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MODERN MEMORY AND WORLD WAR I

World War I wrecked Europe. Millions lost their lives, millions more suffered devastating injuries, towns disappeared wholesale into the mud, and the golden age of civilisation collapsed.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the world, a new nation was born. Australia leapt from the debris, led by Anzacs silhouetted against the rising sun.

The place of World War I in Australian history and memory has been contested for a century. For some Australians, World War I is an event which looms larger than thousands of years of indigenous history, the advent of European settlement, and the 1901 Federation which created Australia as a legally distinct nation. For others, it was an unquestioned catastrophe from which the fledgling nation, having lost a generation of promising men at one stroke, has never recovered. For all, the landing at Gallipoli signals something uniquely Australian: 'To many, Gallipoli was Australia's Westminster Abbey, the fount of her nationhood, the tomb of her kings'.¹

Gallipoli itself has a privileged status in Australia. Every year, at dawn on 25 April, thousands of Australians attend local ceremonies to commemorate the landing at Anzac Cove; thousands more flock to Anzac Cove itself, and also to the Western Front, to mark the significant date. Anzac Day is an Australian public holiday which begins with a sombre, torch-lit service, and ends

with celebratory football games. At these games, the national anthem is sung, the Last Post introduces a minute's silence, and players vie for a coveted Anzac Medal recognising their *Anzac spirit*. Both the ceremonies and the football games are conducted with a specific intensity unknown on other days, a compound of loss and pride rarely seen in Australian public life.

In 1993, at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, then prime minister Paul Keating spoke at the burial of the Unknown Soldier, the only Australian soldier of World War I to be repatriated. In this eulogy, Keating said that the Unknown Soldier's tomb signified not only the nation's losses but also 'what we have gained'.² This statement positions World War I as a benefit as much as a deficit to the nation of Australia; the war affirmed Australia as a nation even while visiting desolation upon the land. In Australia, Gallipoli is often used as a signifier of the entire war. It is worth our while to briefly examine aspects of the historical and cultural bases underlying the special place of Gallipoli (as a symbol of World War I) in the national narrative, and to consider whether alternative foundation myths are more appropriate for Australia's story.

Keating's assertion that this tomb signifies 'what we have gained' as well as 'what we have lost' reflects the mainstream Australian view that World War I brought benefits as well as losses to the nation. That the Unknown Soldier represents the archetypal Anzac, rather than the specific individual, is clear throughout the Eulogy. Twenty years later, the Eulogy is recognised as 'one of Australia's stirring and almost spiritual speeches...even admired by those who do not quite subscribe to the version of Australian history embedded in it'.³ In 2013, in a controversial move that recognises the universal approval of the Eulogy, the original words inscribed on the tomb – as they are on memorials to the missing of World War I all over France and Belgium (see Figure 1) – that

is, 'Known Unto God', were replaced with a phrase from the 1993 Eulogy: 'We do not know this Australian's name, we never will...He is one of them, and he is all of us'. On the twentieth anniversary of the entombment, 11 November 2013, Keating spoke again at the Australian War Memorial in what is described as a 'towering' speech, reaffirming that

the true commemoration of their lives, service and sacrifice is to understand that the essence of their motivation is their belief in all that we had created here and our responsibility in continuing to improve it...Homage to these people has to be homage to them and about them, and not to some idealised and jingoistic reduction of what their lives really meant.⁴

Here we can see the continuing evolution of the Anzac story, especially as it now becomes harnessed to refute jingoism or unthinking nationalism, and instead buttresses the notion of Australia as 'all that we had created here'; in other words, the sacrifices of World War I safeguarded and enabled the modern Australian way of life. While strenuously contested, World War I features in 'the version of Australian history' embedded in the Eulogy, and reaffirmed twenty years later, as a singularly important foundation act underpinning the nation's modern society.

The relationship between a historical war and its place in the national story needs to be considered in context: that is, we should examine what it contributes to the national story and culture both as a salient point in the national timeline, and as a cultural reference point for specific values. World War I remains an important time-marker in the Australian national narrative. While 'before the war' and 'after the war' were phrases which

became ambiguous or meaningless within twenty years of World War I, there is a persistent sense that World War I marks the point in time when Australia became a nation, or lost its innocence, or was finally recognised on the world stage. World War I also seems to punctuate the national narrative in a way which consigns the archetypal bushman to the past, while preserving his culturally valuable attributes such as mateship, loyalty, self-reliance, laconic speech, irreverence for formalities, and readiness to act in emergencies. To some extent, the relegation of the bushman to a golden former age can be understood by the rapid advances in engineering, science, medicine, communications and technology which accompanied the war. The war years also brought, for the first time, a sustained focus on far-off events, and returned more than 250,000 Australians who had overseas experience. Australia's place at the extreme end of the world no longer seemed as distant; the nation had stepped into the modern age.

More than that, Gallipoli itself – as the symbol of our entry into World War I – often figures as Australia's foundational event. While there are important qualifications to be made to popular notions, it is undeniably evident that World War I is uniquely significant in Australian history; it is the 'Big Bang' of Australia's cosmos. The role of educational and cultural institutions in situating World War I appropriately within the national narrative is often disputed, as are the many interpretations of the event itself. In any case, the presentation of World War I in Australian society and education should be informed by a clear understanding of both the flaws and strengths of the Big Bang Gallipoli notion.

Gallipoli: birth of the nation

Popular memory of World War I in Australia is that it provides the foundation for the nation's modern society. What popular

memory is, and whether it should (or can) be distinguished from legend, myth, or apocryphal story, is a vexed question that is worth a moment's thought. For example, do the omnipresent World War I memorials scattered with a generous hand across the Australian continent constitute memory? Does Anzac Day itself reveal, conceal or reprise memories?

Perhaps the role of these markers in the national narrative is more complex, in that they contribute to the idea (or ideal) of the nation. Perhaps they represent memory and its place in the national story. At some level, all such events related as part of a national story become enshrined as right, proper and edifying. Against this constant reprise, any factual contradictions lose importance; they have no agency to counter the mainstream narrative. Factual evidence may accrete to the national story (for example, the previously little-known Fromelles battle is now an important date on the Anzac calendar), but any such evidence is more likely to become assimilated into the national narrative if it is consistent with (or presented in a way to appear consistent with) the basic premise of the national story.

Trying to rewrite such a narrative in derogatory terms is unlikely to be acceptable, once the original narrative is well established. 'History wars' notwithstanding, few cultures can readily assimilate contradictory facts into their national narratives; the ongoing debates in Germany and Japan bear witness to this difficulty. Some commentators contest the idea that memorials and events communicate memory at all: those who did not experience the event do not experience *memory* but something else, the narrative which society has constructed around the event, whether it is called history, myth or legend.⁵

Mostly accepted as history, though aspects of its retelling are challenged to some extent as myth, the Gallipoli landing

is popularly commemorated as the single most important event identifying Australia as a separate entity from Britain. According to national mythology, it is on 25 April 1915 that Australia staked its claim to history. A number of factors contribute to Gallipoli's perceived importance, such as its international reception, its domestic valorisation, the tolerant and proud complacency about Australian ill-discipline, and the widespread acceptance of the Anzac myth. Debates about the strategic value of the Gallipoli campaign itself appear to have little bearing on the respect accorded to those who fought in it. As a signifier of World War I in Australia, Gallipoli encapsulates many of the idealised virtues of the nation, whether or not it was a laudable or even practical undertaking in the first place.

The irruption of the Gallipoli landings onto the world stage served several purposes. Distracting international attention from the increasingly stalemated operations in other theatres of the war, Churchill's radical backdoor plan of attack raised hopes of meaningful progress. Propagandist reporting of the failed invasion as a stirring military success, together with the privileging of Dominion troops, stimulated widespread support and pride throughout the Empire. This is the news which spread rapidly to and across Australia, engendering a pride which has yet to be completely dissipated – indeed one which appears remarkably persistent.

The effect of the Gallipoli news is most salient in the statistics showing that, even after the reality of the cost was known, the months following the Gallipoli landing stimulated Australia's highest enlistment figures, peaking in July 1915 when over 36,500 new recruits were accepted.⁶ Recruitment slowed after this, with most eligible, able and willing men having already enlisted. The later defeat of two conscription referenda meant that the Australian

forces continued to be comprised entirely of volunteers, and it is unsurprising that this source of new soldiers diminished as the war dragged on. There were no more Gallipoli to set hearts racing, and the ongoing cost became more and more apparent as the war continued.

In the first years after the Gallipoli landing, the term 'Anzac', as well as signifying the landing place on the peninsula, referred only to men who had fought on Gallipoli; their colour patches were distinguished by a gold letter A.⁷ Not for decades did 'Anzac' apply to those who had served only in France or Mesopotamia or New Guinea, although eventually the term came to encompass all the Australians who had fought in World War I. More recently, the word has been applied to all members of the Australian Defence Force, and this is the common twenty-first century understanding of Anzac. One could argue that the special meaning of Anzac has been diminished; another interpretation is that the term has become an enduring signifier of culturally approved values, and that the latter-day bearers of the name have been elevated by association with the myth. To some extent, the entire society is elevated by the existence and regular invocation of the myth, particularly for those who connect it with what they consider admirable, culturally appropriate values.

In today's Australia, all acts of bravery tend to be measured against the Anzac standard, with the myth regularly invoked in everyday language, politics and the all-important field of sport. In the now traditional Anzac Day Australian Rules football game, Essendon plays Collingwood in front of 80,000 to 100,000 spectators at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. From 2012, an equivalent game has been played in Wellington, New Zealand on 25 April to commemorate Anzac Day, with a nod to the New Zealand component of Anzac.

Underlining the transformation of Anzac from a significant event commemorated on one day of the year to an ideal that can be invoked when necessary, full ‘Anzac Day arrangements’ are now applied to all the games played in the nearest round, whether they fall on the 25th or not. The national anthem and solemn Last Post are played at every game; at most, a medal is awarded for the player voted the most ‘Anzac-like’, such as the Peter Badcoe VC Medal awarded in Anzac-round Port Adelaide games:

To the club’s eternal credit, it has embraced the sanctity of Anzac and made a significant effort to make the day spiritual and respectful as well as reward the player who most exemplifies the warrior spirit of Anzac.⁸

The Australian Football League’s Anzac Day match arrangements state that the player who best exemplifies the *Anzac ideals* of ‘skill, courage, self-sacrifice, teamwork and fair play’ will be awarded the Anzac Medal.⁹ The following quotes demonstrate the close connection Australians see between war and sport:

Our country was built on hard work, and part of our history is the men and women who served and sacrificed, and who served in other countries to protect people. When you think of all the people who sacrificed part of their life to go to war, you just have huge pride and respect.¹⁰

This was for Collingwood what the Gallipoli landings were for Australia, a defeat that concealed a victory, a defeat that was also a defining moment, a defeat that was also a crucible.¹¹

While some argue that Australian society is ‘militarised’ by such comparisons,¹² it is equally true that the Anzac is ‘civilianised’, and that it has become culturally appropriate for his virtues to be invoked in everyday life. Perhaps it was always so: the Anzac from his first inception was a civilian who volunteered to be, temporarily, a soldier.

If the Anzac is now invoked in quotidian settings, the legend of Australian ill-discipline must also be incorporated. This is achieved by a combination of tolerance for out-of-date evils such as racism (it being understood that the modern Anzac is no racist), complacency in the face of traditional male behaviour (boys will always have been boys – and volunteers will not have had the disciplined attitude of career soldiers), and the hearty disregard on the part of the colonial society for the effete politenesses of its former imperial master. The fact that many Anzacs of World War I treated military discipline as a joke is counted as a positive component of their make-up, one to be celebrated rather than deplored.

This was not the case at the start of the war, when the poor behaviour of Australia’s troops was rather more embarrassing than not. Yet while earlier news had concentrated on the poor discipline and bad behaviour of the Australians in Egypt, the dispatches from Gallipoli suggested that Anzacs could fight, and die, with courage, valour and a degree of martial superiority previously unsuspected. The scandalous behaviour of the Australian Imperial Force in Egypt had prompted serious doubts about the Australians’ fighting qualities as well as their morals. They were rough, untried, unproven, and rather uncouth. They had no notion of discipline, and the British command had reservations about whether they would be able to operate effectively under the stress of battle, where discipline counted for so much. Gallipoli changed all that.

The glowing reports from the peninsula established a version of events that dominated both Australian and international coverage. It is hardly surprising that Australians leaped on the news as proof of their right to stand shoulder to shoulder with troops from all over the Empire. Like cavalry come to the rescue, the laconic, irreverent, indomitable Anzac, whose disregard of military protocol was celebrated as a mark of manly independence, strode onto the world stage. Other troops, more receptive to military discipline and better behaved, had been outdone by the unsoldierly Anzacs.

The Anzac myth became embroidered during the war years and is entrenched in many places, not only domestically, but also in the cultural memory of many Allied countries. In Australia, the NZ (New Zealand) component of the acronym is often overlooked in modern-day common understanding, and many, if not most, Australians are completely unaware of the presence of troops from various other Allied nations on the peninsula. The Anzac is firmly cemented into the national consciousness as an icon of ‘skill, courage, self-sacrifice, teamwork and fair play’.

Australian narratives of the time largely adhere to the Anzac myth, and it continues to be propagated at home and abroad in fictional reiterations, with many Allied writers accepting the unruly courage of the Anzac as characteristic of Australians. In the 1919 Gallipoli novel *The Secret Battle*, by English writer A. P. Herbert, one character implores us to: ‘look at the Australians – they don’t have a death-penalty, and I reckon they’re as good as us’. A second character answers, ‘the average Australian is naturally a sight stouter-hearted than the average Englishman – they don’t need [the death penalty]’.¹³ The supposed superior courage of the Australians is accepted by these fictional Englishmen in a perfectly straightforward way, with no ironic intention. Similarly, the

Australians in R. H. Mottram's *Spanish Farm* trilogy are known for 'their splendid physique, their fine fighting qualities, and the tact needed to manage them behind the Line'.¹⁴ Tact; not discipline. In this case, both the laudable and difficult characteristics of Australians are accepted as true.

The popular Anzac provides Australia with 'a story of war we can tolerate':¹⁵ he is competent, courageous and undaunted by official protocols. He is a representative Australian recognisable at home and abroad, to his fellow Australians and to strangers. The Anzac image, though its genesis can be traced in earlier myths such as the Breaker Morant story of the Boer War, sprang fully formed into popular consciousness after Gallipoli. But how valid is Gallipoli as the sole symbol of World War I and of the nation's birthplace?

Challenges to the Gallipoli foundation story

The popular legend can be challenged on several levels. Down the generations, scholars, patriots, critics, pacifists, veterans and the bereaved have all proposed alternative conceptions of World War I and its importance to Australian society. This is not the place to recite a potted history of Australia since European settlement, but rather to touch on a few important qualifications to Gallipoli's dominance, and to consider some possible alternative foundation stories.

For example, fourteen years before Gallipoli, on 1 January 1901, the founding fathers created Australia as a single political state with little controversy, no conflict between the states and scant drama. The founding fathers themselves were unromantic politicians, and most Australians would struggle to name them; very few know that New Zealand played a part in these discussions, and considered joining the federation, if not at its inception,

then at a later date. Many critics of the Anzac myth declare that Federation had already made Australia a nation, with our identity settled more than a decade prior to the landing.

Federated Australia emerged through a series of meetings, conferences and referenda, with the draft constitution, largely composed by then Tasmanian attorney general Andrew Inglis Clark, eventually ratified by British parliament. There was no dramatic war of independence, no violence between the states, no demonstrations of popular dissent. Showing just how much Australians took peace, personal liberty and plenty for granted, Federation happened with a mere ripple of celebration, and many freedoms and inequalities written into the constitution went largely unquestioned and unchallenged.

Today, commemorative landmarks of Federation are scarce compared to the ubiquitous World War I monuments spread across the country. Pride in Australia as a single entity erupted spontaneously from the reports of Australian valour on 25 April 1915. For the first time, Australia was not just one of the British Dominions, but recognised in its own right. While few at the time wished to break the old imperial ties, most were very pleased to acknowledge that there was something special about the men from Down Under. Australians were seen as unique in the imperial mix: giants of men, sun-bronzed, free-spirited, and carelessly brave.

Some writers now suggest that an annual commemoration of Federation should become Australia's national celebration, an idea promoted heavily around the centenary of Federation in 2001. The idea has many advantages, because Federation appears untainted by direct connections to war and bloodshed and can realistically claim to have cemented Australia's identity as a democracy. However, this view overlooks some aspects of Federation

now less palatable to us, such as its complacent acceptance of European conquest of the continent, its failure to recognise fully the citizenship claims of both indigenous people and women, and its dedication to the creation of a White Australia. Further, 1 January is already a public holiday, New Year's Day, and it is unlikely that this tradition could be overturned to rededicate the day to Federation.

These issues could perhaps be overcome, but in terms of its pretensions to stand as the icon of the nation's birth, Federation has a more serious drawback. Whatever Federation gave, it failed to deliver what we would today call an international profile. Federated Australia was still an unimportant backwater of the British Empire, whereas the nation which stormed the beaches of Gallipoli to the admiration of the international press could no longer be so easily overlooked. In any contest for popular perception of nationhood's birth, Anzac overwhelms Federation simply on the superiority of its publicity machine. Anzac ensured that Australia was noticed on the world stage. In the words of a song of the time, Federation said 'Australia will be there'. The Anzac landing confirmed that 'Australia has arrived'.

A second qualification to the primacy of Gallipoli is that Australia had already witnessed war on its own shores, through decades of European invasion, violent suppression and dispossession of indigenous peoples. However, unlike New Zealanders, Americans and Canadians of European descent, the Australian settlers perceived their new country as *terra nullius*: it is not so much that they denied the land ownership of the indigenous peoples, it is rather that they did not consider the indigenous peoples capable of so much as the thought of land ownership. The settlers did not fight a 'war' by their definitions: they contained and controlled a native population, believing that the indigenous

people of Australia belonged to a lesser strain of humanity who could only be exterminated or assimilated for their own good. Indigenous civilisation was perceived as primitive and ephemeral. No treaty or agreement was considered; the European settlers merely claimed the land as theirs.

This is the origin of Australia as a Western nation, but unsurprisingly most Australians prefer not to enshrine invasion, conquest and genocide as fundamental to their identity. Certainly at the time of World War I, such notions were extremely rare. European settlement went unquestioned as a beneficial stage in human progress; indeed, it was the duty of educated and enlightened Europeans to bring civilisation to the world's darker corners. These old ideas, so abhorrent to us now, are scarcely ones to commemorate, though this aspect of our history is increasingly understood.

Australia Day – 26 January, the anniversary of Captain Cook's 1788 landing at Botany Bay – is celebrated annually, but it has in recent decades become a controversial occasion, with some wishing to rename it Invasion Day. A number of Australians, particularly those of indigenous descent, refuse to accept the day as a public holiday, and insist on turning up to work and having the Australia Day holiday replaced with a substitute day off at another time of the year.

Anzac Day, with its arguably more culturally acceptable values of courage, sacrifice and mateship, is often proposed as a more inclusive day of national celebration, one which can be adopted by indigenous and migrant populations alike. This notion is, naturally enough in a robust democracy, strongly opposed, and by an unlikely although predictable combination of champions. On the one hand, there are those Australians who consider Anzac Day as so sacred in itself that it should not be diluted by being turned into a cheery celebration of nationhood, whatever values

are espoused; on the other hand, many Australians deplore any celebration of Anzac Day, seeing it as a romanticisation of the vile machinery of war, and would certainly not support its investment with the entire weight of the celebration of Australian identity. Neither group needs to be too concerned that Anzac Day will replace Australia Day; both will remain, first because it would be inconceivable to Australians to reduce the number of annual public holidays by combining the celebrations, and second because each has its passionate adherents who would not countenance its disappearance.

A third consideration is that Gallipoli is irretrievably diminished by the reflection that more than five times as many Australians died on the Western Front as on the peninsula. Many Australians do not appreciate that Gallipoli was a failure, or that the Australian experience there was of seven months' duration compared to three years on the Western Front. To the bulk of Australians, Gallipoli is the signifier of the entire World War I experience, in much the same way as the British privilege the Somme of 1 July 1916, or the Canadians cite Vimy Ridge, the New Zealanders Chunuk Bair. An interesting recent development is Robin Prior's construction of Gallipoli as valuable precisely *because* it kept Australians away from the bloodier Western Front until mid-1916.¹⁶

The recent discovery of Australian bodies in Pheasant Wood near Fromelles has stimulated more interest and knowledge about the Western Front. Fromelles, where the Australians first went into action on the Western Front, was a disaster, with over 5,000 Australian casualties in a twenty-four hour period; the story of the battle, however, was not told widely at the time, for a number of operational and political reasons (all of which appear inadequate from this distance, as is the case for many such 'operational and

political' decisions viewed with hindsight). The relocation of these bodies to a cemetery near the town (see Figures 2 and 3) has been followed with keen interest, enhanced by the modern search for the identities of the dead through the DNA testing of possible relatives. It should be noted that there is no scarcity of Australians with some familial connection to someone lost on a World War I battlefield: there are more than 11,000 such men.

Pheasant Wood and Fromelles now feature on Western Front tours, which are increasingly popular with Australians, now more than ever keen and able to tour the world. Tourists to the town will hear about the battle, the discovery of the bodies, the determined campaign for reburial and the long, mostly unsuccessful process of identification.¹⁷ They will also hear the moving story of how the site of the current cemetery was chosen: in the face of opposing plans from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, it appears that the villagers of Fromelles favoured a site near their church, claiming that these men had lain for more than ninety years in sound of the village's church bells, and that they should remain within hearing distance. A new monument has been created for the battle site (see Figure 4), and since 2009, ceremonies have been held on the anniversary of the battle, 16 July, both at Fromelles and at various sites in Australia, such as Canberra's Australian War Memorial and the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne. Fromelles, Australia's worst military disaster, was underplayed both at the time and for decades after the war, and it remains to be seen how great a threat its sad legend will be to the supremacy of Anzac Day.

Nevertheless, even the Western Front is conceived through the frame of Gallipoli. The famous rescue of the village of Villers-Bretonneux occurred on what was already known as Anzac Day in 1918. Villers-Bretonneux is the site of the Australian National

Memorial on the Western Front (see Figures 5 and 6), and has retained close connections with its Australian history. The rebuilding of Villers-Bretonneux was assisted by donations from Victorian schoolchildren, among others; recently, Villers-Bretonneux contributed to the rebuilding of the Strathewen Primary School in Victoria following the disastrous Australian bushfires of February 2009. In recent years, Anzac Day celebrations have taken place in France, especially at Villers-Bretonneux, as well as at Gallipoli and across the Australian continent.

A fourth consideration reflecting on the primacy of Gallipoli as the foundation myth of Australia is that post-World War II migration patterns have radically altered the cultural heritage of Australians, rendering last century's tribute to the British Empire less relevant. However, the continuous evolution of Anzac Day as a call to democratic, inclusive values has seen many migrants and their succeeding generations invest in the malleable Anzac myth as the epitome of Australian dreaming. The more unpalatable aspects of the legend, such as the Anzacs' ingrained racism, perceived misogyny and generally uncouth behaviour, are likely to be unknown, accepted without comment, smirked at, or dismissed merely as part of the cultural values of the time. The Anzacs' record of poor discipline continues to be commended as a lasting symbol of the Australian free spirit, independence and self-reliance.

Finally, if we entertain the idea of a Lost Generation, then arguably World War I might figure more as a funeral than a baptism. There is more recognition of the cost of World War I in Australia today, but this serves only to increase the notional heroism of the mythical and now pitiable Anzac, and so strengthens the power of World War I as a foundational event for the nation. The men of the first AIF, none of whom is still living, have

become the immortal representative Australians, who participated in a profoundly important historical event, and who symbolise the values we consider ideal.

So what is the role of the Gallipoli foundational myth in today's Australia? It is a cultural war story, like many others from a multitude of nations, which provides material for mourning, reflection and sombre consideration of the cost of war and indeed the cost of maintaining the culture to which it belongs. Such stories, which have many purposes, also function as admonitory tales about the evils of war, yet in this task they have been singularly unsuccessful deterrents across centuries. Gallipoli/Fromelles/Passchendaele, or any combination of World War I tales, like other such stories in other cultures, will not stop war. However, as in other foundation stories, this tradition serves other purposes: providing role models, demonstrating culturally valued behaviours, enshrining national ideals, marking out notions sacred to the society, and providing a touchstone of memory. Gallipoli is also a cultural story of selflessness and rejoicing, of shared enterprise and victory, of sacrifice for a cause believed worthwhile. If nothing else, World War I is a highly visible marker on the road of Australian history, a signpost about which the nation's self-identity coalesces.

Mainstream cultural memory in Australia embraces not only the reassurance of socially endorsed, heroic sacrifice, but also the martial success¹⁸ as an extension of traditional views of war. World War I provides Australia with a foundational story of equal standing to the legends of other Western democracies: the Anzac is our Arthur, our Theseus, our Heracles, our Charlemagne. Gallipoli, as the site of Australia's first widely recognised martial action, is endowed with the status of a Waterloo or Hastings, regardless of its unsuccessful conclusion or dubious utility.

We should also note that the Anzac's demonstrated military prowess and heroic demeanour are not the only qualities worth remembering. Ricouer claims that all human lives merit the relaying of narratives, both historical and fictional, especially to 'save the history of the defeated and lost'.¹⁹ The mythical Anzac is now more than ever a heroic figure. He represents not only over 400,000 Australian World War I volunteers, but also the 60,000 dead, buried or simply lost, thousands of miles from home. The widening knowledge that Gallipoli was an unsuccessful campaign serves only to increase its romantic appeal by evoking a Dunkirk-style glamour.

The Anzac story satisfies a number of cultural goals, providing a source for traditional values such as sacrifice, selflessness, bravery, adventure and the reassurance of larger-than-life ancestor figures. Further, these values appear to evolve with the times, providing an ongoing reference point for Australian society. A bronze plaque in the new visitor entry to Melbourne's magnificent Shrine of Remembrance proposes a multi-layered, modern meaning for 'Anzac', most aspects of which would be difficult even for the most dedicated of pacifists to refute:

Anzac is not merely about loss. It is about courage, and endurance, and duty, and love of country, and mateship, and good humour, and the survival of a sense of self-worth and decency in the face of dreadful odds.

The Anzac tradition thus serves generative as well as foundational purposes in Australia. World War I was seen to deliver valuable trophies and Australians on the whole continue to celebrate these. Gallipoli appears to have been irrevocably adopted as the proving ground of the nation. The dramatic landing and the swift public

acclaim moved Australian and world opinion in ways which a dry declaration of a worthy, democratic, political Federation could never achieve. No matter the mistakes of the command or the difficulty of the task, the Anzacs in the field showed themselves capable and doughty.

Of course, the democratic, open, free society that Federation had enshrined had created these men, but Gallipoli cemented the vision of a distinct Australia into a reality. The Australians went on to verify their worth beyond anyone's doubt, not only at Gallipoli, but over four years of war. Ill-disciplined, casual and disrespectful they might have been out of the line, but no commander had complaints about their application and dedication when they were in it.²⁰ They were a force to be reckoned with, and one whose unique contribution arguably changed the course of the war. If they had a wish to excel, it was increasingly for their own reasons of pride, their sense of their special individuality as Australians, and their determination to finish the difficult job they had undertaken. No imperial master would ever again look down his nose at these Antipodeans.

Ruby Murray, critiquing the emotive sports events of Anzac Day, remarks that:

the privileging of both football and the Digger as positive statements of what it means to be Australian involves an incredible amount of forgetting on a day supposedly set aside for remembrance.²¹

Murray is quite right; but such forgetting is neither unusual in national narratives, nor for days of national celebration across the world. As ethical and moral values continue to evolve with the increasing diversity of the Australian population, educational

and cultural institutions must in some manner – and yet without rewriting history – consider multiple valid perspectives of past events rather than privilege one traditional (or revisionist) value system, however attractive the idea of an explosive beginning of nationhood or the admonitory tale of costly conflict may seem.

Embedded somewhere among the pity, the drama and the distress of our World War I narrative, mainstream Australian culture has identified a unique hero who affirms Australian ideal values. These ideal values may alter over time, so that a hero who once stood for a White Australia is now the champion of mateship, multiculturalism and the ‘fair go for all’ mantra, but he is remarkably resilient as a national symbol.

Most national heroes are tied to an important event, or bring a very specific benefit to their culture. The Anzac, birthed by World War I, has evolved into something less specific. As mentioned previously, even the name ‘Anzac’ has altered in meaning, so that many Australians remember only on second thought that there is an NZ in the middle of the name which stands for New Zealand. Indeed, the Anzac’s nickname – digger – is often used in everyday speech and in reporting: *Diggers help out in flooded Queensland*, for example. Digger brings with it only a faint echo of our comrades across the Ditch. Still, the name with the most universal appeal, with the most sombre reverberations for sacred days, is Anzac.

Why has the Anzac become such a byword for all that is valued in Australian society – for unselfishness, for heroism, for service, for trustworthiness, for reliability in times of crisis, for staunch defence of mates, for standing by anyone in need? A quick search of Australian news, any week you choose, is likely to turn up some reference to brave diggers or the Anzac spirit. The very anonymity of the Anzac ensures that he can be adopted as

a contemporary everyman, representing the greatness which can be achieved by all, given the right circumstances. He delivers the affirming message of the potential hero in every one of us ordinary Aussies: in the words of the Eulogy, 'he is all of us'.

While the stature of the Anzac is often disputed, few can question the legend's prominence in mainstream cultural memory, however much some deplore its primacy. As we enter the centenary of Australia's involvement in the conflict, energetic explorations of the war's history, legacy, ongoing meaning, and cultural significance continue. In this book we will take a fresh look at World War I in Australian stories, investigating the particularly Australian features of our narratives.

There is much to admire and ponder in Australian war writings, just as there is much to appal and shock the modern reader. The Australians of the World War I period considered themselves unique and proposed a distinctively Australian style in their stories of the war. This style can be traced in the World War I narratives of today's Australian authors, and underpins much of the perennial, controversial discussion about Anzac and its meaning to the nation.

World War I writing styles: the two Western Fronts

Two diverse critical approaches to World War I literature and history underlie the two major readings of the war. The first is the current mainstream reading which poses World War I as the origin of modern cultural disillusionment and the end of innocence. In the second, alternative reading, World War I figures as an important event in a long cultural history of conflict and achievement. It is important to separate both of these readings from the political uses to which they have been harnessed: in general terms, the pacifist left has adopted the disillusionment view,

and the conservative right has been associated with the continuity view. In literature, however, neither reading is necessarily tied to a political ideology. The political uses of World War I literature are much contested,²² but are not the focus here. We will start by exploring the ways in which World War I has been written, concentrating on prose narratives rather than the popular poetry.

The two mainstream readings of World War I in English literature are based on an important duality in British historiography. Both readings foreground the Western Front (overlooking, for example, Gallipoli, Palestine and the Italian front), but they view it from different perspectives. In the rupture-with-history perspective – also called disillusionment or *modern memory*²³ – World War I was a futile, tragic squandering of lives for no gain. In the continuity or traditional perspective, World War I, like other wars before it, was fought for just causes, with every due care available, to a costly but worthwhile victory. These two opposed perspectives conceive the Western Front as either the ultimate exemplar of the uselessness of war, or as a twentieth-century manifestation of the eternal struggle of good against evil.

The futility and horror that modern Western consciousness associates with World War I are largely the product not of its historical events, but of its literary commemoration.²⁴ The populations of all nations in general supported their country's war aims for a very lengthy period of warfare. Immediately after the war, most people did *not* believe that the war had been fought in vain, because value was perceived in the ensuing peace, and because they were more than ready to accept an end to the conflict.

Winning or losing, most people believed that their nation had been justified in taking up arms, and that fighting was a civilised response to threat or attack. The pacifist belief that war as an institution is obscene, and that its rewards never justify its costs, was

held by only a minority. Even the disillusioned authors and the conscientious protesters at the time were more likely to declare their antipathy to *this* war rather than to war as an institution.²⁵

Nevertheless, the gradual entrenchment of the disillusionment perspective did not completely repress other versions of the war, especially in popular literature. ‘Owen, Sassoon and Rosenberg created the myth of...Waste and Pity’, but never quite destroyed the Brookeian myth of ‘Young Apollo sacrificed for King and Country’.²⁶ For example, by 1930, Rupert Brooke’s romantic and idealistic *Collected Poems* had sold over 300,000 copies, in contrast to about 1,500 copies of Owen’s poems;²⁷ Ernest Raymond’s boys-own style heroic tale of the British at Gallipoli, *Tell England* (1922), had been reprinted twenty-five times by March 1926. The disillusionment view of the war was not as accepted early in the twentieth century as it was by the 1960s, when the immediate post-war sentiment had been reversed, bringing about a public preference for disillusionment works over traditional ones.

From the disillusionment stance, World War I constitutes a turning point in society, technology and art. It is an unhistorical, unprecedented break with the past. Critics aligned with this perspective consider that, post-1918, the best war writing takes a modern realist approach that strongly expresses the bitterness of loss and the dehumanising effects of technological war. There is in this view a somewhat limited appreciation of the realism of traditional war texts such as the *Iliad*, which has its fair share of bloody deaths, pitiful suffering, and cruel fate. The essence of the traditional war story is that the hero is eventually doomed to failure, because he is mortal and his exploits defy death as much as they defy the enemy, modelling a style of living that strives towards life no matter the odds. However, this understanding of the majority of war literature fell from favour, and critical regard

for the apparently new (to the critics) ‘detachment, proportion, impersonality and universality’²⁸ of the modernist literary style increased as the clear gains of victory and the immediate, more idealistic responses to the war grew weaker over time.

This phenomenon intensified as pacifist, humanist sentiment increased in the post–Cold War and post-Vietnam era. War stories which could be read as anti-war (again we note a limited appreciation of earlier war narratives; there are few texts about war which cannot be read as admonitory), and which documented war’s disruption of civilisation, increased in critical and popular esteem.

More recently, however, some scholars have questioned the unalleviated waste-and-pity conception of World War I that continues, anti-historically in their view, to gain strength across time.²⁹ Strong currents of tradition can clearly be seen in arts and society, so that the perspective of a long and continually improving humanistic civilisation, now and again interrupted by necessary conflict, is not indefensible. In addition, historical data show that some disillusionment reactions are exaggerated.³⁰

Later societal attitudes, such as the bitter pathos of the Depression and the peace movements of the 1960s, are major influences behind the elevated critical regard for the disillusionment perspective. Popular as it is, however, the disillusionment view is cultural, not historical: it is arguable that despite the obvious losses, the war did not present any insuperable barriers to progress. Barnett, in fact, argues that ‘the war crippled Britain *psychologically*, and in no other way’.³¹

Many readers would be surprised to learn that this disillusioned impression of World War I is not the only, or even the dominant, theme of most writing about it. The bulk of narratives, including most Australian texts, prefer a traditional style. The current critical privileging of disenchantment lends more

authenticity to that astonishing, and astonished, perspective than many veteran-authors would admit to be true. In the 1930s, during the 'War Books Controversy', veterans and academics argued bitterly over how the war should be remembered in literature: as a morass of futile, depersonalising disillusionment, or as a tragic event drawing forth humanity's best qualities. The polarisation of the discussion continues to this day, with scant attention paid to the ambiguity and complexity in the best World War I prose.

We must admit, nevertheless, that much literary criticism is based on the disillusionment view in which the war is seen as meaningless and individuals are victims. This is understood to be the perspective of high literary value. The result is that the preference for a traditional heroic style is generally considered a weakness in Australian literature of the war. On this basis, Australian works have been largely dismissed or undervalued. The appropriateness and value of ambiguity in attitudes to war has been too little recognised, with the result that the complexity present in most narratives has been ignored as literary critics categorise them into one of the two major readings: the 'correct, enlightened' disillusionment view, or the 'wrong, ill-informed' traditional one.

The two historiographic perspectives – the disillusionment and the traditional schools – provide useful bases for discussing World War I literature. Such discussions often invoke the term *modern memory*, which references Paul Fussell's influential work, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975). Fussell identified key literary elements inspired by disillusionment ideas, including rejection of traditional heroic tropes in favour of the victim-protagonist. Modern memory scholars focus on 'ruptures, failures, fear, horror and irony'.³² As the modern memory school of writing has become the more highly regarded in critical terms, it is also

referred to as *canonical*, although it describes an explicit break with literary traditions more usually called canonical, so that the the war canon is (somewhat counter-intuitively) the *anti-traditional* school.

By contrast, researchers identifying aspects of tradition in war remembrance emphasise ‘continuity, healing, acceptance of death, and a reassertion of meaning in war experience’.³³ Many commentators locate enduring elements of the traditional in the literature of World War I. Either the modern memory or the traditional perspective, but typically a combination of both, can be identified as underlying all literary artefacts of the war, including official histories, memoirs, poetry, fiction, and fictionalised accounts.

In the evaluation of war fiction, the contrast between modern memory ‘victim’ and traditional ‘hero’ became, in the latter half of the twentieth century, the most significant factor dividing literary from ephemeral World War I texts, and separating Australian works from those of other nations. To some extent, the Australian style is the traditional soldier’s story, continuing a venerable Western cultural concept of masculine identity invested in military prowess and the qualities of courage, endurance and aggression. Most Australian writers ‘retain a strong sense of pride in nationality and nationhood’ and none is seen to express ‘the extremity of violent protest and disillusionment’ of canonical accounts.³⁴ The widespread adoption of this analysis has created a dichotomised paradigm of victim-versus-hero, ignoring many instances in which the protagonist is in fact a bit of both.

Regardless, the conventional notion of the victim-versus-hero as the sole feature distinguishing Australian texts from the literature of other combatant nations is of limited use. The situation is more complex and nuanced than a discrete division implies.

Brian Bond is right when he claims that we should distinguish not between heroic narration and disillusionment as opposites, but

between those writers whose view of the First World War is negative (with 'futility' as their watchword), and those who stress its positive features and legacy, despite full awareness of the destruction, suffering and heavy casualties.³⁵

This is an insightful but overlooked distinction, as many critics consider that relating any positive aspects of the war (such as companionship) is a denial of war's destructive nature.

This idea becomes key to our discussion of Australian narratives. We will return often to the notion of futility and its divergent functions in Australian and disillusionment works; for the present, it is sufficient to note futility as a foundational, inherent feature of the disillusionment narratives.

What do we know about World War I and its effect on Australia? It is true that World War I brought changes to all participating nations. Australian authors, in contrast to many European writers, show a number of these changes as positive and worthwhile. They present the Australian effort in World War I as purposeful and valuable. By foregrounding purpose rather than futility, Australian works differ from their European counterparts in recognising gains as well as losses in the conflagration.

The narratives under discussion here display numerous features which are peculiar to Australian works. Distinctive attitudes, for example to women, to homosexuality, and to the home front, complement the unique Australian approach to World War I as an event of great moment and achievement. By inviting a

reconsideration of our literary legacy, this book helps explain the unique and disputed position of World War I in Australian history.

European and Australian heroes

As we have seen, the World War I canon is an *anti*-traditional school, unfolding an unequivocal break with traditional literary tropes and conventions. The major works of the English-speaking canon are Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* (1929); Robert Graves's *Good-bye to All That* (1929); Ford Madox Ford's tetralogy *Parade's End* (1924–28); Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930); Charles Yale Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed* (1928); Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929); A. P. Herbert's *The Secret Battle* (1919); and Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918). These are complemented by translations of European disillusionment classics such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (*Im Westen Nichts Neues*) by Erich Maria Remarque (1929). It is interesting to note that the first translation of this influential text, and the provision of its memorable title in English (the German literally translates as, 'in the west nothing new'), was by Lieutenant Arthur Wesley Wheen (MM with two bars), an AIF veteran and, later, a Rhodes Scholar.³⁶

These flagships of disillusionment are the major texts which we will be contrasting with Australian narratives, and it is clear that their perspective is decidedly disillusioned:

The chief rule [is] that all the highlights of war must be put in, from the debauched WAAC to the crucified Canadian, and that the hero shall *not* in the end be awarded the Victoria Cross.³⁷

European literary classics, from the plays of Ancient Greece to postmodern treatises, are posited as the basis of Western cultural values and ideals. The canonical disillusionment texts have been highly influential in the popular construction of World War I in the latter half of the twentieth century. However, while there is merit in the argument that the classical, heroic mode of writing about war was rendered obsolete by the events of the war, there are several qualifications to be made in order to prevent over-simplification.

First, the relationship between heroic narration and the tragic is crucial in considering whether heroic narration is an appropriate strategy to explore World War I. This relationship is overlooked when we accept the disillusionment victim as the quintessential, standard World War I protagonist. Many readers see *the hero* and *the victim* as opposed images, but the hero has important literary connections to the victim. The classical hero, no matter how super-human or semi-divine, cannot outrun his fate. In view of the tragic scope of World War I, the Australian use of the traditional heroic mode is as valid as the canonical writers' use of disillusionment. The 'sense of corruption at the very heart of things'³⁸ is as much a part of the hero's lot in classical tragedy as it is the victim-infantryman's in disillusionment literature. In dissociating the hero from the tragic, disillusionment bestows only futility and farce, portraying valid but incomplete aspects of the war.

Tragedy is an aspect of the heroic, when we take tragedy in its classic meaning. Tragedy occurs when the hero encounters the inexorable workings of blind Fate, or the inevitable conclusions of Destiny, or malicious divinity, or just desserts. The victim is not the only protagonist who can demonstrate catastrophe. The hero, however overblown, is rarely immune from disaster. In many

classical instances, the hero *is* a victim who suffers on behalf of the beloved or the people.

Martha Nussbaum's discussion of luck and ethics in *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986) is illuminating here. Her reading of classical tragedy shows us heroic protagonists who fail despite their best attempts, their *tyche* – fate – being to fail. They fail because they are human, mutable and fallible, operating in a contingent world. They fail because they are fully, indeed in Nussbaum's word, 'beautifully' human.³⁹ Part of that beauty exists in the very possibility of failure; just as mortality lends a special intensity to life which is unknown to the immortals, the potential for fallibility enhances the actions of the hero.

The heroic narration of Australian war fiction accepts this classical notion of tragedy: that those who fail can yet be seen as heroic. This stands in contrast to the more utilitarian, Kantian philosophy behind disillusionment narration, in which there is something, someone, to be blamed for unleashing the horrendous fate, a latter-day attitude which implies that the hero cannot fail unless some external agency interferes. The Kantian view expects that there is a reason for the disaster, and a human agency behind the reason. Tried against such utilitarian and rational principles, the events of World War I are rendered both futile and avoidable: those in charge should not have allowed it to begin, let alone continue; they should have preferred peaceful means of settling their differences; they should have compounded together for peace rather than for devastating attrition. The authorities are to blame for allowing matters to proceed to fighting and for continuing to fight. Had negotiation prevailed as a strategy to resolve conflict, suggests the rationalist view, there would have been no need for armed methods. Unfortunately, attractive as the notion of a warless world is, this is an overly ideal (and ahistoric by the standards

of the day) construction of past events, a course of action which can only be suggested as a better strategy for future impasses. In any case, identifying the guilty among the world leaders of the time positions the citizens as innocent, a stance necessary to create the victim-infantryman protagonist, and one which ignores the democratic foundations of the Allied governments.

This is an important distinction, because apportioning blame to superiors allows the close-up, coalface protagonist to function as a victim of circumstances beyond his control, rather than as an active, enthusiastic, complicit or at least compliant agent of the warlike authorities. The circumstances of the war can be attributed to poor leadership of society as a whole, removing any possible blame from the individual. The victim-infantryman, even when he hails from a democracy, bears no responsibility for prosecuting, supporting or prolonging the war.

Like the canonical texts, Australian World War I fiction also typically portrays the perspective of the front-line soldier, but he is unlikely to be seen as fully victimised. In an excess of patriotic feeling, the successes and achievements of the Australian Imperial Force are presented in these narratives as the result of the unique character of the men in the line, that is the Anzacs themselves and their own officers, as opposed to higher (British and Allied) command. In addition, although blame might be apportioned to the higher command, this rarely results in passivity on the part of the men on the front-line. These Australians remain active agents, and are much more likely to be portrayed as traditional-style heroes than victimised innocents, albeit retaining their sometimes unworldly bushman-pioneer characteristics. Of course, the Australians' historical status as an all-volunteer force assumes a degree of agency improbable in conscripted troops; we will explore this aspect more fully in Chapter 7.

The most complete analysis of Australian war prose is Robin Gerster's *Big-noting: The Heroic Theme in Australian War Writing* (1987).⁴⁰ Gerster provides an excellent foundation for interrogation of the parochialism and exaggeration of much Australian war writing. Many analyses have discredited the assertive dominance of the Anzac, in particular rejecting the use of the heroic mode as inferior to modernist writing. John Laird states that Australian war literature 'must suffer, as literature, if comparisons are made in retrospect' with 'the more sophisticated Australian poetry and fiction' written after 1960;⁴¹ more sophisticated, perhaps, in terms of the ethos of the latter half of the twentieth century, as well as in literary terms.

Paul Fussell's impressive delineation of the ruptures to society, literature and art caused by the tragedy of World War I has been highly influential in defining the disillusionment perspective and demonstrating its relevance to the history and memory of the war. The stature and impact of Fussell's work have led to a critical acceptance that modernism is not only the preferred, but in fact the superior way to write about the war. Most critics appear to equate disillusionment with realism when discussing war fiction. However, the rationale behind this equation is debatable. Heroic narration has been unfairly consigned to archaism as if it were not 'realist', that is, as if heroic acts were not as real as selfish ones.

Describing either men or officers as purposeful actors in this context appears infantile to those who see World War I as a profound example of war's irrational, inhuman pointlessness. Such readers reject any reading that in effect collaborates with the war by portraying protagonists whose actions are meaningful. As Hew Strachan explains, to see World War I as an extravagance of waste, desolation and futility is 'one of the clichés of history',⁴² dependent on a disillusionment appreciation of the war's factual bases. Much

recent scholarship contends that the cliché is underpinned more by the literature than the factual history of the war, being more cultural than historical. Nevertheless, the cliché of waste and futility remains the definitive characteristic of disillusionment narration and the literary measure against which Australian World War I prose is found wanting.

Most Australian narratives are undervalued as literature simply because they appear to promote the heroic protagonist over the helpless, victimised one. Australian writers privilege the front-line soldier, whose point of view is that of the ‘poet of the foreground, the here and now’⁴³ rather than the detached, weary thinker or the suffering victim. However, it is not the concentration on the individual private soldier that distinguishes Australian works and obscures their appreciation of the overall sweep of historical events, for the modernist works of the disillusionment canon also concentrate on the individual – in their case, this is usually the educated subaltern. In fact this concentration on the individual viewpoint has been proffered as the explanation of disillusionment. Thus different critics claim the individual perspective, rather disconcertingly, as the underlying *raison d’être* for both heroic and disillusioned accounts.

This is not an indefensible claim. Concentration on the individual’s war story introduces the subjectivity of a sole point of view, which effectively disrupts objectivity: some individuals will see the war through disillusioned viewpoints, others through traditional lenses as part of humankind’s continuous history. Difficulties arise, though, when one necessarily subjective point of view is premised as the only objective version of events. These are complex notions of received individuality, and greater clarity and distinction are therefore required to refine our understanding of any individual’s experience. The distinction relates more to the

agency and *meaningfulness* of the individual's experience, than to his experience as a subjective individual.

In disillusionment works, all heroic activity is rendered ineffective in the face of the overall futility of the war. However, usually it is not the war *per se* but the character's individual circumstances that compound his despair (or tragic farce). The disillusionment writers' objections to this war rarely led them to promote it as the root cause of their protagonists' difficulties: on the contrary, the war itself is a consequence, perhaps even the offspring, of a wider disillusionment with Western civilisation, a civilisation already characterised as debased and rotten. This notion of a decayed and dying society is rare in Australian World War I texts. Instead, Australians adopt the war as a symbol of the nation's birth. In effect, the war ushers in the start of Australian civil life. While disillusionment uses war to expose civilisation's demise, Australian authors use heroic narration to rescue generative meaning from war's destruction, so that on balance war is paradoxically more fertile than lethal.

Writing the war as unmitigated disillusionment is only one of many possible ways of recording experiences and impressions of the war. Holger Klein claims that responses range in tone from joy to despair and that this breadth, crossing international cultural borders, can be found in the World War I literatures of all nations.⁴⁴ This range is less recognised in Australian literature, in which most writers, whether soldiers or non-combatants, have chosen heroic narration to explore World War I. In the face of literary scholarship that denigrates traditional high diction, Australian authors employ heroic language, images and concepts. Thus for many critics of World War I literature, no Australian text meets the ideal of realism as defined by disillusionment standards. Australian works are criticised for their heroic

narration, in particular their valorisation of the Anzac, rather than for any specific literary inferiority: there is an assumption that heroic narration constitutes, by definition, outdated, inferior literature.

Klein comments that war writers are always vulnerable to the critics: if they are plain soldiers, clearly they are not good writers; if they are real writers, they are just as clearly not representative of plain soldiers.⁴⁵ There is a further vulnerability: that of not meeting the prevailing war attitude, the war episteme, of the time of reading. The disillusionment orthodoxy of unalleviated waste and pity would have been as unacceptable in the 1920s as nationalistic heroism was in the 1990s.⁴⁶ There is 'a lot of disturbing sabre-rattling and jingoistic chaff that now seems badly dated' in Australian war writing; disturbing, that is, to the minds of readers since the 1980s.⁴⁷

To demonstrate how the imposition of a disillusionment/heroic divide affects World War I narratives, we will now focus on a representative pair of texts, the English Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* (comprising four novels written from 1924 to 1928) and Australian Leonard Mann's *Flesh in Armour* (1932).

Both these stories were penned by veterans of the conflict. Both convey more ambiguity about war than is implied by their reception as 'disillusioned' or 'Australian heroic', and both demonstrate the often-ignored complexity of World War I texts. Although clear parallels exist between the writers' own experiences and those of their protagonists, neither work purports to be an autobiographical account.

Christopher Tietjens, the subject of *Parade's End* (recently made into a TV miniseries),⁴⁸ is a mild, long-suffering man with a prodigious intellect but no ambition. He is victimised by his wife Sylvia, an emblem of the decaying pre-war British

society (she is 'one of fiction's more frightening and vengeful immoralists').⁴⁹ Christopher's calm in the face of Sylvia's melodramatic behaviour enrages her. The more she torments him, the more stoic Christopher becomes. His extraordinary talent for organisation is pitted unsuccessfully against the army's even more exceptional genius for disorganisation, and that seen in the war more broadly. Sylvia's infinite spite mires Christopher in a series of gross embarrassments and debacles. He suffers both an emotional and a physical breakdown.

Christopher's story contains elements of the traditional hero's: the outstanding talent, the selflessness, the relentless parade of trials. He is, however, presented as an anti-hero, afraid of death and ineffective in his war work. Nevertheless, he undertakes his duties seriously, without resentment or cowardice, if also ironically without success. His attempt to save the injured Lieutenant Aranjuez from further shelling, when he carries the smaller man through miles of collapsed trenches and mud, is compromised by the fact that Aranjuez's eye is shot out during the rescue (Aranjuez's great fear was blindness and disfigurement). Christopher displays courage, fortitude and selflessness, yet his efforts are doomed to failure, like those of most disillusionment protagonists, but also like the tragic hero of classical literature.

Christopher's inclination is to be the best man he can. His conscientious attention to duty and his revulsion at the horrors of trench life only emphasise his heroic qualities.⁵⁰ He is betrayed not by the war, but by the circumstances of his own personality and the scheming of Sylvia, which considerably both predates and outlasts the war. Nevertheless, he is regarded as representative of the disillusionment hero-victim, portrayed in an ironic mode as one whose heroism is ultimately unproductive in the context of the ghastly war.

Mann's *Flesh in Armour* (1932) has been considered the best Australian novel of World War I 'largely by default' because the most talented Australian novelists didn't write about the war, being either too young or too old to have experienced it.⁵¹ This, of course, raises the question of whether one needs to be a veteran to write well about the war. Some of the best and most influential texts about the war have been contributed by non-combatants: in the Australian context, the works of Patrick White, David Malouf and Christopher Brennan, for example, stand witness to the contribution of non-combatants.

Reprinted four times, *Flesh in Armour* can lay claim to be an enduring text of some literary quality. Mann's main protagonist is Frank Jeffreys, an ineffective loner who loses what little courage he has after being buried by a shell explosion at Passchendaele. He despairs of his own courage when he witnesses, but does not have the nerve to support, the suicidal charge of his comrade Jim Blount, who heroically draws the fire of a German party to protect the rest of the troop. Discovering that his English fiancée Mary has betrayed him with the irreverent larrikin Charl Bentley, Frank shoots himself. His mates conceal his suicide and he is listed as killed in action. Like Christopher Tietjens, Frank's ordeal is complicated by his relationship with a significant woman, his soldierly activity is compromised by his inherent introversion, and his failings are accepted and even hidden by his comrades.

If each of these works is a representative of its type, then a comparative analysis of *Parade's End* and *Flesh in Armour* demonstrates overlaps between the ideologies, concepts and motifs of both disillusionment and heroic narration. The main point to be made is that the two modes are not distinct. A continuum rather than a division is a better representation of the contrasts between

the two narrative styles. Indeed, classification into ‘modernist disillusionment’ and ‘Australian traditional heroic’ poses considerable difficulties when applied to works such as Frederic Manning’s *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (1929), Martin Boyd’s *When Blackbirds Sing* (1962), and David Malouf’s *Fly Away Peter* (1982).⁵² Manning was an expatriate who would probably have defined himself as British, yet his work is included in this study as an Australian text, as it shares many of the defining features typical in Australian narratives. These are further elaborated in Chapter 4, where examples from *The Middle Parts of Fortune* demonstrate Manning’s adherence to Australian style.

The inferiority of heroic narration as a means of conveying the experience of war is a belief engendered by subscription to both the disillusionment version of the war and the notion that modernism replaced traditional ways of representing war, a notion advanced convincingly by Fussell and underlying much critical analysis of war fiction; modernism in this context is often used as a proxy for realism. The Australian heroic tradition, critiqued as hyperbolic self-advertisement, has also served specific cultural, consolatory and commemorative uses. The differences between heroic and disillusioned narratives constitute a range rather than a barrier.

Disillusionment was not begotten by World War I. The idea of war as a rupture to society is present to varying degrees in the literature of war from its first recorded instance. Intense elements of disenchantment can be found in the heroic narrative of the *Iliad*. Simone Weil describes the death and desecration of Hector in disillusionment terms: ‘The hero becomes a thing dragged behind a chariot in the dust...The bitterness of such a spectacle is offered absolutely undiluted. No comforting fiction intervenes’; further,

‘not a single one of the combatants...is spared the shameful experience of fear. The heroes quake like everybody else’,⁵³ as do both disillusionment protagonists and many Australian ‘heroes’.

Disillusionment and heroic narration have been used across the ages to convey and to mediate the war experience; each has strengths and weaknesses as a literary form. Neither disillusionment nor heroic narration is inferior, as such. In each case, the use of one or the other, or more probably the balance between both within an individual work, must be judged for its success or failure to achieve its own specific goals. There is value in ironic disillusionment for expressing anger, despair and grief,⁵⁴ and the manner in which modernist irony fractures our expectations of a narrative is particularly suited to the expression of a sense of futility.⁵⁵ However, for negotiating grief or fashioning coherence, traditional forms continue to be relevant. ‘The consolation provided by the sense of continuity in experience is one of the refuges to which people seek most frequent psychological access’,⁵⁶ continuity in this case being represented by traditional narration.

Waste and futility have limits as mediators of our understanding of war, and the sheer number of bereaved bound the excesses of disillusionment in the 1920s, as it was simply not socially acceptable to tell so many people that their loved ones had died for nothing.⁵⁷ This social restriction weakened over time and disillusionment prospered accordingly, meeting the need of a later era to express anger and rejection of the modern world. Thus for specific purposes, both disillusionment and heroic narration are equally valid mediators.

Contrary to the views of most literary critics, heroic narration can be expressed in a realist mode. Fussell regarded modernist realism as the most appropriate language to convey the ugly and

sordid facts: rats, poison gas, flamethrowers, mud, paralysing fear, dysentery, trenchfoot, and so on. According to Rutherford, 'realism prefers the commonplace, if not the sordid or aberrant'.⁵⁸ From this perspective, the sordid, aberrant and ugly are more commonplace and therefore more *real* than the noble, altruistic or courageous, so that 'vanity, hypocrisy and self-deception... somehow constitute a truer reality than altruism, self-sacrifice and heroism, even when these are known to have existed'.⁵⁹

Fussell defines war literature by dividing the texts into three basic styles, following the lead of Northrop Frye, based on the categorisations of Aristotle's *Poetics*. He defines the *epic* style as one in which the hero has more power than the reader, so that for example Achilles has abilities beyond those of most mortal men. The second style, *realism*, imbues its protagonists with powers similar to that of the reader, with the same limitations, anxieties and decisions to be made. Third, the *ironic* style shows heroes who have less power than the reader, heroes who are characters with human abilities, trapped in situations they cannot transcend. Their power is thus limited by these circumstances and becomes less than the reader's. In classical tragedy, even the superhuman or semi-divine hero is trapped in an inescapable situation.

All three styles are valid literary responses to war, but there is a mainstream preference for modernist realism. Fussell places the British and European disillusionment literature on the border of realism and irony. Jay Winter, alluding to the Fussell taxonomy, considers that most films dealing with World War I straddle the other border, the boundary between realism and the epic, tending to redeem the hideous disillusion with the laudable actions of individual heroes.⁶⁰ Australian works dealing with World War I, like film, inhabit this epic–realism border rather than the realism–irony border occupied by the disillusionment writers.⁶¹ Even while

clinging to the heroic schema, Australian writers must confront the horrors of war, hence the praise of the actors coupled with contempt for the play.

A post-structural consideration of the mimesis offered by both modernist disillusionment and traditional heroic narration of World War I would show equivalent, but different, instances of concealment and disclosure in each: traditional writing conceals some of war's inherent uglinesses while showcasing humanity's physical and spiritual strengths; modernist realism masks many of the human qualities of the war experience by focusing mainly on the obscene.⁶² A complicated combination of revelation and suppression is involved in both styles, as indeed it is in the commemoration of such events. The sordid may have been more commonplace than the courageous in World War I; it did not, however, annihilate the courageous.

Some qualified approval for *Flesh in Armour* springs from the conviction that disillusionment is the most valid way to write about the war and that Frank Jeffreys is the Australian hero closest to a disillusioned protagonist. However, Mann's achievement may be considered diminished because it 'rejoices in the uniqueness of the Australian character' and because his protagonist is set amid 'a host of heroes who meet the accepted Australian standards of versatility and capability'.⁶³ The implication is that the novel would have been better had all the characters been shown as ineffective, incompetent, emotionally compromised and/or unwilling warriors. As this was not the case in the factual circumstances of the historical war, critics of traditional heroic narration have not established why it should be so in fiction, for literary, ethical or admonitory purposes.

The notion that a heroic portrayal can constitute realism has remained, to date, unexplored. Selfless rescues, daring and

innovative attacks, and stalwart defence are as much a part of the historical record of World War I as shell shock and futile charges. However, representation of the heroic in fiction is seen as either fanfaronade or a strategy for allowing a futile war to be remembered as meaningful. Heroic protagonists allow Australian authors (and others employing traditional styles) to present their readers with a psychologically healing literary commemoration, with the consolation of worthwhile sacrifice, and with a note of confidence for facing an uncertain future – heroes will arise when needed. To modernist thinking, heroic narration is used either for questionable political purposes or for narrative satisfaction: to show heroes in the literary commemoration of a war is baseless promotion of oneself and of the soldier in general, or it is a dubious device used to mediate bereavement, or it is simply a fantastic narrative strategy which assists the storyline to overcome the sordid realities.

A century later, it seems time to entertain the idea that heroic narration may reflect heroic exploits that have as much basis in reality as the fear-fraught acts of the victim-infantryman of the disillusionment canon.

There is little evidence for the absence of heroism in World War I, even on the Western Front. Disillusionment orthodoxy emphasises desertion, self-inflicted wounds, suicides, crippling physical and mental injuries, and summary executions. However, the statistics regarding these must compete with the heroic record of successful actions, mentions in dispatches, and decorations for valour. It is probable that the incidence of the former are necessarily understated through, for example, official concealment or lack of detection, but it is also probable that the latter category is underestimated through lack of witnesses to many acts of heroism. For example, an officer's eyewitness account was needed to corroborate actions considered for decoration, and we know that

officers were not always in a witnessing position. Some heroic deeds must have gone unobserved; even if witnessed, such actions may have resulted in failure and death of both hero and witness, leaving no record.

Historical records amply demonstrate that heroism existed; what is not clear is why those literary critics whose analyses are based on the historical record regard it as reprehensible to portray it in fiction.

In summary, disillusionment and heroic narration share characteristics and are not separate identities; neither heroic narration nor disillusionment constitutes a superior representation of war experience *per se*, but each work must be considered individually. Furthermore, realism, if it is to be mimetic of the known world, must be inclusive of heroic narration.

War literature and anti-war literature

Most latter-day novels convincingly represent the soldiers of World War I as victims of mechanised slaughter, appallingly pragmatic or blind leadership, and invidious conditions. Few critics question this representation, although revisionist historians contend that disillusionment motifs of futility constitute an overstatement or distortion of necessary, honourable and even praiseworthy actions by the British Army. Indeed, Gordon Corrigan (in *Mud, Blood and Poppycock*)⁶⁴ argues against the prevailing British notion that World War I was a travesty of waste and suffering in much the same way as Australian literary critics dispute the prevailing Australian notion of heroism and superiority: the English critic claiming that the public picture is too negative, the Australian that it is too positive.

For anti-war propagandist purposes, the anti-heroism of disillusionment has its own drawbacks. Authors writing about the war

grapple with an age-old question when trying to ‘commemorate those who die in war without glorifying war itself’,⁶⁵ a question Winter reminds us Tolstoy had investigated, and one that successive generations of authors have not answered any better than he. The density of grisly detail, even if meant to engender a disgust of war and all its devices rather than to raise the level of pathos and suspense, eventually overwhelms the reader’s sensibility and becomes a suspect literary device in its own right, sensationalising and thereby amplifying the same outrages it seeks to criticise. ‘The very horror of war is part of its enduring attraction’⁶⁶ because war becomes glorified as an extreme human experience: the exaggeratedly negative picture presented by writers whose stance is clearly anti-war in effect glamorises it as a great test of human endurance and spirit. Owen’s poetry can be read as a subtle celebration of war, because it invests war with a special quality that only veterans (that is, the privileged initiates) can truly understand.⁶⁷

At a more pragmatic level, ‘graphically realistic accounts have the disadvantage that sadists might enjoy them’.⁶⁸ In addition, an explicit evocation (or embellishment) of war’s horrors can act to increase the notional heroism of those fictional characters who encounter it, an outcome not to be desired by those wishing to use literature for pacifist ends.

It is challenging to imagine how anti-war lessons might be taught in literature – if indeed this is an appropriate way to teach such a message, and if we agree that this didactic purpose is one function of post-war literature – without running the risk of either romanticising the ordeal or creating a genre akin to popular horror stories, each more gruesome (and perhaps more popular) than the last. The protagonists for whom, in order to decry their awful fate, we must be made to feel sympathy, are likely to be romanticised. This is the case in classical tragedy, where the sympathetic hero

battles his inevitable *moira*, even though classical tragedy is not attempting to teach us disgust of the hero's fate in quite the same way as disenchantment literature tries to engender our outrage at the victim-infantryman's submission to his war death. Classical tragedies may attempt to teach us lessons, for example that hubris will meet its nemesis and that not even the gods can defy their fate, but they do not teach us to hate fate the way anti-war literature wants us to hate war.

Clearly the anti-war writer has a hard task, and this presents a conundrum for all latter-day analysts: anti-war literature still promotes war. No matter how bloody and horrible war stories are, they 'have no apparent restraining power over nations or peoples when the next war comes; young [people] will go to war regardless'.⁶⁹

All this still sidesteps the question of whether Australian fiction of World War I has literary merit. Its efficacy as a persuasion to anti-war ideology is a question for political commentators rather than critics of literature. The preference for non-Australian texts on reading lists at both school and university level in Australia rests on the acceptance of the disillusionment version of the war and the intellectual questioning of the politicised image of the Anzac, rather than from any unassailable dismissal of Australian claims to literary stature. Australian authors decry the war, but by contrast with the disillusionment writers, they praise rather than pity their protagonists, 'like the proverbial theatre critic who thought the play appalling but the acting superb'.⁷⁰ This is not a unique stance: to criticise the theatre of war while commending those who act within it is an element of war writing from its earliest ages. Australian writers, however, seem unable to convey the horror of war without praising Australian actions; the two notions coexist. Hatred of war and admiration of the soldier

cohabit many disillusionment texts – Sassoon and Graves provide excellent examples – but Australian authors stretch this idea in the opposite direction, allowing their admiration for the soldier to overshadow their disgust with the war, rather than having their disenchantment with war overwhelm the human achievements of the soldier. This may be reconceptualised as a question of balance and selection, and a reflection on the Australian writers’ denial of the disillusionment ‘truth’ of futility, and not necessarily the embodiment of a literary weakness.

Rather than rejecting most Australian narratives of war, a more cogent understanding of their contribution to the expression of war as a human affair can be sought. In other words, by discarding works that do not accord with the current mainstream attitude to war, and failing to recognise that such attitudes continually evolve over time, we deprive ourselves of the range of valid responses, indulging in a kind of ‘psychological anachronism’⁷¹ and patronising the texts from a pacifist platform. Some will better match today’s attitude to war, and some will constitute an enduring literary legacy; other works can provide valid insights such as cultural and commemorative perspectives. ‘We must accept as fact that men on the whole are glad they went to war; their narratives tell us that’;⁷² dismissing all positive testimony deprives us of an important window into the human experience of those who have encountered, suffered and made war. Additionally, a preference for British and European texts fails to account for the different experiences and attitudes of troops from the southern hemisphere, in a time when globalisation had not made such experiences increasingly uniform.

The disillusionment canon of works is typically regarded as the best representation of the World War I experience, but there are several reasons to argue that traditional heroic narratives can

be read as equally effective critiques of its random destruction. Heroic portrayal affirms the men as individuals, as humans facing the lethal conflagration of technology, rather than so many helpless and passive ants. The heroic mode, far from being outdated and ineffective, is one valid response to the horror of modern warfare. The hero operates in the theatre of tragedy, while the victim operates within ironic farce. Instead of the modernist representation that emphasises the indiscriminate, technological waste of the war by de-personalising the men, Australian writers chose, and many continue to choose, to reaffirm the heroism of the individual's struggle against fate as a means of rejecting the war's black irony of inhuman, arbitrary destructiveness. After all, one use of war in literature across the ages is to condense the passion, danger and drama of real life into a short space of time; life's random nature, and the beautiful mortality of humans, can be encapsulated in war stories, where both randomness and mortality are heightened. In the heroic narration of Australian war fiction we see brave heroes in impossible situations: *c'est la guerre* ('it is war'; it is the *nature* of war) – *la guerre* which is also part of the human condition.

One way of representing the meaningfulness of individual actions is to invest in effective leaders, and for this reason we will go on to discuss leadership theories and the fictional depiction of leaders. For the moment, though, we turn our attention to a more detailed discussion of the purposes of heroes, and why we continue to need them.

Notes

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