great War*, Curtin University Books, Fremantle, 2004; B Ziino, *A Distant Grief: Australians, War Graves and the Great War*, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 2007; Martin Crotty & Craig Melrose, “Anzac Day, Brisbane, Australia: Triumphalism, mourning and politics in interwar commemoration”, *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 96, 2007, pp. 679-692; Damian X. Powell, “Remembrance Day: Memories and Values in Australia since 1918”, *Victorian Historical Journal*, Vol. 75, No. 2, 2004, pp. 165-188; Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton, “Memory and history in twenty-first century Australia: A survey of the field”, *Memory Studies*, Vol 6, 2013, pp. 370-383.

disjunction between private lamentation and public triumphalism is one of the core complexities of Australian interwar commemoration, which yet awaits a comprehensive treatment”.¹³ Nevertheless, they express the opinion that despite disagreements, such as those I have mentioned, a shared postwar ideology emerged to the effect “that the war had been, at best, a positive national experience for Australia, or at worst, an unavoidable obligation in which Australia had fought on the side of right, was correct to do so, and had aided materially in the defeat of the Central Powers”. They argue that this “shared position was the basis of postwar commemorative accommodations, associations and alliances between returned soldiers, the bereaved, politicians and religious leaders”.

This shared ideology, they contend, also made it possible for the elites who controlled Anzac Day to present a ‘Myth of the War Experience’ that reconciled triumphalism and sacrificialism within narratives of Australian heroism and achievement. “Mourning was prevalent, but there was little or no room for the expression of doubts about the virtues and worth of the Australian commitment, nor of the achievement of the soldiers. If there was sacrifice, it was in a good, and vindicated, cause”.¹⁴

Such narratives of heroism and achievement, combined with the belief that the Anzacs were the true founders of the nation, appear to have convinced the great majority of Australians that the soldiers deserved to be both celebrated and mourned. General Sir Harry Chauvel, commander of the AIF in Palestine, ticked the boxes in his 1928 Anzac Day address when he said that Anzac Day was “a symbol of the awakening of the spirit of nationhood, as a commemoration of victory in the cause of justice and righteousness, and as a time of national remembrance”.¹⁵

Chauvel’s reference to “victory” exposes a paradox in Australia’s commemoration of the First World War in that although the nation’s war commemoration is grounded in triumphalism, it has adopted as its focus Gallipoli rather than, say, the outstanding victories from August 1918 of the Australian Corps under Lt General John Monash. After all the Dardanelles campaign ended in defeat not victory. Ignoring that basic fact, Anzac Day speakers and commentators between the wars would claim that “it was not a defeat they commemorated, but a glorious victory” or that “grim determination, indomitable courage, and superhuman strength won the day”. Crotty and Melrose explain that by ignoring the ultimate outcome “Gallipoli was regarded as a triumph, as the men had stormed the cliffs and established a trench line from which they had not been dislodged. ... The failure ever to reach the first day’s actual objectives was quietly forgotten”.

The nationalist implications of this focus on perceived success on the first day were that the moral virtues taken to have been exhibited on Gallipoli—courage, initiative, ferocity, determination, the will to conquer—became the basis for a national legend

While present-day interpretations no longer see Gallipoli as a military victory, they do emphasise moral victory, albeit extracted from failure.¹⁶

¹³ Crotty & Melrose, “Anzac Day”, p. 681.

¹⁴ Crotty & Melrose, “Anzac Day”, p. 689-690.

¹⁵ Crotty & Melrose, “Anzac Day”, p. 682 citing *Brisbane Courier*, 26 April 1928.

¹⁶ Crotty & Melrose, “Anzac Day”, p. 686 citing *Brisbane Courier*, 26 April 1928 and 25 April 1933, respectively.

Along with changes to the interpretation of the Gallipoli campaign have come changes in the way Anzac Day and the war itself have been commemorated over time. In the 1950s the numbers of veterans marching was swelled by those returned from the Second World War. This younger, brasher cohort began to give Anzac Day a bad name as it descended into an occasion for public drinking and rowdyism as depicted in Alan Seymour's 1958 play "The One Day of the Year". In those days Anzac Cove itself was almost deserted on 25 April, while on the 50th anniversary in 1965 the question being asked in the media was whether Anzac Day would continue to be observed for much longer.¹⁷

In the late 1960s, opponents of the Vietnam War, in which Australians were fighting alongside the Americans, challenged the assumptions underlying the Anzac tradition, as did the feminist movement in the 1980s: members of the Women Against Rape campaign attempted to join in Anzac Day marches to protest against male violence and rape in war and to criticise the 'male glorification of war' they regarded as inherent in the Anzac legend.¹⁸

Over time, however, Anzac Day and First World War commemoration in general has undergone a revival. Peter Weir's 1981 film *Gallipoli* informed a new generation of the "narratives of heroism and achievement" that had underpinned commemoration a half century before. The movie depicts the Battle of the Nek when the lives of the gallant men of the 3rd Light Horse Brigade were callously and uselessly thrown away. It was a defeat which, like the defeat at Gallipoli itself, was depicted as a moral victory reconciling the key components of Australian commemoration, triumphalism and sacrificialism.

The federal government's promotion of the 75th anniversary of the Gallipoli landing also seems to have been a watershed. Since then and for the past quarter century Anzac Day has continued to grow in popularity. Over the past decade extensive construction works have been undertaken at Anzac Cove to accommodate the thousands of pilgrims who turn up each year at the dawn service on Anzac Day. In 2000 the site of the service was changed to North Beach as the traditional site at Ari Burnu could no longer cope with the crowds. The site capacity is 10,500. Those wishing to attend the centenary commemorations at Gallipoli next year have had to enter a ballot for the privilege of doing so, with 8000 places being set aside for Australians. Since 2008 an Anzac Day service has also been held at Villers-Bretonneux, the site of the Australian national memorial in northern France. That service, which this year attracted 4000 people, is televised live on national television in Australia.

The centenary commemorations of the First World War have only just begun. In a letter to *The Irish Times* published on 4 August a correspondent wrote, "It seems that every day when I open my *Irish Times* I have to relive the first World War, from the murders in Sarajevo to the first volleys being fired. My wife says not to worry, it will be all over by Christmas." It will be interesting to see how well Australians maintain their enthusiasm over the next four and half years.

¹⁷ Jenny Macleod, "The Fall and Rise of Anzac Day: 1965 and 1990 Compared", *War and Society*, Vol. 20, May 2002, pp. 149-168, 151; Mark McKenna, "Anzac Day: How did it become Australia's national day?" in Lake and Reynolds, *What's Wrong with Anzac*, pp. 110-134. McKenna explores the reasons for the resurgence of interest in Anzac Day, arguing that its decline was not as marked as some have suggested.

¹⁸ Macleod, "The Fall and Rise of Anzac Day", p. 157; Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, pp. 189-90, 200.