

Centenary (Australia)

By [Bruce Scates](#)

From 2010-2020, Australia fielded the longest, most expensive, and arguably most complex Great War centenary of any combatant nation. It involved unprecedented investment from the state, but was also driven by popular initiatives. “Bottom up” commemoration involved actual people taking on the work of remembrance, shaping and reshaping its complex, and much contested character. The form that labour took, in locations as diverse as museums and battlefields, performative theatre and critical history, is the subject of this article.

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Introduction

At the beginning of 2014, James Brown warned of the drift of [Australia's](#) First World War commemorative program. “Anzac”, the former army officer claimed, had become the country’s “national obsession”. Whilst the rest of the world pondered the cost of a war that had torn Europe apart, Australians claimed a bungled battle on [Gallipoli](#) signalled the “birth of a nation”. While historians gauged the dimensions of a truly global conflict, Australians exaggerated their comparatively minor part in it. The nomenclature of 2014-2018 is telling. Elsewhere it marks the centenary of the First World War; in Australia it is styled “the Anzac Centenary”. The centenary, Brown concluded, would prove “a discordant, lengthy and exorbitant four year festival of the dead.”^[1]

There is much to be said for that analysis. Lengthy and costly Australia’s centenary has been. If one dates the beginnings of the commemorative program from the National Commission’s call for public submissions on Anzac Day 2010, then remembrance of the war lasted longer than the war itself. Nor does the adulation of [Anzac](#) show any sign of ending. Despite what’s been called “commemoration fatigue”, war remembrance remains a thriving industry.^[2] In 2019, the Australian War Memorial, an institution already privileged by a \$27 million grant to refurbish its First World War Gallery, announced a further \$498 million redevelopment. And Australia continues to colonise commemorative landscapes abroad. Even as this article is being written, a new [memorial](#) is being planned for the island of Lemnos, a [hospital](#) and supply base for that ill-fated Dardanelles campaign.^[3]

The extent of Australia’s Anzac largess is difficult to measure. Taking into account commonwealth, state and local [government](#) expenditure, and making some allowance for corporate investment, the current tally exceeds \$550 million. Such a figure

exceeds spending on any other commemorative event – including the nation’s bicentenary celebrations in 1988. The centennial budgets of other countries seem modest by comparison. Proportionate to wartime [losses](#), Australia has spent more than any other nation on the [commemoration](#) of the First World War. The [United Kingdom](#) outlaid AUD\$109 for every soldier and civilian killed, [Germany](#) AUD\$2; while Australia’s expenditure soared to \$8889 for every fatality.^[4]

Commemoration, as several scholars have noted, is never simply a fiat of government. Rather, what [Jay Winter](#) calls historical remembrance is also driven by individuals, families, and communities and its properties are eclectic. It involves “a way of interpreting the past which draws on both memory and history, on documented narratives about the past, and on the statements of those who lived through them.”^[5] “Memory activists” (as Winter styles them) have a personal and subjective investment in commemoration that reaches well beyond the boundaries of any “top down”, government-authorised narrative. For that reason, Brown’s “festival” allusion is apposite. The state may set the stage for the acts to follow, charting an elaborate program of “commemorative events” and funding many of them, but every performance throughout the centenary involved an element of contingency, agency, and chance. “Bottom up” commemoration involved actual “people” taking on the work of remembrance, shaping and reshaping its complex, shifting character.^[6] Not all that labour is charted by this article. The First World War centenary was undertaken in a [digital](#) age. The explosion of [social media](#) sites it prompted, and the trail of tweets that connected virtual communities, is largely beyond this essay’s remit. At the other end of the spectrum I have made only limited reference to professional conferences and scholarly publications. Suffice to note over 2014-2018 “Anzac”, once woefully under researched by [historians](#), became the subject of searching inquiry.

Historical Background

A “national obsession” Anzac may well have become, but there was never any doubt that Australia would commemorate the First World War’s centenary. The conflict was a momentous event in Australian history. When fighting began the nation was just thirteen years old, and numbered under five million people. Of this small population, most of “British stock”, around 318,000 served overseas in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), a name that captured white Australians’ dual affinity to nation and to [empire](#). Some 62,000 would die as a result of the war and over 167,000 were wounded. Australia suffered the highest rate of casualties of any army in the British Empire.

Commemorating the war began long before the conflict ended and to this day a forest of memorials, surrogate graves for men buried oceans away, mark the Australian landscape. But remembering the dead proved far easier than living with war’s survivors. Alongside the maimed and [mutilated](#), the spectre of the shell-shocked, “nervy men” haunted the towns and cities of [post-war Australia](#).

Finally, the legacy of war extended well beyond the damage wrought on the battlefield. Two bitterly contested [conscription](#) referenda (Australia was one of the few nations in the world to field an entirely volunteer army) cut deep divisions into Australian society, between Protestant and Catholic, English and Irish, soldier and shirker, government and unionist. War broke the Labor Party, fuelled bitter industrial conflict, and stalled a program of progressive legislation that had once marked Australia as a social laboratory.^[7]

The memory of 1914-1918 has, as Anzac’s unofficial biographer notes, “drifted on the currents of Australian History”^[8] Its many meanings shifted with each successive generation – the First World War was remembered differently by the men and women who endured it, those who faced the ordeal of the second, and those who lived through an equally divisive war in [Vietnam](#). The changing shape of remembrance through much of the 20th century is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice to say that a surge of popular interest in Anzac dates from the late 20th century – when the “memory boom” was in full swing – and is driven by global as much as local factors. The rise of family history, the growth of identity politics, the valorisation of witness testimony, the decline of formal [religion](#), and a nostalgia for the past in an age where change tore certainty asunder encouraged what scholars have termed “a turn to the past”.^[9] In Australia, that process was facilitated by the recovery of soldier testimony and the mass dissemination of war service records online enabled a “connection” with history and reshaped and reimagined family memory.^[10] These local and personalised narratives intersected in turn with a wider cultural memory of the war. Since the early 1980s, [films](#) like *Gallipoli* had revitalised and re-invented an older Anzac mythology. Australia went to war as a loyal dominion of Great Britain; a hundred years later, a nation’s redemptive sacrifice in Gallipoli, the [Middle East](#), [Belgium](#), and [France](#) would be read

through the prism of victimhood and trauma.^[11] Arguably, long before the centenary began, Anzac had the aura of a "civic religion" in Australia.^[12] The "memory orgy" of recent years further elevated its status.^[13] Nowhere was that more clearly illustrated than when the supermarket chain Woolworth's attempted to turn commemoration to commercial gain, launching (in 2015) an advertising campaign pledging to "Keep Fresh their Memory". Public furore was unbounded: "Brandzac" was seen as "sacrilege".^[14] To this day, "improper" use of the word Anzac is checked by statutory regulation.

Orchestrating Anzac: Government Infrastructure

The evolution of government agencies to stage the Anzac centenary was a protracted process. As early as 2010, the Kevin Rudd Labor government established a National Commission charged with "building" centenary observance (as Rudd put it) "from the ground up".^[15] The composition of the commission is telling. Those who had served in the military staked a proprietorial claim on how war (even a war fought a century ago) should be remembered; the descendants of veterans claimed a kind of lineal descent from Anzac and professional historians were conspicuous by their absence.^[16]

The National Commission issued the customary call to honour Anzac values. "Anzac", it explained, was originally a reference to the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps despatched to the Dardanelles in 1915, but "has come to mean far more than just a military acronym". Rather, the commission declared "[it] encompasses values that every Australian holds dear ... courage, bravery, sacrifice, mateship, loyalty, selflessness and resilience." "Anzac" was now a "spirit", as well as a place and an event. Cut free from its historical moorings, it made no reference to the imperial loyalties that drove Australians to war, or to the white, martial, [nationalism](#) that characterised commemoration through much of the 20th century. The nation's foundation myth may have been "born out of war, suffering and loss" but the sordid futility of 1914-1918, acknowledged by commemorative programs throughout Europe, was far from its principal message: Anzac, the commission concluded, "has given Australians ... a history to be proud of".^[17]

Building a centenary from the bottom up began with a series of focus groups. Reflecting a diverse cross-section of Australian society, they confirmed the importance of Anzac Day as the focal point of any centennial commemoration. Lauding the anniversary of the Gallipoli landings on 25 April had long set Australia (and [New Zealand](#)) apart from commemorative practice in Britain, France, the [USA](#), or [Canada](#) where 11 November marked the cessation of hostilities. The Anzacs' "baptism of fire" was also the point where all war remembrance coalesced, encompassing not just 1914-1918 but subsequent and even current conflicts. And in other ways as well Australians saw their centenary differently, "while commemoration should be the dominant tone, there was a desire for the anniversaries not to be unrelentingly gloomy".^[18] That mirrored the contradictory character of Anzac Day observance historically – for the bereaved it was an emotional salve, an occasion for quiet reflection; for many returned men, it was first and foremost a reunion, marked by marching, gambling and drinking.

Intent on community engagement, the commission appealed for "ideas" and received some 600 submissions from the public. Geographically this archive spans Australia, though [rural](#) and regional communities (considered by some the heartland of Anzac) are slightly overrepresented. As many women as men drafted a submission. Perhaps, as Jay Winter has mused, "because war has moved out of the battlefield and into every corner of civilian life ... women as well as men now construct the story...".^[19] Whilst it is difficult to determine social class, a wide range of ages is evident, from [children](#) as young as nine to aging veterans in their nineties. It says much about the unruly democracy unleashed by the Anzac centenary that few respondents addressed the tidy categories set down by the commission and many exceeded the stipulated word length. By one reckoning the appeal produced some 2000 separate ideas, ranging from modest educational ventures to bizarre proposals to "restage" Gallipoli's battles in the midst of Canberra's Floriade.^[20]

The Anzac Centenary Advisory Board (hereafter the board) succeeded the commission in 2011. This was a larger and more unwieldy body, chaired by the former head of the Defence Force and comprised of over twenty members. Veterans were joined by captains of industry, businessmen, academics, and community leaders. There was one Indigenous appointment, and one (military) historian, himself a retired army officer.^[21] The board promptly established a range of consultative working groups, addressing everything from military history to the needs of local government.

In New Zealand (Australia's partner in Anzac), the [centenary](#) would be the responsibility of the Ministry for Heritage and Culture; in Australia the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) presided over this far more formidable bureaucracy. And that surprised

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no-one. The DVA commemorative program had “grown steadily” from the mid-1990s.^[22] For the DVA, the 50th anniversary of the Second World War had proved a kind of dress rehearsal for 2014-2018: millions of dollars were spent not just on domestic commemorative programs but also large scale “missions” to [battlefields](#) and cemeteries overseas.^[23] Since then, expenditure on commemorative activities has “refocused” on “educating” Australian [youth](#),^[24] “a torrent of curriculum materials sent to primary and secondary schools” in what one critic labelled the “vast pedagogical enterprise of the DVA”.^[25] One might question the extent to which students and teachers read such resources uncritically. And it should be acknowledged that care, compensation, and veteran support still consume the greater part of the department’s \$12 billion budget. Even so, the DVA has been the driving force in what many call “the militarisation of Australian history”.^[26] The department made commemoration its core business, identifying over seventy “key events” in 2014-2015 alone and positioning veterans, figuratively and actually, at the centre of every one of them.^[27]

Most nations have focussed their commemorative program on marking the conflict of 1914-1918. The Anzac centenary captured by [veterans’ associations](#) extended this across “a century of service”. Around a third of the submissions forwarded to the National Commission were drafted by veterans’ groups, including sub-branches of the RSL (the largest and most vocal advocate of veterans’ interests in Australia), battalion associations, and more specific veteran cohorts. All of these organisations pressed their claim to have inherited the mantle of Anzac; the “service and sacrifice” of their generation, in their particular conflict, a direct continuation of the “service and sacrifice” of their Anzac forebears. As scholars have noted, positioning Anzac as “the first among equals” collapses Anzac into a singular tradition.^[28] It also means that the centenary was seen as an occasion to honour surviving veterans of the Second World War, initiate a search for the missing of [Korea](#), raise a memorial to innumerable campaigns, and recover the war dead of Vietnam. The “century of service” looked forward – it also looked back. Yet another exceptional feature of Australia’s centenary was the decision to include the Anglo-Boer War of 1889-1901 in its ambit. The definition of a “century” widened well beyond one hundred years in this expansive re-imagining of Anzac.

History Wars

Historians were not the only critics of Australia’s commemorative program. In appealing for “ideas from the public”, the commission hoped to confer a greater sense of ownership of the commemorative project and create a useful resource. But alongside respectful affirmation, they faced strident criticism. Submissions came in from Médecins Sans Frontières, feminist groups, and Quakers. They called on the centenary to eschew its military trappings and build “a culture of peace”. Women for an Australian Republic warned that the centenary, “if not thoughtfully managed ... may become a jingoistic, male, white, Anglo Celtic gun-fest”.^[29] Some turned the rhetoric of commemoration back on itself. Celebrating Australia’s “first” military engagement as a nation, one submission claimed, wilfully denied the frontier wars that accompanied white colonisation: “It is hard to see Australia coming to grips with our past military engagements while we maintain [a] national blindness to the unfinished trauma and dislocation of war in its own land.”^[30]

Such statements may be a small minority in a cohort of several hundred but that is not the point. The “Festival of Anzac” included a deeply disruptive element. For some the submission process was a vehicle to extoll the virtues of Anzac, or profile one’s own military service, for others it was a forum for protest and debate. Nor should one assume that official commemorative agencies adopted a singular and monolithic view of how the centenary should proceed. Like other states, Victoria established its own commemorative committee and sent a sober word of warning to its federal counterpart in Canberra. In the 1920s a Victorian Labor government (led by anti-conscriptionists) had refused to sanction Anzac Day services in [schools](#), fearing they fostered a spirit of [militarism](#). As the centenary approached, Labor revived, albeit briefly, that dissenting tradition:

there is a danger that the Anzac legend is becoming detached from the past and present realities of war... it ... [has] become a substitute for historical fact, and ... used to smooth over uncomfortable aspects of our nation's past. ... During this Anzac Centenary we should foster critical understanding of history ... [and be] alert to the human cost of war.^[31]

The board’s relationship with its expert advisors proved another source of contention. Historians appointed to the Anzac centenary board found themselves marginalised from the outset. Unlike the commemorative agencies of some countries, professional historians were corralled into a host of advisory panels. These working groups, as they were also called, took on much of the labour of the centenary, vetting public submissions, assessing applications, and submitting their own. But historians’

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recommendations often foundered, casualties of cost, politics, and the skewed commemorative priorities of a “Century of Service”. The board refused to endorse proposals to restrict commemorative activities and prevent further degradation of the fragile landscape of Gallipoli. It disregarded requests to restore [Red Cross](#) facilities in Malta and so promote a better understanding of [women’s wartime labour](#). Bids to repatriate the “Gallipoli Koran” (a sacred text taken by an Australian soldier as a souvenir in 1915) and calls to provide compensation for [Indigenous](#) people whose families were denied war [medals](#) and gratuity payments were formally endorsed, but no action was ever taken. The election of a conservative government towards the end of the board’s deliberations, and the tide of Islamophobia that swept Australia and the world may well account for that shifting agenda.

The most striking example of where historian and commemorator parted company was the tortuous evolution of the 100 Stories initiative. The project emerged as a response to a Canadian proposal – “1914-1918 Centennial. The World Remembers”. That is noteworthy in itself – idiosyncratic as it was, Australia’s centenary was shaped in reference to commemorative ventures elsewhere. Canadians had marked the 90th anniversary of the end of the First World War by projecting the names of 68,000 fatalities onto the national memorial in Ottawa.^[32] Ten years on, an ambitious international [commemoration](#) was mooted: the names of *all* the war dead of *all* combatant nations would be emblazoned on public buildings and memorials the world over. Many on the board responded with enthusiasm. Canada’s [losses](#) in the First World War were comparable to Australia’s own, the venture seemed cheap and feasible and offered a practical way to connect descendants with “their” war dead. The “vigil”, as it was styled, also drew on historical precedents – honouring an individual name had long been a hallmark of commemorative practice.^[33] Historians, by contrast, raised grave reservations. It was not just the militarisation of civic space, or the theatrical quality of a commemorative light show. Naming the fatalities would prove nigh impossible in many combatant nations. Then there was the question of how Australia chose to identify its war dead. Official figures took no account of those who died after 1921, the year the AIF disbanded – and they excluded a substantial number of Australians who died in the service of imperial or other dominion forces. What too of those who survived the fighting, a legion of the blind, insane, and crippled who carried the war home with them? Finally, the cost of war, historians argued, was never borne solely by combatants – how could its impact on the wider community be better acknowledged and understood?^[34]

100 Stories moved well beyond this fixation on the “fallen”. Crafted by historians at the board’s request, each story took the shape of a silent, digital narrative and much of the content was challenging. Stories addressed the divisive politics of war, the physical and psychological wounds inflicted on veterans, the war service of Indigenous soldiers, women’s emotional labour, and the dark tide of grief that swept through families and communities. Between 2012-2014, the first twenty stories were presented to the board and its advisory panels.

One presentation was deemed to go “too far”. It centred on Frank Wilkinson, whose courage at [Ypres](#) earned him the Military Medal. Wilkinson survived the war but not the peace. He returned home, took up a block of land as a soldier settler, fell deep into debt, and eventually took his own life. None of this was so exceptional in post-war narratives, and similar experiences had been flagged in previous presentations. But Wilkinson’s story stepped beyond tragic victimhood. Before he slit his own throat, Frank Wilkinson took a hammer to his family and battered his wife and four-year old daughter to death. Board members balked at what one called “a brutally honest history”. The chair instructed historians to replace Wilkinson’s story with “a positive, nation building narrative”.^[35]

The official account of the DVA’s role in the Anzac centenary argues that Wilkinson’s “sad story sat uncomfortably with the wider mood of the Anzac Centenary”.^[36] But the mood of the centenary was read differently by different people. The director of the Western Australian Museum told the DVA the stories were “powerful, relevant and insightful”, had them screened in Perth’s city centre, and installed (despite the department’s opposition) as a permanent installation in the National Anzac Centre built with centenary funding.^[37] Developed as a university outreach project after any prospect of government sponsorship was withdrawn,^[38] the 100 Stories were profiled in schools, repurposed as a MOOC (Mass Online Open Courseware), screened in state memorials, rendered in [music](#) at national^[39] and international festivals,^[40] and formed the centrepiece of a public exhibition in Australia’s National Archives.^[41] What all this suggests is that museum curators, educational agencies and even commemorative stakeholders had very different ideas from the board on how the centenary might be observed; their agency and intervention subverted any simple, singular model of top-down commemoration.

There were lost opportunities in Australia’s centenary project. The tension between professional historians and Anzac’s

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mythologisers suggests the much-contested nature of historical remembrance. But there were also momentous gains, most notably the digitisation of Australia's repatriation records. Occupying over ten kilometres of shelving space, these files represent the largest and most complex of Australia's First World War holdings. The [archive](#) includes detailed medical reports, personal correspondence, and often fraught exchanges between Department of Repatriation authorities and those who sought their assistance. It extends the narrative of Anzac into the post-war period, shifts the focus from soldier to civilian, rescues women's voices from an often male-dominated narrative, and enables the recovery of Indigenous stories. Historians deemed public dissemination of this sensitive and often confronting material "*the most appropriate funding initiative to mark the Centenary*".

Over the course of three years several thousand case files were catalogued, repackaged, and digitised.^[42] They have revolutionised our understanding of the post-war period, offering insights into the enduring impact of war and profiling powerful stories both of hardship and resilience.^[43]

Government Sanctioned Remembrance: The Dispersal of Centenary Funding

After long and controversial deliberations, the Anzac centenary board delivered its final report in March 2013. With alacrity uncommon in Canberra, the government responded within a month, accepting all thirty-four of the board's recommendations. These were divided between "large" and "small" projects. In the former, the bulk of expenditure went on the refurbishment and enhancement of existing state memorials. Like the diggers they honoured, Australian commemorators would burrow deep beneath the earth, creating new exhibition centres beneath the [Anzac Memorial](#) in Hyde Park, Sydney, and amidst the foundations of Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance. A pedestrian bridge would link Hobart's Soldier's Memorial Avenue and Cenotaph and, in Adelaide, an "Anzac Memorial Garden Walk ... physically and symbolically link South Australia's principal sites of Remembrance". The category of major projects included two new centres, both "accepted-in-principle" by the government. "Anzac Interpreted" at the old Torren's Training Depot in Adelaide would tell "the stories of wartime South Australia" and an Australian Centre of Excellence would research the mental health of veterans, yet another illustration of how commemorating 1914-1918 served the needs of modern "Anzacs".^[44] To date, neither project has eventuated, though in 2019 a joint parliamentary committee inquiry recommended the creation of an Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health.^[45] In 2013, the government envisaged that its greatest single outlay would be a travelling exhibition mounted by the Australian War Memorial. Over \$50 million dollars would develop "digital multi-user touch screen technology" and "multi-sensory simulations" connecting Australians across the country with "sites, sounds and attitudes".^[46] In the end, twice as much was spent at the Australian Interpretive Centre in Villers-Bretonneux, a facility catering for those with the means to travel overseas.

Smaller projects encompass less costly memorials, educational initiatives, digitisation projects, documentaries, scholarships, the extension of Australia's Western Front Remembrance Trail, and "an online multimedia, community awareness and education program" (styled the "Anzac Portal").^[47] Amongst the new commemorative ventures singled out for funding, the Australian-Turkish Friendship Memorial was raised in Melbourne. It took the form of a stainless steel wreath, curved in the shape of a crescent, with the hand-carved seeds of a Turkish pine and Australian casuarina at its base. A series of quotations were set in a mosaic of bluestone pebbles, capturing voices from both sides of the trenches. The sculpture might be seen as an instance of dialogical memorialisation – loosely woven steel allows visitors to weave [poppies](#) and other offerings into the wreath-like structure and the monument is set within clear sight of the Shrine of Remembrance. Victoria's state memorial was raised as a tribute to the empire's "crusade" against Turkey - the "Seeds of Friendship Memorial" speaks the language of a new commemorative age.^[48]

Some \$4 million was also set aside for an Anzac Centenary Arts and Creative Fund. Managed by the Ministry for the Arts, it supported "presentations, exhibitions or performance" that "explore and contribute to ... the Anzac Legacy".^[49] Two of its earliest commissions were *Black Diggers*, a play exploring Indigenous service which premiered at the Sydney Festival in 2014, and *The Gallipoli Symphony*, a collaboration by composers from Australia, New Zealand, and Turkey first performed in the Hagia Irene in Istanbul in 2015. Two major musical productions followed. *Sacrifice* was a performance of the work of twelve musicians belonging to six combatant nations all of whom "were lost, injured or deeply affected by their war service".^[50] A truly international collaboration, jointly funded by French and Australian commemorative agencies, it toured towns and cities of both countries through 2016. *The Diggers' Requiem* marked the end of the centenary. Its twelve movements were aligned to the major battles of the First World War, it drew again on the work of distinguished Australian composers and ended with the ringing of 62,000 bells, signifying Australia's official roll of war dead. The Arts and Creative Fund offered artists virtually unfettered license to

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speak. Tom Wright and Wesley Enoch's play addressed issues of grief and trauma, Indigenous dispossession, and the inequalities confronted by black servicemen. Christopher Latham, artistic director of the *Flowers of War* project and the first musical artist in residence at the Australian War Memorial, summoned the work of a host of international composers to render the pain and loss of war. Artistic works, they were also acts of commemoration. The ringing of those 62,000 bells signalled the "affective turn" of the centenary.^[51]

Musical ensembles and avant-garde theatre marked one extreme of the "Festival of Anzac's" performance - Bread and Circuses the other. Some three million dollars was allocated to the Albany Convoy Commemorative Event, a naval re-enactment of the first contingent of the AIF's departure from Australia. Attended by the prime ministers of both Australia and New Zealand, it effectively launched the centenary program and was televised across the country. Replete with military parades, light shows, a catafalque party, and wreath laying, the four-day spectacle festooned a quiet country town with flags and poppies. The event cost almost as much as Project Albany, the digitisation project centred on the repatriation records of those first Australians sent to fight overseas.

Anzac was defined by the experience of war abroad so it is not surprising that the centenary years would have an extraterritorial dimension. In addition to work on the Australian Remembrance Trail culminating in the redevelopment of Villers-Bretonneux, the government initiated a joint archaeological survey of the "Anzac area" of Gallipoli. The published findings were gifted by the DVA to every public, university, and school library across Australia. That project involved co-operation with both allies and erstwhile enemies. The same was true of the program of commemorative activities charted through the course of the centenary. By far the most significant of these was the Anzac Day service at Gallipoli marking the centenary of the landing. The DVA took the unusual step of balloting places, with preference given to descendants. Over 10,000 attended the service at Lone Pine or Chanuk Bair in 2015, marking the symbolic centre of the Australian and New Zealand campaigns, respectively. The attempt to limit numbers was driven by security and logistical issues rather than the environmental concerns flagged by historians. In attendance (again) were the prime ministers of Australia and New Zealand, Tony Abbott and John Key, their respective ministers for veterans' affairs and both Prince Charles and Prince Harry. In a gesture of what Matthew Graves has called "commemorative diplomacy",^[52] the Turkish head of state hosted a reception in 2015, though subsequent remarks by Recep Erdoğan that critics of Turkey would be sent home "again" in coffins, disrupted the cosy reconciliation that has sanitised war on Gallipoli. "Peace is Possible" was emblazoned across a fleet of commemorative ferries plying the straits of the Dardanelles in 2015 – but it seemed increasingly unlikely as military tensions escalated across the region.^[53]

Another remarkable feature of Australia's commemorative calendar abroad is the steady shift of focus away from Great Britain. In the 1920s, pilgrimages to war graves were centred on hospital cemeteries where Anzacs were buried and Anzac Day itself was framed by the commemorative space of Whitehall.^[54] By the centenary, commemoration focused on a new Australian memorial beside Wellington Arch and there was little collaboration throughout the centenary years with the Imperial War Museum in London. Australians might be forgiven for forgetting that they fought as much for an empire as they did for a nation.

More enduring was what the Anzac Centenary Advisory Board called the "special relationship" with New Zealand. A new memorial fashioned of Australian sandstone and ringed by eucalypt was installed by the national memorial in Wellington. Its New Zealand counterpart, replete with striking Māori imagery, had been raised across the gateway of Anzac Parade in Canberra in 2001, marking the centenary of federation. On the centenary of Anzac, New Zealand funded the travelling exhibition "Flowers of War", some 480 handcrafted broaches emblematic of the poppies and cornflowers that sprang up across the battlefield. Opening the installation at Victoria's Shrine of Remembrance, Paul Gough spoke less of the Anzac "relationship" and more of the "emotional potency" of flowers, grounding the collaborative artwork in historical precedent:

it echoes the trans-global exchange of seeds, soil and plants that took place in the decades after the First World War, when soldiers, veterans and relatives of the dead brought home seedlings and small plants ... in a ... cycle of active remembering.^[55]

The most expensive of all these extraterritorial projects to date – the transformation of Australia's National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux from a solemn site of reflection to an immersive "theatrical experience", has already been the subject of considerable historical inquiry.^[56] For now, we turn from federal to state initiatives and popular rather than official investment in the centenary. For all its efforts to lead the commemorative project over 2014-2018, the government devolved responsibility downwards.

Commemorating from the Bottom Up

In 2010, Prime Minister Rudd invited “ground up” commemoration. What that overlooked was yet another layer of government managing Australia’s centenary. States set up commemorative bodies around the same time as the federal board was established. Though smaller in size, their composition was remarkably similar. They were led by politicians (in Victoria’s case a retired premier whose grandfather was killed in the war), executive members of veterans’ organisations, politicians with an interest in veterans’ affairs, and token representation from the public. State boards had a modest budget of their own and (through the Anzac Centenary Local Grants Program) would also bid fiercely for federal money. They again sought historians’ advice but were in no way bound by it. With less of the formidable bureaucracy of the DVA at their disposal, state initiatives were reliant on support from a web of cultural institutions, libraries, and museums at their forefront. The exhibitions and activities they fielded had, in Chris Gosden and Frances Larson’s formulation, “multiple authors” and no single individual or agency shaped their narrative of Anzac.^[57] Practitioners in these fields prized their professionalism and independence; none accepted uncritically officially sanctioned eulogies of Anzac, all were alert to the affective power of personal stories, and many revisited the archive in searching and imaginative ways. A collaboration between the State Library of South Australia and the State Theatre is one such example. *The Red Cross Letters* dramatised correspondence to the Red Cross Wounded and Missing Inquiry Bureau. Tales of unresolved [mourning](#) ran counter to the heroic narrative of Anzac and glimpsed at “grief at the most intimate level”.^[58]

Queensland has long claimed a privileged place in the mythology of Anzac. Men from the 9th battalion were the first ashore and though Gallipoli was deemed a *nation’s* baptism of fire, they fought as Queenslanders first and foremost. Australia’s northern state fielded the most ambitious and best co-ordinated centenary program. It was led by the state library in Brisbane and styled QANZAC100.

In 2014, the library launched “an evolving program right across Queensland”. “These activities”, it explained, “will enable Queensland communities to reflect, learn, share stories and experiences, discover, co-create a collective memory, and better understand the Queensland experience of the First World War”. As with libraries in other states, enormous store was placed on digitising collections: at the stroke of a key, schools and households connected with what was called their “Anzac heritage”. Some 30,000 soldier portraits were profiled online, literally individualising the face of Anzac. Public libraries, RSL clubs, schools, historical and family history societies were encouraged to contribute to Historypin, a dedicated site that gathered stories of war, featured a Queensland-specific timeline, and provided near continuous commentary on community observance of the centenary.^[59] Throughout the centenary years, the library convened a series of heritage leaders’ workshops, fielded fellowships, invited academic debate through symposia, respected Indigenous knowledge, and encouraged the general public to reflect on the ways war reached into the whole social fabric.^[60]

Each of Australia’s seven states and territories nurtured a slightly different commemorative culture, actual and online activity adding yet another dimension to the ever-evolving festival of Anzac. From 2014, Victoria’s lavish centenary program encouraged communities large and small “to renew and make connection with their Anzac history”. Launched in Melbourne’s Town Hall (a venue for fundraising and recruitment drives), bands performed the old wartime favourites *It’s a Long Way to Tipperary*, *Keep the Home Fires Burning*, and *Australia Will Be There*, then do-it-yourself centenary packs were distributed. The *Community Resource Guide* explained the protocols of commemorative ceremonies, a publication entitled *Victoria’s World War One Legacy* lionised those from the state awarded the Victoria Cross, and a simple timeline reduced the war to a series of Australian engagements.^[61] Meanwhile protestors gathered outside the building, condemned those who “bolstered nationalism and militarism”, and distributed leaflets reading “Never Again”. “62,000 young Australians”, it proclaimed, “were sacrificed on the European killing fields ... fighting in a dirty little trade war for the Glory of God, King and Country NOT for democracy, liberty or the defence of Australia”. In Australia’s centenary, “Lest We Forget” assumed a meaning never originally intended.^[62]

State-based engagement is one way to measure local investment in the centenary. Small-scale grants, targeted at communities rather than major cultural agencies, is another. In 2014 the Australian government established the Anzac Centenary Local Grants Program, offering each federal member of parliament (MP) \$125,000 to support projects in their electorate commemorating the First World War. They spanned a range of community activities, suggesting the myriad ways that remembrance was revitalised and the extension of the “shelf life” of memory.^[63] Research was funded, scholarships set up, exhibitions hosted, and Anzac Day observance (including “vigils, dawn service and gunfire breakfast”) facilitated.^[64] The DVA

had long promoted the work of family historians and the digitisation of historical records, most notably AIF service dossiers, encouraged Australians to position their personal stories within a much larger national framework. The Local Grants Program continued that process.

Projects put forward by the public straddled a wide emotional and intellectual register, ranging from critical reflection to chauvinistic celebration. The Repat Foundation of South Australia received \$6,000 to host a conference on “The Seen and Unseen Wounds of War”, “Women Wept” explored the “theme of women’s loss and grief in wartime”, and the Coalfields Heritage Group produced 4,000 pages of research on the impact of war on mining communities. But the centenary of Anzac would be marked in lighter ways as well – through “contemporary dance”, “centenary balls”, “poetry readings”, “Anzac Sing-Alongs”, “puppet plays”, and “musical spectaculars”.^[65]

The centenary strived to be “inclusive” – one should bear in mind that this process of public consultation “from the ground up” had been initiated by a Labor government. Lingering concerns that the centenary might privilege Australians of British descent led to a \$20,000 grant to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and the recovery of “stories” of Tasmanian Aboriginal soldiers; the government funded projects by Greek, Turkish, and Chinese diasporas, sponsored the participation of the Sikh Bagpipes Drums Band in commemorative events around Sydney, and enabled a multi-cultural festival in Lithgow. To a lesser extent, The Anzac Centenary Local Grants Program empowered dissenting voices. The Beechworth Theatre Company received over \$4000 to revive Alan Seymour’s (1927-2015) controversial play *The One Day of the Year* (a scathing critique of Anzac Day written in the 1950s), the Tasmanian branch of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom received around the same amount of money to write their history, a theatre in Brisbane staged new plays against conscription, and the Medical Association for the Prevention of War secured over \$5000 for a public presentation.^[66] These aligned with independent and unsponsored ventures. Steve Vizard’s brilliant satire *The Last Man Standing* was fielded by the Melbourne Theatre Company. It parodied the centenary at the very point of its creation.

Those opposed to “nationalism and militarism” were far less evident in the Local Grants Program than through the submissions process – few [pacifist](#) or left-wing groups saw the Anzac authorities as appropriate patrons. Re-enactment troupes, on the other hand, welcomed fresh opportunities for funding. Throughout the centenary peaceful bayside suburbs restaged the Anzac landings, historical societies fielded “pageants” of “songs, artwork, costumes and cameo re-enactment”, light horse troops paraded the streets of country towns and recruitment marches set off again led by descendants in AIF uniform. Re-enactment groups (with names like the Military Brotherhood Incorporated) placed great store on the historical accuracy of performance and the “authenticity” of costume. “I accept nothing short of perfect in portraying the A.I.F ‘Digger’”, one submission informed the commission, “This includes ... authentic underwear.”^[67] All aspired to embody the “experience” of Anzac – emulating the physical and emotional ordeal of wartime. Throughout the centenary re-enactment offered its practitioners an intense engagement with the past – “self creating a persona for oneself and using history as a backdrop”. It collapsed “temporality” and allowed what Jerome de Groot has called “the controlled entry of the past into the present moment”.^[68] And beyond this dedicated circle, the general public sought what was often styled an Anzac experience. Camp Gallipoli, Anzac cruises, military tattoos, and family “pilgrimage” to battlefields abroad contrived a connection with past generations.^[69] From mock battles to fundraising concerts, re-enactment “relived” Anzac. Perhaps the greatest irony of Australia’s centenary was that the war to end all wars would be marked by marching to war again.

By far the most common form of community engagement was the making and remaking of memorials. The establishment or renewal of commemorative sites was the single largest funding item in the Local Grants Program and involved an active affirmation of a community’s Anzac heritage. Such memory work, as Steve Vizard has argued, returns both to the past and to the grassroots from whence the Anzac legend has sprung. “In a very physical sense the myth of Gallipoli is given a clean and polish, as if in the restoration of artefacts, Anzac itself might be resurrected”.^[70]

Clean and polish quite literally. Honour boards (recording the names of volunteers) were re-etched, fading photographs retouched, and dilapidated memorial halls repaired and repainted. Stone was blasted clean, weathered bronze replaced, and avenues of honour replanted. In bush and city alike, rusting war trophies were pressed back into service, literally and symbolically rehabilitated. Captured [artillery](#) pieces were a controversial feature of post-war commemoration. Could we appropriately memorialise the mass slaughter of 1914-1918 through the very weaponry that caused it? But throughout the centenary years, returned services groups and military history societies restored Howitzers and 18 pounders to good working order, mounted them on “spanking new” carriages and wheeled them out to prominent civic spaces.^[71]

Most of these memorials were established in the 1920s, their diverse forms and settings determined after vexed debates within the communities that raised them. Civic memorials, as Ken Inglis and others have shown, came in every conceivable shape, from obelisk to arch, stone soldier and broken pillar; they were set on busy street corners and in quiet memorial parklands.^[72] Throughout the centenary, communities worked with the material culture they had inherited, with the location, nature, state of repair, and accessibility of a local memorial shaping the character of community engagement.

This renovation of commemorative space was often an attempt to repurpose memorial culture. Monuments raised to mark the First World War were extended to address the second and a host of subsequent conflicts. Low-lying walls studded with plaques flank many centenary-funded structures, commemorative appendages in an age of near continuous military conflict. This aligned community efforts with the political imperatives set by the Anzac centenary board. The centenary of the First World War would be used to honour *all* Australian “service and sacrifice”. Today a few even acknowledge the service of Aboriginal veterans.

“Upgrading” memorials was also a euphemism for modernising them. And here we see an irony in the commemorative culture fostered by the Anzac centenary. On the one hand, aging monuments are faithfully restored. On the other, they are wilfully reinvented, revamped to suit the gaze of a new century. Gaze quite literally. Eudunda RSL, took the injunction “Lest We Forget” extremely seriously: a ring of spotlights was positioned around the town’s simple commemorative cairn “to ensure that the names of the First World War fallen soldiers from the Eudunda District be visible at all times”. Yallourn, site of Victoria’s coal fuelled power stations, marshalled the abundant energy at hand by floodlighting the entire “Cenotaph area”. The local RSL sub-branch code-named the commemorative campaign “Enlighten”. As Robert Musil (1880-1942) once remarked, it is the fate of most memorials to become invisible. But bright illumination thrust once unassuming monuments into public consciousness again; blocking the work of forgetting.^[73]

Names on a memorial once had an eloquence all their own. These were men and women known to the families who lost them. In this new age of Anzac, naming required supplementary narratives, or what the RSL in Bunbury styled “an information kiosk”. The city of Mandurah in Western Australia spent almost \$40,000 “installing an interactive audio device” at the city cenotaph, a place of reflective silence transformed into a talking memorial. Hobsons Bay City Council decided restoration of the local honour roll was simply not enough – “digital images and stories for the further education of the community” loaned that list of “nameless names” “history and context”. Once the medium of memorials was inscription in stone, now the “interactive touch screen” supplants an older language of remembrance. In Western Australia the “Anzac Centenary Imaginarium” “merged the traditional world of live performance with the virtual world of ‘Augmented Reality’”: a “3D animated Anzac character” guided visitors through the precinct of the state memorial.^[74] It says much that returned services associations, comprised for the most part of aging male veterans, championed such initiatives. New technologies relayed the message of remembrance to future generations. Even a neo-classical monument like Melbourne’s Shrine of Remembrance was circled by banners reading #REMEMBER.

The centenary was a time of innovation and inventiveness. Even so, older commemorative forms had not entirely lost their purchase. Charting the character of memorialisation in the immediate post-war period, Jay Winter argued that traditional Christian imagery offered greater consolation to the bereaved than challenging modernist sculpture.^[75] One hundred years after the end of the First World War it is questionable whether descendants of the war dead have any such need for “solace”, and Australia is a far more secular society than when the war memorial movement was founded. Even so, in making a case for funding many communities drew on a long-established commemorative repertoire. Explanatory plaques notwithstanding, townships sunk heavy memorial stones in the earth and raised sturdy obelisks of Australian marble; memorial arches swung back into favour, and new eternal flames were (re)kindled. The most iconic of these new memorials laboured to recreate a familiar feature of the Australian memorial landscape. Brooklyn RSL on the country’s east coast also called for the “installation of a sculpture of a First World War digger”, head bowed, arms reversed, a symbol of timeless remembrance.

Above all, the commemorative garden and avenue of honour witnessed an unexpected revival: in an age of global warming, trees became Australia’s environmentally friendly memorials and Flanders poppies sprang up across the landscape. The Brisbane City Council loaned its support to the National Avenues of Honour Project hoping to both “celebrate the centenary of Anzac service” and beautify the environs of the city. Planting a tree in the 1920s was charged with symbolic significance, historians likening the act to a secondary funeral. In 2011 the council requested an advertising budget to explain that ritual to the public. Older avenues of honour laboured to renew that sense of historical connectedness. Hobart City Council called for the

“rejuvenation” of the city’s Soldier’s Memorial Avenue, and its replanting with drought-resistant cedar. Aging trees would be reverently removed and their sacred timber reworked in other commemorative projects or distributed to family members. The memorial’s restoration was intended to mark “a new chapter in the [ongoing] history of the avenue”. As in 1919, the involvement of the community – and in particular the young – in any re-plantings ensured the renewal of remembrance across the generations.

This zeal to commemorate extended to unexpected places. Nursing homes, at one end of the generational divide, set aside a space to honour veterans in their midst; primary schools argued they were the Anzacs’ rightful heirs and requested funds for flower beds and flagpoles; even the Men’s Shed in Werribee sought \$10000 to create “an Anzac Reflective Garden”. Things as well as places were invested with meanings never originally intended. In Victoria Bendigo tramways sought \$52000 to refurbish a 1914 tram, “used by First World War soldiers” (but presumably by civilians and anti-war activists as well) as a kind of mobile memorial. Houses were “offered” commemorative plaques (at \$70 apiece) mourning those who never returned to them.^[76] The last was an instance of what one might call “Anzac merchandise”. From cloth hats “embroidered with the Australian Defence Force badge” to teddy bears dressed in AIF uniform, communities and companies commodified remembrance.^[77]

Finally, if a community lacked an Anzac association, it could always invent one. New suburbs in Sydney’s and Melbourne’s sprawling west sent none of their sons to war – unlike the towns on the trail of recruitment marches or shires that raised a brood of Victoria Cross winners, their claim for a place in the lexicon of Anzac was tenuous. But centenary funding could be used to create a space for Anzac Day observance. A simple plinth or obelisk sited a “sacred place” by shopping malls.

The forms memorials took were diverse – so too were the communities that raised them. As one might have expected, returned services associations often took the lead. Memorials usually fronted RSL halls; this was seen as *their* heritage. But Winter’s memory activists were recruited from a much wider social spectrum. Schools, scouting groups, historical societies, sporting clubs, and fire brigades rallied to the commemorative cause. The Greek diaspora in Melbourne, resentful perhaps of the privileged place accorded the Seeds of Friendship Memorial, erected a memorial to the Australian [nurses](#) stationed at the hospital on Lemnos. Light Horse Associations, RSLs, the Purple Poppy Foundation, and the Scottish Terrier Association of Victoria raised monuments to [animals](#) who “made the supreme sacrifice” in war.^[78] One could also argue that the centenary unleashed something of a commemorative industry, a revenue stream cash-strapped municipalities eagerly tapped into. A large number of applications were couched in the language of civic improvement, “accessible footpath and landscaping” around a pre-existing memorial space offered “revitalised space for the community”.^[79] The city of Ballarat even announced a First World War Memorial Overpass, draping a busy roadway with poppies. “Utilitarian” memorials like these were an innovation in the 1920s – usefulness, many feared, would distract from the singular task of remembrance. By the time of the centenary, Anzac had become an amenity.

Conclusion

From 2010-2020, Australia fielded the longest, most expensive and arguably most complex First World War centenary of any combatant nation. It involved unprecedented investment from the state but was also driven by popular initiatives. The “Festival of Anzac” was never pre-determined, and, notwithstanding ritual’s reliance on repetition, always imperfectly scripted. The shape the centenary took was determined on the ground, as communities grasped for new ways to remember. For over a decade, then, Anzac was a site of endless inventiveness – rendered anew in poetry and play, march and memorial. In all its myriad forms, remembrance offers insights into the making of historical sensibility.

Contestation has always been a feature of commemorative practice – and that was clearly the case of the Anzac centenary. On that note, this article has sought to recover disruptive and dissenting voices. Alongside expressions of pride, sorrow, and gratitude dwelt feelings of disquiet, anger, and unease. Lost possibilities, awkward questions, and the search by historians and others for more nuanced and complex ways of understanding the human cost of war charged Australia’s centenary with political significance. At every turn through these fraught deliberations the remembrance of war also proved an act of forgetting. Australia’s centenary certainly left a lasting legacy on the nation’s physical and cultural landscape, its presence is evident in thousands of communities that raised or rebuilt a memorial. But 2014-2018 witnessed the faltering rise of ephemeral counter memorials as well. To mark the centenary of the armistice, white poppies “representing remembrance for all victims of war” were planted near the Shrine on Melbourne’s domain. Fashioned from tissue paper, they “symbolised a commitment to peace, and a challenge to attempts to glamorise or celebrate war”.^[80] In that light, [Steven Trout’s](#) observations on the character of American \$Centenary (Australia) - 1914-1918-Online

commemoration seem particularly pertinent: “the memory of war was fractured and unsettled, more a matter of competing versions of memory ... than a single, culturally pervasive construction of the past”.^[81]

It is beyond the scope of this article to consider the future course of Anzac. As the centenary draws to a close, some scholars have argued that Australia’s foundation myth has undergone yet another reinvention. Anzac 2.0, as it has been called, “valorises inoffensive values such as mateship, suffering and sacrifice”. It long ago discarded “the imperial connotations and emphasis on Australian soldiers’ martial prowess that lay at the heart of the original Anzac legend” and today is steeped in the intimate language of trauma. And like all mythologies, “Anzac commemoration invites emotional rather than intellectual engagement from its adherents”.^[82] As with most generalisations, this cries out for qualification. Martial prowess was very much in evidence as re-enactors across the country restaged the First World War; it also underpinned the adulation of war service that characterised “a century of service”. Nor was the centenary entirely a matter of emotional engagement – if unthinking adulation of one’s Anzac forebears was at one extreme of Australia’s response, a willingness to interrogate the causes of war and situate a “morally complex event” historically, was another.^[83] Above all it is not a case of one “version of memory” but several. Today as in the past the mythology first fashioned in 1915 carries many meanings and serves many purposes. What is beyond dispute is that the Anzac centenary will offer “a rich bounty for future historians”.^[84] And that the cultural salience of Anzac, its seemingly endless allure, shows little sign of diminishing.

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