

The Militarisation of Australian History

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One of the most remarkable developments in Australian intellectual life in the 21st century has been the militarisation of Australian history. The evidence is all around us. In 1901, the new federation inherited from the six colonies their engagement in the war in South Africa. In 2001, the war was widely and enthusiastically commemorated and in official speeches the troops who fought on the Veldt were honoured for being 'the fathers of the Anzacs'. But the cavalcade of commemoration marched and gathered momentum with centenary celebrations for the Great War. They still continue and will climax with already planned events to commemorate Armistice Day in November.

Australia has not been unique in commemorating the First World War. What has been striking is the massive public expenditure committed by both Federal and State governments culminating in the establishment of the \$100 million Monash Museum in Northern France at a time when Australian museums, galleries and libraries are struggling to survive. But money has been lavished on innumerable public war projects over the last ten years. Books and curriculum material have been subsidised, films commissioned and research projects funded. Monuments have been re-furbished all over the country and new ones commissioned. Neglected avenues of trees have been re-planted. Scholarships have been established and tours of old battlefields arranged and subsidised. Particular attention has been devoted to children. Primary and secondary schools have been targeted with free, professionally developed aids for teachers.

The Department of Veteran's Affairs and the Australian War Memorial have been central to this promotion of the historical pre-eminence of the country's experience of war. It has been a project uncritically supported by both sides of politics. It is certainly unprecedented in Australian history and it would seem unmatched in comparable democratic societies. Criticism has been easily contained. The particular slant of official propaganda has been sanctified by the sacrifice of our countrymen and women who died and suffered in our

wars. Scepticism about the unbridled commemoration could be cast as a case of unconscionable disrespect. The whole project has been a remarkably successful campaign in the broader culture wars all the more so because its underlying motivation has been so skilfully cloaked in sanctimony.

John Howard played a key role in the historiographical putsch. Along with fellow conservatives he was deeply disturbed by the revisionist history of the last decades of the 20th century and in particular the new and radical emphasis on indigenous history. He talked frequently about his hostility to 'black armband' history which he believed made young Australians ashamed of their nation's past. He adopted a strongly partisan stand in the so-called history wars of 2002-03 and provided personal patronage to the leading conservative protagonist Keith Windschuttle. The Mabo case of 1992 alarmed many conservatives partly because its radical re-casting of Australian jurisprudence was so unexpected and it led on to the even more surprising Wik case in 1996. It seemed as though the new revisionist history had invaded the High Court itself with startling consequences underlined by the views of Justices Deane and Gaudron in their shared Mabo opinion that the relations with the Aborigines had left a legacy of unutterable shame.

With the reputation of those erstwhile heroes of Australian historical writing – the explorers and pioneers – seriously compromised, the Anzac legend proved an invaluable tool to re-direct the nation's historical gaze to the heroism displayed in overseas wars. Killing Turks and Germans was far more tolerable than shooting down Aborigines out on the ragged frontiers of settlement and could be wrapped in the time-honoured robes of military glory. But the result has been a serious distortion of our history which will be with us for years to come. A whole generation has been subjected to a pervasive exercise in state-inspired propaganda which has resulted in exaggeration on the one hand and serious neglect on the other. The revived cult of the Anzac landing at Gallipoli provides us with abundant evidence of these two developments.

Anyone who has had any contact with this generation of school children will have heard the substance of the official message. Leading the way is the ubiquitous assertion that the nation was 'made' on the beaches and hills of Gallipoli. This may seem persuasive to anyone without any broad knowledge of national history. But it is truly an extraordinary claim. It represents a survival of ideas current in the late 19th and early 20th century, but deeply discredited by the Great War itself, that nations are born in war. The same idea was often heard in New South Wales in 1885 at the time of the adventure in the Sudan. It was repeated in dozens of speeches during the Boer War when contingents left for South Africa and again when they returned. How many births can any nation experience? More to the point is that it is a particularly pernicious doctrine suggesting that countries need war to achieve maturity and that killing is a necessary rite of passage for both men and nations. Do any other nations still embrace this doctrine which was central to the ideology of both Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany?

But of equal concern is the way in which the Anzac legend profoundly distorts our history. What did the Australia of 1913 lack which was provided by the exploits of young men who invaded the Ottoman Empire to further British strategic objectives they knew little about? What we have is an extraordinary promotion of military endeavour ahead of the achievements of civilian life. The work of thousands of men and women across generations was not as important as that brief interlude on the other side of the world. This simply won't do. The young Australian federation was one of the most successful societies in the world. It was one of the wealthiest and one of the fairest. It had stable institutions and almost universal literacy. It was, along with New Zealand, the most democratic nation anywhere with universal adult franchise and a powerful labour movement strongly represented in the seven parliaments which had, together, pioneered an inspiring array of progressive social and economic reforms. Whatever on earth had the young warriors added to this picture by bayonetting other young men who were defending their country?

The officially inspired and funded militarisation of our history favours war more than peace, places the military before the civil and the imperial ahead of the national. War history is inescapably imperial history despite a tendency of popular war historians to leave out the often crucial importance of British strategy and logistics in most Australian battles during the First World War. The home front is usually left out of much military history. It's all about what happened on the other side of the world. Australia must surely be unique in that the implication implicit in the cavalcade of commemoration is that our most important achievements happened somewhere else. This was

illustrated by the upsurge of commemorative enthusiasm late in 2017 concerning the Battle of Beersheba. A new Light Horse Museum was opened in Beersheba by the Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, watched by the Leader of the Opposition and other prominent Australians. At the time of the battle Australia was being convulsed by the second conscription referendum which was held a few weeks later. However, the referendum centenary passed without any official notice whatsoever. The failure to celebrate this great story was a telling illustration of the priorities of the current generation of our political leaders. A nation putting to the people one of the most significant questions of the time. Men and women voting and rejecting conscription. It was utterly unique, radically democratic and inimitably Australian. It was far more noteworthy than battle field honours on the Western Front.

The Australian reaction to Beersheba illustrated many aspects of the ongoing carnival of commemoration. The focus has been on particular battles. Characteristically the role of other, allied countries, has been overlooked. It would have been easy, for instance, to assume that the Light Horse won Beersheba all on their own. There were few references to the important role of the New Zealander army or of the even more significant contribution of British infantry and artillery. Time and time again popular accounts of the war overplay the achievements of the Australians. Again and again the focus is on how the local boys fought not why they fought. There has been almost no public discussion of whether it was in Australia's national interest to be involved at all. There has been no assessment of the great cost of the war and whether Australia's enormous sacrifice was worth it. Such assessment was impossible in the years following the war. It should have been an essential ingredient of any reconsideration a century later.

The meagre discussion of the results of the war in Australia are invariably misleading. We have heard that it united Australians when the true result was the exact reverse. Class and religious divisions were exacerbated. It did not foster national pride. It deepened the dependence on Empire and reverence for the British monarchy. Regional dissatisfaction with the federation flourished in the post-war period. Western Australia voted by a two to one majority to secede and become again a crown colony. Only one electorate opted for the federation. Australia gave a lot for the Empire and got little in return. This points to the larger tragedy. Australia in 1901 had everything needed for national independence. It chose to remain tied to an Empire already in relative decline and suffered accordingly.

There are deeper concerns with Australia's remembrance of the First World War. All too often commemoration slips into celebration of the prowess of our soldiers and our commanders. The passing praise they received at the

time is endlessly replayed. It is as if we are still living in the immediate aftermath of a victorious war. And that is very odd. How can anyone take pride in contributing to such an unparalleled disaster? The war was a catastrophe for Europe from which it could never fully recover. The prestige of European civilisation itself was smashed beyond recall. The seeds of the even greater catastrophes in the 1930s and 1940s were already sown when the Australian Prime Minister returned in triumph from Europe at the end of the war to tell the nation that the achievements of the soldiers had assured the safety of a white Australia which was as secure as it was on the day when it was first adopted in 1901.

Author

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The Haunting

on our island, the young girl's ghost
curls beneath the nightscape

by the toilets, the young girl's ghost
has some in tears

on our island, what's by the toilets
stops men leaving their rooms
on our island, by the toilets
a tiny ghost

on our island, behind the wire
between the guards the Afghans see
a girl's ghost by the toilets
her unwet tears

men will not leave
their cramped and rotting dorms
cannot stand to hear the sound
of her suffering.

From the collection *The Sky Runs Right Through Us*, published by UWAP, February 2018.

RENEÉ PETTITT-SCHIPP,
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Parting Glass,

after Gabriela Mistral

for M., asylum seeker and friend, who attempted to take his own
life at North West Point Detention Centre
Christmas Island, 2011.

the act is simple enough
remove lid from bottle
pour into plastic cup
pour like rain at midnight
a river's sheen by firelight
your childhood framed in puddles
like a dream

the liquid claims light like
a jungle newly varnished
bright fishing boats in moonlight, until
ocean deep with dawn
like a prayer

lift the vessel high
to all you've ever known
close those eyes
to lovers and glances
music and dancers
beautiful hunger
shiver of sky

and in that moment
when rim meets
your mouth
relinquish
outstretched arms, eyes
of nieces
pull of letters
your own face
then swallow
there will be searing
like villages blazing
plumes from boats
wire and want
ablaze

gulp
at new dark freedom
promise of oblivion, after pain
when this world sways
leave the afterglow

without your name.

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