

**What role has Gallipoli played in the manufacture of Australian identity?**

Rad Young

University of Notre Dame, Australia

This essay explores the role of the Anzac legend, born at Gallipoli, in the manufacture of the Australian identity. The Gallipoli campaign is a very important part of Australian history, but the role of myths in the Anzac 'legend' play a disproportionate part in the creation of our national identity. This essay explores how Australia's national identity has been affected by an Anzac story built by myths, myth-makers, mateship and men. The Anzac legend as a role model has profoundly affected Australia's male dominated culture. Commonly known as the birth of Australian nationhood, Gallipoli was also popularly considered a 'rite of passage'<sup>1</sup> for manhood. The Australian soldiers of World War One have been portrayed by war journalists and modern writers as strong, tough, inventive heroes, diggers and larrikins. So much is written about the physicality of the Diggers, the strength they possessed, but what of their emotional strength? Was the bravery simply bravado and how has the role model of the Anzac legend affected the generations of Australian men following the Gallipoli campaign?

Alistair Thomson interviewed ex-servicemen in the 1980s to try to understand how altered public perception had affected the diggers' personal memories of Gallipoli. The efforts of film makers and writers like Peter Weir and Patsy Adam-Smith respectively, helped older diggers accept and express some of the trauma of those early years. But there is a darker side, the line between fact and fiction had blurred. "Some men related scenes from the film *Gallipoli* as if they were their own"<sup>2</sup> These men were unconsciously replacing painful memories with the media manufactured and more socially palatable 'Anzac legend' version of the strong, brave hero, deepening their insecurities. Thomson suggests; "That affirmation may be essential for individual peace of mind, but in the process contradictory and challenging memories are displaced or repressed"<sup>3</sup>. There were many men who deeply resented the mythic 'legend' label as it compounded their own pre-existing feelings of inadequacy. If you were lucky enough to physically survive the slaughter of the initial

---

<sup>1</sup> Junk Male, John Webb, Harper Collins Publishers, Sydney NSW, 1998, p67

<sup>2</sup> Thomson, A, 'Interpreting Memories' in R Perks, & A Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, Routledge, London, 1997, p303

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, Thomson, A, p300

landing at Gallipoli, you then had to mentally survive nine months of the starvation, day and night shelling, extreme heat, smell of your friends scattered rotting corpses, constant sand in your eyes, mouth and food, and the mental anguish of serious depression, self-doubt, confusion and disillusionment. The majority of these men were not heroes they were simply survivors. Fred Farrell who was interviewed by Thomson admitted “he was terrified in battle and miserable in the trenches, and began to doubt his own worth and that of war itself ... He was a physical and emotional wreck”<sup>4</sup>. For the returned soldiers and their families these experiences must have been difficult to understand. Farrell explains “those that were at the war were reluctant to talk about it, and those that were not at the war ... the women and that, didn’t seem to want to hear about it. So the war just slipped into the background ... I never talked about it. Never. For years and years and years.”<sup>5</sup> Farrell was traumatised but lucky, he survived to eventually tell his story. Many other men did or could not tell their stories, breaking the vital communication link between the generations.

By the 1960’s the manufactured Anzac legend had fully cemented itself in the Australian culture. Vietnam war veteran Bob Gibson explains that his grandfather had been killed in WWI at the age of twenty and his photograph had always hung high up on the wall. The image of his grandfather became a silent example of strength, courage and sacrifice. “I idolised him. He looks exactly like my father and I’ve got the same set of eyes...”<sup>6</sup> Gibson had unconsciously perceived what he thought was expected of him in order to receive that same respect and adoration from his family. The ripple effect of a media manufactured glorification of Anzac soldiers extended to Vietnam soldiers “War can almost seem the climax of [mens] socialisation ... heroism and the suppression of fear”<sup>7</sup> Indeed Farrell was discouraged from expressing his fear during and after battle “it was not manly or Australian.”<sup>8</sup> Conversely Australian men who express feelings of fear

---

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, Thomson, A, p306

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, Thomson, A, p308

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, Webb, J, p78-79

<sup>7</sup> Colling, T, *Beyond Mateship*, Simon & Schuster Australia, East Roseville NSW, 1992, p12

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, Thomson, A, p303

are believed to be unAustralian. The link between masculinity and Australia's national identification in Anzac soliders can not be denied. Gibson learned nothing from his deceased elder about the trauma of war and was destined to repeat the same errors, further compounding the misappropriation of this country's cultural identification with a manufactured myth. One Vietnam Veteran describes; "When I came back the first reaction my parents had was that here was a man that had no feeling, cold totally cold. When I had left I was a really affectionate home-loving person."<sup>9</sup>

So many men were crippled physically and emotionally upon there return from WWI that their ability to fight for their own injustice was ruined. Their ability to stand up against the barrage of nation building 'Anzac hero' rhetoric and propaganda is unfathomable. Imagine the crushing pressure on your sense of self-worth, dignity, pride, and masculinity to read the words below but know the truth of your own personal experience.

... [F]rom the moment of this new experience he adopted his own independent standard of conduct. He judged, by what he saw, that all except the heaviest barrages could be passed with a reasonable chance of survival, provided that he did not hesitate, and it became a matter of pride that, if he was carrying food or ammunition to his mates waiting for them in the firing line, his burden must be delivered.<sup>10</sup>

When Charles Bean wrote about the taking of Pozieres he exposed the soldier's innocence, independence, courage, fearlessness, strength, loyalty, mateship and resilience. To visualise our heroic bullet dodging superman charging up the beach, huge crates under each arm to save his friends is truly spectacular. This is legend-making stuff and Australia did indeed build statements like this into its national character, you only have to think of the Australia's beloved Surf Life

---

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, Webb J, p81

<sup>10</sup> Gare, Deborah & Ritter, D, *Making Australian History*, Thomson, South Melbourne, 2008. p293

Savers charging up Bondi Beach for yet another successful rescue. Others went further, declaring them gods. Poet Crompton Mackensie writes; “There was not one of these glorious young men I saw that day who might not himself have been Ajax or Achilles”<sup>11</sup>. Some writers suggested men towered 6 foot 4 inches - gigantic men if it weren't a gigantic stretch of the truth. These men must have been monsters. In fact, only 2% of all the Australians in Gallipoli were over 6 foot<sup>12</sup>. Gallipoli was one of the last conflicts before warfare was industrialised. There were no tanks, no rockets<sup>13</sup>, it was man against man. A true battle of physical strength courage and endurance. The ‘birth of a nation’ rhetoric is masking the physical and psychological undercurrent of the ‘rite of passage’<sup>14</sup> for men and an eager young nation keen to see their men perform well on the international stage. The Australian citizens back at home were not disappointed, British cables remarked on their ‘magnificent achievement’<sup>15</sup>. For a very unsuccessful military campaign on foreign soil, this was not, interestingly a failure of nationhood or manhood in the eyes of Australians and only served to reinforce older ideas of what it was to be Australian.

The worshipping of the unassuming hero was not new to Australia. Influenced heavily by the Australian bushman legends ‘Banjo’ Paterson and Henry Lawson had constructed, journalist Charles Bean wrote romantically about the diggers at Gallipoli. The image of hard, tough men battling against harsh adversity was reinforced in *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, Bean’s war correspondence outlining the battles in WW1. He enthusiastically focused on the soldiers and projected a revealing self-interest in these men by creating larger than life characters breed for the harsh realities of war. Indeed this is exactly what has happened in Australia

---

<sup>11</sup> Thornhill, J, *Making Australia: Exploring our National Conversation*, Millennium Books, Newtown NSW, 1992.

<sup>12</sup> *Lateline*, TV program, “The making of The Anzac Myth”, ABC TV, Sydney, Originally Broadcast 23/04/01, [Transcript retrieved from URL: <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/s281903.htm>],

<sup>13</sup> Trueman, C, *Tanks and World War One*, N.D, retrieved 5 April 2010, URL: [http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/tanks\\_and\\_world\\_war\\_one.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/tanks_and_world_war_one.htm).

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, J. Webb, p12

<sup>15</sup> Gammage, B, ‘Agenda Setting’ in D Gare, & D Ritter (eds.), *Making Australian History: perspectives on the past since 1788*, Thomson Learning Australia, 2008, p. 294

since the beginning of white settlement. In our history there has been constant battles against land and authority. To be a 'battler' in modern times, is well known and respected in Australian society. "we have come to value the struggle more than the success. 'Waltzing Matilda' should have been our national anthem, as it embodies all of the elements of the cultural hero: fearsome, hardship, contempt, for authority and a loser."<sup>16</sup>

The story of Gallipoli and the Anzac legend revitalised, transformed and immortalised and most importantly manipulated the Australian national identity, giving it a face that we could all recognise in our fathers and grandfathers - the respected Digger that he is today. While we do not have any Gallipoli diggers left to share their stories, there are many more from Vietnam, the Gulf war, and more recently Iraq. The conflicts of war should not be a motivation to prove manhood as a rite of passage or cultural identity. The gruesome stories of men in war are universally overshadowed by the rhetoric and propaganda of nations and individuals, common in wartime. Gallipoli was important to Australia's history but the inextricability of the Anzac myths in the manufacture of Australia's national identity and culture is inappropriate. As a country the association of war together with any form of reinforced model of self-identity or national image is a dangerous liaison. The idea of the Digger being the typical Australian in our present society doesn't hold much relevance today<sup>17</sup>. Australia has changed in the last ninety years, men and women of a mature prosperous nation, our task now is to define our complex modern identity without the use of wartime hero archetypes.

---

<sup>16</sup> Colling, T, *Beyond Mateship: Understanding Australian Men*, Simon & Schuster (Australia), East Roseville NSW, 1992, p49

<sup>17</sup> Dr Dale Blair, interview on *Lateline*, TV program, "The making of The Anzac Myth", ABC TV, Sydney, Originally Broadcast 23/04/01, [Transcript retrieved from URL: <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/s281903.htm>],

## Bibliography

Beyond Productions & Australia Broadcasting Corporation (Producer). (2001). *Australia at War*. Ep 2, "Who'll Come a Fighting the Kaiser with Me" [DVD].

Colling, Terry, *Beyond Mateship*, Simon & Schuster Australia, East Roseville NSW, 1992.

Clarke, James, *War Films*, Virgin Books, London, 2006.

Gare, Deborah & Ritter, D, *Making Australian History*, Thomson, South Melbourne, 2008.

Macintyre, Stuart "What if Australia's Baptism of Fire Had Occurred at the Coco Islands", Macintyre, Stuart & Scalmer, S (eds), *What if?*, Melbourne University Press, 2006.

Mosier, David, (2002), "The Birth of a Nation", *Australia, The Recreational Society*, Greenwood Publishing Group, p17-32, Westport, CT, USA, 2002.

Summers, Anne, *Damned Whored and God's Police*, rev edn, Penguin Books, Ringwood VIC, 1994.

Stearns, Peter N, *Be A Man!*, Holmes & Meiers Publishers, New York, 1979.

Thomson, Alistair "Anzac Memories", *Oral History Reader*, Perks, Robert & Alistair Thomson (eds), Routledge, London, 1997, p300-310.

Thornhill, John, *Making Australia: Exploring our National Conversation*, Millennium Books, Newtown NSW, 1992.

Tranter, Bruce & Donoghue, J, (2007). "Colonial and post-colonial aspects of Australian Identity", *British Journal of Sociology* 58(2), p165-182, DOI 10.1111/j.1468-4446.2007.00146

Trueman, Chris, *Tanks and World War One*, N.D, retrieved 5 April 2010, URL: [http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/tanks\\_and\\_world\\_war\\_one.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/tanks_and_world_war_one.htm)

Webb, John, *Junk Male*, Harper Collins Publishers, Sydney, 1998.

Weir, Peter (Dir), *Gallipoli*, motion picture, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment. Distributed by Roadshow (Australia) 1981