

Emotions and the Criticism of War

by Professor Joy Damousi

MAPW War & Militarism series

- The emotional response promoted when looking at war defies historical or political analysis.
- The result of this is a resistance to critical analysis of war.
- Part of this promotion of an emotional response is the merging of military and family history in a way that encourages identification with our military past.

Debating our responses to war

There would be few historical events in Australian contemporary life that continue to arouse such a deep and passionate response as Anzac Day. Debate over the most appropriate form of remembrance is ongoing while many people object to it being debated at all. Some argue that any questioning is profoundly disrespectful of those who gave their lives. Others believe that without such a debate, Australian national identity will be framed by an unquestioning acceptance of a national war story that is exclusive, rather than one that is inclusive, and based on a narrow representation of Australian achievement.

This debate has in recent times drawn out many different emotional responses that seem to defy historical or political analysis. As a result, we have a mythic tale which doesn't allow – indeed even resists – engagement with those historical and political issues needed to understand the cause and ramifications of war. Yet it is the role of the historian to provide analysis and explanation.

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History is a critical and intellectual practice. Historians also have an ethical responsibility to engage with a range of perspectives that do not simplify but complicate the story of Gallipoli and the memory of war. Family members of those who served in war identify with battles and battlefields in particular ways, while journalists

and political commentators have different interests. In recent times, some historical writing itself has begun to reflect the sentimental turn evident in wider community responses to war commemoration.

What do these public emotional responses suggest about our commemorative practices? I would argue that an expression of strong emotion is a way to avoid discussion and circumvent debate. Most significantly, such reactions depoliticise war commemoration by reducing the event to an emotional story of sacrifice and service. In his Armistice Day address at the Australian War Memorial on 11 November 2004, Prime Minister Howard rejoiced in the way that young people were “seeing in the sacrifice of their fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers a wonderful Australian saga.”

Sentimentality is perhaps now the prevailing mode of relating to Anzac Day. It is present in the responses of backpackers who travel to the battlefields, and who recall youthful loss and heroism on the beaches at Gallipoli with little apparent knowledge of the reasons the soldiers were sent there. They feel sad and sorrowful.

It wasn't always like this...

Earlier generations were disturbed by war and questioned its purpose; they were angry with their elders for condemning young men to a futile war and the waste of lives. For those in the 1960s and 1970s, Australian engagement in war became the rallying point of opposition against all the forces that conspired to send men to die in Vietnam, to



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repress dissent and that led, also, to the systematic abuse and rape of women.

A resistance to critical debate on this subject today – and indeed a hostile response to the suggestion of debate – represses alternative narratives about what it means to be Australian. The costs and consequences of war, its horror and waste, the mistakes and massacres are thereby largely forgotten.

Merging military and family history

What has led to this shift in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries? One of the major changes is the merging of military and family history in a way that encourages identification with our military past – with the experience of grandfathers and great-grandfathers – and a proud investment in that history. Whereas HB Higgins responded to the loss of his only son in World War 1 by devoting himself to the cause of disarmament and peace, relatives today are more likely to participate in the national ritual of commemoration, celebration and pilgrimage. Those who speak from the perspective of a familial connection seem to draw on a special authority – sometimes as those who inherit the Anzac tradition.



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Inset photo: UAW protesters during the Vietnam Moratorium rallies c. 1971, UQLF193, Fryer Library, University of Queensland Library.

Even as World Wars 1 and 2 recede into the distance, the descendants of those who served multiply in number – the grandchildren of Vietnam veterans now attend university – and these proliferating family connections sustain the new wave of commemoration and national identification. Thus our discussions of Anzac, war and nation building have become increasingly devoid of historical analysis, yet it is historical analysis that is urgently needed to understand the emotional dynamics of the new wave of popular pride in the Anzac story. The connection between military history and family history has shaped a new sense of pride in the role of family sacrifice in shaping the nation, and in being part of the national story.

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In encouraging Australians' personal identification with our long history of fighting in overseas wars, the myth of Anzac has thus worked to discourage the kind of historical or political analysis that might just lead to more criticism – or even worse - outright opposition to our participation in war. Once an occasion for mourning, for the expression of grief, regret and remorse about the loss of life and casualties of war, Anzac Day has been transformed during the last decade under the leadership of our recent political leaders into a festival of national pride and collective rejoicing.

Further reading

Marilyn Lake, Henry Reynolds with Mark McKenna and Joy Damousi (2010) *What's Wrong with Anzac? The Militarisation of Australian History* (University of New South Wales Press)
News.com.au, 31/10/08 'Keating wrong on Gallipoli, says Rudd'.
Damousi, Joy and Lake, Marilyn (eds) (1995) *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century, Part 3* (Cambridge University Press,)

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