

The Australian Left & the Anzac Tradition

There are millions...who are ready to pluck the sceptre from nerveless hands so soon as the old spirit is allowed to degenerate...England has time...to put her military affairs in order; time to implant and cherish the military ideal in the hearts of her children; time to prepare for a disturbed and anxious twentieth century...From the nursery and its toys to the Sunday school and its cadet company, every influence of affection, loyalty, tradition and education should be brought to bear on the next generation of British boys and girls, so as deeply to impress upon their young minds a feeling of reverence and admiration for the patriotic spirit of their ancestors.

General Sir Ian Hamilton published these opinions in *A Staff Officer's Scrapbook* in London in 1905. His words echoed throughout the British Empire, including the young Dominion of Australia.¹ Hamilton was a largely conventional military thinker whose interpretation of the strategic challenge facing the Empire channelled mainstream opinion. He was to command the Allied Mediterranean Expeditionary Force landed at Gallipoli without particular distinction, although in fairness it should be said that his command was a poisoned chalice. His plan for mass indoctrination of youth in the glories of imperial patriotism was effectively establishment policy in the years leading up to the Great War throughout the Empire, implemented in Australian schools and universities amongst others.² The rallying to the colours which saw so many eligible Australian men and boys volunteer for the Great War in 1914 can't be understood apart from this prior ideological preparation. Hamilton's program was successfully implemented.

The Anzacs were accordingly a deeply indoctrinated generation. Patsy Adam-Smith recorded in the wake of the Vietnam War, another highly ideological imperial venture in which we subsequently involved ourselves headlong, that few of the Anzacs could even after the Great War articulate their motivation for volunteering, so deep were the cultural well-springs of that fateful decision.³ The question in this Anzac Centenary year of 2015 is: are we really very different, culturally and institutionally? A Prime Minister can still send us to war without facing Parliament, for example.⁴ Our King may be a Queen, and 'our empire' may belong to a President, but what else has changed? Hardly the pre-disposition of some amongst us to be in like Flynn.

Are our media any more enlightening than our press was in 1914? In South Australia, the coverage in the *Adelaide Advertiser* of the European July Crisis, which precipitated the Great War after the assassination at Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, was spasmodic if not cursory. The loyal imperial response generated in the week following news of the Habsburg ultimatum to Serbia of 23 July⁵ was colonial second nature, not an index of the work of an informed and informative press.

In 1928, barely a decade after the Armistice which had ended the almost senseless slaughter of the Great War, the Communist Party of Australia organ *The Workers' Weekly*

published a letter from a returned Anzac, who signed himself 'A Class Conscious Digger'. He declare

Anzac Day has become a day of imperial boasting and military boosting... On Anzac Day, capitalists, politicians and priests will don their silk hats and decorations and come out and chant about Anzac in order to build up a new military tradition in Australia, to get ready new Anzacs for recruiting, to prepare young Australia for another bloody massacre.⁶

The Australian Left, both political and cultural, has been complaining ever since in much these terms about what Humphrey McQueen has rightly christened 'ANZAC-ery',⁷ the reactionary instrumentalisation of the 'national-popular'⁸ military tradition which emerged from the Great War and saw another generation, voluntarily but reluctantly, take up arms, this time against fascism, in 1939. The slaughter in Flanders' fields worked a great change in popular culture. Never again after the Great War would the outbreak of hostilities be celebrated with such belligerent joy. There was a subtle difference too between the two generations of Australian volunteers, between the 1st and 2nd Australian Imperial Forces. The first fought for King and Empire. The second fought for King and Country. Great War soldiers fought as British Subjects, as did the Australian soldiers of World War II. But by Australia Day 1949 the Chifley administration had legislated into being Australian citizenship, a different legal status, if still under the Crown.

The man who more than any other created the legendary image of the Anzac was the journalist and historian CEW Bean, a meticulous and patriotic middle Australian by adoption, product of an English public school, who was convinced that defeat on Gallipoli had nevertheless seen Australian soldiers contribute something transcendental, something extraordinary to the building of the young nation. Bean spoke nevertheless not of an Anzac legend or myth, but of a tradition. In 1974 one of my historical mentors, the democratic nationalist historian Bill Gammage, who gave the oration at the Centenary Anzac Day Dawn Service at the National War Memorial on North Terrace, Adelaide, published *The Broken Years*, the classic empathetic study of the Australian soldier's Great War experience as revealed in letters and diaries. The title came from a poem by an Anzac, and could stand for a comment on psychological injury from war. In the Great War, which was very much an artillery war, it was called 'shell shock'. In World War II it was called 'battle fatigue'. Now it is known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Gammage has a reverent respect for Bean as much more than a myth maker, as having had insight into the heart of the people. Gammage's perspective is one which humanizes and broadens the culture of commemoration.

This is terrain elements of the Left have diversely addressed. At a previous Narratives of War symposium, Bruce Scates pointed out how differently Anzac Day had been negotiated in Melbourne during the 1980s by the Gay Ex-Service Association and the Women Against Rape Collective. The first approached the Shrine of Remembrance respectfully, stating that

So far as Anzac Day is concerned, we wanted to quietly lay a wreath in honour of fallen comrades. We are not a political extremist group bent on the degradation of the

Anzac Day tradition. We simply wish to publically recognise the fact that gay people also gave their lives in war. We are not playing politics.⁹

This mainstreaming response to the Anzac tradition addressed the horns of a dilemma which was `similar to that of the communists half a century ago: to attack a popular tradition head-on might alienate sympathy; to seek incorporation in it might make the radical critique invisible.’¹⁰ By contrast with the inclusive approach of gay service personnel, radical feminists chose the path of minority politics:

Instead of insisting on our right to mourn and lay a wreath for women who suffer in war, instead of trying to `reclaim’ Anzac Day as a day of mourning, instead of trying to broaden the meaning of the day to include the women of all nations who have suffered in war...we have decided to simply demand the abolition of Anzac Day, and to do so at a confrontationalist rally.¹¹

So can we say that the Anzac tradition is all ANZAC-ery? Is the wide popular engagement with the pathos of the price the soldier pays for his or her extreme form of community service, the sense of a public duty to recognise it and mourn the losses involved, altogether militarist? I would argue not. When the first Anzac Cenotaph was inaugurated by Governor General Munro Ferguson here in Adelaide in September 1915 in the South Parklands, it was designed to have a non-military appearance. While the proconsular guest at those proceedings was promoting the war effort, the builders of the monument were already thinking of peace. In truth the Anzac tradition was always involved with public mourning, and as such expressed a tension between official militarism and near pacifist refusal to glorify war. If the Left were to culturally and politically isolate itself from what socialist historian Tom O’Lincoln has correctly called `the battle over Anzac Day’¹², which McQueen has correctly termed `a class struggle’¹³, this would merely mean the surrender of the tradition and the national community to jingoism. Constructive critical engagement as practiced by the cultural Left must guide the political Left. That politics stands on sound cultural foundations laid down over decades, which must not be surrendered but built upon. The challenge for progressives in the Australian polity and culture is to build upon community responses of mourning and reflection on the human cost of war and deconstruct its celebration. We must build a critical public understanding of the realities of the national interest respecting policies of war and peace in an unstable world. In such a fraught context, if we continue to answer the call of empire and alliance to launch blindly as we did at Anzac into world war, then we court more than a bloody nose, we court disaster.

It is the true historian’s task to criticise national foundation myths. A demythologised Anzac Day, aware of the human cost of rushing as Australia did in 1914 into an imperial adventure, could serve as a warning to future generations to reform Prime Ministerial prerogative war powers and be skeptical of foreign entanglements. Gallipoli was a salutary defeat and it should never be forgotten that it was a military disaster, a tragic side show to the main game on the Western Front. The Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, scraped together principally from all over the British Commonwealth from England to New Zealand, represented an imperialist widening and an escalation of the stalled war in the East in support

of and contradistinction to the stalemate in Flanders. Millions had already died in battle. The call for armistice and an enduring peace which went out on 28 April 1915 from the Hague Conference of what soon became the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom should have been heeded.¹⁴ Instead we are left with loss and legend in the form of a national Iliad whose true meaning still evades us a century later, with all that portends for the future. For as McQueen has aptly pointed out, 'History wars' are about how to control the future. They are not disputes over the past.'¹⁵ The Left can neither embrace the Anzac tradition uncritically nor damn it wholesale. We must engage in the battle of ideas which swirls implicitly every year around Anzac Day to shape the culture of commemoration over the coming century, in which the need for an astutely independent Australian foreign policy will be ever greater.

Dr David Faber Adjunct Senior Lecturer Flinders University Adelaide November 2015

¹ See commentary and citation in Michael Howard 'Men Against Fire' in Miller, Lynne Jones & Van Evera eds *Military Strategy & the Origins of the First World War* Princeton NJ Revised & Expanded Edition 1991 p14-17

² See Bessant & Spaul *Politics of Schooling* Pitman Carlton 1976 p1-6 & Bessant 'British Imperial Propaganda in Australian Schools 1900-30' *Working Papers in Australian Studies* 98 Sir Robert Menzies Centre For Australian Studies, Institute For Commonwealth Studies, University of London. See also the evocative second chapter of Patsy Adam-Smith *The Anzacs*, Penguin Melbourne 2014 'Moulding the lads'.

³ Adam-Smith cit Chapter 1 'Why Did You Go to the Great War, Daddy?'

⁴ I know from conversation at the margins of the 2015 'Fighting Against War' National Conference of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History with the historian Douglas Newton, author of *Hell Bent: Australia's leap into the Great War* Scribe Melbourne 2014, that the war powers issue raised by the Australian Greens in contemporary politics is a problematic he takes very much to heart. As I argue here, so should we all.

⁵ T.G Otte *The July Crisis* CUP Cambridge UK 2014 passim

⁶ Tom O'Lincoln 'The battle over Anzac Day' *Red Flag* 20 April 2015

⁷ See his 'Anzac: a class struggle' *Honest History* 3 July 2014

⁸ I am extrapolating this term from Gramsci's literary reference to authentically mass culture in his *Quaderni del Carere (Prison Notebooks)* Torino 1975 passim. For brief elucidation see Vittorio Spinazzola 'Nazional-popolare' in *Gramsci: Le sue idee nel nostro tempo* l'Unita` Roma 1987

⁹ Quoted in Scates 'Contested ground: Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance' *Legacies of War* Australian Scholarly Publishing Melbourne 2012 p198

¹⁰ Ibid p199

¹¹ Ibid p199

¹² O'Lincoln op cit

¹³ McQueen op cit

¹⁴ See *100 years: Women's International League for Peace & Freedom in Australia* WILPF Canberra 2015 unpaginated

¹⁵ See McQueen op cit p1