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## What's Wrong with Anzac? [Book Review]

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## Book Review

Peter Dean reviews *'What's wrong with ANZAC'*  
By Marilyn Lake & Henry Reynolds

**N**ational myths are important for all countries. They are a part of the social fabric that binds us together as a nation and helps to form our national identity. The Anzac myth is one of the most important and powerful in the Australian national story. We have all heard of it, a lot of us participate in the rituals and activities (formal and informal) that help to constitute and reinforce it, a number of us have family or personal connections with it and some of us even claim to understand it. But no matter what interaction any of us may have with it individually it is the national story that takes prominence.

Like all national mythologies Anzac is a contested space and from time to time all nations should stop and assess whether the myths to which the people and the country prescribe are still relevant, still 'real' and still representative of the country that we have become and the country we want to be. It is time according to Marilyn Lake, Henry Reynolds, Joy Damousi, and Mark McKenna that we stop and consider what has become of Anzac.

In this respect this work is courageous and highly commendable. The rise in popularity of Anzac Day combined with the increased volume of publications on Australia's military past in recent decades means that amongst all the comment, commemoration, and publications, the country has; I believe, lost sight of what 'Anzac' means and what role this mythology should play in our society.

Besides the courage of the subject matter there is much to commend in this work. The authors have rightly pointed out that a fair amount of sentimentalism has been entrenched around Anzac Day in recent years. Anzac Day, and its associated mythology, is now surrounded by too much ill informed opinion, regrettably much of it being driven by politicians on both sides of the mainstream political spectrum. The authors raise important and challenging questions about this mythology, such as whether or not the nation was 'born at Gallipoli' and what actually constitutes the 'Anzac Spirit'? They also point out the growing mass of books on Australian military topics that grace the shelves of popular bookstores; a significant portion of these are poor history, with little or no analysis, and which only a very modest contribution to improving our understanding of the Australian experience of war.

However there is also a lot to disagree with in this book and sadly most of it strikes, not at the edges of the work, but at its very core. The book is driven by a misinterpretation of Anzac that views it as an extension of militarism and imperialism. Behind this misinterpretation is an admirable, but naive, pacifism that wrongly believes that Australia has only ever fought 'other people's wars.' In order to justify its conclusions it ignores the role of the 'digger' and other significant portions of the Anzac legend. Furthermore, at times, it seems that some of the authors are more concerned with the ideological ownership of Australian history rather than a systematic study of the Anzac mythology. Ultimately it is exceptionally hard to agree with their argument that Australian history has been thoroughly 'militarised'.

As a result I can't help but conclude that this collection of eminent scholars is not the right assembly of minds to assess this exceptionally important subject. They are neither military historians nor are they specialists on Anzac – be that the Myth, the Day, the Legend, or the cultural phenomenon. Despite this conclusion one cannot help but admire their intention and conclude that this work should play a significant role in the public debate around Anzac.

Despite its flaws this is a book that should be read by a large section of the community, especially those involved in the teaching and study of Australian history. One can only hope that this is only the first salvo in a long and rigorous debate into the meaning of Anzac, rather than just a 'commando' raid on one of our most important national institutions.

*Dr Peter J Dean is a military historian and Manager of the Research and Quality Office at Notre Dame Sydney. His book, The Architect of Victory: The Military Career of Lieutenant General Sir Frank Horton Berryman, will be published by Cambridge University Press in 2010.*



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