Commemoration in Australia: A memory orgy?

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Australia’s commemorations of the First World War have thus far been massive at both the government and local levels, reflecting and affirming the dominance of the memory of war and the ANZAC ‘legend’ in the national political culture. The commemorations in 2014–15 triggered some debate about the commodification of the memory of war and the possibility of commemoration fatigue, but the centenary of the key commemorative event, the landing at Gallipoli on 25 April, attracted large crowds and blanket media attention. Whether Australians of culturally diverse backgrounds engaged with these centenary commemorations, and how strongly they identify with the ANZAC legend as the dominant narrative of Australian nationalism, however, remains unclear.

Keywords: Australia; commemoration fatigue; commodification of war memory; First World War commemoration

There was never any question about the scale of Australia’s commemoration of the centenary of the First World War. The landing on the Gallipoli peninsula on 25 April 1915, and the ANZAC ‘legend’ which the war inspired, occupy a central place in the national political culture – being routinely described as ‘the birth of the nation’ and ‘what it means to be Australian’. The Australian government, which has played a central role in the resurgence of war memory since 1990 (McKenna 2010), was therefore bound to sponsor an extensive program of national commemoration at home and abroad. Moreover, given that critics have claimed that the government has orchestrated ‘a relentless militarisation of Australian history’ in recent years (Lake and Reynolds 2010: 138) official agencies were keen to encourage a plethora of commemorative activities at the local level, as evidence of public engagement with the narrative of ANZAC.

Planning started early at the national level. On ANZAC Day 2010 the federal government announced the creation of a National Commission to consult with the public and identify the board themes and scope of a commemorative program from 2014 to 2018 (National Commission 2011: vi). The membership of the Commission said much about the politics of Australian war memory: there was no historian, popular
or academic, but there were two former prime ministers (Liberal Malcolm Fraser and Labor Bob Hawke), the head of the Returned and Services League (RSL); a journalist; and – lest anyone think that the ANZAC legend was an relic of the past – a female veteran of the Australian Defence Force and peacekeeping, and a young war widow of Afghanistan. Within a year the Commission had received 600 submissions and some 1500 ‘ideas’ from across Australia, Turkey, Belgium, Papua New Guinea and the UK. Its recommendations, issued in 2011, included the development of education programs, mobile exhibitions, the restoration of existing war memorials and avenues of honour, the installation of new memorials to the Boer War and peacekeeping, and a restaging of the first major convoy to leave Albany with troops of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in November 1914. The Commission also proposed the creation of an ANZAC Centre for the Study of Peace, Conflict and War, to be housed at the Australian National University, but this more controversial initiative – the brainchild it seems (private advice from Commission member) of Fraser, who had moved strikingly to the left in his post-prime ministerial years – lapsed for want of bipartisan support. Most significantly, the Commission endorsed the concept of ‘A Century of Service’: that is, the commemorations should not be confined to the First World War but should cover significant anniversaries of other 20th century conflicts which fell in the period 2014–18 (National Commission 2011: x–xii). These included the 70th anniversaries of key Second World War events and the Malayan Emergency, and the 50th anniversaries of key dates in the Vietnam War.

To implement this ambitious agenda the federal government appointed a Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the Centenary of ANZAC and delegated further planning to the Secretary of the Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA), supported by an Interdepartmental Task Force and an ANZAC Centenary Advisory Board. The latter consisted of a board of 21 members and 6 advisory groups (ANZAC Centenary 2011), which were variously to consider education and curriculum, military and cultural history, business, youth, engagement with state, territory and local government and ceremonial and commemorative issues. This byzantine and overlapping structure, replete with community representatives, business leaders, academics, teachers, public servants, defence personnel and – to ensure that the ‘NZ’ in ANZAC was not forgotten, as it often is – the New Zealand High Commissioner, did not lend itself to radical options. Indeed according to its chair, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, a former Chief of the Defence Force, the Board was ‘determined to ensure that the ANZAC Centenary is marked in a way that captures the spirit and reverence it so deserves and that the baton of remembrance is passed on to this and future generations’ (Australian government 2015a; emphasis in the original). When released in 2013, the Board’s report affirmed the concept of ‘A Century of Service’ and recommended a program organised into three ‘coherent streams of activities that can be understood readily by the Australian public … the ultimate “owners” of the commemoration’: education and research, commemoration, and arts and culture (ANZAC Centenary Advisory Board 2013). Thus Australia was committed to what, at the time of writing, seems like a century of commemoration!

Australian commemoration tends to be parochial, focused on ‘telling the Australian story’ rather than that of the wider war. Hence the first event in the approved national program was not 4 August 2014, although Victorians remembered on 5 August the ‘first shot fired in anger in the British Empire at the start of World War One’, from the battery at Point Nepean stopping the German freighter S.S. Pfalz
from running for home (Victoria 2014). The nationally funded public program began in earnest two months later with the commemoration of the departure of the first convoy of Australians and New Zealanders from Albany. To mark the event a new National ANZAC Centre was opened on a hilltop ‘overlooking the vast coastline that was the last sight of Australia’ for many soldiers (Hampton 2014), while the nearby precincts of the towering 1964 Desert Mounted Corps memorial were handsomely refurbished.

Around this time a number of funding opportunities, of which only a few can be mentioned here, were advertised to the Australian community. The Australian War Memorial had already been granted $28.7 million from the federal government to refurbish its First World War gallery and restore its historic dioramas (Australian War Memorial 2015). Subsequently the National Archives was funded to digitise the post-war correspondence between the soldiers on the Albany convoy and the Department of Repatriation; $125,000 was made available to each of the 150 federal electorates for grants approved by DVA; and over $4 million was allocated to an ANZAC Centenary Arts and Culture fund to support projects that conveyed ‘a multitude of themes, stories, reflections and messages about Australia’s experiences of war at home and abroad over the last century’ (Australian government 2015b). Overseas, work proceeded on the development of the Australian Remembrance Trail along the Western Front, a kind of ANZAC ‘stations of the cross’ stretching from Bellenglise on the former Hindenburg Line, France, to Iper (Ypres), in Belgium. In 2014 a further $6.9 million was allocated to a new interpretative centre, named after the commander of the Australian Crops, Sir John Monash, at the French town of Villers–Bretonneux (Barry 2014), the site of the 1938 Australian national memorial and since 2008 an official dawn ANZAC Day service.

But inevitably the centrepiece of the national program was the centenary of the Gallipoli landing on 25 April 2015. Who was to get a seat at the all-important dawn service? The confined space and the fragility of the environment – memories of the damage inflicted on the precious ANZAC Cove when the access road was widened in 2005 were still fresh – meant that numbers had to be limited. Ultimately a cap of 10,500 was placed on those who could attend; of these 8000 were to be Australian; 2000, New Zealand; 500 official guests from other countries and 25 seats for Turkey, whose collaboration, as the host country, was essential, and whose standing had shifted over the past century from enemy to honoured friend (ABC News 2014a). Enterprising tour and cruise companies had already ‘sold’ some of Australia’s allocation, guaranteeing their clients a seat as part of their travel package, but the government refused to recognise these commitments and chose to conduct a national ballot (AAP 2013). It was a process worthy of a democratic nation with a fondness for gambling, but as one media commentator put it, referring to the conscription referenda of 1916 and 1917, ‘Prime Minister Billy Hughes never managed it’ (Kemp 2012)!

In the event, the ballot proceeded with little controversy: 42,273 Australian citizens or permanent residents (a criterion of eligibility) applied. About 60 per cent of them were male and their ages ranged from 16 to 99 years. The allocation of places reflected a cascading hierarchy of memory credentials. Ten widows of First World War veterans were given priority, even though all had married well after the war, in one case in 1962 (Whinnett 2015). Four hundred places were reserved for school children (de rigeur at all commemorations today to testify to the supposed
cross-generational transmission of the ANZAC legend); and then came the public, in the following order: direct descendants with a preference given to the first generation (sons and daughters); ‘veterans’ and the general public. Those who were disappointed in the first round were placed on a waiting list or encouraged to go to other official remembrance events, such as the 11 am service at Lone Pine or the dawn service at Villers–Bretonneux (Ronaldson 2014).

However, if the dawn service ballot managed to finesse the politics of recognition and inclusion, the centenary was not without its debates. The most animated of these concerned the commercialisation of ‘ANZAC’. The commodification of war, it must be said, is not a recent phenomenon – nor one confined to Australia. Across the world, it seems, death has become ‘a commodity for consumption in a global communications market’ (Lennon and Foley 2000: 5). In 1995 the Australian Football League initiated its ANZAC Day ‘clash’ which, although purportedly an act of remembrance, generated considerable revenue for the sport in the subsequent two decades. But as the centenary approached, the commodification of war memory reached unprecedented proportions. In anticipation of the First World War centenary, the Australian War Memorial shop offered an array of commodities, including stubby holders and shot glasses, bearing their centenary slogan, ‘Their Spirit Our Pride.’ Intriguingly, the RSL approved (for fundraising purposes) the sale, for $2.26, of a pre-recorded Minute of Silence, purchased via phone or text service (ABC News 2014b). Meanwhile, with the endorsement of the ANZAC Centenary Advisory Board, the RSL and Legacy (a charity dedicated to caring for the families of deceased or incapacitated veterans), Camp Gallipoli offered Australians the chance to mark the centenary by sleeping out ‘under the stars as the original ANZAC did 100 years ago’. To quote the promotional website:

Mates coming together on one special night to commemorate the deeds of those brave ANZAC’s one hundred years ago, eating great tucker, watching historic footage on huge screens, seeing iconic entertainers live on stage and camping in authentic swags will in itself create history. In addition the Dawn Service honouring those who have fallen will be something you and your family will never forget.

(Camp Gallipoli 2015a)

Many organisers of these initiatives may have had government approval to invoke the word ‘ANZAC’, the use of which is regulated by the Protection of the Word ‘ANZAC’ 1920 Act; but there were limits to the media and public tolerance for commercialisation of what has often been described as Australia’s secular religion. When Woolworths launched in early 2015 an advertising campaign featuring a First World War Soldier’s face set against the banner ‘Lest we Forget ANZAC 1915–2015’ and the slogan ‘Fresh in our Memories’ – a play on the supermarket’s marketing brand, ‘The Fresh Food People’ – a furore erupted. In damage control the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs declared the advertising inappropriate and Woolworths withdrew the campaign (ABC News 2015; La Canna 2015). But one senses that this intervention was a belated one, and that the government was closing the door after the ‘ANZAC’ horse had bolted.

Other debates about the centenary simmered in the media, if gaining less traction. Among these were the issue of whether the commemorations resonated with the culturally diverse communities that constitute at least a quarter of today’s Australian
population. In 2012 the National Commission on the Commemoration of the ANZAC Centenary dared to suggest that they might not. Australia’s military history, it said, was ‘something of a double-edged sword’; and while the centenary might provide opportunities for a great sense of national unity, it might also prove ‘a potential area of divisiveness’. These comments were dismissed out of hand by the then Prime Minister Julia Gillard (News.com.au 2012); and the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia (2012), presumably fearful of identity politics unsettling the multicultural consensus, assured Australians that ANZAC Day was ‘a day of national significance’ and ‘solemn reflection’ for all Australians, ‘including Australia’s culturally and linguistically diverse communities’.

In the years that followed, government agencies made considerable efforts to make the memory of First World War more culturally inclusive. The Australian War Memorial and the DVA, for instance, invested in research and public information about indigenous Australians; while prominence was given to First World War soldiers of ‘ethnic’ backgrounds, such as the half-Chinese Billy Sing, who gained notoriety as a sniper at Gallipoli. However, these attempts to ‘recover a kind of multicultural history of ANZAC’ – evident also in studies of German ANZACs, Russian ANZACs, Irish ANZACs and Chinese ANZACs (Bongiorno 2014: 91) – did little to unsettle the essentially ‘white’ narrative of ANZAC. While they may have satisfied some marginalised groups’ desire for recognition, as Hsu-Ming Teo has argued, the ‘fleeting acknowledgement’, within narratives of national building, of ethnic groups (and women) – along the lines that who ‘did their bit too’ – hardly de-centres or transforms the focus on ‘white’ people of British/Irish descent (Teo 2003: 147).

Meanwhile, the guidelines of the Gallipoli centenary grants to the federal electorates were so traditional that they had the effect of consolidating Anglo–Celtic narratives at the local level. Of the 1168 grants approved, most involved the repairing of war memorials and honour boards, the renewal of avenues of honour, local histories into members of the AIF, local exhibitions and the design of new memorials (Australian government 2015c). There was little scope in this scheme for new modes of remembrance, which might reflect other, different and more contested war memories of multicultural Australians. Few explicitly ‘ethnic’ communities applied for the centenary grants, with the exception of the Jewish and Turkish communities, though there was the occasional Indigenous, Maltese, Coptic Orthodox and Greek-related project.

A further issue which gained some media coverage in 2014–15 was the potential for commemoration fatigue. The Channel 9 mini-series ‘Gallipoli’, aired in March 2015 and promoted heavily, was a ratings failure. With a million viewers on its first night, the program could attract an audience of only 400,000 four weeks later. One commentator blamed the lack of interest in the program on Australians’ chronic ‘sense of cultural inferiority’ about home-grown television, but the blog commentary this triggered condemned the infuriating number of advertisements, the timing (Monday mid-evening) and, most significantly, the overexposure of the story of Gallipoli (Mathieson 2015). Why have another story on Gallipoli when Peter Weir had told it so well in 1981? Meanwhile Camp Gallipoli, according to

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1 In the 2011 census almost 25 per cent of Australians had been born in another country and 43 per cent had at least one overseas-born parent (World Population Review 2015).
one account, attracted only a tenth of the numbers nationally that its organisers anticipated in Australia. In New Zealand, meanwhile, it was cancelled, supposedly because of unforeseen circumstances but probably for lack of numbers (Camp Gallipoli 2015b; Phillips 2015).

All of these debates were, however, silenced by the crescendo of media excitement as 25 April 2015 approached. In what might be described as a memory orgy, each of the television networks ran commissioned documentaries in the weeks preceding the centenary, the print media issued coloured souvenir wrap-around editions, and on the anniversary of ANZAC Day itself all media offered blanket coverage of the official ceremonies in Australia, Turkey and France. These, given the time zones, spread themselves conveniently across almost the whole day.

The ceremonies themselves testified to the manner in which ANZAC Day rituals manage to reconcile the new with the old – a capacity which helps to explain the legend’s extraordinary resilience as a signifier of national identity over many decades (Beaumont 2014). The Australian War Memorial, which in the past has consistently refused to embrace ‘frontier wars’ as part of Australia’s wars (McPhedran 2013), opened its dawn ceremony with a didgeridoo being played from its parapet. Young women meanwhile featured prominently in the dawn services in Canberra and at the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance. Their inclusion spoke to a 21st century version of the ANZAC legend that is gender-neutral, but the poem both girls read was traditional: Canadian John McCrae’s ‘In Flanders Fields’. At Gallipoli meanwhile the ceremonies at North Beach and Lone Pine included British royalty, their presence signalling both the major role that the British played in the Gallipoli campaign and the importance of imperial loyalty for the Australians of 1914–18 (and presumably the affection for the monarchy of Prime Minister Tony Abbott who had knighted Prince Philip only three months earlier). Across Australia, too, the traditional Christian and imperial rituals that have infused ANZAC Day since 1916 were re-enacted, even if many in the crowds seemed to struggle to remember the Lord’s Prayer and to sing ‘Abide with Me’, ‘Oh Valiant Hearts’ and ‘Oh God, our help in ages past’.

The official message was delivered by senior politicians and defence personnel at multiple venues across the nation and abroad and said as much about the values of the present as the events of the past. Abbott, speaking at the premier event, the Gallipoli dawn service, claimed that ‘we are here on Gallipoli, because we believe that the ANZACs represented Australians at our best’:

It’s the perseverance of those who scaled the cliffs under a rain of fire. It’s the compassion of the nurses who attended to the thousands of wounded. It’s the conquest of fear, often through a larrikin sense of humour. And it’s the greatest love anyone can have: the readiness to lay down your life for your friend. (Abbott 2015)

Even more, Abbott followed the lead of his predecessors John Howard and Kevin Rudd (Beaumont 2014: 343) and invoked Gallipoli as the legitimation of later commitments of Australian defence forces: not just to the Second World War, Korea, Malaya, Borneo, Vietnam but also to Iraq and ‘our longest war – Afghanistan’. ‘Even now, our armed forces are serving in the Middle East and elsewhere, defending the values that we hold dear. They did their duty; now, let us do ours.’
For Australians, it seems, ‘Dulce et decorum est pro/Pro patria Mori’ is not the ‘old lie’ of Wilfred Owen!

The populist media too warmed to the theme of the transmission of the ANZAC spirit across the generations. On 24 April Melbourne’s Herald Sun depicted two soldiers of the First World War and Afghanistan side by side: ‘Australia’s first ANZACs and today’s modern heroes may be separated by a century but are joined by a common bond’. Two days earlier it had featured a full-page image of four primary school children dressed in oversized army jackets and slouch hats, their chests festooned with medals: the caption was ‘Heroes in our Hearts.’ On 12 April meanwhile Ben Roberts-Smith, a Victoria Cross recipient in Afghanistan, claimed that 25 April 2015 ‘is the beginning of our military history’:

A big part of who were are as Aussies. Take any bloke from Afghanistan and put them in the trenches at Gallipoli and it’s the same jokes, the same piss-taking, the same effort to do what it takes to keep the boys alive. (Cited in Rule 2015)

It was all deeply ahistorical. As French scholars Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker (2000: 10) have written, the values of the First World War generation are not today’s values, and ‘the foundation on which the immense collective consensus of 1914–18 was based … has vanished into thin air’ – but history and memory are, of course, different phenomena.

The press also enthused about the record crowds attending the dawn services: reportedly a total of 275,000 across Australia: more than 120,000 of whom were at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra; 30,000 at the Sydney Cenotaph; some 80,000 at the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance and 80,000 at King’s Park, Perth (Gough 2015; Sunday Age 2015). The Melbourne crowds were deemed particularly noteworthy, given that there had been a terrorist attack reportedly planned and the dawn service was conducted in pouring rain. The terror threat, incidentally, allowed a Herald Sun journalist to intone that ‘war [remains] a bitter reality. It’s the kind of contemporary conflict that requires a cautious eye, increased security and rigorous assurances from our leaders’ (Langmaid 2015).

Meanwhile the emotional responses of the crowds were also earnestly recorded. ‘It means a lot that we can be here for the 100 years, but also to go and see him. It’s been a mix of emotions for us today’, said one Australian woman at the site of her great-uncle’s grave at the Lone Pine ceremony, Gallipoli (cited in Carswell 2015; see also Pollard 2015). What emotions she (and many other Australians) actually felt was not discussed. While they have appeared at times to be manufactured, or a response to the powerful aesthetics of commemoration, such emotions are perhaps most appropriately understood as a form of ‘postmemory’: that is, the transmission of memories across generations ‘so deeply and affectively [that they] seem to constitute memories in their own right’ (Hirsch 2008: 107).

The ANZAC Day ceremonies therefore were in many ways a triumph for the official custodians of national memory. In Turkey, France and Belgium the various commemorative rituals clearly affirmed the nationalist narratives, but at the same time they were exemplars of the ‘soft power’ of memorial diplomacy: that is, ‘the instrumentalization of sites of memory, commemorative events and national days as a

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2 Sweet and proper it is to die for your country.
vehicle for international relations’ (Graves 2014: 169–70). In Australia, the record crowds seemed give lie to any suggestions of commemoration fatigue and to affirm the government’s position that, rather than the commemoration being orchestrated ‘from above’, there was an organic up swelling of nationalist sentiment ‘from below’.

However, it is the nature of hegemonic narratives that they exclude alternative versions of events. The crowds attending ANZAC Day dawn ceremonies were certainly large, and exceeded the expectations even of the organisers, but they constituted perhaps 1.2 per cent of the Australian population. What did the 98.8 per cent who stayed at home make of the centenary? Do they accept the message of the state that ANZAC is ‘what it means to be Australian’? These questions go to heart of the question of national identity formation in contemporary Australian society, but it is again a testament to the power of the official centenary commemorations that they are questions which few in the Australian public sphere seem inclined even to ask.

Disclosure statement

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References


