

Anzac Nations: The Legacy of Gallipoli In New Zealand And Australia 1965 – 2015

By Rowan Light. Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2022.

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Adapted from his doctoral thesis, Rowan Light's *Anzac Nations* examines the changing position of Anzac commemoration in Australia and New Zealand between 1965 and 2015. This period opens at a time when Anzac Day attendance rates were in decline, the 50th anniversary of the Gallipoli landings were marked by relatively limited proceedings on the peninsula and predictions that the event would pass alongside the greying veterans of Gallipoli were heard on both sides of the Tasman. From this nadir, the following half century witnessed a quite unexpected and dramatic revival of Anzac remembrance. Certainly, the resources and levels of engagement exhibited at the 2015 centenary stand in remarkable contrast to the observations of 1965.

Yet, as Light reminds us, this restoration was also a renovation, in which remembrance narratives and touchstones were reworked or reinterpreted to make Anzac a 'useable past' able to serve contemporary needs. *Anzac Nations* revolves around an exploration of this phenomenon and the forces operating within it. Recurrent interests include the role of the state as an agent of memory, indigenous perspectives within or at odds with national myths, points of cross-Tasman influence, and instances of convergence and divergence in how the two Anzac nations have understood what Gallipoli means to them. Light's interpretation of 'Anzac' over his survey is broad. 'Anzac', he states, 'symbolises something about what it means to be an Australian or a New Zealander, as well as friendship between the two countries. It suggests a collective existence: a shared story and tradition authorised by the events of 1915, and a legacy of values and attitudes concretised in a heritage of physical sites, relics and monuments' (p.8).

The book's eight chapters serve as 'flashpoints' to chart key developments in Anzac's evolution as Australia and New Zealand underwent massive social and cultural changes and asserted a post-imperial status. Chapter one, for example, surveys the approach to Anzac Day at its 50th anniversary. Chapter two examines how feminist and anti-war protests over 1966-1987 challenged martial aspects of Anzac tradition. Chapter three considers the impact of cinematic engagement with Gallipoli in the 1980s. Chapter four takes stock of the state of commemoration at the 75th anniversary in 1990, an event which exhibits the increased role of officialdom in remembrance and the expanding place of the Treaty of Waitangi (which had its 150th anniversary that same year) within New Zealand's national narrative. Chapter five compares and contrasts how Australia and New Zealand each undertook a repatriation of a body from Flanders for internment within new national tombs of unknown soldiers. Chapter six considers the commemorative diplomacy of the Howard-Clark years, noting trans-Tasman divergences in what Anzac meant and demanded of contemporaries. Chapter seven studies the changing dynamics within indigenous-state relations since 2005 and the ways that this has impacted Anzac commemoration. Chapter eight brings the volume to a close by evaluating the 2015 centenary, taking stock of the current state of Anzac within the Tasman World.

Writing the cultural history of a subject which spans decades, covers a large geography, possesses vast particularities and which handles artefacts deemed to be sacred is an ambitious task. Light's willingness to take on this endeavour and his command of disparate knowledge are commendable. He does, however, find himself with the disadvantage of being reviewed by someone who has argued in favour of recognising the deeper roots of the subject under scrutiny. Light has described his book as 'the whole backstory as to why we remember

Gallipoli and how we think and feel about it' (promotional material). However, starting Anzac's 'backstory' in 1965 abridges some crucial earlier acts: the levels of mobilisation and loss experienced during the Western Front campaign over 1916-1918; the explosion of disparate cultural productions over the interwar years; the renewed questioning of the War's meaning against the social-political turmoil of the 1930s; and the massive recasting of legacies which resulted from the Second World War.

This is not simply a matter of evoking the historian's dilemma of infinite regress – whereby any starting date can be peeled away to reveal a world already in motion. Rather it is to note that pre-1965 developments reveal post-1965 ones as part of a more complex dance. Take, for example, the proposition that 'Since 1965, stories of Gallipoli and World War I have been rewritten to express a new national spirit in Australia and New Zealand that asserts a cultural belonging that is independent of empire.' (p.182) Anzac did indeed take on additional duties as a touchstone for distinct and independent nationalism after 1965, but the first 'drafts' of this 'rewriting' appeared decades earlier and existed for some time alongside those aligning Anzac with imperial fidelity.

A similar dynamic is apparent in the statement that 'The Anzacs, once seen as imperial citizen-soldiers, are now seen as heroic victims of violence who gave their lives in sacrifice for democracy, freedom and friendship' (p.182). Again a 'once'/'now' distinction blurs a more complicated shift. Visions of soldiers as heroic victims constituted *the* central motif within the wartime culture of sacrifice and were notably reworked during the Great Depression when suffering veterans became a powerful symbol within protests for social justice. Ideas of the Great War as a struggle for democracy and freedom was not a post-1965 invention: they also date to the conflict and dominate the remembrance rhetoric and school lessons of the 1920s. To be clear, these points do not scuttle Light's findings, but they do reveal Anzac's evolution after 1965 as connected to a deeper 'backstory' and a more complex history.

In the final sense, *Anzac Nations* offers many worthwhile considerations within a slim volume (just under 200 pages, minus notes). It is especially welcome for putting New Zealand aspects of the subject on a firmer ground – Australia possessing a more developed literature devoted to studying changing interpretations of Anzac. Readers of Tasman World scholarship and memory studies will find much of interest and the book represents another valuable contribution to the productive intersection of memory studies and First World War studies.