

War Memorials, Anzac, and National Identity **Tragedy of War to Source of Pride**

“Men living in democracies love their country just as they love themselves, and they transfer the habits of their private vanity to their vanity as a nation...No kind of greatness is more pleasing to the imagination of a democratic people than military greatness of vivid and sudden luster, obtained without toil, by nothing but the risk of life.”

—A. De Tocqueville, “Democracy in America,” II, pp. 226, 278 (McLachlan, P. 187)

Introduction:

It has been remarked that you can deduce what is most significant to a society merely by observing its skyline. Often the tallest buildings that grab your attention represent an aspect of that city that is most valued among the people. Though not necessarily the most towering building in all of Melbourne, the Shrine of Remembrance is a building that “proclaims itself the most important object in the landscape (Inglis, P. 1).” War memorials are a very significant and meaningful part of the Australian landscape, both literally and culturally. The presence of more than 4,000 war memorials throughout Australia, with the particular focus of these monuments upon WWI and Anzac, points to a society that takes a great part of its national identity from this war. The recurring theme of Anzac throughout these memorials raises several questions about a country that so values the events that transpired at the Gallipoli shore in defining what it means to be Australian. What does Anzac, as it is represented in war memorials, mean to Australia? What are the advantages and disadvantages of using this particular legend in articulating national character? What does Anzac Day, Remembrance Day, and the war memorials that dot the country mean to Australia today? As a country that is still

searching for its own national identity, war memorials provide insight into Australia's still emerging national character.

Legend of Gallipoli: Australian National Identity:

Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance was dedicated by the King's son, the Duke of Gloucester, on the 11th of November, Armistice Day, 1934. Entering the Shrine, visitors are greeted with the reminder that these are hallowed grounds to be respected:

“Let all men know that this is holy ground. This shrine established in the hearts of men as on the solid earth commemorates a people's fortitude and sacrifice. Ye that come after give remembrance.”

After being asked by veterans outside the doors to remove your hat out of the respect, tours are told that every Armistice Day, at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, a ray of light falls on the Stone of Remembrance, highlighting the word “love.” This is a very important, much cherished site in the city. Most often in Australia, the war memorials are a valued reminder of the first “Great War.” “How is it possible,” asks a French historian, “to ignore the thirty thousand monuments aux morts erected after 1918, constituting as they do the greatest efflorescence of public art in the nation's history (Inglis, P. 7).” In particular, in Australia, one cannot ignore the multitude of references and great reverence paid to actions of the men who fought in Gallipoli. But, what, with its great respect paid in memorials across the country, does this military venture really mean to this country?

WWI was supposed to be “the war to end all wars.” For many, this was supposed to be man's greatest endeavour of the twentieth century. For Australia, a young nation attached to Great Britain with little nationalism and cultural identity of its own, this was

the country's opportunity to prove itself on the world's stage. As a lieutenant going to his death wrote, this was Australia's chance: "It is going to be Australia's chance and she makes a tradition out of this that she must always look back on. God grant it will be a great one" (McLachlan, P. 191). As young men across Australia rushed to enlist, the country was excited to prove itself, no matter what the consequences. Another soldier wrote in his journal, "We have been told of the impossible task before us, of probable annihilation yet we are eager to get to it (McLachlan, P. 191)." The members of Anzac were the first to face this "probable annihilation" and the legend that was to grow from their actions would live up to their anticipation in every way. This legend would inspire a country.

The legend of the battle of Gallipoli was developed mainly through the reports of the war's two chief correspondents, Englishman Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett and the Australian C.E.W. Bean. As the story goes, the Anzac forces landed on the shores of Gallipoli to challenge the Turkish forces with the ultimate goal of taking Constantinople (now Istanbul). The soldiers were met with a brutal line of Turkish machine guns, which mowed down row after row of Australian "diggers." Though the troops failed to gain ground, they followed their orders and sent soldier after soldier to certain death, all while holding the line. 60,000 Australian soldiers were killed and 50,000 physically wounded. This military venture could have been looked upon as a failure, but not when framed by the two official war correspondents. As Ashmead-Bartlett cabled,

The Australians rose to the occasion...this race of athletes proceeded to scale the cliffs without responding to the enemy's fire...captured the enemy trench at the top within a quarter of an hour, and their blood...up, rushed onward searching for fresh enemies to bayonet (McLachlan, P. 192).

His were not the only words of praise. Bean's Anzac Book was key in perpetuating the Anzac legend. He wrote, "These raw colonial troops in these desperate hours proved worthy to fight side by side with the heroes of Mons, the Aisne, Ypres, and Neuve Chapelle" (McLachlan, P. 192). W.H. Fitchett, famous chronicler of British battles too concluded that the deeds at Gallipoli not only equalled those at Waterloo but in one respect surpassed them: "Wellington's lads would not have had the initiative and daring to climb that cliff. That was the 'Australian touch'" (Inglis, P. 80). Australia finally had something to point to, to show the rest of the world as proof of their strength of national character. Edgar Wallace, crime novelist, wrote the rhyme:

The children unborn shall acclaim,
The standard the Anzacs unfurled,
When they made Australia's fame
The wonder and pride of the world (McLachlan, P. 195).

The young Australia had proven itself equal to the rest of the world. Their unique courage certainly impressed Ashmead-Bartlett who added "that he'd never seen anything like the wounded Australians, brought back on ship, for courage. 'Though many were shot to bits, without hope of recovery, their cheers resounded throughout the night (McLachlan, P. 192).'" According to the legend, Australians had taken "their chance" and proven their medal.

This legend that developed on the beaches of Gallipoli became a cornerstone of the emerging national identity. Following the war, Anzac Day, the twenty fifth of April, came to stand for the birth of a nation. A "Freeman's Journal" editorial claimed that, thanks to Anzac Day, "we are at last a nation, with one heart, one soul, and one thrilling aspiration (McLachlan, P. 197)." It was often referred to as Australia's baptism by fire. The notion of sacrifice was key in the nobility of the act. In 1915 one officer spoke

proudly of Australia having leapt into “Nationhood, Brotherhood and Sacrifice in one bound” (McLachlan, P. 198). An Australian War Memorial website reflects:

The idea that some sort of blood sacrifice was a necessary rite of passage or initiation ceremony in the birth of a nation was common in the late Victorian and Edwardian period. In attempting the daunting task of storming the Gallipoli peninsula, the ANZACS created an event which, it was felt, would shape the new Australia (“Australian War Memorials,” www.awm.gov.au/).

In addition to identifying Australia’s bravery and willingness to pay the ultimate sacrifice, Anzac came to represent the soldier’s staying true to their idea of Australian manhood. “The big thing in the war for Australia,” Bean judged, “was the discovery of the character of Australian men. It was the character which rushed the hills at Gallipoli and held there during the long afternoon and night (Inglis, P. 82).” The soldiers personified Australian manhood. To be an Australian bloke now meant to be “tough and inventive, loyal to...mates beyond the call of duty, a bit undisciplined...chivalrous, gallant, sardonic (Kent, P. 27).” The very image of the Australian “Digger” took on meaning among Australians as “Tommy Cornstalk had not done in the South African war. A common image in the war memorials in Australia is the “digger,” the new generation of Australian bushmen. “As the AIF journal ‘Aussie’ defined the type in January 1918: ‘A friend, pal, or comrade, synonymous with cobber; a white man who runs straight (Inglis, P. 84).” This military event came to identify Australian manhood, heroics, and national character.

Gallipoli as Exaggerated Legend:

However, there are some dilemmas in using the Anzac legend to point to in terms of a national identity, not the first of which is the fact that it is, in fact, a legend. Though, based on facts, the story of the Anzac forces in Gallipoli is largely fabricated and exaggerated. It has been written since that “Neither then nor at any time later was that beach the inferno of bursting shells, barbed wire entanglements, and falling men that has sometimes been described or painted” (McLachlan, P. 190). These images that came from the pen of Bean were used, as he put it, to capture “the spirit of the thing.” In fact,

There was, all told, horror and beastliness, cowardice and treachery ‘over all of which the writer, anxious to please the public, has to throw his cloak.’ But Bean was convinced a higher proportion of men in the ‘Australian Army’ tried to do their job cheerfully and without showing fear than in any of the other forces... (McLachlan, P. 194).

Material that Bean most likely also rejected included the acts of theft, disrespect, murder and misconduct that occurred in Egypt and Turkey. Also, it has since been reported that far from the unwavering line of defense, many “numbers dribbled back from the firing line and cannot be collected in this difficult country (McLachlan, P. 193).” These were the unheroic details that are hidden by the Anzac myth.

There is further criticism of Australia’s many monuments to Anzac. Some argue that this battle is a poor example on which to build Australian nationalism, in that this was a war that was fought not for Australia, but for mother England. This is not nationalism, but “pseudo-nationalism” (Dobrez, P. 220). Anzac was not even led by Australian command, but by English generals Hamilton and Birdwood who showed little care when sending wave after wave of Australian diggers to their death by Turkish machine guns. “In short, Gallipoli can only be linked to the development of national

sentiment in this country by ignoring every rule of common sense. You simply cannot foster nationalism in place A by fostering allegiance to place B” (Dobrez, P. 220). In defense of the Anzac legend, author Inglis presents the argument that, “As material for a legend in which Australians were still loyal to the Empire but mature enough to be full partners in it, Gallipoli suited very well, failures and all (Inglis, P. 83).” Bean further defended Anzac saying that the battle was fought “as it would have been had they fought on Australian soil.’ Location was irrelevant (McLachlan, P. 198).”

Others challenge the “spurious myth: that the true Australian is a Gallipoli Digger, that the Digger is the spiritual descendant of the bushman, that Gallipoli must be set at the heart of the quest for nationhood (Dobrez, P. 220).” It is argued that this is actually a damaging myth that has “persistently shaped our attitudes to our own society, and especially our sense of national priorities” (Lohrey, P. 38). The Australian identity it formed was based solely around white men and left out two important groups in Australia, namely women and Aborigines. Thus, it is an inaccurate picture of Australian identity and, as some contend, still the just the “old myth, brought out of the cupboard, dusted and paraded every Anzac Day (Dobrez, P. 221).” In this respect, the Anzac legend does fall short in providing a complete, all-encompassing picture of Australian culture. Like many legends, it is imperfect.

Conclusion: Bravery & Sacrifice:

Despite all of this debate, Australian war memorials like the Shrine of Remembrance, and the national holidays of Anzac Day and Remembrance Day still serve a vital role in defining Australian national identity. This legend that emerged out of this

battle was what the young nation was looking for, something to hold onto, and something to be proud of as distinctly Australian. Australia had been a country “which has had its moments of nationalist charm and ardour, even glory, though no full-scale revolution: violence vented on the Aborigines instead (McLachlan, P. 2).” This was a country in need of something heroic and, however imperfect, Anzac provided that. These memorials remind the country not only of the brave soldiers who have fallen in the wars abroad, but of that moment when Australia began to solidify its image, both to the world and to itself. “It is curious that Australians have always favoured a species of hero who goes down inevitably against outlandish odds but who does it with style” (Thomas Keneally, P. 70). The focused eyes that Australians have towards that day on the beach at Gallipoli may be closely compared to that of September 11th, 2001, which will remain in American history as a moment of both complete terror and heroism. Americans died that day as sacrifices for something out of their control, but their memories will live on forever. Both 9-11 and Gallipoli are examples of how nations as a whole are able to connect and mold events into symbols of their own culture and of their national character. The American (strong, democratic, fighter of terror, brave, and patriotic) and the Australian (masculine, courageous, loyal comrade) are embedded in their national identity forever because of a singular moment in history.

Thus the rituals of Anzac day and Remembrance Day (originally Armistice Day) provide a significant celebration and minute of silence across the nation. In that minute, Australians may reflect on the emergence of a nation, the horrors of war, or merely take part in the mourning rituals that had been denied to a generation of Australians whose sons never came home. “Memorials (are) ritually necessary...” (McLachlan, P. 108).

Thus, the speech given by Paul Keating at the funeral service for the Unknown Australian Soldier in Canberra clearly resonates:

The Unknown Soldier honours the memory of all those men and women who laid down their lives for Australia. His tomb is a reminder of what we have lost in war and what we have gained. We have lost more than 100,000 lives, and with them all their love of this country, and all their hope and energy. We have gained a legend: a story of bravery and sacrifice, and with it a deeper faith in ourselves and our democracy, and a deeper understanding of what it means to be Australian (Keating, P. 288).”

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