

Australia – Still yearning for a dignified way to remember the human waste at *Gelibolu* (Gallipoli)

By George Venturini \*

05 April, 2014

Countercurrents.org

“One of the most horrible features of war is that all the war- propaganda, all the screaming and lies and hatred, comes invariably from people who are not fighting.”

George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, 1938

A civic alternative must be found to the celebration of war, sinister and sectarian liturgies, the exaltation of human waste, the opportunity for mindless rhetorical exercises by political persons - who usually do no fighting, military parades - where marching is traditionally a substitute for thought, and the obscenity of dressing little children in miniature uniforms laden with someone else's medals - conferred by people who prudentially stay behind and in most times overseas, and the floating of a flag which carries the symbol of British interests (the red cross comes from the City of London Corporation - then 'the Empire' and the world's primary business centre) and of the oppression of the Irish and Scottish people (with the red saltire representing Ireland and the white saltire representing Scotland). All that mystification is a prologue to a bibulously transfixed expression of that 'mateship' often associated with a powerful sublimated homosexuality. Indeed some of its most ardent intellectual celebrants are slowly coming to see that mateship is deeply antipathetic to women. And if that sounds heretical consider the proposition that much stolid rhetoric could very well be substituted with the recital of the words that Mustafa Kemal Ataturk offered to the mothers of his former enemies:

*“Those heroes that shed their blood  
And lost their lives.  
You are now lying in the soil of a friendly country.  
Therefore, rest in peace.  
There is no difference between the Johnnies  
And the Mehments to us where they lie side by side*

*Here in this country of ours,  
 You, the mothers,  
 Who sent their sons from far away countries  
 Wipe away your tears,  
 Your sons are now lying in our bosom  
 And are in peace  
 After having lost their lives on this land they have  
 Become our sons as well”.*

\* \* \*

### A war-making tradition

For the Australian Britons, the battle of *Çanakkale*, on the southern (Asian) coast of the Dardanelles, was a disaster. As it turned out, Australia became a member of a small club of other nations - Serbia is another - the military myths and sense of nationhood of which are characterised by a celebration of defeat.

The British, with an eye on the oil-rich Ottoman Empire, had deceived and encouraged Turkey into entering the first world war the side of Central Powers.

For the Ottoman Empire and the Turks, the Battle of *Gelibolu* (Gallipoli) was a successful heroic defence of their country from foreign invaders.

The result is dramatically recorded by the Australian Department of Veterans’ Affairs:

	dead	wounded	total
Total Allies	44,092	96,937	141,029
– United Kingdom	21,255	52,230	73,485
– France (estimated)	10,000	17,000	27,000
– Australia	8,709	19,441	28,150
– New Zealand	2,721	4,752	7,473
– British India	1,358	3,421	4,779
– Newfoundland	49	93	142
Ottoman empire (estimated)	86,692	164,617	251,309

Total (both sides) 130,784 261,554 392,338

The Allies were keen to open an effective supply route to Russia: efforts on the Eastern Front relieved pressure on the Western Front. Austria-Hungary and Germany blocked Russia's land trade routes to Europe, while no easy sea route existed. The White Sea in the North and the Sea of Okhotsk in the Far East were distant from the Eastern Front and often icebound. The Baltic Sea was blocked by the German *Kaiserliche Marine*. The Black Sea's only entrance was through the Bosphorus, which was controlled by the Ottoman Empire. When the Ottoman Empire joined the Central Powers in October 1914 Russia could no longer be supplied from the Mediterranean Sea.

Late in November 1914 First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill put forward his first plans for a naval attack on the Dardanelles. The operation was aimed at securing Allied control of the Dardanelles, the strategic sea-lane separating the Aegean and Black Seas, in order to bolster the position on the eastern front of the tottering Russian Tsarist autocracy.

But the naval attacks, which had begun on 19 February 1915, failed and it was decided that ground forces were necessary to eliminate the Ottoman mobile artillery. This would allow minesweepers to clear the waters for the larger vessels. The British Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener, appointed General Sir Ian Hamilton to command the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force which was to carry out the mission.

All through August and September 1914 the Australian Government of Sir Joseph Cook - a much 'regressing' prime minister who had begun as Labor, went on as Free Trade, then Liberal and finally Nationalist with William Morris Hughes - first, and the government of the more 'stable' Laborite Andrew Fisher, prepared for war. On instruction from the Imperial Government small expeditionary forces from Australia and New Zealand occupied the German colonies in New Guinea, the Solomon and Samoa. In a manifestation of sub-imperialism, and more enthusiastic than the 'mother country', the colonials wanted to conquer Fiji and the New Hebrides. At the same time the governments called for volunteers to make up the expeditionary forces of twenty thousand men promised to Great Britain. Uniforms, wagons and harness were manufactured, ships were refitted to carry troops, food was requisitioned, and medical equipment was prepared while the volunteers trained near Sydney, and near Melbourne.

By the end of October 1914 twenty-six Australian and ten New Zealand transports had gathered in the deep waters of King George's Sound on the south coast of Western Australia, and on 1 November 1914, under an escort of British and Australian warships, the convoy steamed out on to the high seas bound for the Middle East.

By December 1914 the British General Staff had conceived the plan on weakening the Ottoman Empire and thus Turkey by forcing a passage through the Dardanelles and bombarding Constantinople. This would also relieve Ottoman and German pressure on the Russian on the Eastern Front, who were by then suffering from the defeat at Tannenberg - or, more correctly, at Allenstein (today Olsztyn). It was a plan for light-headed, a plan by those who believed a rich prize outweighed the suffering, the cruelty, and the waste of men.

Once in Egypt, the Australian and New Zealand Expeditionary Force trained for war at their camp, or relaxed and pursued pleasure in the *cafés* and the low dives, while their commanders frequented the *maisons du plaisir et de débauche* of Cairo - all unaware of the ordeal being planned for them by the men in black in London.

A.N.Z.A.C. was originally an acronym for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, assembled in Egypt, which was used by the clerks of Lieutenant General Sir William Birdwood, a senior officer in Britain's pre-1914 Indian Army, who had been appointed in December 1914 to the command of the Australian and New Zealand forces - so much for independence. General Birdwood resided at his headquarters in the Sheppard Hotel in Cairo.

All leaves were cancelled on 1 April, and the Force took the trains on 3 April from Cairo to Alexandria, where they boarded the convoy bound for the Dardanelles. Before dawn on 25 April the advance party rowed for the shore in small boats. But the current swept the boats away from the bay destined for the invasion. There the incline on the cliff was gradual. When they finally attempted to land, they faced cliffs such as they had left from the south coast of Australia. The heights of *Gelibolu* were steep, and defended by a well-equipped force trained to a fighting hedge by the German military adviser to the Ottoman Empire, General Otto Liman von Sanders.

Not much of this: the current, the excellent preparation of the defending Turks, had been considered by the planners of the invasion, sitting comfortably in London.

When the men reached the beach, and later when they attempted to scale the heights, they were met by the merciless fire of the Turkish guns.

Still, the landing was hailed 'the world over' as a masterful military feat, a brilliant display of the fighting qualities of the raw colonial troops from Australia and New Zealand, whose legend would forever be branded with their British commander Sir Ian Hamilton urging to the Anzacs: "You've got through the difficult business. Now you only have to dig, dig, dig until you are safe."

What followed was an Australian tragedy: eight months of military debacle, a general blood-bath which would leave more than 130,000 dead and over 261,000 wounded. For what ?

From April to December the Allied forces held on until the order came from London for the withdrawal. On 20 December the last of the Australians and New Zealanders embarked on the ships of a convoy instructed to take them back to Egypt. There they stayed until early in 1916 when the General Staff in London decided to move the Anzacs from Egypt to the Western Front in France.

The entire Dardanelles campaign was the brainchild of Great Britain's First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, who saw it as a master move on the chess-board he viewed as Europe at war - draw the force of the Ottoman Empire and the Turks away from the Russians, so the Russians could be freed up against the Germans, and Great Britain could emerge supreme after the destruction of Germany and the Ottoman Empire. On 5 June 1915, six weeks into the campaign, Churchill lauded the united colonial efforts on behalf of the British Empire: "The loyalty of our Dominions and Colonies vindicates our civilisation, and the hate of our enemies proves the effectiveness of our warfare ... See Australia and New Zealand smiting down, in the last and finest crusade, the combined barbarism of Prussia and of Turkey. See General Louis Botha holding South Africa for the King. See Canada defending to the death the last few miles of shattered Belgium. Look further, and, across the smoke and carnage of the immense battlefield, look forward to the vision of a united British Empire on the calm background of a liberated Europe." And never mind that Churchill will subsequently be dubbed "the butcher of Gallipoli."

However, the campaign was already going badly - the objective was proving to be tactically impossible, and the one genuine breakthrough was botched by the tardiness of the British General Sir Frederick Stopford - a 61-year old who had never commanded in battle in his life, but owed his position to 'seniority', to follow up his unopposed landing at Suvla Bay on 7 August - a tardiness which allowed the Turks to reinforce their position with all the men and guns they needed to resist.

Churchill had drooled over the early reports of the bloody fighting: “Quarter was neither asked or given; parties of Australians cut off were killed to the last man; no prisoners wounded or unwounded were taken by the Turk.” To Churchill, being cannon-fodder for the British Empire was a glorious sacrifice - it fuelled his faith that ‘the British’ could not be beaten. By mid-September, when the entire British war cabinet was finally convinced that the only option was withdrawal, Churchill protested that the size of the sacrifice in human lives so far could only be justified by victory: “It would be very hard to explain, particularly in the case of Australia, a sacrifice which had been incurred with no result.”

Unwilling to let go, he grew more strident, demanding the use of the new chemical weapon - gas - against the Turks, and an even greater sacrifice. But his was a lone, crazed voice.

On 15 November Lord Kitchener advised the Gallipoli campaign should be abandoned; in his resignation speech to the House of Commons that same day, Churchill protested: “But it seems to me that if there were any operations in the history of the world which, having begun, it was worthwhile to carry through with the utmost vigour and fury, with a consistent flow of reinforcements, and an utter disregard of life, it was the operations so daringly and brilliantly begun by Sir Ian Hamilton in the immortal landing of the twenty-fifth of April 1915.” Soon to be Australian Prime Minister, William Morris Hughes would deliriate about “the purifying breath of self-sacrifice.”

Churchill later claimed that history would vindicate him, “particularly as I intend to write the history myself”; it seems then that Churchill must be one of the authors of the subsequent glorification of the Gallipoli bloodbath to generations of Australians - a glorification taken to unprecedented heights under the leadership of former Prime Minister John Winston Howard. The real tragedy of Gallipoli is not Churchill’s fanatical imperialism, and the bloodbath it produced, but its reflection in the outlook of Australia’s population: 15 years earlier, Australians had eschewed becoming a sovereign republic, and opted for federation under the Crown, to remain part of the “British Empire of the white races.”

Such malignant, deeply racist prejudice was certainly responsible in the involvement of the three Australian light horse brigades of the four making up the Anzac Mounted Division in the ‘Surafend affair’. It occurred on 10 December 1918 and involved the premeditated massacre of 137 male inhabitants from the Arab village of Surafend near Beersheba and a Bedouin camp in Palestine. The cause of the massacre was a retaliatory response to the murder of a New Zealand soldier by a villager !

Australians Britons were there.

They had always 'been there'.

Thus, though no Australian units were engaged in operations there, many former 'diggers' and their officers became involved through service with the British Army during the North Russian Campaign, 1918-1919. They served in a variety of roles, including as advisors to 'White' Russian units as part of the North Russian Expeditionary Force. About 150 men of the Australian Imperial Force who were still in England awaiting repatriation following the end of the first world war also enlisted as infantry in the North Russia Relief Force, where they were involved, in a number of sharp battles. Despite the official Australian Government's refusal to commit forces, the Royal Australian Navy was involved too, with the destroyer HMAS *Swan* briefly engaged in an intelligence gathering mission in the Black Sea in late 1918 on behalf of the British military mission then advising the 'White' Russian General Anton Denikin.

During the second world war, when the Japanese could have invaded, no Australian soldier remained to defend Australia.

After the second world war, the Australian Army was involved in the Malayan 'Emergency' from 1955, and Australian soldiers remained in the region until 1963, three years after the conflict's official end.

Australians would subsequently be in Korea, in Vietnam, again in Malaysia, and in various peace-keeping operations 'up north'.

When the allegiance to Great Britain became 'shared' with, and later on 'transferred' to, the United States, Australian forces were sent to the first war against Iraq in 1990-1991, to Afghanistan in 2001 and, one would finally hope - alas in vain, to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Australia has been variously involved in British and American adventures for over two centuries.

As *The* (London) *Guardian's* tally of relentless war-making showed on 14 February 2014, British troops have been in action somewhere in the world every year since 1914 - one entire century. It is [an extraordinary and chilling record, unmatched by any other country](#). Only France, Great Britain's historic rival colonial power, and the United States of America, at the head of the first truly global empire, come close.

It is not as if other major powers have sent their soldiers to fight abroad with remotely such regularity, or at all. But when it comes to Great Britain, the line of uninterrupted armed action in any case stretches far further back than a century.

British forces were involved in violent suppression of anti-colonial rebellions every year from at least the 1760s for the next 200 years, quite apart from multiple other full-scale wars. One needs to go back before Great Britain's foundation as a state and the English civil wars to find a time when government-supported privateers, slavers and 'settlers' were not involved in armed conflict somewhere in the world.

There are in fact only a handful of countries that British troops have not invaded at some point. What is so striking about the tally of the past 100 years is that only in 1940 were British troops actually defending their own country from the threat of invasion.

And there is a telling continuum between Great Britain's conflicts in the colonial period and the post-cold war world. The same names keep cropping up, a legacy of imperial divide-and-rule: from Ireland, Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine to Sudan, Libya, Yemen and Waziristan.

There is very little in this saga in which the British - let alone those at the receiving end, from Kenya to Malaya - can seriously take pride, even if they knew about it. Who, for example, remembers the [killing of 15,000 Indonesian civilians by British troops](#) as they restored Dutch colonial rule in 1945 ? Even the supposed successes of 'liberal' interventionism, such as Kosovo and Libya, are scarred by escalated death tolls, ethnic cleansing and dysfunctional states.

What is it about Great Britain ? Are its people really more warlike than others ? It is this: England's early development of capitalism and technology gave its *élite* the edge over colonial rivals, while its [plunder and economic power](#) was enforced by a dominant navy. That shaped British society and delivered wealth and clout to its rulers. But for the majority there were few if any benefits. There was always a strong strand of domestic opposition to Great Britain's warmongering, from Charles James Fox, who became noted as an anti-slavery campaigner, a supporter of the French Revolution, and a leading parliamentary advocate of religious tolerance and individual liberty, and later a campaigner for votes for women and for self-rule for India and an end to segregation in South Africa, to Keir Hardie, the Scottish socialist unionist and labour leader, and the first Independent Labour Member of the Parliament of the United Kingdom. A pacifist, Hardie was appalled by the first world war



and along with socialists in other countries he tried to organise an international general strike to stop the war.

During the past two centuries, Great Britain, even recently assisted by 'loyal overseas troops' has invaded all but 22 countries in the world in its long, colourful perhaps, but not always glorious history. Force might not always have been necessary, but in other cases the threat of force was employed, forced 'negotiation' was put to use, 'payment' was otherwise exacted.

A new study has found that at various times the British have invaded almost 90 per cent of the countries around the globe. The analysis of the histories of the almost 200 countries in the world found only 22 which have never experienced an invasion by the British. Research for a recently published study, covered the 193 United Nations member states as well as the Vatican City and Kosovo, which are not member states, but are recognised by the United Kingdom Government as independent states.

'Colonial' Australians have 'always been there', when the 'mother country' would call. In some cases the initiative was independent and not necessarily 'commissioned'.

One may consider the 'first war' fought by Australians as the attempted extermination of the Indigenous People of the country. It might have passed as the defence of the new 'settlement', but it was in fact the defence of the fruits of British imperial conquest and of the state machinery built on Indigenous dispossession. It is the false logic of the receiver of stolen goods ! It began soon after 1788 and continues - in various forms - unabated. The real war might have cost the life of 2,000 'whites' and 20,000 Aborigines. The war on Tasmanian Aborigines, between 1803 and 1876, almost completely exterminated the Blacks.

Australian colonies participated in the Maori wars of 1845 to 1872.

Then the colonies went to Africa to participate in the Sudan war, from 1881 to 1898.

If South Africa was to be preserved to the English because it was laden with gold and studded with diamonds, Chinese had to be kept down to insure that they continued smoking all the opium that British ships exported to them from Burma, which had been occupied in 1885.

Australian Britons were involved in suppressing the Boxer Rebellion of 1898, which of course had a lot to do with the imposition by Great Britain on the Chinese of Bengali opium: the opium wars of 1839-1842 and 1856-1860.

Around 16,000 'colonial' Australians volunteered to fight for Great Britain in the second Boer war, 1899-1902. 28,000 women and children died in British concentration camps.

Other Boers fell victim of the Australian *Bushveldt* Carbineers. 589 colonial and post-colonial Australians lost their life. This remains Australia's third-worst conflict in terms of casualties.

Before federation, Australian colonies had been actively engaged in the kidnapping of 'forced labourers' from Pacific islands - one could call them slaves.

When 'colonial' Australians, joined together in 1901, with an Act the Imperial Parliament - mind you, they proudly proclaimed the 'White Australian Policy' on the basis of the first Australian prime minister's widely shared view that "The doctrine of equality of man was never intended to apply to the equality of an Englishman and the Chinaman." One huge colony came out of joining six pre-existing colonies.

During the years 1942-1945, at the heights of the second world war, Australia had contributed to the British-imposed Bengali Famine by withholding its huge wheat stores from starving India at the behest of the government of Great Britain. Coincidentally, Richard Gavin Gardiner Casey, better known as Baron Casey KG GCMG CH DSO MC PC FAA, was an Australian politician and diplomat who served as the colonial Governor of Bengal between 1944 and 1946 and as the 16th Governor-General of Australia between 7 May 1965 and 30 April 1969.

Australia Britons 'were there', alright.

They seem to have remained frozen in the past. Forty-five years after Casey relinquished the Governor-Generalate of Australia, the present Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, on 25 March 2014 re-introduced knights and dames and, just like Henry VIII, said that the decision was his alone. He thought of being applauded by offering the title of 'dame' to the outgoing Governor-General, henceforth to be known as Her Excellency the Honourable Dame Quentin Alice Louise Bryce AD, CVO. As an evanescent republican, she had made some 'republican noises' in a public lecture in November 2014, during the course of which Her Excellency uttered the word republic in contemplation of the future of Australia. The country which is outsourcing its asylum-seeker problem to its poorer neighbours has just reinstated an order of knights and dames in its society. Of course, Her Excellency accepted the title of Dame ! Such are Australian 'republicans'.

The incoming 26th Governor-General received the first new knighthood. He is to be known as His Excellency General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK MC. He, of course, accepted gracefully. And how could one forget the aphorism by Georges Clemenceau, prime minister of France during the first world war, to the effect that even ['War is too serious a](#)

[matter to entrust to military men](#)? Such movements are governed by and the oath of loyalty is proffered to the sitting Hanoverian, pursuant to an 1866 Act, the Imperial Act, 31 & 32 Vict. c. 72 .

Australian Britons - it seems - will be here for a long time.

\* \* \*

### History hijacked by Anzac Day

People who rely on an unwritten tradition must be provided with a long memory - if they have a long history.

The populace can afford approximation, because in the general indifference the people of 'un-history' can be made to believe and say anything, anytime - for a time, anyway. It is the triumph of an induced ignorance. As Australians approach the centenary of the start of the 'Great War for Civilisation', they are in danger of returning to a narrow, nationalistic and self-congratulatory account of the costly and ill-conceived campaign which has name Gallipoli. And in their rush to remember, those who know run the danger of forgetting.

What history is studied by the majority disregards all the mistakes, all the atrocious abuses of 226 years of invasion/occupation. That 'history' is surrounded by a continuous fog, and to top it all up, by way of short cut, the story of Australia seems to have begun at Gallipoli. That is, with the same rhetoric which triumphs at the celebration of Anzac Day.

The commemoration/celebration of a glorious defeat and the totally useless loss of almost 9,000 Australians was until recently largely left to the Returned Services League of Australia.

The influence of the former Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia, now simply R.S.L., is formidable. It derives from its founding days organising rituals for Anzac Day dawn services and marches, and Remembrance Day commemorations, in an incandescent atmosphere of nationalism, chauvinism and jingoism. Needless to say, the League has a patron - the Hanoverian queen.

This sizeable pressure group may count on some 200,000 members - only males, of course - in over 1,300 sub-branches. Initially, the role of the League became controversial as it banned women from attending the dawn service because of their wailing. In time, the rule was relaxed a bit. There are now over 5,500 women members organised in the League's women's auxiliary from almost 400 sub-branches.

Still, R.S.L. men do not cry. They are the custodians of the memory of “the battles which have changed Australia forever.” - as they would proudly say. Whether it be the hellish military folly of Gallipoli or the carnage at Fromelles, the R.S.L. is in charge. They preserve ‘the Anzac tradition’, and so it became a pillar of conservative nationalism.

Between the first and the second world wars, at least in the view of a distinguished historian, the late Ian Alexander Hamilton Turner, professor of history at Monash university in Melbourne, “the worker had no fatherland, patriotism was the last refuge of the munitions-maker ... all men were brothers, an nationalism stood on the lunatic fringe ...” Not for him the R.S.L.’s common, vulgar generalities ! Not for him the exaltation of those who might have returned and were still thrilled, obsessed with the mad race to slaughter with the bayonet - those who had stopped being ‘ordinary blokes’ and became blood-lusting murderers.

The resulting broad ‘historical picture’ is painted by the R.S.L. in colours which transform military history into the accepted history of Australia.

As the League proclaims, offering the ‘history of Anzac day’: “The date of the landing at ANZAC, the 25th April was chosen to be the day that would become our national day of commemoration. ... the date has become the day on which the nation remembers those who served and those who made the ultimate sacrifice *in all the conflicts that Australia has participated up to the present day* in the continuing struggle to preserve our freedoms in the attempt to rid the world of tyranny.” [Emphasis added]

A quick perusal has already been made, to give an idea of the madness of it all.

In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s Anzac Day was a relatively low profile event, with dwindling attendances. A more critical attitude to the Gallipoli campaign and to Australia’s relationship with British imperialism dominated - reflected for example, in Alan Seymour’s 1958 play *The One Day of the Year*. The central character in the play is a university student who regards Anzac Day as nothing but a pretext for his father and his mates to engage in drunken brawling. While Gallipoli veterans began to die in this period, many had steadfastly refused to participate in the marches and ceremonies which glorified and falsified the brutal reality of their war experiences.

Gallipoli has been held up by the Australian Establishment and men and women from both Australian major parties as a glorious defeat which marked the beginning of Australia’s nationhood. This is a vulgar lie passed around by people who might know, and certainly

should say, better. Anzac Day has become a ‘sacred day’ which commemorates the loss of more than 100,000 Australians who have died in wars fought on foreign soil.

In a country which has raised the post-modern problem of meaningless, de-cultured, post-religious existence to a world-standard level, the powers-that-be are disinterring Anzac - the new actors, through a reductionist, superficial and populist ‘discussion’ which typifies ‘public discourse’, preparing to shield themselves in the shrouds of young men, more naive, and possibly more simply decent, than professional politicians.

Former ‘Labor’ leader Kim Beazley acknowledged in 2009 that “politicians need the Anzac myth, or they would never be able to convince soldiers to go to war.”

In 1990 ‘Labor’ leader Bob Hawke was the first prime minister to attend an Anzac Day dawn service at Gallipoli, just three months before the United States launched ‘Operation Desert Storm’ against Iraq, in collaboration with Australia as one of the key allies.

Prime Ministers Hawke - ‘Labor’ and Howard - ‘Liberal’ gave new life to rhetorical nonsense. Not long before his own ‘glorious defeat’ at elections in 2007, Howard said: “You feel as an Australian [that Anzac Cove] is as much a part of Australia as the land on which your home is built.”

More recently, the proponents of new memorials in Canberra referred to the two great conflicts as [“the wars that matured our nation.”](#) Nothing was said about democracy - such as it is practiced in Australia, universal education, mass communications, the growth of cities, depressions, industrialisation, globalisation, improved crop yields, the eradication of diseases, subsidised health care, immigration, and all the other forces that most countries see as influences on their development and which might be expected to receive at least a mention - nothing else, just those two wars.

In April 2012 then Prime Minister Julia [Gillard added](#) her own bit of rhetoric. “All of us remember, because all of us inhabit the freedom the Anzacs won for us.” The obsession with past conflicts has been driven by the successive anniversaries of the Anzac landing, the much-chronicled deaths of elderly veterans, the mawkish sentimentalism of some remembrance exercises, the rise of military tourism, the sending of expeditionary forces to Iraq and Afghanistan, the celebrity status accorded to Victoria Cross - Australia’s highest decoration - winners, the recruitment of children as ‘participants’ in past battles through the Discovery Zone section of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra and the promotional

work of the Department of Veterans' Affairs and, finally, the desire of politicians to be associated with military events, even military funerals.

The then prime minister announced that Australians would be having four years of commemoration to cover the centenaries of Gallipoli and the battles on the Western Front - 1915 to 1918. The funding necessary had been set aside for up to AU\$ 83.5 million over the following seven years to run commemorative services, to provide grants to local communities so they could set up their own commemoration projects, to give money to artists to produce "creations that showcase our *military* history", and to fund a multimedia education programme "that has broad community reach to help Australians learn more about our *military* history." [Emphasis added]

A travelling exhibition of first world war memorabilia was contemplated. There will be an Anzac Interpretive Centre at Albany, Western Australia, along with a "a scoping study for a restaging of the first convoys that left from Albany in November 1914 and carried Australian and New Zealand soldiers to Egypt and Gallipoli."

No mention was made of restaging the return of convoys carrying home soldiers blinded, gassed, with missing limbs, or maddened by the ordeal. No proposal was made to examine the plight of families and communities which cared for the legion of crippled, blind and insane. "War-wrecked men" once they were called, and they carried the conflict home to their communities. Sadly, poverty, alcoholism and domestic violence were as much the legacy of war as the legends many celebrate on Anzac Day. On that day, Australia and the world should be presented for what it was: pointless and obscene. It is time to look beyond that narrow beachhead at Anzac Cove, to acknowledge the futility of war and to mourn the suffering of nations other than Australia. That is learning from history !

Nor is there any mention in Ms. Gillard's statement of the proposed Peace Studies Centre, recommended by the Anzac Centenary Commission in 2010. The Commission's report also provided a handy list of some 250 potential commemorations during the period 2014 to 2018.

The burgeoning desire for commemoration can be attributed to much deeper reasons, reasons which say something about the sort of Australia its inhabitants have become. There is something sick in the progression from the narration of something unspeakable to something about which one can never say enough. The commemoration of an immense loss has turned from what should be a quiet - almost personally intimate - remembrance of other people to an unrestrained glorification of present day Australians. The spreading of a lather of

*clichés* - most of which are as much about filling a void in the narcissistic present as lending dignity to the past - help the populace to believe that in looking at the Anzacs they are looking at themselves.

There is a certain uneasiness in certain commemorative circuses, and the sludge of banal official 'remembrance', despite the solemnity of some traditional ceremonies, like the Anzac Day dawn service at the Australian War Memorial. Incidentally, this appears to be rather exclusive in a so-called multicultural society: the service may be in the great tradition of the Judeo-Christian 'river of life', but there is more often than not no 'Judeo' component, and where is the regard for other faiths: the Hellenic tradition, the Arabs, the Muslims, why, even of those who 'do not wish to declare', or have nothing to declare ?!

On 25 April 2010 the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced the formation of the National Commission on the Commemoration of the Anzac Centenary.

The Commission was required to undertake public consultation in order to identify the broad themes, scale, scope and shape of what a commemorative programme for the Anzac Centenary period from 2014 to 2018 may look like. It was required to make a series of recommendations to the Australian Government on how most appropriately to mark the centenary. The recommendations were to take into account the broad scope and shape of commemorative, educative and interpretive initiatives and activities, and the governance process for the programme.

The Commission was also asked to consider the other significant events which would take place during the centenary period, including the 70th anniversaries of second world war events, the 70th anniversary of Australia's involvement in peacekeeping, the 70th anniversary of the Malayan 'Emergency' and the 50th anniversaries of battles which occurred during the Vietnam war.

In the foreword to its report, the National Commission for the Commemoration of the Anzac Centenary claims that "The Anzac tradition has undeniably shaped the development of Australia since the First World War."

Speaking of the creative legacy of Australia's involvement in the first world war, particularly at Gallipoli, the Commission said that its commemoration programme will give "every Australian an opportunity to ... learn about the men and women whose service was *instrumental in creating the Australia* we know and enjoy today." [Emphasis added]

But war is not a creative process. On the contrary, it is fundamentally destructive and extremely costly. War is not glorious, but messy and bloody. It takes human lives; destroys health and wellbeing; tears apart families, communities and societies. It also consumes an enormous amount of money.

The human costs of war are manifold. Intrinsicly there are physical injuries which are, if not fatal, often permanently disabling, while the mental injuries are more complex and enduring than the term 'post-traumatic-stress-disorder' can ever really encompass.

Australian war veterans are sometimes left with no job or money while they wait for their claims to be processed by the Department of Veterans' Affairs. Veterans leaving the military after deployments often face a difficult transition back to civilian life. Those suffering physical or mental injuries are hopeful it will be easier with some form of assistance from the federal government in recognition of their service. But many are finding the post-military bureaucracy a nightmare, with the Department taking up to six months to process some claims.

Modern warfare hurts the armed forces and civilian alike.

Civilians are exposed to trauma long after the fighting stops. Unexploded weapons including land mines and cluster bombs kill and injure civilians for decades and worsen poverty by preventing families from returning home or farming their land. Food production is also disrupted by land degradation and often toxic contamination.

Agent Orange is one of the herbicides and defoliants used by the British military during the Malayan 'Emergency', 1948-1960.

Americans used it during the Vietnam war. Spraying began as early as 1961 in a campaign coordinated by America's Central Intelligence Agency. By late 1964, when United States involvement in the war was on the rise, the defoliation campaign also gathered momentum, peaking between 1965 and 1967.

Australian troops were also involved in the use of Agent Orange and other herbicides and insecticides, the latter being widely sprayed in Phuoc Tuy province, particularly at Nui Dat. Even during the war herbicide use attracted growing criticism in the United States with the first reports of birth defects in children born in areas subject to aerial spraying appearing in 1965. Concerns about the use of chemical sprays and its effect on people emerged in Australia during the 1970s. Veterans began reporting high incidences of cancer while abnormalities in their offspring were also blamed on Agent Orange. The debate in Australia



about links between chemical sprays and veterans' ill health was played out in the media as growing numbers of veterans came forward claiming Agent Orange had affected their health or that of their children.

The Australian Government at first denied, of course, that Australian troops had been exposed to chemical defoliants. Involvement had begun with a lie, so how difficult was it to continue lying ? Later the government retracted its position in the face of contrary evidence.

Agent Orange, sprayed widely in Vietnam five decades ago to kill forests, increased birth deformity rates in Vietnamese children. For the Vietnamese, as well as Australian veterans of that adventure, the war still continues.

On 24 April 2012 the then Prime Minister Gillard and the Minister assisting the Prime Minister on the Centenary of Anzac announced a programme of commemorative events and initiatives to mark the Centenary of Anzac, to run from 2014 to 2018.

Just as the first Anzacs helped define our national character - they said, the Anzac Centenary will be an important time to honour and reflect upon the service and sacrifice made by members of our Defence Force, past and present.

Speaking in Singapore before heading for Gallipoli Prime Minister Gillard announced that government was to provide AU\$ 83.5 million over seven years to implement the programme. Key elements of the program include:

the refurbishment of the first world war galleries at the Australian War Memorial;

the refurbishment of war graves to ensure individual and collective memorials to Australian war dead, in Australia and overseas, would be properly maintained;

the funding for the running of commemorative services overseas during the Centenary;

the provision of local grants to help communities carry out their own Anzac Centenary commemoration projects, with funding to be available from January 2013;

the setting up of an Arts and Culture Fund to support individuals, artists and cultural institutions to develop commemorative displays and artistic creations to showcase Australian military history;

the preparation of a multimedia education programme with broad community reach to help Australians learn more about their military history;

the funding of a scoping study for a travelling exhibition or similar, which would take important memorabilia from the first world war and subsequent conflicts out to communities across Australia;

the funding for the establishment of the Anzac Interpretive Centre at Albany;

the preparation of a scoping study for a restaging of the first convoys which left from Albany in November 1914 and carried Australian and New Zealand soldiers to Egypt and Gallipoli; and

the granting of support to continue the work of the Anzac Centenary Advisory Board, which would play a key role in shaping planning for the Anzac Centenary commemorations.

The Chair of the Anzac Centenary Advisory Board, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, AC, AFC (Ret'd), welcomed the funding programme and noted that "The Board and its Business Group will also have an essential role in encouraging appropriate private sector sponsorship in relevant Centenary activities and projects." Anzac would become good for business !

*The (Melbourne) Age* commented quite succinctly: "Anzac Day ... is not a celebration. And it is because of the importance of retaining this character of solemn commemoration that *The Age* has long argued that declaring Anzac Day the national day would be a mistake. For the record, we believe that if there is to be a change it would be best to wait until Australia *finally casts off the vestiges of its colonial past by declaring itself a republic*: that would be unambiguously a day of national self-affirmation, worthy to be celebrated as such thereafter. [Emphasis added]

Another reason why April 25 cannot be claimed as uniquely *our* day should be apparent each time the word 'Anzac' is uttered, though Australians too readily fail to hear it. [Emphasis in original] The first Anzacs were so called because they comprised an Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, and the solemnity of this day has always been marked as much across the Tasman as it has here. The day properly belongs to both nations, and Australia should do nothing that might suggest otherwise."

On 25 April 2012 Prime Minister Gillard attended the dawn service at Gallipoli, the first Australian prime minister to visit Gallipoli on Anzac Day since John Howard did in 2005. Ms. Gillard paid homage to the defending Turks. She was eloquent, generous and moving, but could not avoid the customary rhetoric.

"Through Turkey's hospitality, we do today what those who left these shores most dearly

hoped:

We come back.

As we will always come back.

To give the best and only gift that can matter anymore - our remembrance.

We remember what the Anzacs did in war.

And for what they did to shape our nation in peace.”

And later:

“All of us remember, because all of us inhabit the freedom the Anzacs won for us.”

Coming from a prime minister, nay from a woman, this amounts to stuff ready for a turbocharged festival. And one could readily wonder whether the fuel for such festival was to be drawn only from two sources: ‘mateship’ and ‘nation-building’.

As for mateship, it appears to have been forged as much in an Australian disdain for British objection to the ‘diggers’ propensity to indulge in war crimes against the Arabs populations. Much of what is derided as ‘stuffy’ British reaction to Australians’ rough-and-ready boys was really Field Marshal Edmund Henry Hynman Allenby, 1st Viscount Allenby GCB, GCMG, GCVO, solemn hypocrisy in showing his disgust at an army which looked on the mass killing of Arabs with grand insouciance - possibly a habit which was unquestionably a transfer of ‘white’ attitudes to Black Australians onto a new indigenous population.

And as for ‘nation-building’, Prime Minister Gillard’s speech amplified all the nationalist myths which have been generated during the past century about Australia’s participation in the first world war. Describing Anzac Cove as “sacred soil”, Ms. Gillard declared that the Australian soldiers who fought there had created a “new story for a new nation.” Ascribing militarist values to the very establishment of the Australian nation state, she continued: “The laws and institutions of our nation were laid down in 1901. But here, in 1915, its spirit and ethos were sealed. This was our first act of nationhood in the eyes of a watching world, an act authored not by statesmen or diplomats, but by simple soldiers ...”

Far from having anything to do with ‘freedom’ or ‘democracy’, the first world war erupted as a ferocious struggle between the major European capitalist states. It was an annexationist, predatory, war of plunder on the part of both sides; it was a war for the division of the world, for the partition and repartition of colonies and spheres of influence of finance capital.” And the fact that those words belong to Vladimir Illyich Ulyanov, better known as Lenin, leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution, does not make them any the less true.

It is true that Ms. Gillard made the point at Lone Pine: “Our federal bond was young when the Anzacs came to this place. The laws and institutions of our nation were laid down in 1901.”

But she could not help adding:

“But here, in 1915, its spirit and ethos were sealed. ... This was our first act of nationhood in the eyes of a watching world, an act authored not by statesmen or diplomats, but by simple soldiers. The Anzacs.”

Speaking after addressing the service, Ms. Gillard said Anzac Day had “organically grown into what it is” and had meaning for all Australians, including migrants such as herself.

“It wasn’t forced at the start, we didn’t have Anzac Day created by an act of Parliament or because a prime minister or a premier had a bright idea.” she said.

“That organic sense of growth has taken us to a new place with Anzac Day.”

No historical fact was permitted to intrude upon the official Anzac Day ceremonies. Nor was there any mention of how deeply unpopular the first world war was at the time. In reality, the Australian Government’s attempts to impose conscription were twice defeated in referenda held in 1916 and 1917.

Ms. Gillard would subsequently go on to hail Gallipoli’s “tradition of arms”, which had been “passed down unbroken over a century to more recent conflicts”, and to refer specifically to the adventure in Afghanistan.

Support for that invasion was a common theme of Anzac 2012, what with former Governor General Quentin Bryce travelling to Afghanistan to “reflect on our proud military history” and to pay tribute to the “modern Anzacs” and former Treasurer Wayne Swan exalting Anzac Day as about the “principle of justice - the principle that nations that trample on the rights of others must be resisted.” He then hallucinated by saying that the Australian soldiers in Afghanistan “know that equality is a cause worth fighting for - that, even when we fight a long way from home, their struggle ennobles all of us.” Here is the identification of each modern Australian with the ‘digger’ at Gallipoli !

But there is still a sliver of hope: in April 2012 the governments of Australia and Turkey agreed to declare 2015 reciprocal years - Turkey Year in Australia and Australia Year in Turkey. It remains to be seen what the directors and choreographers in residence of the Australian multicultural circus will make of it !

In 2012 a visitor to the ‘sacred place’ would have been confronted with buses and vans as far as one could see, security gates, grandstands, searches, massive screens showing *collages* of military history, coffee outlets - something of a circus. The crowd, consisting overwhelmingly of Australian and New Zealand backpackers, had begun filing to the site early the previous day, when the entertainment had started. Was Anzac Day turning into a paganised Big Day Out ?

Some re-thinking would not go amiss for the 2014-and-onwards activities, so that the dawn service manages to reach a balance between remembrance/celebration and reverence, national identity and the contemplation of the global calamity which was Gallipoli.

\* \* \*

Anzac, biggest - humongous

Some twelve months from the Anzac centenary, Australia is gearing up for an enormous celebration to mark the hundredth anniversary of the Gallipoli landing. 8,000 Australians will travel to Anzac Cove for the event and over AU\$ 325 million is to be outlaid on first world war commemorations, more than double the amount Great Britain plans to spend.

The Anzac legend has generated an enormous ‘industry’ and now one Army veteran is wondering whether Australians’ obsession with Anzac has gone too far.

On 13 February 2014, interviewed on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Programme 7.30 Report, former Captain James Brown, who had just published a book by the title: *Anzac’s long shadow - The cost of our national obsession*, wondered whether Australians “were about to embark on a four-year festival for the dead which in some cases looks like a military Halloween.”

The reporter, having commented that commemorating Australia’s war dead has become big business and it’s about to get bigger.” was able to introduce clips with quotations from three past prime ministers:

Here is Hawke: “ ... Because these hills rang with their voices and ran with their blood.”

Then Howard: “ ... Australia, a lasting sense of national identity.”

Recently Gillard: “ ... but here, in 1915, its spirit and ethos were sealed.”

James Brown went on: “It tells us something about the importance of Anzac in Australia that we are spending 200 per cent more on commemorating the anniversary of the first world war than Britain is. Australia, a country that is trying to cut back spending in almost every other area of government policy, is spending money on an Anzac arms race, looking for bigger and better ways to commemorate the service of our war dead.”

And further: “There’s merchandising, there are tours, there are cruises, there are surfboat races, there are stonemasons who are whipping together memorials all across the country and actively selling their product to sub branches of RSLs and other community groups. So, there’s a lot of money in this. I mean, just managing the events in Turkey over the next couple of years will cost the Government AU\$ 27 million, which is going to a company in Melbourne. So people are making money and living off the Anzac industry.”

The national president of the R.S.L. tried to differ: “ It’s not a national obsession, it is part of our makeup, it is part of what makes us Australia. It’s part of our ... - the richness of our society, the fact that we do honour those - those and not only those who fought and died, but those who fought and return, those who stood up at home.”

Of course, Rear Admiral Ken Doolan is chair of the War Museum and helped to design the centenary activities.

James Brown continued: “We’re commissioning new histories about the soldiers at Gallipoli when we haven’t even begun writing the history of soldiers at East Timor, in Iraq or in Afghanistan. We’re spending three times as much money on Anzac Day ceremonies over the next four years as we are on the problem of mental health for those soldiers coming back with post-traumatic stress disorder. And for me, I can’t understand it.”

And then he sank the sword: “If we really believe what we say about Anzac, then why aren’t we spending that money looking after the soldiers right here and now ?” Right !

Two weeks later Mr. Brown came back for a second service: “Rather than letting silent contemplation be our offering to those who served and died for us, we are embarking on a discordant and exorbitant four-year festival, that looks like an Anzacs arms race of sorts.

Across the country, and in the Dardanelles, Australians are looking for bigger and better ways to salute our military forebears. And many companies are looking to cash in.

In 2015 cruise ships will ply Anzac Cove as Bert Newton narrates the war. [Mr. Newton is an Australian ‘television personality’, celebrity, and stage performer] One company has applied for permission to market an Anzac ice-cream, another here in Melbourne has been awarded \$27million in contracts for Anzac events management. Government is crafting an Anzac merchandising plan to match. A century after Gallipoli, the Anzac spirit is being bottled, stamped, and sold.”

And Mr. Brown warned: “Because of our constant stories of Anzac, many Australians believe in the *exceptionalism* of the Australian soldier.” [Emphasis added] Australians had convinced themselves, and many Britons as well, of their superiority as soldiers. But does it make sense to see comradeship or courage under fire as unique to the Australian soldier ?

Returning to his subject on the last day of February 2014, six months into the new ‘conservative’, nay reactionary Abbott Government, Brown dryly compared the engraving at the War Memorial in Sydney’s Hyde Park: “Let silent contemplation be your offering” with the vulgarity of public commemoration, slick with a nostalgia that only further separates civilians from soldiers.

“This year an Anzac festival begins, a commemorative programme so extravagant it would make a sultan swoon.” he said. “But commemorating soldiers is not the same as connecting with them.”

Brown also sees a great rift between spending many millions on the voices of dead soldiers and the federal government’s suffocation of the voices of living ones. Australia has one of the more opaque militaries in the ‘western world’, one the centrally run communications team of which routinely thwarts media attention and, ultimately, the people’s understanding of modern deployments.

In evaluating Australian military - and Australia’s fixation with its past - Brown seeks the middle ground. He dispenses with the either/or tribalism which strains so much of public debate - such as it is: a sophistry which declares any criticism of the Anzac myth exposes an anti-military sentiment. He argues that the military is un-served by politicians’

“gratuitous praise” - often the product of ignorance - and finds telling the near absence of former soldiers in Parliament. He is further critical of the military’s idolatry of the larrikin soldier, which he says has forged a culture suspicious of officers which favours egalitarianism over excellence. *Larrikin* is a word of Australian slang which, until very recently meant “a lout, a hoodlum” or “a young urban rough, a hooligan” and has been redesigned to mean: “a mischievous young person, an uncultivated, rowdy but good hearted person”, or “a person who acts with apparent disregard for social or political conventions.”

\* \* \*

## Is anybody listening ?

So, what are the important point of Anzac story ?

What are the questions ?

One should begin with former Captain Brown: “If we really believe what we say about Anzac, then why aren’t we spending that money looking after the soldiers right here and now ?”

It is easy for the so-called conservatives in Australia asking the question: “Why ?” - and simply to promote Anzac Day as a day for patriotism and nationalism. However, for those Australians who care for the lives of the more than 100,000 Australians needlessly dying on foreign soil, and the pain and suffering of their parents, brothers, sisters, spouses, children, relatives and friends as a result of losing a loved one, the history of Anzac should be the day for self-reflection and soul searching. Australians should ask themselves, quietly: Why ?

Why do Australian men in power - it is always mostly men - have to sacrifice the lives of so many of Australian young men and now women, and the happiness of their families, to engage in wars across the globe simply because the British and the Americans want Australians to join them ?

How long will they carry on following the British and the Americans blindly, unquestioningly ? To what and where do Australia’s national interests lie ?

And why should the confidence which came from Gallipoli, combined with the fear of invasion, have left Australians with an unjustified swagger combined with a forelock-tugging dependence on ‘great and powerful friends’ ?



Is it not highly embarrassing that people have this ‘romantic’ idea that Australians were all heroic ?

And should it not, in the end, be better to call the Day as Gallipoli Day, recognising the role in that global calamity of Australia’s allies: the 480,000 ‘British’ - from India, Newfoundland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom - of course; the 79,000 ‘French’ - including the ‘colonials’ from Algeria, Morocco and Senegal; and - on the other side - the role of 315,500 Turks ?

Is Australia going to be offered, at the cost of AU\$ 325 million, a gigantic Anzac Theme Park - maybe a series of them - straddling the country’s first world war battlefields in Gallipoli, Palestine and the Western Front ?

Should Australia, as a nation, remember the fallen and the living, the disabled and the broken and both its own victims and those that it caused in foreign lands ?

It would be a long time before receiving a meaningful reply from the incumbent Prime Minister.

Speaking in Darwin at a welcome home for troops who served in Afghanistan or as part of ‘Operation Slipper’ in the Middle East, which includes those who served on bases in the emirates or naval operations in the Persian Gulf, Mr. Abbott announced that Australia is to have an Anzac Day-style national commemoration for the war in Afghanistan, to ensure that the bitter experience of returning Vietnam veterans is not repeated for those who have served in Australia’s longest war.

21 March 2015 - barely a month before the centenary of the landing of the Anzacs at Gallipoli - will be the first national day of commemoration for the war in Afghanistan, in which 40 servicemen have lost their lives. State governments have agreed.

In October 2014 Prime Minister Abbott had gone to Afghanistan with the Leader of the Opposition for a special ceremony at the Australian base in Tarin Kowt in Oruzgan province to mark Australia’s withdrawal.

Mr. Abbott told the troops and Afghan leaders that “Australia’s longest war is ending.” ... “Not with victory, not with defeat, but with, we hope, an Afghanistan that is better for our presence here.”

Over more than a decade, nearly 30,000 Australian men and women have served in and around the conflict in the valleys and mountains of Afghanistan. In addition from 40 who have lost their life, more than 260 have been wounded. At the height of the war, there were

1,550 Australian army, navy and air force personnel in Afghanistan. Australia still has 400 personnel serving in Afghanistan ‘as advisers’.

Taking one more occasion for inflated political rhetoric in his Darwin speech, Mr. Abbott had the temerity to say that the troops serving in Afghanistan were like the ‘diggers’ who fought Nazism and Communism, and declared that the high price had been “worth it.”

Mr. Abbott said that Australian troops who served in Afghanistan had been fighting for an important principle: “The rights of the weak against the strong, the rights of the poor against the rich, and the rights of all to strive for the very best they can.” ... “Like your forebears who fought militarism, who fought Nazism and Fascism, and who fought Communism, you have fought for the irreversible decencies of mankind.”

Mr. Bill Shorten, the Leader of the Opposition, would determine to do no less. He said that it was a tremendous privilege to welcome the troops back to their families and to safety. “You here have taken the vow of absence from home, the vow of absence from family; you put yourselves in unimaginable danger and risk.” ... “All Australians admire courage. All of us aspire to be strong. You exemplify the best of us. Thank you and welcome home.” That is what is called ‘by-partisanship’ in Australia !

That is also turning Australian history, with or without Anzac, into a *pastiche* of patriotism.

It may be worth observing that Mr. Abbott holds a B.Ec. and an LL.B. from the University of Sydney and was a Rhodes Scholar at The Queen’s College, Oxford, where he graduated with an M.A. in philosophy, politics and economics - P.P.E.

Mr. Abbott could see himself as a kind of (*manqué*) clerical philosopher, a modern time Joseph de Maistre. He is not. He qualifies, at best, as a *chutzpanik* ! - a person of unmitigated effrontery or impudence.

\* \* \*

### Looking for an explanation

On Anzac Day Australians talk of duty, sacrifice and mateship, while extolling how an immortal element of national identity was ‘created’ from the blood and bullets of Gallipoli - hardly a way to begin a serious discussion of the subject.

Attending dawn services, watching marches on television, listening to interviews does not help either. Public ‘discussion’ - if that word should be spoiled - is largely the province

of the media, and media reporting does not go beyond superficial, jingoistic and patriotic outpourings.

The late Lloyd Robson, reader in History at the University of Melbourne, and a memorable teacher, used to tell his undergraduate students that Anzac Day was the “nation’s collective funeral.”

Ken Inglis, Emeritus Professor at Australian National University observed in his *Sacred places : war memorials in the Australian landscape* that “scholars newly curious about the emotional history of Australia would do well to include among their sources, the uses, public and private, made of war memorials by people living with their grief.”

Public discussion has transformed over the last 20 years or so to become a populist commemorative experience of Anzac and in some ways the glorification of war.

In a book by the provocative title *What’s wrong with Anzac?* and the even more provocative subtitle *The militarisation of Australian history*, Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, both distinguished professors at Australian universities responded to their very question: “Why do we accord the Anzac story priority over every other aspects of our history ?” by arguing that “... the sudden rush to embrace 25 April as the Australian story has resulted in a crowning irony; in transforming Anzac Day into a sacred myth, we have forgotten our rich and diverse history of nation-making and distorted the history of Gallipoli and its imperial context and consequences.”

In a public defence of their thesis they wrote:

“What we find remarkable, ... is the sudden reinvigoration of Anzac and its impact on the writing of Australian history, contributing to what we have called the militarisation of that history. ... Federal government departments and instrumentalities have been involved in unprecedented ways in the creation and dissemination of curriculum materials relating to war in a direct attempt to influence the content of classroom teaching. That upsurge of interest in war has also swept the wider community.

The replanting of memorial avenues of trees, expansion and refurbishment of old and almost forgotten monuments and building of new ones, the restoration of decaying monuments, the resumption of antiquated rhetoric - called back into service and put to new uses, the conviction that war was the ultimate test for both nations and men, the beckoning threshold to individual heroism and national maturity have become “the central claim that Australia became a nation at Anzac Cove” and are “the product of these ideas.”

The ‘Anzac legend’ perpetuates an attitude to war in general and to the first world war in particular. But “The belief that it was a source of unique and positive national virtue sails directly into the winds of contemporary global interpretations, which portray the conflict as the prime source of the brutalisation of the 20th century that fuelled vast and terrible violence.”

Nor did Lake and Reynolds stop there.

They acutely observed that “It is essential to look again at the overbearing idea that the spirit of the nation was born among the members of the Australian Imperial Force on active service on the other side of the world. A significant problem with this proposition is the very uniqueness of their experience. The soldiers were far removed from normal life and its complex web of kinship, affections and responsibilities. They were in the distinctive situation of being in all-male company for years on end, and even then their associates were drawn from a very narrow male age cohort. We might well ask how such an unnatural society could give birth to a spirit of general relevance.”

The author de-mystified the ‘*dulce et decorum*’ rhetoric, largely passed about by people who do not do the fighting, when they wrote:

“Added to this is the fact that despite the evidence of their anti-authoritarianism, the soldiers were governed by military laws which compelled obedience and severely punished mutiny or insubordination. They had to do as they were told and, even if grudgingly so, obey their senior officers.

Their experience was far removed from the norms of civil society. And then there is the inescapable matter of violence. It shadowed the experience of soldiers in a way unthinkable in ordinary life in Australia itself. The fear of cowardice was not unknown at home, but at the front it assumed compelling importance.

The conflict at Gallipoli, in particular, was often conducted at close quarters, accompanied by vicious hand-to-hand fighting with direct, personal experience of killing. Respect, admiration and decoration accrued to those who could do it without flinching or even with dark, triumphant elation.”

According to Lake and Reynolds, “The source of the Anzac spirit, according to (C. E. W. Bean, the pre-eminent founder and celebrant of the Anzac legend) was not to be found in military battle, but in the distinctive character of outback life in the colonies. The diggers

were citizen soldiers. A further complication for the current apotheosis of the spirit of the Anzacs is that *they were men of their time and therefore convinced white supremacists.*

*They were the proud representatives of the white Australia policy, which promoted racial purity at home and abroad. Indeed, much of their self-confidence and élan came from their belief in their racial superiority.* They embodied it in their swagger, proud bearing and well-nourished physiques. The dark side of such racial cockiness was the contemptuous treatment of non-Europeans and, in the Middle East, the Egyptians, Turks, Palestinians and Bedouin.

*Some of the Australians behaved like overbearing bullies in their dealings with the people whose countries they were occupying.* Others expressed amused kindly condescension. The British authorities found this pattern of behaviour particularly useful when they used the [\[Australian Imperial Force\]](#) to help put down the nationalist uprising in Egypt in 1919 after the end of hostilities.” [Emphasis added]

And there was more: “The accompanying atrocities have been largely forgotten or repressed, which is not really surprising, for how would we explain [the] arrogant contempt for other people’s nationalist aspirations in terms of the spirit we wish to associate with our national character ? And how do we explain this to a world that still remembers the white Australia policy and remains only half convinced of our much-proclaimed recantations ?

*In explaining the historic return to Anzac in the last decade we have seen a clear relationship between the militarisation of Australian history and the controversy over Aboriginal history known as the history wars.* The same political leaders who emphasise the importance of our military heritage have been demonstrably uncomfortable when asked to deal with the century-long conflict on the frontiers of settlement. *Thus we show no embarrassment, indeed even feel pride, in our invasion of Turkey at the behest of the British, but great reluctance to acknowledge the British invasion of Australia.*” [Emphasis added]

The passionate authors noted that: “In the Anzac War Memorial Museum in Auckland there is a monument to the memory of all those who gave their lives during the New Zealand wars of 1845-72. How long will it be before a similar monument is commissioned in Australia? And what of the leaders of Aboriginal resistance ?” but in Canberra “The leadership of the Australian War Memorial stoutly resists any suggestion that they should give recognition to domestic warfare.”

To the forthcoming critics the authors launched the gauntlet: “There is no doubt that many Australians found the public discussion of frontier violence deeply disturbing and adopted the

pejorative term ‘black armband history’ as a way of discrediting the new critical history. It was time then to open up a new front in the history wars.”

“Black armband” was a term coined by the extremely ‘conservative’ Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey, one of the major exponents of a profession - that of the historians - which was largely complicit in the silence over the attempted extermination of the Indigenous People. The term was very widely and effectively later used by former Prime Minister Howard. The critics refer to a desire to place ‘undue emphasis on unsavoury and violent aspects of Australian history’ at the expense of the ‘positives of European settlement’. Try invasion !

Lake and Reynolds were concerned that “Admiration, not analysis, is what is now expected from historians.” They were aware of the upsurge of interest in ‘doing justice to the celebration of the Anzac spirit’, and they noted the proliferation of war books and the popularity of pilgrimages to Gallipoli, the battlefields of France and the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea, known for being the location of the second world war battle between Japanese and Australian forces in 1942.

But Lake and Reynolds also knew that many Australians are deeply disturbed by and recoil from what they called “the relentless militarisation of our history.” They shared this feeling, of course, but were troubled that “in the myth of Anzac, military achievement are exalted above civilian ones.”

In their book they detailed the millions of dollars which have been spent since the late 1990s inculcating Australian schoolchildren with the virtues of diverse military campaigns and their key role in shaping the country’s heritage, history and ‘national values’.

With none left in Australian society who can bear direct witness to the obscenity of the first world war - and which war does not strongly offend the morality of any time ? - Australian schoolchildren are charged with the onerous responsibility of keeping the distorted Anzac legend alive, wrapped in a flag which is only questionably Australian, on the far shores of Turkey, imbued with history lessons about ‘the diggers fighting there for freedom and democracy’.

Far from being regarded as the ‘birth of Australian nationhood’, the first world war tied the country more strongly to the British Empire.

The authors suggested, instead, “that Australians might look to alternative national traditions that gave pride of place to equality of opportunity and the pursuit of social justice: the ideals

of a living wage and decent working conditions, the long struggle for sexual and racial equality.”

\* \* \*

### The ‘Anzac spirit’ revealed ?

Probably since the arrival of television, certainly in recent times, most Australians have ‘commemorated’ Anzac Day ... by watching. That has been the most successful Anzac Day for many.

In that way, during the past twenty years, Anzac Day has been consciously managed and marketed by official bodies of all kinds, and commercial enterprises of all colours. The formal has been provided with official parades, dawn services and wreath layings. The more accessible is offered in the games of two-up, the jokes, banter and ‘celebratory’ beer drinking - and a lot of it. Two-up is a traditional Australian gambling game, involving a designated ‘spinner’ throwing two coins or ‘pennies’ into the air. Players gamble on whether the coins will fall with both heads up, both tails up, or with one coin a head, and one a tail. Not too brainy, for sure, it is traditionally played on Anzac Day in pubs and clubs throughout Australia, in part to mark a shared experience with ‘diggers’ through the ages. Excessive drinking has a ‘patriotic’ meaning: it is justified as a way of marking the experience of ‘diggers’ by repeating the ceremony of giving a tot of rum - usually an eighth of a pint - to the original Anzacs before they went ‘over the side’ in the slaughter at Gallipoli. As a way of ‘commemorating’, the ritual assures that ‘the spirit of Anzac’ will not die.

On 31 July 2002 it was reported that ‘Military admits Vietnam War was a mistake’. Ah, not only a lie by Menzies sent Australians to get killed in Vietnam; they were led by a platoon commander, who now is His Excellency General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK MC in charge of the Australian Governor-Generalate, and who declared that “the war was a mistake.”

In 2002 the then Head of the Defence Force, General Peter Cosgrove and the Retired Services League said that Australia’s contribution was never going to be successful.

General Cosgrove won the Military Cross for his efforts in Vietnam but now he thinks the war was a mistake. He added that “with a conflict with Iraq on the horizon, it’s the right time to discuss Vietnam.” The same commander risked this much: “I think the people in

Vietnam across the board, ultimately seemed to prefer self-determination rather than the presence of a large number of foreign troops.” Oh, if the 521 dead soldiers could hear that admission !

Ten years later the same General Cosgrove confirmed that heroes and booze are the unhealthy mix at the core of Australian ‘culture’.

On the occasion of Anzac ‘commemorations’, General Cosgrove - by then well retired and with a certainly adequate pension - was seen on television in a ‘Raise a glass’ for Anzac advertisement on behalf of a well known beer-maker.

‘Raise a glass’ was designed to raise money and awareness for the R.S.L. and Legacy’s welfare programmes. Legacy is a charity which provides support to families who have been left without proper means after the death of a loved one in active military duty.

All this may be a meritorious enterprise. But when a beer-maker funds an advertisement featuring a ‘war hero’ gazing out to sea with two amber ales, one’s sober reaction may not be so favourable.

In the advertisement, then General Cosgrove sits in a bar and tells the viewers us that the beer-maker will again donate AU\$ 1 million to veterans’ welfare. “I’ll be raising a glass to the men and women [serving] in the Middle East.” he says. And asks: “Who will you raise a glass to ?”

The advertisement starts and finishes with a lingering shot of two foaming beers. It is for a good cause, yes, but one is entitled to ask: is the beer-maker using Anzac Day to sell its product ?

The message that one should honour Australian soldiers by drinking seems self-serving, to say the least. Some people may have a difficulty in following the exhortation, on thinking how many returned soldiers and their families have been harmed by alcoholism. Alcohol causes major harm to individuals and others and costs Australians over AU\$ 15 billion a year.

One does not wish to be branded as a wowser; but often the children are watching, possibly, implicitly, linking heroism to alcohol, identifying ‘real heroes’ with ‘real drinkers’.

The message is unambiguous: here is a beer company ‘doing the right thing’, donating in the cause of freedom and defence of Australia.

The viewers are encouraged to go to a website to register their interest in attending a dawn service on Anzac Day. Other iconography appears on the commercial, most prominently the



badge of Legacy Australia and the R.S.L. But the website to which the viewer is directed is, in fact, a website for the beer-maker's 'Raise a glass' Appeal on Anzac Day.

Anzac Day should be a day of quiet reflection and devoted respect, not a chance for a beer-maker opportunistically to market beer on the back of nationalistic sentiment. If nothing else, Australians need to work together as a community to improve their drinking habit, so that they can reduce the widespread harm it is causing the community. Hospital admissions, and other indicators of alcohol related-harm including assaults, 'spike' on Anzac Day - and Australia Day, too - every year. The last thing Australians need is beer-makers implying that people are not saluting those who served if they are not drinking their beer - and drinking in excess.

The idea of "the man with a beer at the bar" contains a semiotic power which can be traced back more than a century, to the character of Henry Lawson, Australia's then most respected author, poet and balladist, as well as the characters in his fiction. More than any other author Lawson's short stories and poems seem to capture the quintessential form of Aussie manhood celebrated and emulated over the last century. What is that quintessence? It is distinctly working class, bronzed by the sun, with thongs, earthy, laid back - that is to say informal, having a relaxed or casual way, easygoing, untroubled and, above all, loyal to his 'mates', with a touch of larrikin and, of course, a grand taste for liquor. This, of course, is a self-indulgent caricature. But it is meant to be the complete antithesis of the English, middle-class model of masculinity: the lofty, refined, reserved, stiff-upper-lip type in a hounds-tooth jacket.

It is also a quintessence of character which feeds a masculine fantasy which, when served up in the 'real world', often carries with it something far less appealing. Lawson, after all, and if that were to be the 'model, was an alcoholic whose life and happiness were deeply marred by his drinking.

Now to be referred to as His Excellency General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK MC, Peter Cosgrove was named 2001's Australian of the year. As Chief of the Defence Force since 2002, he met the qualities that Australians have come to recognise in him: strength, determination, intelligence, compassion and humour. At the end of January 2014 General Cosgrove was designated as Australia's 26th Governor-General, replacing Quentin Bryce. He is portrayed as a popular, 'apolitical' choice for the role. Adulation on occasions such as this runs almost wild. He has ascended to his office on 28 March 2014.

As chief of the Defence Force General Cosgrove oversaw Australia's involvement in the so-called 'war on terrorism'. His tenure was not without controversy. In 2004 he criticised the then Australian Federal Police chief for expressing concerns that the Iraq war had prompted terrorist train bombings in Spain on the morning of 11 March 2004. He later apologised for the comments, admitting that the Iraq war had indeed heightened global terrorism.

In 2013, ten years after Australian troops were first sent to the Middle East, General Cosgrove conceded that he had 'mixed feelings' about Australia's involvement. Would he now have 'mixed feelings' about being used as front-man for a beer-maker, urging television viewers to 'raise a glass' of beer with him on Anzac Day ?

The fact of the matter is that many pubs on the 'One day of the year' are really not concerned about losing any sense of civility or reflection of sacrifice, particularly at the coming of closing time when the incidence of violence increases dramatically.

One does not need to 'raise a glass' to remember. To do that one needs a clear head.

\*\*\*\*\*

\* Dr. Venturino Giorgio Venturini devoted some sixty years to study, practice, teach, write and administer law at different places in four continents. On 25 April, every year since 1945, he remembers the Liberation of Italy from the Nazi-fascists by the people of the Resistance, victorious after the twenty months during which he was 'coming of age'. He may be reached at *George.Venturini@bigpond.com*.