



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

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‘Commemoration of the Anzac tradition has widespread support in Australia despite different historical interpretations and debates about the nature and significance of the Anzac legend.’

To what extent does your own research support this view?

The Anzac legend is the defining factor of the wider Anzac tradition, establishing the shared ideals of the Anzac tradition. To some extent, it is true that commemoration of the Anzac tradition receives widespread support despite debates surrounding the Anzac legend. This essay posits that contemporary support for commemoration is ebbing, though this reality does not signal the death knell of Anzac in Australian society. Rather, the Anzac legend and tradition have, and will, continuously adapt to changing times with ebbs and flows of support. The continual drive towards the inclusion of diverse stories within the Anzac legend has been the central element of its enduring commemoration. The decline of the militaristic nature of the legend has led to support for its civic virtues. Similarly, the historically marginalised service and lives of women and Indigenous/First Nations people have been brought into the legend, thereby contributing to its contemporary currency. Hence, the Anzac legend is not a static story, but one which changes to fit the needs of its contextual Australian society.

The militaristic nature and significance of the Anzac legend has been challenged and supplanted by an emphasis on civic, and civilian values. This shift towards less militaristic values has enabled continuing support for Anzac commemoration. The origins of the militaristic nature of the legend are clear in an April 1919 issue of the Anzac Bulletin, which was written for members of the Australian Imperial Forces in Great Britain.¹ The landing at Gallipoli is described in a highly militarised manner, and the article declares that it was the place where ‘Australian troops first made their name.’² By doing so, as Joan Beaumont notes in **Source 7**, the Anzac legend has implanted itself in the ‘Australian cultural imagination.’³ However, this militarised narrative of the war has been challenged. Especially during and after the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s, the traditional form of legend came to be seen as ‘militaristic, misogynist and anachronistic.’⁴ In **Source 8**, Leah Riches and James Bennett state that the militaristic, ‘celebratory’ nature of the legend impedes engagement with the ‘complex and challenging histories of

¹ [Anzac Bulletin](#)

² [Anzac Bulletin, 6](#)

³ [Simpson's Prize 2024 Source 7](#)

⁴ [Simpson's Prize 2024 Source 7](#)

war.’⁵ The relevance of this concern is highlighted by the fact that it was a major issue raised and debated at a public symposium held in 2016.⁶

Part of the shift away from militarism occurred in the wake of the Second World War, as soldiers, especially captured prisoners of war, used their memoirs to elevate virtues such as mateship and humour over militaristic values.⁷ Weary Dunlop’s demonstrates potently vocalises these less militaristic sentiments, declaring “all men are equal in the face of suffering and death”.⁸ Dunlop presents a far more sympathetic picture that draws the curtains on hatred and propaganda. Likewise, in her 2012 Anzac Cove speech, then-Prime Minister Julia Gillard reflected on the civic virtues of Anzac (**Source 2**). Gillard talks of ‘honour... equality and respect’ as well as the Anzacs’ ‘character and conduct.’⁹ The closest Gillard gets to appreciation of military prowess are her references to a ‘dreadful war,... skilful enemy...[and a] mortal struggle.’

Both sides on the issue of militarisation can be seen within Jim McKay’s critique of the book ‘What’s Wrong With Anzac? The Militarisation of Australian History’ by Marilyn Lake, Mark McKenna and Henry Reynold.¹⁰ Lake, McKenna, and Reynold claim that it is impossible to deny ‘the surfeit of jingoistic military histories’¹¹ and that ‘relentless militarisation of our history; the commemoration of war and understanding of our national history have been conflated.’¹² Yet, Jim McKay argues that the modern Anzac legend focuses more on ‘reconciliation, healing, tolerance and intercultural friendships’¹³ and that there are ‘ways in which Australians constantly reconfigure Anzac myths.’¹⁴ McKay’s argument draws together both academic research and cultural analysis, presenting an enriched image of the fluidity of the Anzac legend. He critically explores the aforementioned accommodation of the legend to civic virtues, countering critiques that posit the Anzac legend’s present-day

⁵ [Simpson's Prize 2024 Source 8](#)

⁶ [Simpson's Prize 2024 Source 7](#)

⁷ [Simpson's Prize 2024 Source 7](#)

⁸ [Paul Kelly, Sir Edward ‘Weary’ Dunlop Asialink Lecture \(2005\)](#)

⁹ [Simpson's Prize 2024 Source 2](#)

¹⁰ [Jim McKay, A Critique of the Militarisation of Australian History and Culture Thesis: The Case of Anzac Battlefield Tourism](#)

¹¹ [McKay, Critique, 1](#)

¹² [McKay, Critique, 2](#)

¹³ [McKay, Critique, 13](#)

¹⁴ [McKay, Critique, 19](#)

fossilisation. Hence, due to its characteristically malleable nature, the Anzac legend has been able to adapt to challenges by adopting civic values, rather than heavily militaristic ones.

Likewise, a societal shift towards gender equality has called into question the overwhelmingly masculine Anzac legend. Yet, by adaptation – the inclusion of women’s stories in official narratives and commemoration – the Anzac tradition has maintained its currency. Historically, there has always been an emphasis on the masculinity of the army, an outdated way of thought that does not accord with modern notions of gender equality. We can see this in a 1917 propaganda poster that depicts the army as an entity synonymous with heavily masculine activities like sports (see Appendix A).¹⁵ The military is dubbed ‘the Sportsmen’s 1000’, and the central figure of the soldier is framed by a British flag and images of sports. Such a depiction of the military service shows it embracing masculine virtues. In depictions of the Anzacs like this one, women were excluded. Similarly, women were excluded historically from much of wartime service and largely limited to being nurses or engaging in homefront wartime production. Yet, despite playing significant roles where they did participate, women have ‘had to fight to be recognised for their non-combatant war service.’¹⁶

In this fight for recognition, Robyn Mayes suggests that there has been reluctance to adopt commemoration of women, with women needing to protest, ‘presenting the most serious of all challenges to Anzac core beliefs and rituals.’¹⁷ According to Mayes, women have been vocal opponents in protesting the exclusivity of the legend. Even when taking into account the fact that women were to an extent included in the early Anzac commemorations¹⁸, by large, there was a bold but defined line between the treatment of women and men. Had Maye’s critiques been redirected towards the traditional Anzac legend, her statements would have been by a large, full of verisimilitude.

¹⁵ [Propaganda Poster](#)

¹⁶ [Conversation Robyn Mayes](#)

¹⁷ [Conversation Robyn Mayes](#)

¹⁸ [Dr Kirsty Harris, ‘Was it Just for the Boys’](#)

Yet, in accommodating changing perceptions of gender equality, the Anzac legend has undergone some changes. In doing so, the legend largely focuses on the prominence of women as nurses or supporters and the people running charity and relief funds for the front line. Many female figures such as Vera Deakin were recognised in the Australian War Memorial for their services.¹⁹ In Dr Kirsty Harris's short article "Was it Just for the Boys", she talks about how the misogynistic roots of the Anzacs led women to empower and '[forge] their own traditions'. At the end of the article, she announces the success of integrating men and women into one Anzac legend, celebrated by one inclusive Anzac tradition, another example of the malleable nature of the Anzac legend.

Despite the presence of some clingy occurrences of misogyny, the Anzac legend was able to undoubtedly fend itself from falling complete victim to modern-day 'cancel culture'.

Continued support of the Anzac tradition has also been maintained by a move towards the inclusion of Aboriginal people within the Anzac legend. As Joan Beaumont said, 'The question perhaps is not whether there is a place for multicultural Australians in the narratives of Gallipoli and other battles of the past, but whether the values that the Anzac legend enshrines are ones that transcend culture, ethnicity and faith.'²⁰ Beaumont's narratives of Indigenous recognition, though overdue by decades, are widely supported today.

In recent times, with the influx of the Indigenous rights movement and other Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander campaigns, the Anzac legend had to harmonise with new generations, so that Australian society would be in sync. Examples of this can be seen in the success of the theatrical production 'Black Diggers'²¹, a welcome example that slowly draws Indigenous stories into the mainstream, despite forced exclusion of their service personnel by the authorities in the initial phases of both the First and Second World Wars. Additionally, previously neglected tributes

¹⁹ [Roles of Women in Anzac](#)

²⁰ [Joan Beaumont](#)

²¹ [Black Diggers \(play\)](#)

like the erection of a commemorative window in the village church at Raukkan, South Australia, built by local Indigenous persons in 1925²² are receiving newfound media representation for their reimbursements of Indigenous Anzac service. Newfound cultural nationalistic imagination cites a reason for continued support of the legend supported by the voices of revolutionary works like 'Black Diggers'.²³

Acknowledging its racially flawed past, the Anzac legend reconciles with Indigenous communities in the modern world and continues its commemoration.

Thus, the Anzac legend continuously adapts to the changing societal tides whilst keeping true to its nationalistic ideals. With the changing tides of Australian communities, the Anzac legend may look for new ways of commemoration or change its elements, however, it will adapt and survive this ebb the same way it has persisted through previous ones and will continue to be commemorated. Whilst the number of attendees has dropped in recent times²⁴ – as historian Helen Robinson put it, it is 'not just a matter of attendance' but 'a question of attitude'²⁵. Instead of dwelling on antagonistic highlights of its flawed past, Australia should be turning to a new page of civic virtues and harmonic narratives, celebrating the fact that after a nimble revision, we will continue the Anzac tradition, commemorating the embodiment of our national pride, the Anzac legend.

²² [Simpson's Prize 2024 Source 5](#)

²³ [Black Diggers \(play\)](#)

²⁴ [Simpson's Prize 2024 Source 9](#)

²⁵ [McKay, Critique, 4](#)

Appendix

Appendix A:



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