

**The Anzac Legend:**  
a foundation myth

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# **The Anzac Legend: a foundation myth**

## **Abstract**

The myths associated with Anzacs are important elements of Australian national identity. Anzacs live on in Australian culture through annual Anzac Day celebrations that legitimate and reinforce their position as a symbol of Australian identity.

Drawing upon national survey data we show that Anzacs have symbolic importance for a large majority of Australians. Attitudes toward Anzacs vary little according to social background, although older, less educated, Australian born citizens tend to see Anzacs as having a greater influence upon the way Australians see themselves.

The heroic deeds of Anzacs at Gallipoli is a foundation myth, even though the campaign ended in retreat. As long as Anzacs continue to be celebrated by artists, writers, politicians and mass media they will be remembered. They symbolise the nobler aspects of the Australian character in a country searching for positive foundation heroes.

# **The Anzac Legend:** a foundation myth

## **Introduction**

Military myths remain salient for many citizens of advanced industrialised societies. This research examines the importance of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps soldiers, the Anzacs for contemporary Australian identity. Drawing upon national survey data we demonstrate the enduring symbolic importance of Australia's World War I soldiers. Anzacs symbolise the masculine, heroic aspects of national identity for a large majority of Australians although older, less educated people are most likely to regard Anzacs as national heroes.

Anzacs were more than citizen soldiers; they were seen as symbolic of the national character. The relationship between Anzacs and the bush was considered to be close in myth if not reality. Anzacs were regarded as bush heroes, although not in the manner of a Ned Kelly or Ben Hall. They defied the rules and undermined the authority of officers but risked death in the service of the State and survived through their daring and cunning. As Seal (2002: 157) put it, 'Anzac Day, still 'the one day of the year', that temporarily displays the contradictions of the invented Anzac tradition of militarism, sacrifice and national duty and the spontaneous folk traditions that produced the iconic figure of the digger with his larrikinism, his drinking and irreverence'.

Military folklore still resonates in contemporary western societies. We argue that in some countries, military figures, such as the Napoleon, Nelson, Washington - and in Australia, the Anzacs - contribute to what Bell (2003, 66) calls the *mythscape*, the 'temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of peoples memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly'. The characteristics displayed by military heroes including bravery, fighting against injustice and/or overwhelming numbers, and embodying a sense of fair play, are associated with mythical heroes in many nations.

## **Anzacs, Gallipoli and Australian Identity**

Anzacs have been the subject of documentaries, films (such as ‘Gallipoli’ released in 1981), historical works and novels. Gallipoli holds an iconic place in Australian culture, to a far greater extent than the battle of the Somme, the Kokoda track, Tobruk, Long Tan or other well-known military campaigns. The Gallipoli campaign is still the subject of newspaper articles and commemorated even though it was a successful retreat rather than a glorious victory. Gallipoli is now a popular destination for backpackers, tourists and family members who want to pay their respects at the site where many Australians died. These commemorations of Gallipoli have grown in popularity considerably from the original ‘four hippies’ who greeted a group of Anzac survivors at Gallipoli in 1965, on the fiftieth anniversary of the diggers’ landing (Hirst 2007: 61).

As Seal (2002, 158) put it, ‘[W] henever there is a need to signify ‘nation’, as in Bicentennial, Olympic and Federation Centennial celebrations we reach for those tried and true icons of the bush, the Anzacs and Ned Kelly’.<sup>1</sup> Kelly is one of only a few historical figures most Australians recognise but they have mixed feelings as to his status as a hero or victim. It is a different response regarding the Anzacs who are generally regarded as real heroes - arguably the only Australian military heroes enshrined in myth. Even though the Turks defeated them at Gallipoli, the Anzacs retain a positive aura, in contrast to Vietnam veterans who have only recently received widespread recognition.

Interest in Anzacs taps a notion of national identity that is socially constructed – the Anzac in Australia as folk hero and larrikin.<sup>2</sup> This identity is constructed rather than comprised of ‘singular, integral, altogether harmonious and unproblematic identities’ that are ‘based on some “essence” or set of core features shared by all members of the collectivity and no others’ (Calhoun 1994, 13). Tranter and Donoghue (2007, 168) argue that Australian ‘narrative includes the ‘discovery’ of Australia, British colonization and ‘white’ settlement (Aboriginal myths tend to be ignored), military transportation, bushmen and pioneers, settlers, ANZACS, immigration post-World War II, and of course, Australian sporting heroes’. We examine one aspect of this narrative by concentrating upon the role of Anzacs, or more specifically, we consider how the Anzacs symbolize Australian-ness, why they are important and the extent of their influence upon national identity for contemporary Australians.

Australian survey based identity researchers have tended to concentrate upon subjective forms of national identity by examining aspects of attachment to 'Australia'. For example, Pakulski and Tranter (2000, 209) argued 'ethno-national' identity emphasizes attachment to the Australian 'nation, where nation is conceptualised as 'specific and shared culture, traditions and customs'. Their 'civic' form of identity is characterized by attachment to Australian 'society' seen as 'a voluntary association of people sharing major social institutions and commitments' (Pakulski and Tranter 2000: 209). In contrast, this is a study of some of perhaps the most recognizable figures of early 20th Century Australia – the Anzacs – and their relationship to contemporary Australian identity. While Anzacs were actual 20<sup>th</sup> Century soldiers, they are often portrayed in the Australian media as iconic, national heroes. Yet why do they remain so well known?

We attempt to gauge the importance of Anzacs to the Australian people in relation to national identity. Based upon the popularity of Anzacs in the media, and the ubiquitous nature of Anzac images in Australian culture (Day 1998), a majority of Australians were expected to view them as having an important influence upon Australian identity. Attitudes about Anzacs were also expected to vary according to socio-demographic background, particularly on the basis of age, with the larrikin qualities personified by the Anzacs expected to be more popular among older, less educated Australians.

### **Data and Method**

The 2003 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) was the first in a biennial series of cross-sectional surveys of Australians aged 18 and over. The samples were drawn on a random basis from the 2002 Australian Electoral Roll, with mail out, mail back administration of questionnaires. The samples were stratified to be proportional to the population in each state. There were 2,183 respondents to the 2003 representing a response rate of 45%. We developed questions for the 2003 AuSSA to measure the importance of individuals and groups who have been influential in relation to Australian identity. Among others, we included the following question in the 2003 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA; see Gibson et al. 2003).<sup>3</sup>

*Many different groups throughout Australia's history have influenced the way Australians see themselves. How much influence have each of the following had? - Anzacs*

### **Analyses**

In earlier research we found 65% of Australians view Anzacs as having 'a lot' of influence and 25% 'a little' influence on the way Australians see themselves. Anzacs were even more important than 'sporting heroes' with 52% and 30% influence respectively (Tranter and Donoghue 2007: 172). This suggests Anzacs clearly have an important influence upon the way most Australians view themselves. But why are Anzacs still important so long after Gallipoli?

[Table 1 about here]

Our binary logistic regression analysis presented in Table 1, Model 1 examines the influence of sex, birth cohort, education level and country of birth (Australia). We present odds ratios to facilitate the interpretation of the logistic regression estimates (Long 1997). The dependent variable is coded 1 for Anzacs having a lot of influence and 0 for a little, not much or no influence at all upon the way Australian see themselves. A series of attitudinal questions are added in Model 2. Some of these questions tap aspects of the 'ethno-national' and 'civic' forms identity outlined by Pakulski and Tranter (2000) and Jones (1997). That is, we model the influence of feeling 'very close to Australia', the importance of being born in Australia to be 'truly Australian' and how proud Australians are of their defence forces upon the dependent variable. The importance of having strong defence forces as a national aim is also assessed.

The social background results indicate that for Australians born before the end of WWII, and baby boomers, the influence of Anzacs is much more important than it is for younger people. Those born before WWII ended are 1.6 times as likely as those born after 1959 to see Anzacs as important. Educational achievement reduces the perceived influence of Anzacs, but being born in Australia increases the likelihood of seeing Anzacs as important by approximately 70% (i.e. odds ratio 1.73) compared to those born elsewhere. With the introduction of attitudinal variables in Model 2, birth cohorts

and education become non-significant at the 95% level, suggesting background effects are mediated through attitudes. Our expectations regarding the importance of and pride in the defence forces appear to be justified. Essentialist forms of identity also appear to be manifest here, though the 'true Australians must be born in Australia' results. The percentage of variance 'explained' by the independent variables ( $R^2$ ) also increases markedly from .03 for the social background model, to .10 for the model including attitudes.

## **Discussion**

While Australians have campaigned in many theatres of war, since white settlement they have not fought on home soil nor experienced a civil war or revolution.<sup>4</sup> With the possible exception of Ned Kelly, Australians lack colonial or foundation heroes. Their best-known heroes are the Anzacs, yet they were a group of men rather than notable individuals. Although Turkish forces defeated the Anzacs, perhaps their high status reflects Australians' admiration for the underdog, allegedly an important part of the Australian character (Hirst 2007). The lack of other positive foundation figures may help to explain why Anzacs remain 'heroic' figures for a majority of Australians.

Theophanous (1995: 281) maintains that 'prior to the development of multiculturalism' there were 'two strands' to national identity in Australia: 'one that emphasised our British heritage, and one that emphasised a limited form of egalitarianism and commitment to social justice'. If he is correct, one reason why Anzacs remain an important figure for Australians is that they bridge both strands of identity. Anzacs' fought for their British heritage (for King and Country) and tapped the historical elements of Australian identity where Britain was regarded as the 'Old Country'. At the same time, the Anzacs struggle against the Turks and their German allies who were attempting to dominate Europe, also taps the egalitarian and social justice strand of national identity. Yet why do Anzacs remain so well known, when many Australians would be stretched to name any individual Anzacs with the exception of Simpson and his donkey.<sup>5</sup>

Billig (1995: 69) argues 'national identity is more than an inner psychological state or an individual self-definition: it is a form of life, which is daily lived in the world of nation-states'. National identity is continuously constructed and reinforced by everyday

symbols and language (Billig 1995), including for Australians, political, media and cultural interest in Anzacs and Anzac Day. We see three interlinked elements to be of particular importance in the Anzac legend. The first is the influence of political leaders in developing the Anzac legend. The second relates to the role of the media <sup>6</sup> in promoting and maintaining interest in the Anzacs. The third relates to significant cultural representations of Anzacs, such as Peter Weir's film *Gallipoli* (1981), and Charles Bean's book 'Anzac to Amiens' (1946).

Political rivals, former Prime Ministers Paul Keating (Labor) and John Howard (Liberal) both contributed to the re-invigoration of Anzac Day. A public holiday, Anzac Day has been transformed into a day of national solidarity, a day to remember and honour family, friends and ancestors who fought bravely against overwhelming odds to protect the Australian way of life (when most Australians considered themselves to be British). Today Anzacs are portrayed as young volunteer soldiers who fought bravely for their country, rather than the British Empire. Their actions at Gallipoli are cast to symbolise the birth of a nation, less than a generation after Federation. This foundation link also helps to explain why Anzacs are remembered and celebrated, while other soldiers have not been (re)constructed as national heroes.

The press have played an important role in the construction of Anzacs as folk heroes. War correspondents, like Charles Bean and Keith Murdoch (father of media magnate Rupert Murdoch), who allegedly smuggled the story of the botched Dardanelles landing back to Australia from where it was forwarded to the British Prime Minister Lloyd George, have promoted the Anzac legend. The myth of the Anzac fighting spirit and the troops' remarkable 'escape' from Gallipoli continues to be propagated through a variety of popular books, such as Patsy Adam-Smith's 'The Anzacs' (1978); Gammage, Williamson and Weir's (1994) 'The Story of Gallipoli – the film about the men who made a legend', documentaries like Harvey Broadbent's (2000) 'The Boys Who Came Home – Recollections of Gallipoli', the war photographs of Charles Bean and paintings (of the Western Front) by Arthur Streeton.

Another reason for the Australian fascination with Anzacs – we believe a crucial factor for their enduring popularity – is the representation of their 'blood sacrifice' at Gallipoli. The influence of the cultural elite is significant here. The Australian



filmmaker Peter Weir immortalized the Anzacs in his film *Gallipoli* (1981) by portraying the larrikin and 'sporting' qualities of young Australian soldiers willing to die for their country. Contemporary images of Anzacs' are configured in terms of Weir's representation of carefree, young, warrior athletes, in contrast to England's angst-ridden, officer war poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who challenged the 'old lie' that it was sweet and glorious to die for one's country.

Gallipoli is Australia's most cited military engagement. As Churchill's cannon fodder,<sup>7</sup> the Anzacs captured the nation's imagination in their fateful advance up the infernal cliffs at Anzac Cove. In adversity and miraculous retreat back down the cliffs, they scaled even greater heights symbolically, emerging to carve their own foundation myth for a young colony. With a paucity of real heroes to celebrate, the memory of these brave young soldiers is still cherished and influenced, although as Tranter and Donoghue (2007, 180) so eloquently put it, 'perhaps we need to look beyond the brief history of 'white' Australian settlement to the traditions and values of western imperialism, in order to explain why these 'heroes' have such an influence on contemporary national identity.'

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**Table 1: How much influence have Anzacs had on the way Australian see themselves? (Odds Ratios)**

Model	1	2
<i>Social Background</i>		
Men	0.98	0.96
Women (referent)	1	1
Born before 1946	1.59***	1.22
Born 1946-1959	1.40***	1.25
Born after 1959 (referent)	1	1
Education < Year 10	1.38*	1.20
Education > Year 10 (referent)	1	1
Born on Australia	1.73***	1.38**
Born elsewhere (referent)	1	1
<i>Attitudes</i>		
Feel 'Very Close' to Australia	-	1.51***
Very Important 'True Australians' are born in Australia	-	1.39**
Strong Defence Forces are a Priority National Aim	-	1.39**
Very Proud of Defence Forces	-	1.75***
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.03	.10
N	(1,995)	(1,933)

Dependent Variable coded 1 = a lot of influence; 0 = a little influence, not much influence or no influence at all.

\* p< .05 \*\* p< .01 \*\*\* p< .001

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

<sup>1</sup> 'The nickname "Diggers" is attributed to the number of ex-gold diggers in the early army units and to the trench digging activities of the Australian soldiers during World War I' (Australian Army website).

<sup>2</sup> Hirst (2007, 63) maintains that the term 'Larrikin' is from Britain. In Australia it originally described a 'tough, violent, young trouble maker' but over time came to describe 'a mischievous or frolicsome youth' although the term 'could be applied to a man of any age or to an approach to life'.

<sup>3</sup> The AuSSA data were obtained from the Australian Social Sciences Data Archive, Australian National University, Canberra.

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<sup>4</sup> Air raids upon Darwin and other northern towns in 1942 and 1943 by the Japanese air force is the exception.

<sup>5</sup> Simpson is specifically remembered for carrying 300 wounded men to safety at Gallipoli in 1915. Simpson placed himself at great risk as he was under Turkish fire when he recovered wounded soldiers from the front lines, displayed conspicuous bravery and was cited for honours by his commanding officers.

<sup>6</sup> A search of The Australian web site on 2 July 2008 provided 753 (estimate) articles with references to Anzacs.

<sup>7</sup> C.E.W. Bean reported that Australian Brigadier-General Brudenell White held Winston Churchill responsible for a great many of the casualties at Gallipoli.