

Reflections on Anzac Day 2016

On Monday 25th April this year, Australians will once again commemorate all those who served in the Gallipoli campaign from April 25 to December 20, 1915 during the Great War. But Anzac Day has come to mean much more than a commemoration of Gallipoli. It is now a day devoted to the remembrance of service men and women who suffered and perished in all Australian wars.

The Gallipoli Centenary Peace Campaign (GCCP) pays tribute to all those who exposed themselves to horrific dangers to serve militarily for causes which, to the best of their knowledge, they judged to be honourable.

However, in doing so, this does not mean that we should turn our backs on asking some hard questions about the wars Australians have fought in, such as: (a) How did our country get involved in these wars? (b) What were their purposes and (c) What mistakes were made in prolonging them?

During commemorative occasions such as Anzac Day when these crucial questions tend to be shunted to one side, GCPC upholds a simple principle: 'love the warrior, hate the war'. In other words, we must respect the troops but we *may* reject the war.

As one leading historian of WW1 has said: "We have to challenge the familiar smear, namely that all those who send and keep our troops abroad love, respect and honour them; and all those who question the wars to which the troops are sent hate, disrespect, and dishonour them. *That is contemptible political fakery.*"¹ (My emphasis)

'Lest We forget' – War, Suffering and the Anzac Legend

It is estimated that some 35 million people died during the First World War. The extent of the slaughter, the suffering and the devastation was truly horrendous. Commemorating the victims of war is perfectly legitimate. However remembrance of the tragedy should be inextricably allied to minimising the risk of such hostilities occurring in the future.

| Gallipoli casualties (not including illness) | | | |
|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Country | Dead | Wounded | Total |
| Ottoman Empire | 86,692 | 164,617 | 251,309 |
| Great Britain & Ireland | 21,255 | 52,230 | 73,485 |
| Australia | 8,709 | 19,441 | 28,150 |
| France | 10,000 | 17,000 | 27,000 |
| New Zealand | 2,779 | 5,212 | 7,991 |
| India | 1,358 | 3,421 | 4,779 |
| Newfoundland | 49 | 93 | 142 |
| Total | 130,842 | 262,014 | 392,856 |
| Source: Richard Stowers, <i>Bloody Gallipoli</i> (2005). | | | |

It is GCPC's contention that the promotion of Anzac Day, especially since the late 1990s, has made genuine remembrance of those that suffered and perished in war more difficult to observe. If true remembrance is linked to understanding the lessons of war i.e. its causes and how the nation became enmeshed in war, so that similar conflagrations can be avoided in the future, then we believe that Anzac Day has failed to fulfil its proper mission.

As the former Governor of Tasmania, Peter Underwood, said during his Anzac Day address in 2014, "the spirit of true remembrance" should be dedicated to:

examining and talking about the causes of war and how we got involved in wars. We should spend less time studying Simpson's donkey and more time looking at why we were fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan for so long. All this is not in order to criticise past decision makers, but

in remembrance of the dead, to help us avoid doing it again in some other place, simply because we failed to examine all the alternative means of resolving conflict.²

The present day promoters of Anzac Day rarely refer to the historical context i.e. that Australian troops were sent abroad to fight for God and Empire (the British Empire), that the invasion of Turkey was linked to Czarist Russia's ambition to conquer the Ottoman capital Constantinople, and that the Anzac campaign was a failure resulting in half a million casualties on all sides, including over 8,000 Australian soldiers dead.³ References to such abstractions as fighting for 'freedom and democracy' distorts an accurate understanding of the Gallipoli campaign which was more about imperial rivalries than promoting our national security or global peace at the time.

Such an unhistorical and amoral account of Australia's engagement in the First World War thwarts a true reckoning of Australia's past and compromises our ability to embrace a genuine commitment to the prevention of war in the future. In this sense, the Anzac legend fails to do justice to our war dead.

Making History a Slave to Military Myth Making

The official Anzac Centenary website claims that our engagement in the First World War, and the Gallipoli campaign in particular, was significant since it helped define us as a people and as a nation. This is the kind of fiction that many Australian historians have vigorously disputed in recent times.

It is well recognised that the Anzac legend was created to console the relatives for those that sacrificed their lives at war. The excessive promotion of Anzac Day over the last 20 years or so has transformed it into a national celebration and multimedia festival.

Promoters of the Anzac legend make the following dubious claims:

- The nation was born as Gallipoli;
- It was our first blood sacrifice;
- Our national identity was established in war time;
- We fought at Gallipoli for freedom and democracy;
- Our national values are military values.

To quote the historian, Marilyn Lake, this is the "puff, the promotion, the propaganda ... that falsifies history and does no honour to those that died".⁴

Contrary to these dubious claims, historians are at pains to point out that the Australian colonies federated in 1901 and that our national identity and democratic values were forged in peace prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 1914.

In addition, the Australian Federation was unique amongst representative democracies at that time in having instituted a number of progressive reforms. These included:

- Full political rights for women;
- The first living wage that recognised working people as human beings;
- The eight hour day;
- Old age and invalid pensions;
- A maternity allowance that extended to unmarried mothers.

The impact of war domestically, however, generated deep social fractures based upon gender, religion and social class. Those who decided not to serve - 50% of eligible men - were pilloried as 'stay-at-homes' and 'shirkers' and many were sent white feathers. Opponents of conscription – the majority of voters – together with peace activists were condemned as traitors and 'disloyalists' i.e. being disloyal to the British Empire. Far from instilling a greater sense of national independence, the war made Australia more conservative and more amenable to British imperial interests.

The distortions of history engendered by the Anzac myth were underwritten by a multimillion dollar campaign undertaken by the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA). A primary goal of the DVA was to disseminate educational material to school children and the wider community on how the

nation's military forces had shaped the nation and its values. The success of this multimillion dollar campaign on reinforcing the Anzac legend should not be underestimated. The willingness of both the Labor and Coalition parties to lavishly fund the Anzac Centenary owes a lot to the successful promotion of the Anzac myth by the DVA and government agencies since the late 1990s.

Anzac Day – An Opportunity to Reflect at 'Richardson's Lookout – Marrickville Peace Park'

GCPC's *Mission Statement* emphasises the following:

*GCPC does not believe that Australia as a nation was born in war. We honour and respect all Australians who have died and suffered in war, both overseas and in Australia's Frontier Wars, and we respect the contribution and suffering of their families and loved ones. We also honour and respect all those who have pursued the path of non-violent resolution of national and international conflicts.*⁵

In the spirit of true remembrance and in keeping with our advocacy of peacemaking and the prevention of future war, GCPC will be holding an hour of reflection at **'Richardson's Lookout – Marrickville Peace Park' on Monday April 25, 2016 from 10.00am to 11.00am**. The peace park is located at the corner of Richards Avenue and Holt Crescent in south Marrickville.

The event will include:

- A meditation by Jo Blackman (yoga teacher and GCPC member);
- A reflection by Nadia Wheatley (author and historian) on the predicament of children on the homefront during WW1;
- A period of silent reflection and the planting of a tree in the park to symbolise peace and reconciliation.

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| <p style="text-align: center;">Event: Anzac Day – An Hour of Reflection When: Monday April 25, 2016 from 10.00am to 11.00am Where: Richardson's Lookout – Marrickville Peace Park <i>All welcome - snacks and refreshments will be provided.</i></p> |
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Notes

1. Douglas Newton, '[Gallipoli Centenary Peace Campaign talk](#)', Petersham Town Hall, Apr 22, 2015.
2. Peter Underwood, '[Anzac Day Address – 25 April 2014](#)', mathewinkson.com.
3. "In total there were nearly half a million casualties during the campaign, with the British Official History listing total losses, including sick, as 205,000 British, 47,000 French and 251,000 Turkish", *Wikipedia*, '[Gallipoli Campaign](#)'.
4. Marilyn Lake, '[Anzac Day is More Puff than Substance](#)', The Wheeler Centre / St James Ethics Centre debate , Melbourne Town Hall, April 30, 2013.
5. Gallipoli Centenary Peace Campaign, '[Mission Statement](#)', GCPC website.

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