

Australia's Foreign Wars: Anzac Day Memories, The Sullen Child of History

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Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [History](#)

"Periodic vigilance will protect us against new generations of lords and masters who exploit national myths to lure us into enterprises born in timidity and corrosive mateship." -Andrew Hamilton, Eureka Street, May 6, 2015

Old countries have baggage so heavy it drags, stifles and even drowns. Incapable of getting it off, history becomes the assault of the present for those who wish to grope for the future. Young countries like Australia (youth here is only from the perspective of the invasive settlers), struggle to create a baggage to be bound to.

Comically, then, a state like Australia yearns to have a blood soaked, folly-driven set of variables that make it a state, when in actual fact, it might do something different. This might, in part, explain the foolish insistence on the part of its vassal politicians to crave the breast of maternal empire, terrified that being weaned off it might lead to yellow-coloured extinction.



The Anzac tradition is one of those desperate calls to cling on. It is an attempt to create a baggage of patriotic necessity, stubbornly masculine and oblivious. (Excuses are always needed for creating piles of corpses.) It is an attempt to catch up with other nations with centuries of assumed legacies and concocted contributions, be they flags brought down by divine inspiration, or the sign of the Chi-Rho, as Constantine was meant to have witnessed before the Battle of Milvian Ridge in 312. But little Australia (only in terms of population) must behave like the sullen child of history, hoping to be acknowledged in great patriotic traditions.

A glance at the historical incidents of the morning of April 25, 1915, and one sees an opportunistic force invading Gallipoli at the behest of Winston Churchill, then the First Lord of the Admiralty. As A. P. Rowe noted when Vice-Chancellor of Adelaide University during the 1950s, "If you care to look at the newspapers of the time you will find that life in Australia had not been much affected by war" (*Australian Quarterly*, Mar 1957).

Churchill had been boasting about his military imagination and intuition. "I have it in me to be a successful soldier," he claimed with self-evident conviction. "I can visualise great movements and combinations." Not quite what would transpire in the Dardanelles.

Even before the slaughter on that day began, Churchill was already aware that a good lot of bloodletting would be in store in his effort to put down the sick man of Europe. His combinations and movements would come with carnage.

"The price to be paid in taking Gallipoli would no doubt be heavy, but there would be no more war with Turkey. A good army of 50,000 and sea-power - that is the end of the Turkish menace."

Within a month of the landing by French, British and Australian and New Zealand forces (collectively known as Anzac), the Allies found themselves 45,000 men short. The campaign would last for nine months and see over a hundred thousand deaths, and casualty lists on both sides peaking at a quarter of a million.

Historical baggage is useful political ballast, the bird seed for demagogic intent. It feeds the apologetics of war, providing the alibi for the next righteous military action. Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, was a warring wet dreamer, a dull clerk who wished to be great. His desperation to attach Australian interests to the carriage of Washington's folly should be a matter of criminal consequence.

Other features always find their message in the Anzac Spirit, sprung forth from Gallipoli. An industry of commemoration soon crept up, barely as the bodies were buried. The Veteran Affairs Department knows its sacred cow, and polices the "branding" of Anzac with an accountant's dedication.

Australian servicemen and women, fighting in distant theatres without knowledge, awareness or understanding - this is the Gallipoli heritage, the inverted idea that being on foreign soil for pre-emptive gain is somehow a good idea. Australian resources have been deployed in what was then Malaya during the Emergency, on the Korean peninsula, secretly in Indonesia, Afghanistan, Iraq, with other theatres. All needing the oddly crafted Anzac image which, let's face it, was forged in the heat of invading a sovereign state.

Re-deployed again after September 2001, the invasion theme was embroidered with tortured notions of liberty and freedom. This was always pure nonsense. Australia's involvement in such countries is as fatuous as the next western state. Its politicians, however, remain desperate to justify their complicity, their desperation in being in the stream of history.

The final point of all of this manufacture lies in the strange symbiotic relationship between Turkish contributions and Australian worship. On Turkish soil, distant from Australia, the country's youth, the veterans, the relatives, will engage in a ceremony of acknowledgement to the slaughtered, those lives expended in an obscene chess move on the part of the Royal Admiralty. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his successors should receive posthumous Australian awards for having permitted the annual pilgrimage by tourist collectives of vowel-killing Australians.

The perverse logic of the Dardanelles engagement remains as an annual reminder, one that Churchill himself alluded to when reminded about the calamity on the election trail. "Don't

imagine I am running away from the Dardanelles. I glory in it.”

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