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Recent Scholarship in Military History and the ANZAC Legend: Down Under 2010

PETER J. DEAN

On 25 April every year Australians and New Zealanders pause to remember the anniversary of the landings at Gallipoli in 1915. ANZAC Day¹ is named after the acronym for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps and has developed into Australia's national day. For outsiders, it is a somewhat difficult concept to grasp. We remember a generation of young Australian males that died so as to give "birth" to the nation. This came about during a defeat, not a victory, and it happened not in Australia, but in a country on the other side of the globe – Turkey. It leaves most non-Aussies or non-Kiwis scratching their heads. For instance, in order to provide some cultural signposts to the U.S. Study Abroad students who take my introduction to Australian history course each year I explain that ANZAC Day is akin to 4th of July celebrations mashed together with Veterans Day, but in a uniquely Australian context – we gained "independence" from the British, but not by fighting against them, rather we fought with them, blamed them (largely in an attempt to absolve ourselves and prove we are "better") for the loss at Gallipoli, and came to realize that while culturally we were of British stock, we were not actually British, but rather uniquely different. We did, however, still remain connected to the "mother country" for decades to come and to many Australians the bonds and affinity to Great Britain remain (except, of course, on the sporting field).

The landing at Gallipoli also gave rise to the ANZAC Legend and a

1. "ANZAC" has multiple meanings. It can mean: a soldier – an ANZAC, originally a member of the AIF that had served at Gallipoli, and later any Australian or New Zealand soldier; a place, such as ANZAC Cove, as the site of the landing near Ari Burnu became known; a day of commemoration to remember those who have both died and served the nation at war; a battle and/or campaign, a fighting spirit; a folklore tradition amongst the soldiers; and a legend/myth/spirit that is endorsed by institutions and governments that has come to personify Australian "values."

particular tradition in writing Australian military history. The ANZAC Legend was largely fostered by Australia's first military historian, C.E.W. Bean. Bean had been nominated as the official journalist of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and this soon evolved into official historian. He wrote six volumes of the Australian official history of the war (editing the remainder), and was the driving force behind the Australian War Records Section of the AIF and the Australian War Memorial. Bean's contribution was unique; his work is largely focused on the soldiers rather than the commanders and their staff. With a heavy emphasis on the experiences of the infantry and written from the regimental viewpoint, Bean developed a form of history from below that has been described as "democratic" war history. His legacy has been profound. It has led to a dominance of the amateur/journalist historians who focus on the soldier's experience of war and a fascination with the ANZAC mythology in Australian society, which some commentators argue has become a form of civic religion.

The soldiers and battles of World War II (and subsequent conflicts such as Korea, Vietnam) are seen to reinforce the notions of this legend; however, its focal point remains deeply rooted in World War I and especially the campaign at Gallipoli. With the centenary anniversaries for World War I fast approaching, it will be interesting to see how far the battles and campaigns of this war dwarf the experience of other conflicts such as World War II, Australia's largest military commitment. Evidence already abounds of the anniversary impact. For example, the Australian War Memorial conference of 2010 chose to remember the 95th anniversary of the failed August Offensive at Gallipoli; this followed on from their 2008 conference on 1918. One suspects that the anniversary focus will remain firmly entrenched around Gallipoli, Palestine, and the Western Front. The "Australia Remembers" campaign of 1995 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II seems a long time ago. The hopes for a surge in publications, conferences, and funding for the historians and scholars of this conflict in Australia may well have to be pinned on the anniversaries due to arrive in 2039-2045.

Yet, the centenary anniversaries are supposed to remember the totality of experiences of Australians at war and as such the Australian government has set up a special body to plan commemorative events.² For historians in Australia, one of the most perplexing decisions in recent times has been the decision of the Australian government to set up an ANZAC Centenary Commission, yet not include an historian! Rather, it is being left to two former Prime Ministers, a journalist, a veteran's advocate, the head of the Returned Services League (a retired Admiral), and a former

2. ANZAC Centenary: <<http://www.anzaccentenary.gov.au/>>.

Army officer to guide the direction of the nation's commemoration. As I argued recently,

one only has to touch on any one of the number of debates that surround [Australia's] military history to see how the decisions of this commission can influence the public's interpretation of our past. For instance, will the commission endorse programs that remember the supposed "battle for Australia" and the idea that the United States naval victory at the battle of the Coral Sea and the Australian victory on the Kokoda Trail saved Australia from invasion by the Japanese in 1942 or will it reject any commemorate ideas on this topic on the basis of (amongst others) Dr Peter Stanley's 2008 work *Invading Australia: Japan and the Battle for Australia*?³

The other major development in the national debate around ANZAC in Australia during 2010 was the publication of a controversial book by a number of Australia's leading political, cultural, and feminist historians entitled *What's Wrong with Anzac: The Militarisation of Australian History*.⁴ In it the authors make a range of claims some of which, like the poor state of much of Australian military history that is published, are commendable. As the well-known World War I historian Professor Robin Prior has stated, the authors quite rightly point out that there has been a "plethora of books on military matters [in Australia that are] mostly under-researched[,] badly constructed, huge in size, short on analysis [and] ...add little to a deep understanding of our military past."⁵

Yet most of the arguments in this work are ill-considered and demonstrate a lack of understanding of military history. The most glaring omission is the fact that the text skips over Australia's involvement in World War II. It seems this global conflict does not fit the argument that "Australia has only fought other people's wars." The only major entry of any substance for this war is the rioting between Australian and American troops on the streets of Melbourne in 1942.

The other major text to come out in Australia during 2010 by a collection of academic historians is entitled *Zombie Myths of Australian Military History*.⁶ This collection of chapters by some of the countries lead-

3. Peter Dean, "Assessing and Reassessing Anzac in 2010," *Australian Policy & History*, <<http://www.aph.org.au/files/articles/assessingReassessing.htm>>; Peter Stanley, *Invading Australia: Japan and the Battle for Australia, 1942* (Sydney: Penguin, 2008).

4. Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *What's Wrong with Anzac: The Militarisation of Australian History* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010).

5. Robin Prior, review of *What's Wrong with Anzac* by Lake and Reynolds, *Australian Book Review*, May 2010, pp. 12-14.

6. Craig Stockings, ed., *Zombie Myths of Australian Military History* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010).

ing military historians attempts to put to rest ten persistent myths in Australia's military history. Four chapters are notable to the period of 1919-1945: Craig Stockings, "There is an idea that the Australian is a born Soldier" (largely based on his study of the battle of Bardia in 1941 and the ANZAC Mythology); Peter Dennis, "Out in the midday sun: The loss of HMAS *Sydney II*"; Peter Stanley, "Dramatic myth and dull truth: Invasion by Japan 1942"; and David Stevens, "Australia's Thermopylae? The Kokoda Trail." This work is an excellent collection that puts many of the populist myths in Australian military history to the sword. The authors have done an admirable job, but as the title implies, it is doubtful it will put an end to any of these myths amongst the broader Australian populace. One can only hope.

However, as per the tradition in Australia, the academic historians have not dominated the publishing scene in military history during 2010. The year has seen the continued domination of journalist and populist writers who more often than not produce history that tends to do little to increase our knowledge or further our understanding. One of the most prolific of these has been Patrick Lindsay, a journalist and television presenter who became a full-time author in 2001. He has made a major contribution to the journalist/nationalist type of military history which has become so popular in Australia. His *The Spirit of Kokoda* and *Fromelles: The Story of Australia's Darkest Day* are two of the "classics" of this genre, and now he has turned his attention to *The Coast Watchers*.⁷ This is a valuable and worthwhile topic and while Lindsay may help to raise the profile of their service in the Pacific and make some contribution to oral history in this area, his work lacks depth. This is a topic that deserves a more rigorous and scholarly history.

The other major contributions in this field in 2010 came from the journalist-come historians Peter Thompson, *Anzac Fury: The Bloody Battle of Crete, 1941*, and Mike Carlton, *Cruiser: The Life and Loss of HMAS Perth and Her Crew*.⁸ Thompson's book is both poorly-named, in that it only gets to the Crete campaign after discussing enlistment, the movement of the troops to the Middle East, the operations of the 6th Australian Division in Cyrenaica, and the Greek campaign, and short on research and analysis. It takes a typical populist view of laying blame on senior commanders and politicians without providing a thorough analysis of the strategic and operational conditions, while heaping praise on the

7. Patrick Lindsay, *The Spirit of Kokoda: Then and Now* (South Yarra: Hardie Grant, 2002); *Fromelles: The Story of Australia's Darkest Day* (Pahran: Hardie Grant, 2007); *The Coast Watchers* (Sydney: William Heinemann, 2010).

8. Peter Thompson, *Anzac Fury: The Bloody Battle of Crete, 1941* (Sydney: William Heinemann, 2010); Mike Carlton, *Cruiser: The Life And Loss of HMAS Perth And Her Crew* (Sydney: Random House, 2010).

troops. It does, however, succeed in telling a lively tale and providing some interesting anecdotes. It also serves to highlight the need for a work of serious military history that encompasses the Australian contribution to the Allied cause in the Mediterranean from 1940-43. Mike Carlton's work on HMAS *Perth* also sits comfortably within the confines of the journalist/historian genre in Australia with one reviewer claiming that the work is "sensationalist, breathless, [and written in] schoolgirlish prose."⁹ Nevertheless, Carlton's work has been nominated for a Walkley Award for excellence in journalism.

A much more considered effort in this field is Paul Cleary's *The Men Who Came Out of the Ground*.¹⁰ Cleary, a journalist with *The Australian* newspaper has produced a well-written and well-researched story of the 400-odd Australian troops of the 2/2nd and 2/4th Independent Companies who, along with considerable support from the local population (that is well documented by Cleary), fought against approximately 12,000 Japanese troops for more than ten months in 1942. Cleary has a strong connection with this region and his knowledge shines through in the work and he gives due credit to the local population who suffered heavily from the barbaric Japanese occupation. The work is very personality- and character-driven at the expense of operational analysis, but it makes a valuable contribution to the history of the Pacific War.¹¹

The Bean-inspired small unit-type history such as Paul Cleary's work can also produce first-rate history and 2010 served up another excellent title from Cambridge University Press, Phillip Bradley's *To Salamau*.¹² Bradley's contribution is an example of how this type of regimental history can and should be written. Largely free of the nationalist-/sentimentalist-type approach of the popular histories, Bradley presents a thoroughly researched, analytical, and engaging story. One of its greatest strengths is the author's extensive investigation of the battlefields and this allows him to give credit to the importance of the terrain in New Guinea to the outcome of both the campaign and its component operations. Bradley's strength is his description and analysis of small unit actions and this work builds on his two previous studies, *On Shaggy Ridge* and *The Battle for Wau*.¹³ These three excellent books and a number of

9. Hal G.P. Colebatch, "At war with clichés," review of *Cruiser: The Life and Loss of HMAS Perth and Her Crew* by Mike Carlton, *The Spectator Australia*, 7 October 2010.

10. Paul Cleary, *The Men Who Came Out of the Ground: A Gripping Account of Australia's First Commando Campaign – Timor 1942* (Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2010).

11. This work has also been shortlisted for the Walkley Book Award.

12. Phillip Bradley, *To Salamau* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

13. Phillip Bradley, *On Shaggy Ridge: The Australian Seventh Division in the Ramu Valley Campaign from Kaiapit to the Finisterres* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2004); *The Battle for Wau: New Guinea's Frontline 1942-1943* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

other important works on the South West Pacific Area in recent years have done much to help fill the "green hole" in Australian military history that Peter Stanley once described as enveloping Australia's contribution to the Pacific War post-1942.

2010 also saw the publication of two works dealing with the military-cultural interface. Maria Hill's, *Diggers and Greeks: The Australian Campaigns in Greece and Crete*, which has derived out of the authors Ph.D. thesis, and Stella Tzobanakis' *Creforce: The ANZACS and the Battle of Crete*.¹⁴ Hill's book makes a solid contribution to World War II history through its use of Greek sources and its analysis of the relationship between the Greek populace and the Australian soldiers. Yet, the work is too much like the Ph.D. thesis on which it derives, it overstates the case for this being a "forgotten" campaign, and it falls well short in its analysis of strategic and operational matters.

Two other texts, published in 2009, are definitely worthy of note here. Brian Farrell and Garth Pratten, *Malaya 1942*,¹⁵ and Craig Stockings, *Bardia: Myth, Reality and the Heirs of Anzac*.¹⁶ Farrell and Pratten's text is part of a series of books produced by the Australian Army with "a focus on leadership, command, strategy, tactics, lessons and personal experiences of war" that are designed to be read by its soldiers and junior leaders, but have also been made available to the public. The series has also produced books on the Western Desert Campaign 1940-41, Crete, and the battle for Wau. The Malaya book is an insightful and sophisticated work that is not afraid to be critical of the conduct of the campaign. This criticism is especially concentrated around the poor leadership that was shown at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of the campaign by British, Indian, and Australian commanders. The authors write with confidence that is born from their expertise in the field, and with excellent maps and a focus on analysis over narrative, this text is a first-rate addition to the field. Craig Stockings' book also makes a major contribution. This anatomy of a battle tackles topics and themes as diverse as culture and mythology as well as the staples of command and training. Stockings is equally at home at the operational or strategic level of analysis and his emphasis on both the Australian and Italian forces makes this a highly commendable text and an excellent addition to the history of the Australian military and of the Western Desert Campaign.

In addition to several major publications, 2010 saw the usual round of

14. Maria Hill, *Diggers and Greeks: The Australian Campaigns in Greece and Crete* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010); Stella Tzobanakis, *Creforce: The ANZACS and the Battle of Crete* (Melbourne: Black Dog Books, 2010).

15. Brian Farrell and Garth Pratten, *Malaya 1942* (Canberra: Army History Unit, 2009).

16. Craig Stockings, *Bardia: Myth, Reality and the Heirs of Anzac* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2009).

conferences in Australia. Although there was no particular conference that specifically focused on the period 1919-1945, there were a number of notable individual papers. The Australian Army History Unit's annual international conference in 2010 was focused on "Victory or Defeat? Armies in the Aftermath of Conflict," and it produced a number of excellent papers, including Geoff Megargee's (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum) paper on "The German Army after the Great War: a Case Study in Selective Self-Deception." Other papers covering 1919-1945 include: George Peden (University of Stirling), "The British Army after the Victories of 1918 and 1945"; and Graeme Sligo (Australian Army), "Liberating Australian New Guinea and British Borneo: the Directorate of Research and Post-Hostilities Planning 1943-45." The AHU produces refereed conference proceedings which will be published by Big Sky Publishing in the first quarter of 2011. Previous conference proceedings can be accessed online through the AHU's website: <http://www.army.gov.au/ahu/Previous_Conferences.asp>. Of interest to readers of *Global War Studies* would be the 2003 conference, "The Foundations of Victory: The Pacific War 1943-1944," and the 1994 conference, "Australian Army Amphibious Operations in the South-West Pacific: 1942-1945." The Australian Army's professional publication, *Australian Army Journal*, also includes academic refereed military history articles and book reviews. The journal can also be accessed online at: <http://www.army.gov.au/lwsc/Australian_Army_Journal.asp>.

In many ways, 2010 was a "typical" year for the publication of military history titles in Australia: the dominance of popular over analytical history, and of titles concentrated on the army over the navy and air force. Yet 2010 produced some excellent, thought-provoking, and original works. It serves to prove that despite the dominance of the ANZAC Legend and the campaigns of World War I in the contemporary literature, the period 1919-1945 is still a rich and diverse source of military history in Australia.

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