

The story of the story of Anzac

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Martin Ball', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role of the Anzac myth in the imagining of Australian nationhood. It considers the historical poetics out of which the Anzac myth emerged, together with the contemporary social structures in which it continues to flourish.

Due to the scale and variety of the subject matter, the thesis is catholic in its use of theoretical methodology. It likewise visits a broad range of data: from newspaper comment to historical monographs; from manuscript archive to official propaganda; from political speeches to fiction and poetry.

The first half of the thesis pursues a critical study of myth theory, and the sorts of myth models that accompany narratives of nationhood. I examine how the Anzac myth appropriated many existing Australian myths into itself, and I illustrate how Anzac is an abundant field for mythic readings.

The second half of the thesis analyzes the central text of the Anzac story, C.E.W. Bean's *Official History of Australia in the Great War 1914–1918*. I look at the range of Bean's writings to highlight the themes which pervade all his work. I analyze the tropes of style and form in the text, as well as the influence on Bean of his historiographical exemplars. Lastly I discuss the structural archaeology of the text, and recover the traces of Homer's *Iliad* that mould and colour the *Official History*.

The two parts of the thesis are bookended by chapters that combine the various terms 'myth', 'history' and 'nation', and at the same time examine the place of Bean's *Official History* in contemporary Australian culture. I analyze the portrayal of Anzac in various literary and filmic texts. In particular, I discuss the way Prime Ministers Keating and Howard have harnessed Anzac imagery to express their conceptions of Australian politics and values.

Lastly, I look to the silences of the Anzac myth — the stories it suppresses, and those it does not tell; and I consider the question of whether Anzac should continue to claim its pre-eminent position as the myth of nation forming for Australia.

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Acknowledgements

Ah, days of incompleteness – the umpteenth draft,
the road yet to be taken – I embrace them, let go.
Torpor of their obverse: a last nail's driven home.

– *Andrew Sant*, 'Days of Incompletion'

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Foreword

The title of my thesis is taken from the subtitle of the first two volumes of C.E.W. Bean's *Official History of Australia in the Great War 1914–1918*. Bean calls his two volumes on Gallipoli “The Story of Anzac.” This thesis, then, is a metanarrative, a story about a story.

I use this title to draw attention to the importance of Bean's text in the narration of the Anzac myth, but also to stress that the genre of my work is story, not history. I do not examine here, for instance, whether the boats landed at the right beach at Gallipoli, or the extent to which Monash and the Anzacs helped “win the war.” Rather, I consider how these events become stories, how those stories become myths, and how such myths influence our thoughts and beliefs today.

There are many books about Gallipoli that tell the history of the campaign, most of which are written by men with some intimate connexion to the Great War. Many of these books contain what we might call a “confessional preface,” where the author shares with the reader how in their youth ‘their father told them stories of the war’. Such a book is usually dedicated to ‘my father’, or ‘the men of the Nth Battalion’. As well as providing anecdotal information, the prefaces of these books establish the authors as cultural heirs of their subject matter. Equally, however, they may point to unspoken aporias in the text itself.

These confessional prefaces have become more common in recently written books. For example, Michael Hickey's *Gallipoli* (1995) begins, “As a small boy I heard my father and his contemporaries talking about their service in the Great War”; Stephen Garton's *The Cost of War* (1996) tells us his father fought in New Guinea; Robin Gerster dedicates *Big-noting* (1987) to his late father, “a veteran of the Second World War”; John Williams opens *Anzacs, the Media and the Great War* (1999) by telling us that his father “fought with the

British army on the Somme,” and he dedicates the book to his father and uncle. All these writers are conscious that their familial history informs their work. Greg Kerr’s *Lost Anzacs* (1997) is the most directly personal, being an account of the author’s grandfather and great-uncle at Gallipoli. This book gives a catalogue of familial involvement with war, right down to the apologetic aside that, “My father Laurie was too young to enlist.” Kerr’s book is a textbook of contemporary Australian scripts; pride in a convict heritage, Christian Brothers education, football career, war service. Kerr is “the one destined to tell” the story of “a lost episode in Australia’s war history.” Destiny and ancestry make for potent motivation.

Perhaps the most engaging confession comes from Alistair Thomson in his *Anzac Memories* (1994), a critique of traditional Anzac paradigms. Thomson opens gamely: “I had a military childhood.” Thomson’s father served with the Australian Army in Indonesia in the sixties, and both his grandfathers fought in the Great War. The young Al Thomson plays with toy soldiers, plays war games with friends, and looks proudly at the names of his grandfather and great uncle on the Honour Roll at his school, Scotch College in Melbourne. His father and grandfather speak at Anzac Day gatherings. He makes the emotional pilgrimage to Gallipoli and the Somme, and is “moved to tears” by the TV serial *Anzacs*. As he freely declares, he grows up imbued with the ideology of the Anzac legend in its fullest manifestation.

By contrast, I was fifteen years old before I got to know a ‘real Anzac’. For a project on Australian history, I conducted a series of interviews with a veteran of the Light Horse in Palestine. (It was only years later that I understood this as ‘oral history’, of the very form that constitutes Thomson’s book.) Armed with this germ of the Anzac legend, I went to see the film *Gallipoli*, and watching how that horrid British officer sent the Light Horse to their deaths at the Nek I was fiercely patriotic, and there was a tear in my eye. As a second-generation Australian with British heritage I was negotiating the rub of ancestral heritage with contemporary loyalties. Just as Al Thomson

concluded at the graves on the Somme that, “the greatest significance of the war for Australians was the proud discovery of an Australian identity,” I suddenly knew what Anzac meant to me. Upon later discovering that the hated officer who insisted the attack at the Nek proceed was in fact an Australian, I felt confused and betrayed. How easily we are manipulated. Such a little deception, such a potent patriotism generated. And so it is with most legends.

Like Al Thomson, I played at war in my youth. And like Thomson and his ancestors, I went to Scotch College. But unlike him I did not look up at the school Honour Roll and see my antecedents’ names in gold leaf. For there is no history of military service in my family, no ‘gold-leaf heroes’ as David Malouf calls them in ‘Report from Champagne Country’. Not one of my grandfathers, uncles, great uncles, and not my father, ever served in any war. As Greg Denning says, “I have no memory of battle and have stood outside the cultural experience of it.” And yet, I remain equally an inheritor of Australian national culture, inescapably inflected with its stories and traditions, haunted and fascinated with its history.

My study of Anzac then, is not of the battles, not of the men, nor yet of their families — but with the cultural imprint of Anzac. Not with the events themselves, but the context of the events, and their remembering. It is about how and why this statistically unimportant encounter has become the seminal moment in Australian national consciousness. In the course of this research I have spoken with many who treasure their family’s military history. I have gone to Anzac Day services and parades, and have spent much time at the Australian War Memorial. Any study of Anzac needs to acknowledge the passion that lives in the story. But equally, it needs disinterest to have any value as a critique.

process of 'reconciliation'. If a nation is to be a collective 'imagined community', it cannot refuse to remember its past.

John Howard would have Australians forget and remember Anzac and Gallipoli as the spirit of Australian nationhood. In the same fashion, Paul Keating had tried to relocate this topos to Singapore and Kokoda. But for Renan, the important things for national consciousness to remember/forget were not the external wars against foreigners, but the massacres within France that split the society assunder. What are the wars that Australia's conscience must remember/forget for its collective soul? Not the 'valiant and noble' efforts on a beach ten thousand miles away. The place to examine the conflicts that have shaped the nation is the domestic history and landscape: the class divide between soldiers and convicts among the British who arrived in 1778; the struggles of non-white British migrants; the gender blindness which celebrates the deaths of men but ignores the stories of women. And finally, it must be the massacres of those 'always already Australians', the indigenous population.

The nation must be able to remember collectively the battles and skirmishes between settlers and Aborigines, and the deaths on both sides, in order then to forget collectively and become a single imagined community. This recognition of the importance of the black wars of the early nineteenth century is what Henry Reynolds has pursued in his work. It drives Andy Kissane's poem 'Reconciliation achieved', which asks those who stand in RSL clubs across the country to honour the fallen "from that other Great War":

the unknown warriors
 who fell at Coniston Station
 and Waterloo Creek...
 in countless skirmishes
 without date or legend...
Terra nullius: lest we forget.¹⁷

¹⁷ Andy Kissane, 'Reconciliation achieved', *Meanjin* (1999/3) 58: 127.

Similarly Hank Nelson says of the Prime Minister: "Howard want[s] no Australian to think that they were there at Myall Creek or rode with the police at Coniston or joined the miners to harry the Chineses at Buckland River" ('Gallipoli, Kokoda', 216). Remembering these dead, on both sides, is not to substitute the memory of the Anzacs, but to add to it. Anzac speaks of none of these memories, just as it excludes women, and all those who have come after. And these other rememberings have implications for the legal, moral, and spiritual status of modern Australia, with far greater import than one battle on a foreign shore.