

## Essay: “Australians and the Great War”

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Reading—or often re-reading—a selection of articles on the broad theme of war in Australian history, culled from thirty-odd years of the *Journal of Australian Studies* offers an exhilarating journey through a fertile landscape of history and memory. Speaking personally, it reminded me of colleagues and sometimes friends whose work I had noted, quoted, used and generally admired, but also of how the ideas and arguments these authors have posed span the entire course of my career (so far), marking some of the concerns, debates, pre-occupations and fashions of the study of war in Australian history. These articles demonstrate not only the fecundity of war as a theme in Australian history—both in the *Journal of Australian Studies*, and more broadly—but also how many of the ideas and interpretations they proposed remain of interest and relevance. Re-publishing this selection of articles (only a few of the articles that the editors of this issue could and did consider) will come as a boon to younger colleagues who missed the insights they offered the first time around. This introduction offers a commentary that is intended to help place them in their historical and intellectual context and to attempt to evaluate the contribution they made, and often continue to make.

The *Journal of Australian Studies* has always attracted articles that explore the significance of war in Australian history, both in terms of empirical experience and also as a potent and long-standing element in understanding the conscious study of Australia and its history. The editors of this selection considered nearly fifty articles published over the period 1978 to 2011. Mostly dealing with the Great War, the pool could easily have been deepened. Of those available, they have selected nineteen. That the authors whose articles have not been republished in full include Carl Bridge, Paul Ashton, Judith Smart, Martin Crotty and Janet Butler suggests how rigorous their winnowing has been. Though presented chronologically, from Robert Selleck’s study of the attitude of Australians to Germans during the Great War (1980) to Jen Hawksley’s (now Roberts) article on Australian parents and the legacy of loss (2009), the articles can best be considered thematically.

The social history of Australia in wartime has often seemed to be less developed than the social history of the relatively few Australians who served overseas in war. A number of *Journal of Australian Studies* articles refute this perception, based perhaps on the balance of books, and especially popular books, which do skew the field toward an operational history that is too often triumphal, male-centred, and uniformed.

The selection of articles published in this issue reflects the dominance of “Anzac” in both the popular remembrance of war in this country and in the scholarly attention the relationship between war and history has attracted and continues to attract. Again and again, *Journal of Australian Studies’* authors discuss and analyse the phenomenon of Anzac, seemingly a constant in our understanding of Australian history and society.

Kevin Fewster's 1982 article, "Ellis Ashmead Bartlett and the making of the Anzac legend" helped to establish the significance of Bartlett's May 1915 newspaper report on the Anzac landing, which stimulated recruiting and encapsulated the qualities Australians wanted to see in their fighting men on Gallipoli. (Ironically, as Fewster points out, the legend Bartlett fostered took flight exactly when he became disillusioned with his naïve endorsement of the failing campaign.)

John Williams's "Seven battles: the foreign press and the Anzacs" (1993) does what few other Australian historians of war have done: look at Australian contribution to war from a non-Australian perspective. So much is Australian war history dominated or permeated by nationalist assumptions that very few Australian historians trouble to examine how Australia appeared to others. Williams points out that in overseas press reports Australians figured "hardly more than was accorded the hapless Portuguese": a salutary view hardly welcome to proponents of the "Aussie, Aussie, Aussie" school of military history. Likewise, Graham Seal's "Unravelling digger yarn-spinning" (1997), though seemingly a celebration of the yarn-spinning digger, is actually a splendid demonstration of the way a scholar can analyse the phenomenon of Anzac without necessarily endorsing its grosser manifestations.

The origins of Anzac Day itself remain contested and a subject of continuing research and debate. One of the earliest contributions to the discussion was made by Richard Ely in his article, "The first Anzac Day: Invented or discovered?" (1985). Ely's article, which investigates the marking of "Anzac Day" in 1916 in Hobart and Melbourne, is distinguished by a rich use of literary evidence informed by an awareness of Christian history. The result was unusually informative. Anzac Day, he concludes (quoting an editorial), was "a repetition of Empire Day, with a new note added". Working out what that "new note" might be has now occupied several generations of social historians who have mined the seam of Anzac Day—with no end in sight yet.

The centrality of war to the definition and expression of Australian national identity remains a subject of compelling interest. The late and very much missed Hank Nelson's "Gallipoli, Kokoda and the making of national identity" (1997) ought to be better known for its identification and analysis of key issues in the historical relationship between war and Australian national identity. As he concludes (after a masterly survey of the pros and cons of according Kokoda a greater weight in the place of war in national history), "the debate about what is remembered and what is celebrated is a debate about the future".

Nelson used Gallipoli as a counterpoint to Kokoda; the Turkish battlefield is the highly specific site of the association between national identity and war. Bart Ziino's article "Who owns Gallipoli?" (2006) traces the proprietary interest Australians have taken in this part of Turkey during and after the campaign of 1915. Ziino's analysis, which deftly spans decades of a complex relationship between Australia and Turkey and successive presents and the past, shows that "the form of the legend and its relationship to a new generation of Australians is more liable to change than the Gallipoli landscape itself".

The emergence of the recognition of gender as a factor in the experience and analysis of historical experience has been one of the defining developments in historical scholarship in recent decades. While beginning with the women's movement, it has belatedly also embraced the consideration of masculinity as a crucial component of the male experience of war; though it remains the province of a relatively small number of scholars who feel confident in deploying the theoretical ideas inseparable from gender analysis.

Melanie Oppenheimer's "Gifts for France" (1993), dealing with the virtually unknown subject of the experience of Australian volunteer Red Cross nurses, represents one of the early contributions to Australian humanitarian history, from a scholar who in 2014 published a major centenary history of the Red Cross. It also offers a reminder that Australian participation in the war did not only occur through Australian bodies and forces. Male participation in British Empire forces remains almost entirely unexplored. One of the few exceptions to this neglect is Stephen Garton's pioneering article "War and masculinity in twentieth century Australia". Distinguished by its boldness in surveying the experience of a century, Garton's article offers a reminder—one that still needs to be heeded—that "nation" may not have been the most pressing identity to Australians in 1915, that "race and empire" were equally important, and all were "intertwined" with the notion of masculinity. Indeed, Garton writes "the legend is saturated in manhood", in ways his article expertly teases out.

Bestriding the study of war and society in Australia is the work of K.S. (Ken) Inglis, who became one of the earliest Australian exponents of what has become known as "memory studies". He contributes his reflections on the interment in the Australian War Memorial on Remembrance Day, 11 November 1993 of the "Unknown Australian soldier". The years between the interment and the article's publication in 1999 allowed Inglis to reflect as only he could, on the place of the remains of a man who "symbolises all Australians who have died in war" in the context of the history of Australian remembrance that he had made his own. Inglis's piece, embodying the knowledge he had acquired through a decade-long study of Australia's *Sacred Places*, justifies its place in this issue as an example of the mature work of the premier scholar of war and memory.

There has always been a striking imbalance between the treatment of experience of war and operational military history with the impact and consequences of war. While social historians have recently (say, since Stephen Garton's *The Cost of War*) discovered war's aftermath, the great bulk of scholarly and especially popular books deal with the experience of war rather than its effects. Kristy Muir's "Idiots, imbeciles and moral defectives" (2002) explores the treatment of psychiatric casualties, especially in the long term by the "repatriation" system. It reflects the relative novelty of such a treatment, a subject which, a decade on, remains relatively undeveloped, and a sign of the need for war studies to embrace the more difficult reaches of private as well as public responses to war. That this approach is becoming more representative is apparent from Jen Roberts's (formerly Hawksley) "In the shadow of war" (2009), which explores the responses of parents to loss in and after the Great War, an article representative of a powerful tendency in Australian (and indeed international) historiography.

Roberts is but one of the most recent proponents of a desire to explore the impact of grief on individuals and, through them, on society.

The growing interest in the iconography of war, the beginning of which more-or-less coincided with the foundation of the *Journal of Australian Studies*, is reflected in several significant articles. Representations of Anzac remain of persistent interest, and rightly so. This issue includes Chris Flaherty and Michael Roberts's "The reproduction of Anzac symbolism" (1989) and Sue Lovell's "Dew to the soul" (2006). Lovell's article, a sustained meditation on the transition from remembering war to commemorating it, uses as its centre-piece the artist Vida Lahey's drawing *Rejoicing and remembrance, Armistice Day, London, 1918*, placing her life and work in the context of the trauma of the Great War. It is curious that Flaherty and Roberts's article should begin by echoing the common assumption of twenty-five years ago that Anzac Day was "in the process of crossing the line from living legend to museum piece", though the authors immediately qualify that assumption by observing that the Anzac legend and its celebration would see "increments of meaning ... added to the original conceptions"—and so it has proved.

The *Journal of Australian Studies* has also been at the forefront of the study of the social history of Australians at war—and especially of the experience of what is (often wrongly) called the home front. Robert Selleck's 1980 article "The trouble with my looking glass", examining the experience of German-Australians during the Great War, deals in unprecedented detail with the "tempestuous and agonizing days" that German-Australians and "British-Australians" prefer to forget. Selleck's article prefigured, and informed, a raft of subsequent scholarship, notably by Michael McKernan, Peter Monteith, Jurgen Tampke, and above all, Gerhard Fischer. Likewise, John McQuilton's "German-Australians in rural society" (1999), prefiguring his magisterial 2001 book tracing the war's impact on north-eastern Victoria, "from Tarrawingee to Tangambalanga", demonstrates the value of his characteristically deep engagement with the nuances and personal relationships within small communities. McQuilton's ability to combine scholarship and empathy is exemplary, and is evident nowhere better than his exploration of the travails of German-Australians in rural Victoria.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the prominence of war in Australian historiography, those opposed to war (a notable part of the domestic Australian experience of the South African, Great War, the Vietnam war and conflicts after 2001) have never been accorded their due. One of the most detailed and important articles the *Journal of Australian Studies* has ever published is Ann-Mari Jordens's "Anti-war organisations in a society at war, 1914-18" (published in 1990). Jordens provides, effectively for the first time, a survey and analysis of the growth and development of pacifist and anti-war bodies in wartime Australia during the Great War. This was something that Ernest Scott's 1936 official history, *Australia During the War*, could not or would not do; but also something that no scholar had attempted in the half-century that followed. Jordens draws on the growing body of literature in "peace studies", but the substance of her article is based largely on primary research, boosted by her collaboration with the late Alan Gilbert in writing a chapter on "Traditions of dissent" in *Australia, Two*

*Centuries of War and Peace*, published by the Australian War Memorial in 1988: this is not something that we might imagine happening today. Twenty-five years on, Jordens's article remains the single most valuable account of the peace movement in Australia during the Great War.

Australians—and their historians—have also never been quite clear about the fact that when war begins, “ordinary life” ceases. The seeming disinclination to see that life continues during wartime and that not everything worth noticing between 1914 and 1918 or 1939 and 1945 occurred either overseas or in relation to war proves to be hard to challenge. Michele Langfield's 1999 article, “Recruiting immigrants: the First World War and Australian immigration” offers a persuasive reminder that while numbers of migrants might decline in wartime, the persistent theme of migration in Australian history remains of perennial concern. Langfield's article details the qualms over the cessation of British migration and the arrival (though not necessarily the acceptance) of migrants from Patagonia, Greece and Malta. She reinforces the centrality of war to the stimulation of migration in the period, showing that the Great War too strongly influenced migration after 1918.

Too often war is seen as distinct from the broader themes of Australian history. While operational military history does demand expertise as esoteric as, say, a facility with the theory of gender, the integration of the military and social history of war and its consequences remains rare. Elizabeth Nelson's “Civilian men and domestic violence in the aftermath of the first world war” (2003) is important because it seeks to connect the social impact of war on men and women, concluding that violence against women might have been accentuated by war but was not necessarily caused by it. “Post-war domestic violence”, she concludes, “was the result of something more than returned soldiers' war trauma”. That Nelson's argument has hardly been taken up suggests the difficulties of moving between war and civilian social history—a matter not just of sources but of willingness and capacity to work beyond easy categories and accustomed periods.

One historian who cannot ever be accused of being limited by periods or categories is Bill Gammage, who over a career of forty-odd years has repeatedly produced seminal works, in war, rural history, the history of colonial Papua New Guinea, and Indigenous environmental history. Perhaps the most reflective and profound of all the articles on the Great War published by the *Journal of Australian Studies* since 1980 is Bill Gammage's 1980 article simply entitled “Australians and the Great War”. Gammage begins by pointing out that the magnitude of the Great War had led historians (even in 1979) to treat it in isolation, and argues that historians should “immerse it more fully in other broad streams of Australian experience”. He proceeds to do this in the course of his article (originally a lecture to the Victorian Historical Association). Gammage looks at how the war accelerated the extent of official control over lives, examining the “consequences of a war too large and terrible for individuals to bear alone”. His arguments, the product of close engagement with a mass of primary evidence and deep reflection, bear continued consideration.

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