

Militarising Australian history

by Professor Marilyn Lake

MAPW War & Militarism series

- The militarisation of Australian history has increased dramatically. The assumption that national history *is* military history is now widespread.
- The memorialising of war is rampant, while commemoration of other national achievements is much more limited.
- Australia has a great diversity of historical and cultural experiences. The things we commemorate nationally should cover the full range of our cultural, social and political achievements.

'Australian values' forged by warfare?

In recent decades some federal government agencies, and the Australian and state war memorials, have been promoting a militaristic view of our past, actively fostering the notion that our national identity was forged in overseas wars. In the late 1990s, the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) redefined its mission to focus more on commemorative and educational activities and the resultant DVA programs have been well funded.¹

The government has made significant investment in programs covering commemoration, war memorials, special Days and Years for public commemoration (most recently, the new annual Bombing of Darwin Day), publication subsidies, television documentaries, and the digitising of military archives, making it possible for everyone to locate even distant relatives who served in war.

"Anzac history certainly generates more education funding than any other areas of Australia's past." Anna Clark⁴

Most worrying has been the systematic distribution by DVA of [curriculum materials](#)² – books, websites, posters, class exercises and [prizes for essays](#)³ – to all primary and secondary schools across Australia. This mass education program has taken place since 1996 without the public realising that millions of dollars of government funds are being spent in this way.

The DVA-supplied materials teach that our national values, national identity, and our development as a nation, have been achieved through our military engagement in foreign wars.



The broader public has for the most part been successfully co-opted into this enterprise through the marketing of military history as family history. Families are encouraged to locate themselves in this national story and to embark on pilgrimages to battle sites to give personal meaning to overseas touring.⁵

Thus military experience – warfare – has been given a key role in Australian nation-building. It's not surprising that this is the lesson school children take home and away with them on pilgrimages to Gallipoli.



Military myths obscure important Australian achievements

The relentless militarisation of Australian history has marginalised other stories, other historic sites, and other conceptions of national values. It is distorting our understanding of Australian history. It especially serves to obscure the proud achievements of men and women in civil and political society in building our nation prior to 1914.

The Australian nation was not born at Gallipoli in 1915, but with the inauguration of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. Significantly, it was a nation made in peacetime, not war. It was, it should be remembered, a national vision resting on more than a century of dispossession and displacement of Indigenous peoples; a vision initially constructed in terms of racial exclusion. But history also teaches us that political mobilisation in civil society was effective in ending the White Australia policy through commitment to the values of multiculturalism, non-discrimination and racial equality.

The Australian Constitution was created by men who had never been to war, such as Andrew Inglis Clark, Alfred Deakin, HB Higgins, Edmund Barton and Charles Kingston. Contrary to the popular idea that Australian values were forged in military service, the majority of Australian nation-builders, including John Curtin and Robert Menzies, never served in war.

“It’s time to question the increasing myth-making and glorification of Australian military ‘history’ ”

Australian nation-building was applauded internationally for its innovative experiments to promote social justice and equality of opportunity between the classes and sexes. In the first decade of the new Commonwealth, the Australian Labor Party came to power for the first time, forming the world’s first ever national Labor government.

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Subsequent Liberal and Labor governments introduced advanced reforms, such as conciliation and arbitration, old age and invalid pensions, and one of the most radical maternity benefits in the world, which extended to unmarried mothers. Notably, Australia’s granting of full political rights to women was a world historic first, changing international political and social relations forever. These are surely achievements worth commemorating. Why don’t we have statues nationwide of women such as Rose Scott, Vida Goldstein, Louisa Lawson, Edith Cowan, Dorothy Tangney and Edith Lyons?

Time to question militaristic myth-making

It’s time to question the increasing myth-making and glorification of Australian military ‘history’. We need to demand evidence of the historical realities of war. We must also start celebrating the many other important contributions to the building of our nation.

Many men and women across our country dedicated their lives to helping build a peaceful, innovative, democratic, progressive society committed to the values of equal citizenship and opportunity. Their achievements, and the commitment of civil and political society more broadly, should also be widely commemorated and memorialised by our nation.

References and further reading

¹Lake, M, Reynolds, H, et al (2010) What’s Wrong with Anzac?: The Militarisation of Australian History. UNSW Press.

Chapter 6 covers DVA funding. See www.dva.gov.au for DVA Annual Reports.

²www.dva.gov.au/commems_oawg/commemorations/education/Pages/index.aspx

³For example, the annual **Simpson Prize** funded by the Federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

⁴Clark, Anna (2008) History’s Children: History Wars in the Classroom, UNSW Press, Sydney, p49

⁵See, for example, www.awm.gov.au/research/family/