

## Digging Up the Past: Post-conflict Memory of the First World War in Australia

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Carolyn Holbrook, *Anzac: The Unauthorised Biography* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2014)

Nathan Wise, *Anzac Labour: Workplace Cultures in the Australian Imperial Force during the First World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014)

Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2013)

The centenary of the First World War has brought renewed public and academic interest to the conflict that ushered in the twentieth century. Nowhere is this resurgence of popular interest more evident than in Australia. As of December 2015, Australian federal and state governments have allocated over \$552 million Australian dollars to events and projects that commemorate the impact of the First World War on Australian history. Per capita, Australia far outstrips the commemoration budgets of any other nation that participated in the conflict.<sup>1</sup> Nor is this enthusiasm merely contained to government spending. 42,000 Australians entered a lottery for one of 8,000 seats at the Anzac Day Dawn Service at Anzac Cove in Turkey, the site of the ill-fated Gallipoli landings.<sup>2</sup> The scale of this spending and the degree of public interest reflects the importance of the First World War as a milestone in the Australian national narrative.

This enthusiasm for the First World War builds on a problematic interpretation of historical events. Nationalist narratives interpret the achievements of Australian soldiers on the battlefield as a validation of essentially Australian characteristics, which combine Victorian ideals of frontier and martial masculinity. Because of its affirmation of a national character, this narrative of the First World War is entwined with a particular construction of Australian identity. Scholars and members of the public have struggled to revise interpretations of Australian history and identity that mythologize violent masculine attributes. Indeed, Australian academics actively challenge the nationalist narratives of the First World War. Australian historians have collaborated to produce accessible compilations that confront the popular narratives of Australian history with argumentative essays aimed at changing the mind of the Australian public. These recent interventions include titles such as *What's Wrong with Anzac?* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010), co-authored by Marilyn Lake,

Henry Reynolds, Mark McKenna and Joy Damousi, as well as *Zombie Myths of Australian Military History* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010) and *Anzac's Dirty Dozen: 12 Myths of Australian Military History* (Sydney: New South Publishing, 2012), both edited by Craig Stockings. Certainly, Australian historians have devoted a lot of energy to debunking the mythical narratives of Australia's First World War.

While the aforementioned works direct their arguments at the wider public, Australian historians maintain a long tradition of employing the methods of left history to write nuanced and compelling studies of the First World War. Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake's edited collection *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) followed in the footsteps of Margaret Higonnet's *Between the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). Australia's tradition of radical politics is reflected in histories of wartime Australia, where two referendums on conscription aggravated social and political divides. Michael McKernan's *The Australian People and the Great War* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1990) and Bobbi Oliver's *War and Peace in Western Australia: The Social and Political Impact of the Great War, 1914-1926* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1995) both place these tensions at the forefront of their analysis. Joan Beaumont recently synthesized the insights gained from these path-breaking histories into *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War* (Crows Nest: Allen & Ulwin, 2013), a comprehensive survey of Australia's war at home and overseas.

Three recent monographs continue this tradition of applying left history to the study of Australia's wars. At a time when public interest in nationalist narratives of Australian military history rises to a high ebb, Carolyn Holbrook's *Anzac: The Unauthorized Biography* offers a comprehensive survey of historical and popular interpretations of the First World War in Australia. Among the dozens of popular histories based on Australian soldiers' experiences in the trenches, Nathan Wise's *Anzac Labour: Workplace Cultures in the Australian Imperial Force during the First World War* offers a fresh perspective on the lives of these soldiers. Alistair Thomson's pioneering study of memory *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* arrived on bookshelves in 1994, but the release of a new edition in 2013 demonstrates both the resilience of the book's methods as well as its relevance in understanding the current place of the First World War in Australia.

### War in Retrospect

Looking back on the experience of war from the vantage of peace is the central theme of Alistair Thomson's *Anzac Memories*. Thomson takes an innovative approach to the construction of memory in Australia through oral interviews with Australian veterans of the First World War. His inquiries focus on the intersection between public and personal memories of the war, as Thomson seeks to understand how popular narratives of the war affect the recollections of Australian

veterans. While Thomson conducted interviews with 21 veterans, mostly based in Melbourne's western suburbs, the experience of three interviewees take prominence in his study. The stories and conversations between Thomson and Percy Bird, Bill Langham, and Fred Farrall reveal three representative patterns of personal memory of the First World War. Each veteran looked back on their wartime experience through the lens of their later life experience and defined themselves, at least in part, in relation to the popular construction of the archetypical Australian soldier. In examining the relationship between public memories and personal narratives, Thomson's introduction situates his research alongside his own memories of growing up in a military family with the stories of his father—an infantry officer who served in Borneo; grandfather—a veteran of the Second World War; and great-grandfather who died at the Somme. While he felt a personal, familial attachment to the nationalist narratives of Australia's military history, Thomson describes how his undergraduate studies in history prompted him to question the universality of the Anzac narrative, ultimately leading to his study of personal and public memory.

Constructing popular and scholarly historical narratives in the aftermath of conflict is one of the main themes in Carolyn Holbrook's *Anzac: The Unauthorized Biography*, which provides a detailed overview of the relationship between war, history, politics, and national identity in Australia. Moving seamlessly between intellectual and cultural history, Holbrook's research highlights the historic trends that shaped Australian narratives of the First World War. Working through a hundred years of historiography and hagiography, Holbrook demonstrates how narratives of Australia's First World War have been shaped and reshaped through the lens of recent military conflicts. Holbrook's study surveys Charles Bean's compulsion to frame his official history of Australia's war into a narrative of national maturation; the impact of military service during the Second World War on the outlook of historians Russel Ward and George Serle; the decline of Anzac Day during the turbulent years of the Vietnam War; and the resurgent popular appeal of military history in Australia in the context of peacekeeping missions during the 1990s and the War on Terror. In surveying these interpretations of the war, Holbrook highlights how historians such as Charles Bean or Bill Gammage wrote their narratives, in part, while considering their own experiences and their relationship to the qualities that defined Australian national identity.

Though Nathan Wise does not explicitly frame his research as a response to contemporary conflicts, his *Anzac Labour* emphasizes the continuity of a workplace culture in the experience of Australian soldiers before, during, and after their time in uniform. Wise frames his research against those Australian military historians who focus their inquiries on assessing operational effectiveness or understanding soldiers' experience of combat. By examining wartime service as a temporary phase in a worker's life, *Anzac Labour* provides a broader perspective on the experience of Australians serving overseas. This study raises deeper ques-

tions about the relationship between wartime service and workers' culture both before and after the war. By drawing on the diaries of Australian soldiers, Wise shows how new recruits used elements of their pre-war working lives to shape the fledgling traditions and culture of Australia's nascent army. By examining the vocational training offered to soldiers on demobilization, Wise highlights how educational programs intended to provide new opportunities to men transitioning back to their civilian lives, as defined by their work. By exploring these transitional phases, Wise demonstrates how the pre-war Australian labour force shaped the military and, in turn, how the military shaped the Australian labour force after the war. By contextualizing military service in this way, *Anzac Labour* acknowledges the unique hazards and hardships of wartime service while eroding narratives that rationalize soldiers' performance in battle as the product of an inherently Australian national character.

### **Labour and Class**

Each of these monographs highlights the strong influence of the labour movement and class politics in shaping historic narratives of Australia's military past. Marxist theory played an important role in influencing Australian historians and the histories they wrote. The relationship between this strand of historiography and Australian narratives of the First World War are addressed in Carolyn Holbrook's fourth chapter. Historians such as Russel Ward and George Serle began their undergraduate studies after their return from military service during the Second World War. Both historians balanced their affiliation with the Communist Party with their renewed nationalism, brought on by their time in uniform. Ward's *The Australian Legend* (1958) reframed the archetypal Australian bushman into the utopian idealism and trade unionism of the late nineteenth century radicals (Holbrook, 98). While endorsing Charles Bean's official history of Australia during the First World War in constructing the Australian war experience as an affirmation of Australia's frontier character, Ward nevertheless struggled to reconcile his own left-leaning interpretation of Australian history with the Labor Party's devotion to the imperial war effort during the First World War. Prime Minister William Hughes' attempts to implement conscription presented a particularly difficult contradiction, as Ward sought to frame the First World War into a longer narrative of Australian radicalism (Holbrook, 99). Ken Inglis, one of the first historians to study the construction of social memory, challenged Australian historians to delve deeper into the contradictions between Australia's First World War and the Marxist narrative. As Holbrook points out, however, the Left's brief attempt to place the First World War into a longer history of Australian radicalism by casting soldiers as an extension of nineteenth-century radical republicanism was ultimately undone by the scholars of the New Left. A younger generation of historians criticized this personification of Australia's national character as racist, chauvinist, misogynist, and militaristic, and finally drew the Left's history of the

First World War away from relying on constructions of Australian national identity (Holdbrook, 114).

The University of Melbourne's activist culture certainly played a role in shaping Alistair Thomson's study of private and public memories of the First World War. As a peace activist, Thomson witnessed how the Anzac narrative deflected critiques of Australian entanglements in military alliances, while his feminist friends pointed out how a militarized narrative of Australian history marginalized the contributions of women. Thomson's undergraduate research into Melbourne's working-class suburbs and the returned servicemen's riots led him to pursue doctoral research on the experience of working class veterans of the First World War (Thomson, 10). Through his interviews, Thomson found a starker version of the war than the stories he heard growing up. On one hand, many of Thomson's interviewees remembered their officers, and the authoritarian culture of the military, with contempt (Thomson, 40-41). While most veterans cherished the comradeship they found during the war, many of Thomson's subjects grew wary of the Returned Services League's conservatism and joined pacifist or socialist clubs during the interwar years (Thompson, 143-145). Thomson's interviews with Fred Farrall best illustrate this divergence among veterans, as Farrall later joined the Communist Party and successfully ran for mayor in his Melbourne municipality. Farrall's radical politics left him in an uncomfortable relationship with the commemoration of Anzac Day. Though he refused to march in the parades, Farrall appreciated the holiday as an occasion to reconnect with old mates and share his stories as a radical veteran with a younger generation (Thomson, 244). The working class veterans Thomson interviewed expressed a complex relationship between their experiences and the popular commemorations of the war. Shaped by his own emerging class politics, Thomson wrote a groundbreaking study of social memory.

Labour lays at the heart of Nathan Wise's monograph. Work—rather than combat—constituted the majority of soldiers' lives in uniform. By framing military service as work, Wise opens new opportunities to examine soldiers' experiences during wartime. Wise's first chapter demonstrates that thousands of Australian soldiers exercised established labour practices of striking or refusing to work, to protest an increase in their training hours from 36 to 40 hours per week (Wise, 27-28). Soldiers likewise employed more discreet methods of collective workplace resistance while serving overseas, to contest the authority of overbearing or overzealous officers or non-commissioned officers. Wise reveals how humour could undercut an overly authoritarian officer or how carefully selected moments of collective resistance won soldiers a respite from unnecessary hardships (Wise, 77-86). These tactics also escalated into full-scale mutinies, as Australian soldiers fought to exhaustion during the offensives of 1918 (Wise, 88-90). More than a bargaining chip, Wise demonstrates that work offered a measure of personal fulfillment while serving away from the front lines. Soldiers detailed their

work in letters and diaries to validate themselves as hard or skillful workers, and compared themselves to a clumsy or unmotivated colleagues (Wise, 69-70). By focusing on soldiers' labour, Wise provides an alternate narrative to combat, service, or sacrifice, and highlights soldiers' agency in challenging and disrupting conventional military authority.

### **Revising Narratives**

Each of these studies takes a particularly critical approach to the established narratives of Australia's First World War. By framing military service as a type of work, Wise washes away some of the heroic varnish from the more celebratory narratives of the war experience. Focusing on soldiers' work, Wise frames his analysis to reveal the more mundane and ordinary aspects of daily life in uniform. While exploring the unique risks and hardships of wartime service, Wise situates soldiers' duties within a broader set of considerations than the purely operational context of the front. Working to dig trenches, dugouts, and tunnels improved the collective comfort and safety of Australian soldiers, while the performance of such tasks could bring soldiers out of the line of fire (Wise, 41-42). Being assigned an unpleasant or tedious task such as guard duty or stable work could provide a reprieve from combat operations, as Wise shows in his chapter devoted to work in the Near East (Wise, 99). The rhythm of this work—at times monotonous—added a sense of regularity and predictability in an otherwise unpredictable environment. Placing work, rather than combat, at the centre of a study of soldiers' experiences provides a more relatable means of understanding the motives of soldiers in the performance of their duties, without reinforcing or relying on tired myths of heroism, patriotism, or martial masculinity.

Alistair Thomson's study delves directly into the relationship between celebratory narratives of war and soldiers' personal experiences. Through an ongoing series of interviews, particularly with the three veterans featured in his monograph, Thomson carefully probes at the gap between popular and personal narratives of the First World War. Percy Bird and Fred Farrall both spoke publicly about their experiences as veterans and drew on a practiced repertoire of personal anecdotes for their interviews with Thomson. Bird thought back fondly on the camaraderie of military service and shared stories of his reputation as a scrounger and entertainer, but Thomson's queries revealed Bird's ambivalence toward the typical Australian soldiers' larrikinism. A practicing Presbyterian, Bird avoided drinking and smoking, as well as bawdy humour toward women (Thomson, 86-87). In his later years, Farrall spoke regularly in public about his war service and developed a polished narrative arc for his naïve enlistment, post-war disillusionment, and ultimate discovery of socialist politics (Thomson, 114). Openly critical of the war, Farrall approved of realistic depictions of the First World War in popular media, as well as the exhibits of the Australian War Memorial. Yet Thomson found that Farrall did not consider how these depictions of

war continued to lend themselves to praising the deeds of soldiers or celebrating Australia's national accomplishments on the battlefield (Thomson, 246). Bill Langham did not speak publicly about the war but nurtured his own complicated relationship with the popular myth of the war experience. Langham grew impatient with military authority while in uniform and became embittered as pensions and rehabilitation schemes failed to work in his favour. Yet Langham remained an active member of the Returned and Services League, in its various forms, and enjoyed marching in Anzac Day parades because he felt the appreciation of the crowds (Thomson, 194). Thomson's enquiries into veterans' experiences of public commemorations reveal the uneasy relationship between military service and popular narratives.

One of the key themes of Carolyn Holbrook's study is the ongoing tension between memorializing war in Australia and propagating heroic narratives. Bill Gammage's research on Australian soldiers during the First World War provides an excellent case study to demonstrate the difficulty of writing an accurate depiction of wartime trauma without lionizing the soldiers who endured such conditions. Gammage relied on the Australian War Memorial's collection of letters and diaries—gathered for, but never used in, the official history—to produce one of the first academic studies of war based on the writings of ordinary soldiers. The resulting book, *The Broken Years* (1974) echoed many of the themes of Bean's official history. Though Gammage did not share Bean's view of the war as a national rite-of-passage, the unique resilience of Australian soldiers became a focal point in his study. Holbrook situates the popular appeal of *The Broken Years*, and subsequent histories that focus on the trials of ordinary soldiers, in the "trauma culture" that emerged from the 1980s (Holbrook, 134-135). Protests against the Vietnam War often challenged the complicity of soldiers in wartime atrocities, but the growing public awareness of PTSD blunted critiques of soldiers as perpetrators of violence by re-casting soldiers as victims of war. This growing public sympathy for soldiers and the trauma they endure offered a new opportunity to praise soldiers' sacrifices. Holbrook's sixth chapter examines the rise in genealogy and family histories in Australia during the 1980s, highlighting the many family histories published by the children of veterans of the First World War. Often guided by a curiosity to uncover their fathers' experiences of the war and a desire to deepen their understanding of their own lives, genealogists published a wealth of books tracing their relatives' journeys through the campaigns of the First World War. Writers who had come of age marching in anti-war protests during the Vietnam era found themselves drawn to Anzac Day parades by an increasingly personal connection to the conflict, developed as they researched family histories of military service (Holbrook, 163-164). Through a nuanced analysis of this phase of Australian historiography, Holbrook demonstrates that professional and amateur historians have struggled to balance commemorations and celebrations of military service in their writing.



## Conclusion

These three monographs certainly make good use of the left's methodologies in critiquing and complicating Australia's history of the First World War. Alistair Thomson frames his work alongside his own discovery of leftist politics during his undergraduate studies, while the political leanings of Australian historians are central to Carolyn Holbrook's survey of Australia's difficult relationship with historical narratives of the First World War. Labour politics and working-class identity frames much of Nathan Wise's study of soldiers as workers, as well as Thomson's decision to interview working-class veterans of the First World War.

All three of these works rest heavily on established theories of gender politics, particularly the construction of Australian frontier and martial masculinity, yet the experiences of women are largely absent. Thomson focuses on the experience of working-class veterans; while his interviewee's wives often enter the narrative, women remain peripheral to Thomson's study of soldiers. Wise acknowledges the omission of nurses from his study by explaining that the workplace culture of nurses in hospitals differed too much from that of the soldier (Wise, 6).

These three works also largely overlook race as category for analysis. An Indian soldier makes an appearance in Wise's chapter on soldiers' work at Gallipoli (Wise, 67), though Peter Stanley's recent research on the relationship between Australian and Indian soldiers on the peninsula reveals many more encounters between the two armies.<sup>3</sup> Holbrook and Thomson both frame the postwar strengthening of the Aboriginal rights movement in opposition to conservative commemorations Anzac Day, but the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders veterans are largely left out of their analyses (Holbrook, 191-195; Thomson 231-232). The growing scholarship dedicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders history includes a small rise in the study of Indigenous service in Australia, yet many of these studies of military service seek primarily to gain public acknowledgement for the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders soldiers in Australia's military accomplishments.<sup>4</sup> While Holbrook, Thomson, and Wise all provide new perspectives and methodologies to contest established narratives of the First World War, their focus on service overseas—or its depiction in popular and historical representations of the war—continues to give prominence to the predominantly Anglophone, male soldiers of the Australian Imperial Force.

In reviewing these three monographs, the resilience of nationalist narratives of the First World War in the Australian imagination becomes patently clear. While each author remains openly critical of such a problematic interpretation of Australian history, their studies gravitate around this powerful narrative. As Thomson admits, and as Holbrook reveals about many historians, the construction of nationalist narratives of the First World War around an idealized national identity can make it difficult for Australians to separate themselves from such an



interpretation of history. Australian nationalist narrative of the First World War are often constructed as an affirmation of Australian frontier masculinity. This affirmation of a frontier identity seeks to naturalize the presence of Europeans on Indigenous Australian soil by rationalizing their characteristics as a product of the environment. Dislodging the nationalist narratives of Australia's First World War requires more than a confrontation with historical facts, it will require confronting Australia's settler colonial past.

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup>Paul Daley, "Australia's lavish spending on memorial cloaks a more distasteful reality," *The Guardian*, 10 November 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/postcolonial-blog/2015/nov/11/lavish-spending-first-world-war-commendations-cloak-distasteful-reality>, accessed 30 August 2016.

<sup>2</sup>"Anzac Day service in Gallipoli: Tickets announced after public ballot for places at centenary event," ABC News, 8 April 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-04-03/tickets-announced-for-anzac-day-centenary-service-in-gallipoli/5365140>, accessed 30 August 2016.

<sup>3</sup>Peter Stanley, "He was black, he was a White man, and a dinkum Aussie': Race and Empire in Revisiting the Anzac Legend," in Santanu Das ed., *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 213-230.

<sup>4</sup>Noah Riseman, "The Rise of Indigenous Military History," *History Compass* 12, no. 12 (2014): 901-911.