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What does an investigation of primary sources reveal about the Gallipoli experience and to what extent does this explain the origins of the ANZAC Legend?

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The Anzac Legend is attributed to Charles Bean. Bean was the official war correspondent of Australia, official historian of Australia’s role in the Great War and the force behind the establishment of the Australian War Memorial. However, the Anzac Legend was constructed from reports from the official British war correspondent, Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett and journalist, Keith Murdoch. Our society perceives the image of an Anzac as that of a heroic man or woman, who gave up their lives for their country, their mates and to preserve the Australian way of life. In 1915 the combined Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) were the men who fought on the frontline in a distant land to protect an even further away Mother-land. It was on the shores of this faraway country that the Anzac Legend was born. The government of the day censored the accounts by reporters to increase enlistment rates for the war effort. Through an examination of primary sources, it can be determined that though the legend was constructed within a political agenda it was validated by the writings of the soldiers and Charles Bean, who detailed their experiences in Gallipoli.

Charles Bean won his position through the Australian Journalists’ Association’s ballot nomination for the war correspondent writer’s competition. In April 1915 he sailed with the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) and watched the first troops land on what is now known as Anzac Cove, Gallipoli. He himself landed at about 10am on the 25th April 1915 and was with them throughout the Gallipoli Campaign and during many of their battles, staying at Gallipoli until the withdrawal in December 1915. As a reporter he observed the day-to-day lives of the soldiers, their battles and the planning by the officers. He wrote “It lay in the mettle of the men themselves... Life was very dear, but life was not worth living unless they could be true to their idea of Australian manhood.” After the evacuation he would use photographs and soldiers’ writings and drawings to create The Anzac Book, which was published in 1916, this primary document is a rare insight into how the soldiers experienced the war. Though he did write for the newspapers his accounts were more generalized to the war, rather than just the Gallipoli experience. Today he is more famous for his accounts in his 12 volume Official History of Australia in the War of 1915 - 1918. As the Gallipoli Campaign continued many newspapers chose not to use accounts by Charles Bean, as the general public considered his writing to be mundane. “His writings were considered dull and papers, such as The Age and The Argus started using reports from other sources.” Readers preferred the more dynamic writing of Ashmead-Bartlett and Murdoch.
Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett covered the landing at “Anzac Cove” and gave the first eye witness accounts of the landing and the battles to follow. The first time Australians read about the Gallipoli invasion was on the 8th May 1915 when the dailies carried Ashmead-Bartlett’s stirring account. “The Australians who were about to go into action for the first time in trying circumstances were cheerful, quiet, and confident. There was no sign of ‘nerves’, nor excitement.” He portrayed them as being courageous, independent, honourable, heroic and larrikins. Australians’ response to Ashmead-Bartlett’s writing was, according to Les Carlyon, that the public loved this writing because it was romantic, fantasized and came from an Englishman. Australians still craved approval from a higher authority. It was noted by A.W Bazley in a letter to John Treloar, dated 7th February 1927, that Bartlett’s account had “led … to an immediate increase in the number of volunteers offering for the AIF.” Australians were enthused to join in the fighting, to escape the routine of their daily lives. As the Gallipoli Campaign progressed, Ashmead-Bartlett’s observation of the British command and its officers, changed, he became highly critical of how the authority was being passed from the British to the Australian officers. He observed that the Australians displayed a healthy disrespect for authority which resulted in them questioning orders and making personal decisions, unlike the British who acted without question. These comments caused Ashmead-Bartlett to be recalled on the 2nd of October 1915. This exaggerated the contrast between the British command and the Australian soldiers, which reinforced the Australian public’s view of the Anzacs and created the start of a belief that their soldiers were better than the British.

Keith Murdoch arrived at Gallipoli in September 1915 as a reporter for the Melbourne Herald. His writings reflect the friendship he had with Ashmead-Bartlett. Both men were deeply concerned about the censorship of the newspapers on the subject of poor leadership by the British Command. They decided to write a letter to the British Prime Minister, detailing the truth about the Gallipoli experience, this has become known as The Gallipoli Letter. This primary resource reflects the amount of information that was censored for the “well being” of the public. In part the letter says “I feel also that the British physic is very much below that of the Turks, indeed, is quite obviously so. Our men have found it impossible to form a high opinion of the British K.men and territorials. They are merely a lot of childlike youths without strength to endure or brains to improve their conditions.” Murdoch’s account does much to reinforce Ashmead-Bartlett’s Anzac Legend showing Australian soldiers to be heroic, loyal and anti-authoritarian. Furthermore Murdoch writes “But I could pour into your ears so much truth about the grandeur of our Australian army, and the wonderful affection of those fine young soldiers for each other and their homeland … to be an Australian is the greatest privilege the world has to offer.” Here, Murdoch draws a clear comparison between the British leadership and the Anzacs.

A further investigation of other sources like soldiers’ diaries and letters, gives us an insight into the true Gallipoli experience, frequently confirms the Anzac Legend first reported by Ashmead-Bartlett and draws on the awareness of how mundane the day-to-day life of a soldier was. A letter from the brother of A. Ritchie tells of life in the trenches, “We get good tucker, and there is not much to complain about. Tell the boys to come over here, those who can, I am sure if they only knew how hard we are pressed by the Turks at times not one would stay behind.” One can also read how the Australians are viewed by other soldiers. In a letter to his mother, dated June 13th, 1915, Trooper E.H. Daft says “The Australian troops have earned a good reputation here for their gameness. The Indian troops think the world of us, also the French.” Although the representation of the mundane day-to-day life of the soldiers may seem to be irrelevant or boring details it is an extension of the Anzac Legend. The mateship they display with their fellow soldiers is not dissimilar to the almost casual dismissal of danger they write about in their letters home to their families to ensure they do not worry about the soldiers at the Front. In a letter to his mother, Private Roy Howard Denning wrote he “knew what pluck and determination was necessary to keep awake and alert through the long weary hours of the night, therefore I thought I was justified in being
proud of being an Australian and after that night I had no fear as to the results of our operations eventually. Give me Australians as comrades and I will go anywhere duty calls,”12 In this quote Private Denning sums up the pride and admiration that the Anzacs have for their fellow soldiers, being self-effacing of their own deeds and admiring of their comrades.

The primary sources referenced above, support that there is a true representation of the Australian troops experience at Gallipoli. Charles Bean writes an unemotional but detailed account of the war emphasising the facts rather than the personal sides of it. He did this by writing a broad generalised account of events and by talking to soldiers about their actions and observations. Murdoch and Ashmead-Bartlelt wrote short, engaging reports that confirmed an Anzac Legend based on the soldiers’ heroic, brave, courageous attributes. The letters and diaries of the soldiers are a combination of both Bean’s and Murdoch’s style of writing, detailing accounts of the events of the war. They always discuss the courage of their mates rather than crediting themselves, they downplay the dangers of the war to protect their families from fear and they give a general day-to-day account of life in the Gallipoli experience. With the benefit of hindsight, as we move further away from this experience and as people that didn’t experience Gallipoli, these sources frequently evoke emotions in the modern reader. Thus primary sources are a vital source to understand and interpret both the Gallipoli Experience and the accuracy of the Anzac Legend.

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