

Version 1.0 | Last updated 08 January 2017

Historiography 1918-Today (Australia)

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Charles E.W. Bean's twelve-volume *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918* (1921-1942) dominated Australian historiography of the Great War for four decades. The theme of the *Official History*, that the Australian nation was born through the deeds of its soldiers, was neither affirmed nor disputed by academic historians, but ignored. It was not until the 1960s that historians began to study the Great War. Much of the historiography since then has challenged Bean's story of martial baptism and emphasised the divisions that existed on the Australian home front during the war. Ken Inglis' pioneering work on Anzac Day and war memorials fanned the historiography of remembrance and commemoration, just as the international rise of cultural history and memory studies led scholars back to the Great War with new questions about grief, mourning and trauma. The nation-making interpretation of the war survives and indeed thrives outside the academy.

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Introduction

Australian historiography of the Great War has developed in the shadow of popular memory of the event. Charles Bean's (1879-1968) *Official History* (1921-1942) both reflected and reinforced the widespread belief that the war gave birth to Australian nationhood. Bean was the most enthusiastic and dedicated proponent of the [Anzac](#) legend, the notion that Australian soldiers were unusually proficient warriors who were united by unique bonds of friendship. The Anzac legend looked set for extinction in the 1970s but has since staged a remarkable recovery, not least because of the interest of family historians in their soldier forebears and the patronage of politicians. Much of the recent Australian historiography of the Great War has been produced in response to the Anzac revival. Historians have been eager both to explain the appeal of Anzac to contemporary Australians and to arrest its momentum by documenting the distance between the legend and historical truth. This article details the major trends in Australian historiography of the Great War.

Initial Responses

For forty years Australian historiography of the Great War was dominated by the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*. Edited by Charles Bean, the *Official History* was published in twelve volumes between 1921 and 1942 and widely acclaimed for its scope and scrupulous detail. The scale of Bean's ambition and the success with which he realised it gave the *Official History* a significance beyond that of other nations' more conventional official accounts of the war.^[1] Bean's romantic imagination had been formulating a thesis of the emerging Australian character since he worked as a journalist on the *Sydney Morning Herald* in the early years of the 20th century. His notion of Australian distinctiveness was reinforced by his observation of the First AIF (Australian Imperial Force) as the official [war correspondent](#). Bean's *Official History* became not merely a meticulously detailed account of the battles in which Australian soldiers fought, but a Book of Genesis for an untried nation. If war was the test of a nation's mettle, as Bean and most Australians of the early 20th century believed, then the performance of the Anzacs at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 was proof that Australia had passed "that transcendent test".^[2]

Charles Bean was not the first to write the history of Australian experience in the Great War. Ernest Scott (1867-1939), an English-born professor of history at the University of Melbourne, was drafting an introductory textbook on Australian history when the Anzacs landed in [Turkey](#) in April 1915.^[3] Unlike Bean, the ardently imperialist Scott did not proclaim the birth of Australian nationhood at [Gallipoli](#). Rather, *A Short History of Australia* (1916) subsumed the story of the Anzacs within the greater tale of the defence of the ideals of the British Empire against Prussian [militarism](#). Scott's [imperialist](#) instinct compelled him to emphasise the similarities between [Great Britain](#) and its "southern reflex"; to announce the national birth or baptism (the metaphor varied), would give undue emphasis to Australian distinctiveness.^[4] Despite their ideological differences, Scott and Bean collaborated on the domestic volume of the *Official History*, where they struggled to contrive a story

of national and imperial unity in the face of the divisive debate over [conscription](#).^[5] Scott also edited the Australian volume of the *Cambridge History of the British Empire*, which dealt extensively with the war.^[6]

Bean's thesis of martial baptism might have represented the popular mood more accurately than Scott's imperial reading of the Great War, but it was of little interest to the coterie of university historians in inter-war [Australia](#), whose principal concerns lay with political and economic history. The attitude of the eminent historian [Keith Hancock \(1898-1998\)](#) towards the Great War was typical of the Australian academy during the inter-war period. Hancock's acclaimed essay *Australia* (1930) barely mentioned the war and ascribed it no import in moulding the character of the "Independent Australian Briton", whose loyalty to the [empire](#) was an extension of his or her Australian [nationalism](#).^[7] General histories written during the inter-war years by Arthur Norman Smith and F.L.W. Wood absorbed the war within the broader themes of nation-building and wartime domestic crises.^[8] Even after the great expansion of Australian universities following the Second World War, academic historians showed little inclination to study the Great War. The historian Ken Inglis observed in 1996 that the war of 1914-1918 and the work of Charles Bean and Ernest Scott were barely mentioned in academic circles during the 1940s and 1950s: "It was as if the spirit of Scott, conservative and imperial, had been exorcised in order to make a climate more congenial to liberal, left-wing radicalism."^[9]

The Second Phase

The post-Beanian phase of historical examination of the Great War was begun by Ken Inglis and Lloyd Robson. While Bean's *Official History* narrated the war experience of Australians and prosecuted an argument about national distinctiveness, the preoccupations of Inglis and Robson were entirely different. With a taste for religious and existential issues that he shared with his university teacher [Manning Clark \(1915-1991\)](#), Inglis was interested in the [commemorative rituals](#) performed in memory of the Great War. In 1960, he published an article in *Nation* magazine that asked whether the rituals enacted each Anzac Day were secular substitutes for traditional Christian rites of worship.^[10] Five years later a provocative piece in *Meanjin* challenged fellow historians to pay greater heed to the work of Charles Bean and the function of Great War commemoration: "A study of the ceremonies of life and death performed on Anzac Day should tell much about our society; and a national history that does not explore the meaning of these ceremonies is too thin."^[11]

Inglis' challenge to his colleagues corresponded with the rise of protest against the war in Vietnam. The controversy over the government's decision to introduce conscription in November 1964 ignited historians' interest in the conscription debates of the Great War. Radical nationalists, such as [Russell Ward \(1914-1995\)](#), [Ian Turner \(1922-1978\)](#) and [Geoffrey Serle \(1922-1998\)](#), characterised the Great War as the wrecking ball of pre-1914 social reform and lamented what they perceived to be the conservative monopoly on the Anzac legend.^[12] Lloyd Robson consulted the extensive enlistment

records of the First AIF to analyse its recruitment and narrate the controversy of the 1916 and 1917 conscription referenda.^[13] Bill Gammage expected to expose the *Official History* as conservative propaganda in the mid-1960s when he began poring over hundreds of letters and diaries written by Australian soldiers during the war. He not only found himself agreeing with Bean's assessment of the First AIF, but his close attention to the emotional experience of ordinary soldiers sowed a new field of war historiography.^[14] Ken Inglis encouraged Gammage in his pioneering work, just as he inspired the doctoral student Alistair Thomson to "interpret the ways in which Anzac had been inscribed in my own family and cultural upbringing."^[15] Based on a series of oral interviews, Thomson's seminal book *Anzac Memories* showed how survivors' remembrance of the war was tailored to their shifting psychological circumstances, and how public memory; chiefly the Anzac legend, contaminated the soldiers' personal recollections.^[16]

Alistair Thomson's doctoral research at the University of Melbourne in the 1980s (supervised by Lloyd Robson), was influenced by the burgeoning fields of oral history and memory studies. In 1975, the American literature professor Paul Fussell (1924-2012) published *The Great War and Modern Memory*, which argued that the gap between soldiers' expectation of trench warfare and their experience of it compelled those who wrote about the war to do so with a new, non-literal sensibility, which he called "ironic".^[17] The literary scholar Robin Gerster applied Fussellian methodology to Australian war literature and concluded that it was overwhelmingly composed in a pre-ironic mode, wherein the Homeric hero retained the capacity to exert his will upon events.^[18] Fussell's contention that the Great War caused a rupture in literary expression was challenged increasingly by scholars who argued that he relied too heavily on the educated British officer class and ignored a mass of less artistically accomplished productions. Rosa Maria Bracco demonstrated that traditional forms of literature were in fact widely employed to describe the war in Britain, while Jay Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* showed how religious, classical and romantic modes of mourning and commemoration not only survived, but thrived among people seeking solace in post-war Europe.^[19] More recently, scholars such as Christina Spittel, Clare Rhoden and Claire Woods have shown that Australian soldier literature was more varied than Gerster allowed.^[20] Indeed, the bulk of Australian war writing was composed in the style of Bracco's middlebrow "merchants of hope", rather than in the heroic form described by Gerster in *Big-Noting*.

The Rise of Memory and Trauma

Australian historiography of the Great War has not been immune from the international memory boom that began in the 1980s, though the cultural turn has been manifest in a particular way in its Australian setting. Following the lead of Lloyd Robson and Alistair Thomson, historians increasingly turned their attention to the "construction" of the Anzac legend. This endeavour is premised upon the iconoclastic assumption that the legend did not emerge organically from the deeds of the soldiers and that there is a difference between the event and the myth.^[21] The British journalist Ellis Ashmead

Bartlett (1881-1931), whose despatch provided Australians with their first knowledge of the Gallipoli landing, was identified as a crucial figure alongside Charles Bean in the creation of the Anzac legend.^[22] In 1975 the feminist historian Miriam Dixon published a book that was critical of the masculinist bias of radical historiography.^[23] The feminist critique of Australian historiography was extended by Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath and Marian Quartly to include digger mythology and the powerful trope of martial baptism: "Though women gave birth to the population, only men it seemed could give birth to the imperishable political entity of the nation."^[24] Other historians turned their attention to the changing nature of the Anzac legend: Stuart Ward described the different interpretations of Anzac offered in two films made four decades apart. The martial proficiency and bloodlust of the soldiers that was celebrated in the film *Forty Thousand Horsemen*, which was made during the Second World War, was absent in Peter Weir's 1981 film *Gallipoli*, where the only violence occurred in the last scene in which the young hero was sacrificed at the hand of British military incompetence.^[25] In similar vein to Stuart Ward, Joy Damousi noted the gradual leaching of imperialism from Australian commemoration of the Great War, and the recasting of Britain from hero to villain.^[26]

The cultural turn in historiography helped to consolidate the Great War inside the Australian academy. Books such as Stephen Garton's *The Cost of War*, which examined the [post-war experience of veterans and their families](#), challenged either explicitly or implicitly, the emphasis that Charles Bean had placed on the nation-making function of the Great War.^[27] Reflecting international trends, grief and commemoration became the primary interests of Australian historians of the Great War. Joy Damousi's *The Labour of Loss* studied private grief through [letters](#) and [diaries](#), while Ken Inglis' *Sacred Places* described the public process of raising war monuments.^[28] [Bruce Scates](#) examined the history of battlefield "pilgrimage" in *Return to Gallipoli*. His research was criticised by Mark McKenna and Stuart Ward, who alleged that Scates' assignation of motivation among young Australians at Gallipoli failed to consider adequately the extent to which they were inculcated with the Anzac legend through government propagandising.^[29] A younger generation of scholars has added nuance to the study of the war's aftermath, often with an emphasis on women's grief and a desire to challenge assumptions about femininity and [masculinity](#) that are embedded in the traditional Anzac legend.^[30] Tanja Luckins, Marina Larsson and Jen Roberts have all written about the "disenfranchised grief" of families whose soldier relatives died after the war.^[31] Larsson's *Shattered Anzacs* told the story of soldiers who returned to Australia with psychological and physical wounds, and the families who bore the burden of their care.^[32] Bruce Scates has traced the phenomenon of battlefield pilgrimage, while [Bart Ziino](#) examined how the distance between home and battlefield affected the ways that Australians grieved their war dead.^[33] Michael Tyquin's study of psychological breakdown among Australian soldiers added to the vast amount of international scholarship about [shell shock](#) and other forms of psychological trauma suffered by soldiers of the Great War.^[34]

Military Historiography

The growth of Australian cultural history of the Great War has been matched by the increasing sophistication of military history of the conflict. As [Joan Beaumont](#) has noted, military history is mostly written by scholars based in Canberra; at the Australian War Memorial and the Australian Defence Force Academy and within the history units of the armed services.^[35] Military historians have shown a willingness to dismantle tenets of the traditional Anzac legend that matches that of their cultural peers. Jeffrey Grey concluded in *A Military History of Australia* that Australian soldiers had no monopoly on mateship, their volunteer status was no different from that of the [British Expeditionary Force](#) on the [Somme](#) in 1916, and their prowess as fighters was something that developed with improved command, logistics and firepower, rather an inherent character trait.^[36] In *Gallipoli: The End of the Myth*, Robin Prior dismissed the common perception that the Dardenelles campaign was botched by incompetent British leadership. He concluded that the operation was misconceived from the start, and that even if it had succeeded it would not have shortened the war by a single day.^[37] [Peter Stanley](#), from the Australian Defence Force Academy at the University of New South Wales, is disdainful of many of the mainstays of what Geoffrey Serle called "Anzackery".^[38] Stanley's *Bad Characters* struck out into new territory by discussing such issues as [homosexuality](#) and suicide within the First AIF.^[39] Other recent works by Stanley combine military and social history to emphasise the personal toll of war and subvert the nation-making ethos of the Anzac legend.^[40]

Non-academic Historians

Another significant historiographical development of recent decades has been the rise of non-academic historians of the Great War. Previously there had been unit histories and memoirs by participants, but since the 1980s descendants of members of the First AIF have published family histories based upon the letters and diaries of their soldier forebears. While some family historians intersperse the letters and diaries with sophisticated commentary and analysis, the majority reproduce the documents with little embellishment.^[41] The contribution of journalist-historians such as Les Carlyon, Roland Perry and Patrick Lindsay has had a more profound effect on popular understandings of the Great War than the work of family historians.^[42] Indeed, the appetite of Australian readers for non-academic military history is one of the more notable publishing phenomena of the past two decades.^[43] The work of the journalist-historians tends to reinforce rather than challenge traditional forms of Great War memory; an inclination that explains why academic historians regard much of it contemptuously.

Recent Developments

The countdown to the centenary of the Great War and the Dardenelles campaign has sharpened

debate about the prominence of Anzac commemoration in contemporary Australia. The most strident and sustained academic critique of the Anzac legend was published by Marilyn Lake, Henry Reynolds, Joy Damousi, Mark McKenna and Carina Donaldson in 2010. *What's Wrong with Anzac?* condemned the "militarisation of Australian history" under successive federal governments since the 1990s and questioned the need for a martial myth as the jewel of the national iconography: "The key premise of the Anzac legend is that nations and men are made in war. It is an idea that had currency a hundred years ago. Is it not now time for Australia to cast it aside?"^[44] The book was a symptom of the left intelligentsia's profound hostility towards the prime ministership of John Howard and his striking success in summoning the symbols of nationalism to his conservative agenda. In a review of *What's Wrong with Anzac?* that appeared in the conservative *Quadrant* magazine, the former academic Mervyn Bendle claimed that the book was part of a broader plan to sabotage the Anzac centenary, just as the left had sabotaged the Bicentenary of European settlement in Australia in 1988.^[45]

The critique of the Anzac legend by the left intelligentsia was joined in 2014 by a former army captain who had seen active service in Iraq and Afghanistan. In *Anzac's Long Shadow*, James Brown claimed that the nation's "obsession with Anzac" was to the detriment of its contemporary defence force.^[46] He claimed that a portion of the estimated \$325 million that the Commonwealth Government allocated to commemorating the centenary of the Great War would have been better spent on providing services for returned soldiers and their families. Brown also criticised the growing commercial exploitation of the Anzac brand by corporations and organisations including Returned and Services League clubs, which profit greatly by their association with Anzac, but contribute little to the welfare of returned military personnel.

The traditional divide between historiography of Australian military experience of the Great War and the domestic scene was bridged in a recent major work by the military and social historian, Joan Beaumont. Written for a popular audience, the chronological narrative of *Broken Nation* (2013) alternates between battle front and home front. It balances the story of the growing martial proficiency of the First AIF with the increasing division and dissent at home over conscription and the toll of death and injury. This synthesising impulse is also evident in [Carolyn Holbrook's *Anzac: The Unauthorised Biography*](#) (2014), which traces the history of Australian remembrance of the Great War from 1915 until the present.^[47]

Conclusion

The Australian historiography of the Great War simultaneously reflects trends in international scholarship and evinces distinctive national characteristics. The cultural turn that has permeated the humanities globally since the 1980s is manifest in the large Australian literature on memory, grief and trauma. On the other hand, debates over the centrality of martial experience to the national identity and the role of the state in promoting military history, which were sharpened in the lead-up to the centenary of the Gallipoli campaign in April 2015, are unique to their Australian setting.

Section Editor: [Peter Stanley](#)

Notes

1. ↑ The genre of official history was relatively new when Bean began writing the Official History. The British produced their first official history after the Crimean War, following the Prussian model, which used official histories as a means of improving military performance; Macleod, Jenny: *Reconsidering Gallipoli*, Manchester 2004, p. 56.
2. ↑ Bean, C.E.W.: *Anzac to Amiens: A Shorter History of the Australian Fighting Services in the First World War*, Canberra 1946, p. vi.
3. ↑ Scott, Ernest: *A Short History of Australia*. London 1916, new editions, 1918, 1925, 1928, 1947.
4. ↑ Scott, Ernest: *A Short History of Australia*, second edition, London 1918 [1916], p. 336.
5. ↑ Scott, Ernest: *Australia During the War*, volume XI. *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Sydney 1936; new edition, Brisbane 1989. On the relationship between Scott and Bean, see Holbrook, Carolyn: *Anzac: The Unauthorised Biography*, Sydney 2014.
6. ↑ Scott, Ernest (ed.): *Australia: Cambridge History of the British Empire*, volume VII, part I, new edition, Cambridge 1988 [1936].
7. ↑ Hancock, W.K.: *Australia*. Brisbane 1961 [1930], pp. 39-51.
8. ↑ Smith, A.N.: *Thirty Years: The Commonwealth of Australia, 1901–1931*, Melbourne 1933; Wood, F.L.W.: *A Concise History of Australia*, Sydney 1935. See Cooper, Anthony: *The Australian Historiography of the First World War: Who is Deluded?*, in: *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 40/1 (1994), p. 16, for a discussion of these historians' attitudes to the Great War.
9. ↑ Inglis, K.S.: 'Remembering Anzac', in: Lack, John (ed.): *Remembering Anzac: Selected Writings of K.S. Inglis*, Melbourne 1998, p. 231.
10. ↑ Inglis, K.S.: 'The Substitute Religion', in: *Nation*, 23 April 1960, reprinted in: Craig Wilcox (ed.): *Observing Australia 1959–1999*. Melbourne 1999, pp. 63-70.
11. ↑ Inglis, K.S.: 'The Anzac Tradition', in: *Meanjin Quarterly*, 24/1 (1965), p. 44.
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13. ↑ Robson, L.L.: *The First AIF: A Study of its Recruitment, 1914–1918*, Melbourne 1970.
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16. ↑ Thomson, Alistair: *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, Melbourne 1994.

17. ↑ Fussell, Paul: *The Great War and Modern Memory*, new edition, Oxford 2000 [1975].
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20. ↑ See for instance, Spittel, Christina: 'Remembering the War: Australian Novelists of the Inter-War Years', in: *Australian Literary Studies*, 23/2 (2007), pp. 121-39; and Spittel, Christina: *A Portable Monument?: Leonard Mann's Flesh in Armour and Australia's Memory of the First World War*, in: *Book History*, 14 (2011), pp. 187-220; Rhoden, Clare: *What's Missing in this Picture? The 'Middle Parts of Fortune' in Australian War Literature*, [Phylament: Borders, Regions, Worlds](#) (retrieved 12 November 2014), 16 (August 2010), pp. 21-33; Woods, Claire: *There and Back: Two Soldiers Shape their Experience of World War I*, in: Starck, Nigel (ed.), *Legacies of War*, Melbourne 2013, pp. 141-162.
21. ↑ For example, Kent, D.A.: *The Anzac Book and the Anzac legend: C.E.W. Bean as Editor and Image-Maker*, in: *Historical Studies*, 21/84 (1985), pp. 376-90; Williams, John F.: *Anzacs, the Media and the Great War*, Sydney 1999; Seal, Graham: *Inventing Anzac: The Digger and National Mythology*, Brisbane 2004; Reynaud, Daniel: *Celluloid Anzacs: The Great War Through Australian Cinema*, Melbourne 2007; Andrews, E. M.: *The Anzac Illusion: Anglo-Australian Relations during World War I*, Cambridge 1993; Stockings, Craig (ed.): *Zombie Myths of Australian Military History: The 10 Myths That Will Not Die*, Sydney 2010; Stockings, Craig (ed.): *Anzac's Dirty Dozen: 12 Myths of Australian Military History*, Sydney 2012.
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23. ↑ Dixon, Miriam: *The Real Matilda: Women and Identity in Australia, 1788–1975*, Melbourne 1975, pp. 57-59, 75-78.
24. ↑ Grimshaw, Patricia et al.: *Creating a Nation: 1788–1990*, Melbourne 1994, p. 218. See also Damousi, Joy/Lake, Marilyn (eds): *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge 1995, for feminist readings of Australian military history.
25. ↑ Ward, Stuart: *A War Memorial in Celluloid: The Gallipoli Legend in Australian Cinema, 1940s–1980s*, in: Macleod, Jenny (ed.): *Gallipoli: Making History*, London 2004, pp. 59-72.
26. ↑ Damousi, Joy: *War and Commemoration*, in: Schreuder, Deryck M./Ward, Stuart (eds): *Australia's Empire*, Oxford 2008, pp. 288-311.
27. ↑ Garton, Stephen: *The Cost of War: Australians Return*, Melbourne 1996.
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30. ↑ Ziino, Bart: *A Distant Grief: Australians, War Graves and the Great War*, Perth 2007.

31. † Luckins, Tanja: *The Gates of Memory: Australian People's Experience and Memories of Loss and the Great War*, Perth 2004; Larsson, Marina: *A Disenfranchised Grief: Post-war Death and Memorialisation in Australia after the First World War*, in: *Australian Historical Studies*, 40/1 (2009), pp. 79-95; Hawksley, Jen: 'In the Shadow of War': Australian Parents and the Legacy of Loss, 1915-1935, in: *Journal of Australian Studies*, 33/2 (2009), pp. 181-94. Jen Roberts has previously published as Jen Hawksley.
32. † Larsson, Marina: *Shattered Anzacs: Living with the Scars of War*, Sydney 2009.
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37. † Prior, Robin: *Gallipoli: The End of the Myth*, Sydney 2009.
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43. † See McKenna, Mark: *Writing the Past: History, Literature & the Public Sphere in Australia*, public lecture, 1 December 2005, Queensland College of Art, Brisbane, http://www.humanitieswritingproject.net.au/Mark_McKenna.pdf (retrieved 12 November 2014).
44. † Lake, Marilyn et al.: *What's Wrong with Anzac? The Militarisation of Australian History*, Sydney 2010, p. 167.
45. † Bendle, Mervyn F.: *Anzac in Ashes*, in: *Quadrant*, 54/4 (2010).
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Citation

Holbrook, Carolyn: Historiography 1918-Today (Australia) , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08.

DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10506](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10506).

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