



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?**

Following the return of Australian troops from the failed Gallipoli campaign, the Acting Prime Minister and Minister for National Defence George Pearce, established the 25th of April as Anzac Day. In the following years, the six states would hold different opinions about the methods of commemoration (National Museum Australia, 2022) and this divide would continue more than a century later with the nation’s historians debating the nature and significance of the Anzac legend. In the legend’s early years, the feats achieved by Australia’s “diggers” would see the 25th of April 1915 become “the day on which Australian nationhood was born” (Beaumont, 2013). Historians would, in later decades, scrutinise the narrative that has been created surrounding the Anzac legend and its impacts on the nation. With recent records of decline in support for Anzac Day, further discussion about the Anzac legend’s relationship to Australia’s identity, history and culture is needed.

There exists a popular conception from early war historians and the general public that Australia’s national identity is synonymous with the Gallipoli campaign. For a fledging nation that was only 14 years old, Australia’s contributions and sacrifices were indeed significant, with the nation’s proportion of military participants being “almost as high as that in any belligerent nation” (Inglis, 1987). Out of the 331, 781 soldiers who embarked for service, 64.98% suffered from casualties (Smith, 1919), an extremely significant sacrifice. This praise is further underscored as the AIF was entirely composed of volunteers, a trait almost completely unique to Australia (Inglis, 1987). WWI’s significance to Australian history is supported by historians such as Manning Clark who describes the first two years of the war as being “momentous in Australia” (1957), as well as through Australia’s Prime Ministers. In their speeches, they often laud “the legend of Anzac” and its “heroic stories” (Gillard, 2012), as well as highlight the qualities of compassion and perseverance (Crotty, 2020). Charles Bean, the Gallipoli campaign’s sole correspondent was instrumental in crafting the portrayal of Australian soldiers (Beaumont, 2013). In Bean’s summary volume, *Anzac to Amiens*, he expresses that “the strongest bond in the Australian Imperial Force was that between a man and his mate” (1946), with his influence affirmed by Australia’s popular identification of “mateship” (Ward, 1958). The Anzac legend’s impact to national identity can also be attributed to the popular notion during Australia’s federation that a nation needed to be involved in conflict before it could be considered legitimate (Buchanan, 1907), thus birthing the idea that the Dardanelles Campaign allowed Australia to be “baptised in blood” (Stockings, 2010).

However, the term “Anzac myth” has emerged with debate about the Anzac legend’s credibility and the consequences of its ties to national identity. The legend’s validity and accuracy has been challenged as the general consensus that Australia’s involvement in the war was an act of self-determination contradicts how the Dardanelles campaign was an act of allegiance to Britain as the mother country (Sharp, 2014). The country’s former Prime Minister publicly declared their intention to contribute to the war as loyalty to the Mother Country, with Joseph Cook offering “any service that the Empire might require” and prior to his election, Andrew Fisher announcing that Australia would support Britain to “the last man and the last shilling” (Dunlop, Palfrey, 1938). This prompts a reconsideration of the historical narrative’s ability to accurately represent the nation and its convictions at the time, with Joan Beaumont labelling the nation’s depiction of “diggers” as “staunch British imperialists” (2015). Furthermore, the national narrative has been recognised as one of exclusion, acknowledging only “white men” (Beaumont, 2015). Although they were forbidden to work on the frontlines, women in the homefront took on many roles, with more than 2000 women serving in the Australian Army Nursing Services (AANS) (Department of Veterans’ Affairs, 2023). Ken Inglis notes that “nobody thought of honouring them” and makes further observations about the lack of legislation for supporting returned nurses. When compared with the NSW Returned Soldiers and Sailors Employment Act (1919), it becomes clear that women were not part of the narrative (Inglis, 1987). Women who actively recruited soldiers in the war effort were acknowledged in *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, where they were recognised not by name, but rather into two categories, “good women who.. in their own mild way sent many a man to the recruiting stations” and “a shrieking sisterhood who.. made the air shudder with their demands upon all and sundry of the local young manhood” (Scott, 1941). The lack of acknowledgement of women who contributed to the war effort calls into question whether this narrow perspective which ignores half the population should represent the nation’s history. The marginalising nature of the Anzac legend is further emphasised in its exclusion of Aboriginal Australians. The Immigration Act of 1901, more widely known as the White Australia Policy and the later Defence Act of 1903 (Amended 1909) prohibited men not from substantial European heritage from serving in the army (Scarlett, 2015). In spite of this, at least 850 Indigenous men were able to enlist (Beaumont, 2015) and records prove the service of 56 Aboriginal men in the Gallipoli campaign (Scarlett, 2015). The idea of “mateship” in the AIF did not extend to Aboriginal men, with the Sydney Morning Herald stating that Aboriginal men would become a pet or a mascot for his unit (1916). The delayed recognition of Aboriginal Australians only prove to undermine the credibility of the Anzac legend and expose its nature of “white exclusiveness” (Scarlett, 2015), contrary to the belief that the Anzac legend “belongs to every Australian” (Gillard, 2012). Moreover, while Australia’s contributions in the Battle of Hamel (Department of Veterans’ Affairs, 2023) and the

Battle of Somme (Campbell, 2022) were significant, they are dwarfed by Britain (Baker, 2023) and America's (DeBrunye, Blum, 2020) sheer manpower and overall involvement.

Support for Anzac Day commemorations has fluctuated over time and the legend continues to expand to become more inclusive. Concern about the decreasing number of attendees at dawn services have been expressed as attendees have fallen by 70% in Canberra and Melbourne, 75% in Adelaide and 85% overseas in Gallipoli from 2015-2020. This trend has been attributed to the lack of relevance to younger generations and lavish government spending (Fathi, 2021). However, it should be recognised that decreasing popularity has fluctuated previously in the 1960s to 1980s (National Museum Australia, 2022) with the anti-war protests and the diminishing British loyalty occurring (Khan, 2017). The Anzac tradition saw a surge of popularity in the 1990s with Bob Hawke visiting Gallipoli and John Howard making WWI commemoration the main focus of his government's culture program (Wells, 2023). Therefore, the popularity of the Anzac tradition is likely to vary depending on current events. It can also be said that commemoration of the Anzac tradition has expanded over time, not just in terms of extending beyond its origins in honouring WWI soldiers to encompass subsequent military operations (National Museum of Australia, 2022), but also in terms of its increased inclusivity. Australian students frequently participate in Anzac Day events (Sharp 2014), with new methods of commemoration being added since 1916 (Watt, 2017). Additionally, Frank Bongiorno charted how ethnic minorities and Aboriginal Australians have been able to research into their familial connections to previous wars, showing that a more inclusive national identity is being created (2018), with the RSL also having increasingly inclusive rules (Watt, 2017).

As differing interpretations are inevitable, the Anzac legend's shortcoming lies in its "sacred" treatment (Cochrane, 2015). In light of the 2020 report by Major General Paul Bereton which disclosed the war crimes of Australian soldiers in Afghanistan, historians have expressed their concern over the Anzac legend blinding Australians from viewing it objectively (Crotty, 2020). Similar to Scott Morrison's defence to the report in 2020, John Howard had previously justified Australia's involvement in the "war on terror" by referring to the Anzac legend (McDonald, 2010). The credibility of the Anzac legend is thus challenged as the nostalgia surrounding it is seen to disregard Australia's cruel treatment of war prisoners and the crimes conducted throughout all military operations (Stanley, 2010). Furthermore, the Anzac legend's role in education comes into conflict with the nature of history as a subject. Alan Tudge, the previous Federal Minister for Education stated that he wanted Anzac Day to be "presented as the most sacred of all days in Australia" rather than "contested" (Hurst, 2021). Yet, one of Australia's most distinguished historians (Craven, 2016), Inga Clendinnen stated that "the discipline of history demands

rigorous self-criticism, a patient, even attentiveness, and a practised tolerance for uncertainty” (2007). Therefore, the “sacred” presentation of the Anzac legend in modern Australian society and education has proved to be an issue for the nation’s contemporary issues and education, prompting reconsideration about the nation’s attitudes.

The sacrifices of Australian soldiers in Gallipoli has upheld an enduring legacy for the nation’s history and identity. As with every event of this significance and given the nature of history itself, debate among historians is inevitable and crucial to our modern understanding of the past. However, the acceptance that debate and change does not undermine the legend’s significance to our nation is necessary. Only by encouraging discussion and revision will the Anzac legend adapt to current values and beliefs, and continue to have a treasured place in our national identity, sustaining the commemoration of the Anzac tradition for generations to come.

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