Remembering Australia's First World War

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Remembering Australia’s First World War

The war memory ‘boom’ is a tsunami that shows no signs of receding. Several more years of First World War remembrance stretch ahead, with countless anniversaries to be commemorated in national and international settings. For historians, this explosion of memory studies has presented both opportunities and challenges: opportunities, because historical research now incorporates subjects which were previously the domain of other disciplines, including the rituals of grief and remembrance, identity politics and the impact of trauma on individuals and communities; challenges, because the study of the past is no longer the exclusive domain of academic historians. It never was, of course, but the recent privileging of memories—multiple, subjective and contested, as they inevitably are—has bestowed a new authority on popular historians and individual memoirists. Much as the empirically-minded historian might lament the inaccuracy, subjectivity and chauvinism of popular histories of war, these tend to dominate sales of war history, illustrating that ‘memory’ has perhaps a greater hold than ‘history’ at the public level.

We are too immersed in the memory boom to fully understand its causes and dynamics. However, the historian can play the role of recording and critiquing the processes by which the memory of war has become embedded in new rituals and processes of commemoration. Memory, after all, is not an agent in its own right. As Jay Winter reminds us: ‘If the term “collective memory” has any meaning at all, it is the process through which different collectives, from groups of two to groups in their thousands, engage in acts of remembrance together’.1

This special issue of Australian Historical Studies, which marks the centenary of the Gallipoli landing of 25 April 1915, has two purposes: the first is to trace some of the processes whereby Australians have constructed and shaped the memory of the First World War during the past one hundred years. The second is to present new research on the imperial context of Australia’s involvement in the First World War and the cultural imaginings that arose from it.

The Anzac legend, myth or spirit, as it is variously called, has already attracted considerable attention from historians, but we know comparatively little about the processes by which it gained such a hold in the Australian imagination and political culture.2 We lack a sophisticated understanding of how the memory of the First World War has changed over the past one hundred years and the role that individuals and organisations have played in effecting this

evolution. Yet the ways in which Australians today remember the First World War—the events they commemorate, the ritual forms they adopt and the values they enshrine in these commemorative activities—are clearly different from those practised by the men and women who fought and lived through the war. Indeed, it is the very flexibility of the Anzac legend—its capacity to be constantly re-invented, to be both static and dynamic, providing a ‘sense of sameness over time and space, sustained by remembering’—which explains its endurance as a foundational narrative.3

The difference between the values that inform ‘Anzac’ today and those of the 1914 generation is nowhere clearer than in the understanding of nationalism and national identity. From its earliest days the valorising narrative of Gallipoli has been associated with ‘the birth of the nation’. The campaign is now described as ‘a symbol of Australia’s national identity, achievement and existence’, while Anzac Day has ‘come to symbolise our sense of nationhood’.4 But, for all the sense of national singularity that the First World War undoubtedly spawned, this emerging identity was firmly positioned within the imperial loyalty that had inspired the initial Australian commitment of 1914. If anything, imperial loyalty was strengthened as the hegemonic value.5 This again is well recognised in the scholarly literature on Australia in the First World War, but in the wider public discourse the role of imperial sentiment in early constructions of nationalism has become largely elided, or attributed to a false consciousness on the part of a Dominion people who were exploited by an unfeeling imperial leadership.

Within this context of dual loyalties, the speed with which the Anzac legend took hold within Australian political culture was remarkable. Other modes of remembering, such as the design of the cemeteries in which the British Empire’s war dead were interred, were crafted in the aftermath of the First World War, whereas Anzac emerged concurrently with the events that it was commemorating. At the heart of this process lay a dynamic interchange between agents of memory at many levels of Australian society. Two journalists, Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett and Charles Bean, provided the raw material for the valorising narrative of Gallipoli, in the form of their famous reports of the landing at Anzac Cove. These accounts were repeated and disseminated across Australia by the media, educational institutions and diverse public agencies. Politicians and recruiting authorities then appropriated this hyperbolic narrative as a means of mobilising the population to greater sacrifices and retrieving something positive from the dismal year of 1915.6 However, like all collective memory, official orchestration

of memory is not a complete explanation of Anzac’s almost immediate purchase. This heroic narrative took hold because it resonated with significant sections of Australian society.

Jo Hawkins’s article explores this public embrace of Anzac from the perspective of the commodification of the word ‘Anzac’. The commercialisation of war memory, so evident now in war museums across the globe, is not new. On the contrary, from 1915 on, traders across Australia began to brand their businesses and to market consumer products with the name ‘Anzac’. Families who had lost men in the war also began to use the word in vernacular remembrance, such as the naming of homes. This appropriation of Anzac, which provides intriguing insights into memory-making ‘from below’, soon provoked that contestation about control and ownership that is inherent in sites of memory.7 Recognising the emotional power of Anzac and its growing sacramental qualities, the government of W.M. (Billy) Hughes moved quickly to prohibit the use of the word Anzac for all but the most limited purposes. In effect, then, consumer culture on the home front became a battleground where individuals, veterans’ organisations and officials competed to assert ownership over Anzac and the social currency it rapidly came to represent.

The battle to control the way the war was to be remembered was also evident in the official war art scheme that the Australian authorities established in 1917. Although the scheme had a number of initiators, in time it came to be dominated by Charles Bean and John Treloar. The central role that these two men played in shaping Australian war memory—through The Anzac Book (1916), the official histories published in the interwar years, and the development of the Australian War Memorial (AWM)—is well known.8 However, Margaret Hutchison explores another important process, the commissioning of artists and the vetting of the art works which would ultimately grace the walls of the AWM. Hutchison shows how the testimony of eye-witnesses came to play an extraordinary role in shaping this visual representation of the war. Bean and Treloar, journalist and public servant, had no hesitation in overruling the aesthetic judgments of established artists in order to create a record of the war acceptable to their commemorative agendas. Bean’s fetish with factual accuracy, and the wider privileging of those who had ‘direct experience’ of war, meant that returned soldiers were accorded a superior place in the shaping of the artistic representation of the conflict. Australian war art thereby remained locked in a traditional mode of representation, with none of the modernism which inspired the far more emotionally powerful European art of this period.

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If it now seems that the privileging of soldiers’ memories marred the aesthetics of the official art scheme, their modes of remembering of the war need to be respected. As my own contribution to this issue shows, in the immediate postwar period the men of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) remembered the battles of the Western Front in ways that differ from current practices. In 1919 the five infantry divisions were invited to choose the locations for memorials to mark their achievements in France and Belgium. Their selection suggests a wish to give prominence to victories rather than defeats. In contrast, the second wave of memorial building, from the 1980s on, focused on sites which spoke to the contemporary obsession with mass catastrophe, victimhood and trauma. This changing hierarchy in sites of memory also reflected a shift of focus in war commemoration in the late twentieth century from the national to the international and transnational spheres. Whereas the building of the AIF divisional memorials in 1919 was an Australian exercise, conducted with the tolerance and, at most, modest engagement of local French communities and central government, eight decades later Australian memorial building in France and Belgium was shaped by the wider phenomenon of memorial diplomacy: that is, Australia’s imprinting of a new memory footprint in the last twenty years was facilitated by the integration of the memory of war into the public performance of international relations, in Europe particularly.

Australia’s rituals of commemoration have always had elements of the transnational, in the sense that the processes of remembrance were mediated through the agencies of the British Empire. When building their divisional memorials in 1919 in France and Belgium, for example, the Australian authorities had to channel requests through the Imperial War Graves Commission. Similarly, the iconography of death that Australians adopted from 1919 onwards assumed largely imperial forms, such as Rudyard Kipling’s epitaph for the missing (‘Known Unto God’), Laurence Binyon’s ‘Ode of Remembrance’ and Sir Reginald Blomfield’s Cross of Sacrifice. Even the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, completed in 1938, was designed by a quintessentially imperial architect, Edwin Lutyens.

This should not surprise us since the war effort itself was imperial. The more chauvinistic accounts of Australia during the First World War might have Australians winning the war single-handedly, but as Rhys Crawley demonstrates, the Australian contribution to the wider imperial and Allied effort was limited. There were relatively small numbers of Australian forces in Europe and the Middle East. Furthermore, Australian infantry always relied on British logistics, technical support and artillery, the weapon so critical to their success on the Western Front. In international scholarship the current consensus is that the combined weight of the British Empire and its Allies, not any single force, defeated the Central Powers. Even Australian claims to a disproportionate contribution to Allied victory, by virtue of their tactical innovation and brilliance, Crawley argues, must be qualified: by 1917 and 1918 all belligerents were learning from the appalling losses of the early years of the war and adapting to fighting an industrial war. General John Monash, commander of the Australian
Corps in the last months of the war, was a competent commander; but so, too, was his Canadian counterpart, General Arthur Currie. The Canadian Expeditionary Corps meanwhile was just as tactically brilliant as the AIF and, in fact, embraced tactical innovation before the Australians. Canadians too would claim as ‘their’ victories those battles, such as Amiens, which are core to the Australian triumphalist narratives of 1918.

Comparisons with the Canadians further suggest that Australia’s nationalist narrative, the Anzac legend, was more imperial than is commonly assumed. As Mark Sheftall illustrates, the cultural myths that emerged in the British Dominions during and after the First World War were strikingly similar. The Anzac legend was paralleled by the ‘myth of the soldier’ in Canada where English-speaking Canadians, at least, shared Australia’s identity as neo-Britons. (French Canadians were more disaffected, especially over the introduction of conscription.) Even the content of the Australian and Canadian postwar mythology was almost identical. To be sure, Australians drew on the distinctive cultural imagination that arose from the bush, but Canadians had a comparable imagery inspired by their settlement of an equally vast and inhospitable landscape. For both Dominions, then, the ideal of the soldier that emerged after the war was the resourceful, independent citizen in arms who, thanks to his social and cultural background, made a natural fighter. The commonalities of these mythologised constructions suggests that they are best understood not as distinctively national, but rather as manifestations of an identity formation that was common to settler societies across the British world.

The persistence of this British world after the First World War is perhaps most strikingly evident in the person of Prime Minister Hughes. Although Hughes is typically depicted as a pugnacious campaigner for Australian rights, particularly at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference where he revelled in confronting President Woodrow Wilson, James Cotton demonstrates in our final article that the prime minister emerged from the war with his imperial loyalty undiminished. Certainly Hughes wanted the communication between the Dominions and the metropolitan government to be closer and more effective than it had been during the war, when he and the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, had clashed bitterly over the terms of the 1918 armistice. Hughes was also enraged when it emerged during the Chanak crisis of 1922 that the British seemed to have learned nothing about the need to consult with the Dominions in the formulation of imperial foreign policy. But for all this, Hughes showed little concern while in office with extending the scope for independent action won by the Dominions during the war. He remained convinced that the Empire was united, in peace as it had been in war, by a deep common interest. Hughes may now be invoked as the man who claimed that ‘the Australian nation was born on the shores of Gallipoli’, but for him nation and empire remained indivisible.

Hughes was not alone in thinking thus. When the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux was finally completed, after a long period of procrastination by successive interwar governments, King George VI, the
reigning imperial monarch, presided at the unveiling ceremony. Budgetary constraints and distance prevented the Australian Prime Minister Joseph Lyons from attending. Such an absence is impossible to imagine today. Attendance at major commemorative events is de rigueur for politicians of all persuasions, and no current prime minister would surrender to Queen Elizabeth II, or even her representative the Governor-General, the presiding role at the 2015 dawn service at Gallipoli. This change in the political culture of memorialisation speaks to the way in which Anzac has become synonymous with a nationalism that shed its imperial associations over the second half of twentieth century. Today’s Anzac conventions also affirm what is axiomatic in memory studies: the ‘national’ memory of war, as manifest in the rituals of commemoration, domestically and internationally, serves to validate contemporary institutions, values and political priorities, and thereby tells us as much about the present as about the past.

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