The Simpson Prize

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Kevin Kim
Knox Grammar School
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?

Kevin Kim
Knox Grammar School

It has become fashionable amongst professional historians to dismiss the ANZAC legend. For them, there is an arresting disjunct between the valorized and sentimentalised account of the ANZAC soldier and the reality of the Gallipoli experience as found in primary sources such as diaries and letters sent home. Those same documents however, reveal that Australians at the time were aware of something unique or legendary about their experience of this war and in particular, the Gallipoli campaign. While the ANZAC legend could not fully capture the experience at Gallipoli it still tells us a great deal about how Australian soldiers understood their mission and their nationality, and what Gallipoli itself presented to the young nation of Australia.

The ANZAC legend strengthened the resolve of the Australian people during the Gallipoli campaign and provided them with a sense of what was special about their country. When Australia entered the war, it did so to fight for the British Empire. When it exited the war, it had a sense that Australia had made its mark on the world stage. In Source A from *The Argus newspaper* 1914, we can clearly see that the main motivator for Australia’s involvement in Gallipoli was largely due to its undying dedication to protect ‘the Motherland (Britain).’ It says “Coo-ee! It’s the mother country calling...Australian sons have manned their guns prepared to do or die.” This hyperbolic poetic register expresses Australia’s powerful connection to England and indicates that Australia’s involvement at Gallipoli was largely for the British Empire. However, in an editorial post called “The Birth of a Nation” Australians shifted the reason for their involvement from its obligation to the British Empire to the creation of an independent national identity. The

editorial emphasizes “We were Australian in name, and we had a flag.” CEW Bean in his *ANZAC to Amiens* labels the features of Australia’s new identity; “valour…resourcefulness, comradeship, and endurance,” thus proving that Australians rather focused on fomenting their own honourable national identity to celebrate rather than following in the British Empire’s shadow. Gallipoli was a particular site of conflict between Australia and Britain, as seen through the squabbling of political and military elites. In his diary entries, Bartlett says that Australian soldiers were “butchered to make a G.D.B or a K.C.M.G” under British orders. Here, he conveys the willingness of British generals to use Australians as ‘cannon fodder’ in order to be promoted which stirred division between both nations. Australians had held a “strong dislike of the... manners and attitudes of the higher British classes,” and detested “English distinction between officers and men.” These quotations support the case that Australian troops hated authority and that cultural clashes between larrikin Australians and ‘civilised’ British soldiers placed a wedge between both nations. These sources illustrate that our experiences at Gallipoli were transformed into a national narrative that would ultimately give Australia its own independent national image to celebrate every ANZAC Day.

The ANZAC legend is often thought of something that was created in the wake of the war to explain the losses to a grieving nation. But the ANZAC legend was very important to the way the soldiers themselves experience Gallipoli: to their sense of purpose, duty and value. The Australian soldier at Gallipoli was depicted as especially brawny and athletic. Ashmead Bartlett, for instance, described them as a “race of athletes” who “scale[d] perpendicular cliffs” and “proved themselves adept at this kind of warfare.” It seems improbable that Australians really were this superior ‘he man’ figure relative to troops from other nations at Gallipoli, but the idea of Australian soldiers as virile colonials was important to troop morale. In Private Roy Denning’s letter to his mother he says “I had no fear... and I will go anywhere duty calls.” Although, as historians, we must question the legitimacy of personal
letters that were often censored heavily, it is clear that the ANZAC legend played an enormous role in raising the morale of troops so that they could fight as effectively as possible. Source B is a highly glorified image of an Australian soldier sounding the trumpet, showered in light, with muscular troops lying in wait. This depiction typifies the obsession with the brute physicality of ANZAC troops. In contrast, in Source C, the British portray their soldiers as leaner and blander. Source C, like Source B, shows a soldier sounding a trumpet but the focus is the British soldier’s expression, face and identity, rather than his body. Promoting our physical superiority was evidently an important dimension of Australia’s early national identity. Perhaps portraits of Australian soldiers which inordinately focused on their physiques, resonated with the average ANZAC because of the early Twentieth Century Australian view that we were a country of frontiersmen, of ruggedness.

One of the most important ways that the Gallipoli experience was affected by the authoring of the ANZAC legend was that soldiers were encouraged by sentimental accounts of their bravery. Ashmead Bartlett, in his first reports, emphasizes that “the courage displayed by these wounded Australians will never be forgotten...there has been no finer feat” This sense of being particularly courageous lingered long after the war had concluded especially during Australia’s repatriation policy. Historian, Marilyn Lake documented that returned soldiers created public unrest by starting violent brawls and drinking excessively due to the elevation of their courageous acts during Gallipoli to “legend status” which created a certain arrogance and disregard for authority among Australian soldiers. We can draw a direct correlation between the ANZACs becoming a powerful force to Bartlett’s legend as he told Australian civilians that “there had been no finer feat in the war.” Furthermore, during the first ANZAC Day, Prime Minister W.M. Hughes said “soldiers, your deeds have won you a place in the Temple of Immortals.” This treatment of soldiers as almost ‘godlike’ figures demonstrates the way that the mythologising of the Gallipoli experience allowed returned servicemen to view themselves as particularly Australian Australians and especially able soldiers.

This isn’t to say that the ANZAC legend includes all of the perspectives that form the Gallipoli experience, and in the same way that it is important to look at what is exaggerated by the ANZAC Legend, it is also useful to observe what is excluded. As noted above, the ANZAC legend is preoccupied with a particular masculine view of Australians, as such; male voices were favoured over female ones. However, there is much to learn from the diaries of nurses at Gallipoli. Australian nurse, Grace Wilson said “It is just too awful – one could never describe the scenes – could only wish all I knew to be killed outright.” The trope of unspeakability is important for two reasons; first, it shows that individuals writing about Gallipoli at the time struggled to put into precise terms, the horrors of war. Secondly, it illustrates the way that women’s versions of events in particular were unlikely to enter the popular consciousness. Wilson is already aware that the depressing histories of failure and death are unlikely to feature in the national mythologies of war, that it is less permissible for women to articulate their experience of war and that it would be inappropriate or ‘unwomanly’ for her to describe, in detail, its gory consequences.

This inability to write about the most terrible aspects of the Gallipoli experience is also exhibited in the diaries of Signaller Ellis Silas. Before the campaign, Silas was broadly optimistic, but after landing he experienced an inability to write. On the ship Ellis stated: “I do not feel the least fear, only sincere hope that I may not fail at the critical moment.” Five days after landing, Silas stopped writing and ended his final diary entry with “it is all too terrible, too sad.” This speedy deterioration of his will and composure exemplifies that the trauma of war that cannot be adequately communicated through language. If, as argued above, the ANZAC legend is obsessed with the physicality of Australian soldiers then it also true that it neglects what goes on in their minds. Shellshock and post-traumatic stress
disorder undermines the image of the Australian soldier as perpetually unfazed by what he encounters at Gallipoli. Both of these sources show that the Gallipoli experience cannot be understood without confronting its psychological dimension. Its exclusion from popular memory also tells us something about the ANZAC legend – why it was created and which version of the conflict it promotes. One could say that the ANZAC legend conceals as much of what is reveals.

The romanticised hyperbolic dedication or commemoration fomented by the reports of Ashmead Bartlett, shows the contrast between the ways that professional historians write about the Gallipoli campaign and its role in the popular consciousness. It would be folly for historians to ignore the ANZAC legend in their scholarship because sources do not just tell us about the passage of a war but also its construction. The mythology of the Gallipoli experience exposes which aspects of that campaign were important to Australia and its troops and explains the inception of the legend that we celebrate every 25th April.

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