

War and Nation Building: How the Disaster of the First World War Helped Forge  
Australian Identity

This essay focuses on the impact of Gallipoli in the creation of Australia's national identity. It will discuss the manner in which Australia was able to overcome the adversity of war by becoming a united nation and gaining a sense of belonging through the ANZAC legend.

**Grant Kynaston**

Prior to 1914, Australia was a fledgling nation, less than 15 years old. Australian society was feeling its way towards a national identity with many loose themes of nationhood. In 1914, Australia entered the First World War. We shared in the enormous casualties and watched the fall of empires. France and England left the war distraught over the horrible mistakes and loss of life. Germany and Russia fell into anarchy and Austria-Hungary disappeared. However, Australia ended the war self-confident, with a clear national identity. This essay will explore three causes for Australia's unique response: the pre-war forces that set the stage for the ANZAC legend, the uniqueness of Gallipoli and the early historiography of the Campaign.

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century a conscious effort was made to identify our national traits. The romantic image of a sunlit landscape, gum trees and cloudless skies, populated by shearers and bushmen, touched a particular nerve in the Australian public.<sup>1</sup> This bush philosophy was advocated by a group Richard White refers to as Australian 'bohemians'.<sup>2</sup> Rejecting Victorian values, they experimented with literature and art to create a national identity. This movement was facilitated by the *Bulletin* magazine, established in 1880. The *Bulletin* provided political commentary, as well as a forum for nationalistic literary works. Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson were first published in the pages of the *Bulletin*.<sup>3</sup> The 'Man from Snowy River', 'Clancy of the Overflow' and 'Waltzing Matilda' all fed the national stereotype of the Australian bushman.

The Boer War (1899-1902) consolidated this new national identity. Banjo Paterson was the war correspondent for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*. His reports shared many themes with his original poems, especially his admiration of the bush ethos. The poems he wrote in South Africa equated our soldiers with bushmen – characteristics such as horsemanship, courage and tenacity, were expressed against the harsh landscape.<sup>4</sup> In the poem *The Queensland Mounted Infantry*, Paterson depicts an idealistic soldier:

---

<sup>1</sup> White, R. 1981, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity, 1688-1980*, p. 85

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p.86

<sup>3</sup> Levis, K. 1950, *The Role of the Bulletin in Indigenous Short-Story Writing during the Eighties and Nineties*

<sup>4</sup> Stanley, P. 1999, *With Banjo to the Kimberley: Banjo Paterson's South African War Verse As History*

There's a very well-built fellow, with a swinging sort of stride,  
 About as handy sort as I have seen.  
 A rough and tumble fellow that is born to fight and ride  
 And he's over here a-fighting for the Queen.

In the early 1910's, Australia's national identity centred on a loose collection of themes, comprising images of the bush, drovers, shearers and, following the Boer War, the bush soldier. This identity would now be tested in the most cataclysmic event of modern times: the Great War.

In August, 1914, Britain entered The First World War to defend Belgium's neutrality. As a British dominion, Australia was also at war. The AIF joined the Allied push to open the Dardanelles and defeat Turkey in early 1915. On 25 April, 1915, as part of the land-based operation, the Anzacs landed at Gallipoli.<sup>5</sup> The Campaign possessed three unique features which separated it from the tragedy of the Western Front and helped shape the pre-war themes into the Anzac Legend.

Firstly, the Anzac sector was a distinct arena in which the Australians could fight. We were not bit players submerged in the British army, the campaign was not the industrialised massacre of the Somme, but a battle based around smaller units. Secondly, Gallipoli's terrain was bush-like in its composition. It had the dust, the flies, the hills, cliffs, intense heat and arid landscape. This encouraged themes of bush ethos that had grown in popularity over the past decades. Finally, the Australians were fighting on ground already romanticised by the Greek poet Homer. It was a land of history, where ancient heroes had once fought. This changed the mentality of the Campaign to one of more distinctive qualities.

The pre-war Bohemian themes were therefore provided the perfect stage at Gallipoli. And from this were written histories that popularised the new mythology. In 1914,

---

<sup>5</sup> Beaumont, J. 1995, *Australia's War: 1914-18* pg. 10

C.E.W. Bean, a journalist, was made the official war correspondent.<sup>6</sup> Around the same time, Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett was made the campaign's war correspondent for England.

Ashmead-Bartlett provided Australia with a romanticised vision of the landing. He wrote:

“The Australians rose to the occasion. Not waiting for orders or for the boats to reach the beach, they sprang into the sea ... Then the Australians found themselves facing an almost perpendicular cliff ... Here was a tough proposition to tackle in the darkness, but those colonials, practical above all else, went about it in a practical way ... Then this race of athletes proceeded to scale the cliffs ... there has been no finer feat in this war than this sudden landing in the dark and storming the heights...”<sup>7</sup>

The account captured the imagination of the Australian public. Importantly, the image of the bush soldier had been confirmed by a British source.<sup>8</sup> Australia felt welcome relief that the nation had passed their baptism of fire. Dr Peter Stanley notes:

“Their nation had been born amid prosaic debates and referenda, not in war. The troops who landed on April 25, 1915- almost all civilians less than a year before - wondered how they would meet the challenge.”<sup>9</sup>

C.E.W. Bean was also a firm supporter of the bush identity. He had written extensively about our “Outback character” prior to the war. His dispatches and later his *Official Histories* enshrined the legend, forming the basis for Gallipoli's history for the next 60 years.

The Anzac Legend had been created. The characteristics that now defined the ‘true Australian’ included sacrifice, fortitude, bravery, independence, irreverent egalitarianism

---

<sup>6</sup> Winter, D. 1992, *Making the Legend: The War Writings of C.E.W. Bean*, pg. 2-6

<sup>7</sup> *The Argus*, May 8 1915, pg. 19

<sup>8</sup> Andrews, *op. cit.*, pg. 57

<sup>9</sup> Stanley, P. 2008, *Why does Gallipoli mean so much?*

and above all mateship - all traits believed to have sprung from our special relationship with the harsh Outback.

When the war ended in 1918, from an Australian population of under five million, 58 000 soldiers were dead and 156 000 wounded.<sup>10</sup> Gallipoli had been a disaster and the Western Front a massacre. However, in contrast to Britain and France, Australia emerged with a heightened sense of self-confidence and national identity. It is truly a triumph over adversity for Australia to have gained social confidence out of the apocalyptic destruction of World War One.

---

<sup>10</sup> Beaumont, *op. cit.*, pg. 1

## Bibliography

### 1. Books

Andrews, E. M. 1993, *The Anzac Illusion: Anglo-Australian Relations during World War I*, Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom

Beaumont, J. 1995, *Australia's War: 1914-18*, Allen and Unwin Australia Pty Ltd, Sydney, Australia

White, R. 1981, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity, 1688-1980*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, Australia

Winter, D. 1992, *Making the Legend: The War Writings of C.E.W. Bean*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Australia

### 2. Articles

Levis, K., "The Role of the Bulletin in Indigenous Short-Story Writing during the Eighties and Nineties", in Wallace-Crabbe, C. (ed.) 1971, *The Australian Nationalists: Modern Critical Essays*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, Australia

Stanley, P., "Why does Gallipoli mean so much?", ABC Corporation, 2008, [www.abc.net.au](http://www.abc.net.au)

Stanley, P., "With Banjo to Kimberley: Banjo Paterson's South African War Verse As History", in Grey, J. (ed.) 1999, *The Boer War: Army, Nation and Empire*, Army History Unit, Canberra, Australia

### 3. Newspapers

*The Argus*, May 8 1915