

Women and Anzac Day in Western Australia: newspaper representation in the 1960s

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Abstract

Anzac Day, widely considered to be Australia's 'real' national day, mobilizes, (re)constructs and negotiates a profound historical and contemporary mythology of national identity. The role of women in this mythology has long been problematic. This paper presents findings from a broader research project seeking to map the extent to which women were or were not represented in the reporting and rhetoric of Anzac Day activities from the 1960s to the present. Drawing on the media coverage of Anzac Day in two key Western Australian newspapers from 1960 to 1969, this study offers a brief exploratory analysis of the representation of women's participation in terms of the categories of "ex-service women" and "non-service women". In the process we identify a diverse and nuanced relationship indicating a complexly gendered politics of Anzac Day as presented in the public record.

Keywords: Anzac Day, Gender, Women, Western Australia, Media Representation

The first Anzac Day was observed on April 25, 1916. It commemorated the landing of the Australian & New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) at Gallipoli on April 25 the previous year. Throughout its history, Anzac Day has been the focus of tension, conflict and ambiguity as various groups and interests have sought to monopolise, join, attack or profit from it (Seal 2004). Widely understood to have experienced an extended nadir in the 1960s and 1970s, since the 1980s, however, the nation has been building into what can legitimately be described as a frenzy of Anzacery. Anzac Day is now the single most important national calendar event, involving large – probably the largest - numbers of Australians in the same temporal observance in a multitude of locations across the country and around the world. As an evocation and manifestation

of the mythology it affirms, Anzac Day is considered to be—and is represented as—Australia’s “real” national day. It relates to the most profound historical and contemporary notions of national identity and to the question of gender in that identity. Within that mythology the role of women has long been problematic.

Early Anzac Day observations were characterised by a diversity of observational modes, many distinctly masculine and militarist in character including sports, competitions and marches. However, women often had a prominent role in these embryonic events (*The Argus* 1916). In the late 1920s the now characteristic structure of the day (dawn service – march – follow-on – afternoon celebrations including eating, drinking and playing of the gambling game two-up, illegal on every other day of the year) became the dominant form. As this occurred women no longer had such publicly or even privately prominent roles in Anzac Day and the potent mythology it affirms. Since then women’s participation has been not only diachronically uneven but also contentious. In the larger Anzac tradition, the roles of women were clearly prescribed and proscribed. They were nurses, ambulance drivers, home-front workers, mothers and sisters of soldiers. These non-combatant roles frequently relegated women to either the periphery or absence in the strongly masculinist representations and observations of Anzac Day. Women have frequently not been allowed to march in the morning. In the late 1920s, women were barred from attending the dawn service due to their loud mourning wails (Parliament of Australia 2009). In 1934 in Brisbane, women were banned from the march, though had “no complaints”: according to the then president of the Nurses sub-branch of the RSSILA, ““We have no desire to march, and the alteration meets our wishes, on which we were consulted by the Anzac Day committee”” (*The Courier Mail* 1934:17).

This suggests a substantial degree of acquiescence by women in their exclusion, at least in the early years of the Day's observance.

However, there has always been an undercurrent of dissent by women's (as well as other) groups. In 1966 the Save Our Sons group demonstrated at Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance on April 25. In the 1980s Women Against Rape (WAR) attempted to demonstrate at Anzac Day sites and events in Melbourne and elsewhere. In 1991 approximately 300 women from WAR joined the Anzac Day march in Canberra. Sixty-five people, most of them women, were arrested and brought before a magistrate. Three of them were gaoled for a month for "coming within 400 meters of the tail end of an Anzac Day parade" (Elder 2008: 250). In 2003 'Women for Peace' were 'abused, assaulted, then arrested and charged with resisting arrest and trespass' at the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance (Sparrow, cited in melbournecyclist).

By 2009, though, women were being actively and publicly exhorted to join the march, even by the RSL (ABC 2009), usually considered to be one of the most antagonistic voices against the participation of women, as well as others considered to be non-combatants. The call for women to take a larger part in Anzac Day events rather than to remain in the background raises the question of when did women begin to again take a more prominent role in Anzac Day, and what might this role have entailed? To date, there is a rich literature around Anzac Day celebrations focussing on its cultural / folkloric role (Seal 2004; Inglis 1998); the production of (masculinised) national identity (Mayes 2009; Nicoll 2001; Thompson 1994); pilgrimage (Scates 2008); popular memory/ history (Seymour and Nile 1998; Mayes 2003); and the contemporary reshaping of the Anzac Myth by and for indigenous participants (Furniss 2001). There is however a dearth of scholarly work on the representation and involvement of women as part of Anzac practice and mythology (beyond broader

historical engagements with women and war such as that undertaken by Scates and Frances).

Here we report on early findings from research critically engaging with the role of women in the ongoing creation of Anzac Day commemorations and meanings, in particular as constructed in media coverage from 1960 to the present. This larger project attempts to determine the extent to which women were or were not represented in the reporting and rhetoric of Anzac Day activities and to identify changes that may have occurred over the period. This period was selected to coincide with the beginnings of wider public engagement with Anzac Day and to map both the decline and rise of interest in the Anzac tradition as it has consolidated for Australians into “the only special day with any significant national meaning” (Hamilton and Ashton 2003:26). The study also highlights links and divergences between local/regional observances of Anzac Day and the national mythology of Anzac. The focus so far has been two key Western Australian newspapers: the *West Australian* and the *Albany Advertiser*. The *West Australian* has long been the newspaper of record in the state and its capital, while the *Albany Advertiser* serves the city that claims the origins of the dawn service and was the site of the departure of the First AIF from the Australian mainland in 1915 and is thus an especially potent location of the state and national manifestations of the Anzac mythology. The findings of the study illuminate the situation in Western Australia. Further work needs to be carried out on newspaper representations in other states and territories to attain a comprehensive overview. Nevertheless, this focus allows in-depth analysis, including comparison between urban and regional coverage of, potentially, highly contingent roles for and attitudes to/of women.

We undertook a search of each Anzac Day edition in both newspapers, including the days immediately before and after April 25, from 1960 to 2009 inclusive. News articles, editorials and letters to the editor dealing with any aspect of Anzac Day were collated to form the basis of this study. In this paper we offer a brief analysis of the representation of women in the decade 1960 to 1969: the point at which the wider decline in Anzac Day participation (and support) is understood to commence, and during which, as a result of opposition to the Vietnam war and the rise of the peace movement, Anzac experienced its most threatening confrontation with public opinion, and which also saw the 50th anniversary. It was during and after the period 1960-1970 that women began to secure again a more prominent public role in Anzac Day observances. Anzac Day reportage in each newspaper throughout the 1960s has been examined for references to women's involvement in Anzac Day proceedings and also for areas of particular attention and absence. Given the brevity of this paper, it is not possible to offer an in-depth analysis; rather we confine the discussion to key findings across both newspapers.

Findings

The coverage of Anzac Day is similar in both newspapers. In the main, articles preceding Anzac Day are concerned to inform readers about the arrangements for the day: which groups will "head" the parade, which ones will march, the route to be taken, wet-weather and public transport arrangements, and business trading hours. Adopting a "matter-of-fact" style, particularly at the outset of the decade, the post event focus is on attendances with particular mention of the number of Gallipoli and/or WWI veterans. Individual marchers and wreath-layers are often singled out for attention, and excerpts from addresses given by RSL presidents are reproduced. From

1961 money generated for the Anzac Day Trust is reported. Within these broad generic conventions, reference to women's involvement is certainly not the norm. Indeed in most years women are acknowledged only briefly as in the phrases "ex-service men and women" and "we remember and honour those men and women." At the same time particular and often extended attention is paid to the "cruel toll of Australia's manhood" extracted in war. In general, women receive less attention in the *Albany Advertiser* (in which there is not a single article title or subheading mentioning women) than in *The West Australian* (which includes six titles in which women are prominent). As part of the wider context for this difference, there is less overall coverage of Anzac Day in the *Albany Advertiser*, just as Albany's specific relationship to Anzac absorbs some of this limited space. Even so, the difference is of note. Attendance levels are also part of the context for the representation of women. Numbers recorded for this period suggest that assertions of a substantial and sustained (national) drop in numbers of attendees may be exaggerated when applied to Perth, Albany and other regional ceremonies as covered in *The West Australian* and *Albany Advertiser*.

Representations of women, we find, fall into two broad categories: that of "ex-service women" and, as designated for the purposes of this analysis, "non-service women." These categories are adopted here without suggesting that either one is self-evident, mutually exclusive, or homogenous. In both categories, references to women's involvement are for the most part complementary to the masculine importance and life of Anzac. For example, in the *Albany Advertiser* in 1960 "Ladies are requested to bring along a plate to feed their brood" at the Pre-Anzac Day Social, "a family affair designed to give the children an insight into what Anzac Day means." Similarly, in 1961 in the same newspaper, an editorial contribution observes: "Whatever their

individual problems, on Anzac Day along with mother, wife and children, as one they [returned soldiers] remembered the sacrifices of the men and women” who died in battle. Wreath-laying widows are occasionally singled out for acknowledgement as in the case of the widow of the “former chairman of the British Legion” who laid a wreath “on behalf of British ex-service men and women” (*West Australian* 1964). Ex-service women are also presented as unproblematically encompassed by the tradition not only in the phrase “ex-service men and women” but also as having value precisely in relation to the well-being of male soldiers: in 1969, for example, the Anzac Day coverage notes that tribute was paid to “women in the nursing corps who had to face severe hardships to treat Australian soldiers” (*Albany Advertiser* 1969). There are, however, exceptions in each category as described below.

Ex-service women

References to women’s service units, in contrast to references to men’s units, are rare but not entirely absent. In some ways this is not surprising given that there were no women present at the landings. The only women in the vicinity of the campaign were nurses on the ships and the island of Lemnos. At the same time we see here the reification of masculine combative roles begun in the 1920s, in part through this limited and limiting focus on a single event. This is further evident in two of the four articles in *The West Australian* which foreground service women over this period. The first, published in 1960 and titled “World War I nurses at Anzac March” singles-out three “nursing sisters” one of whom has “married an Australian ex-service man soon after the war”. The women are introduced as “World War I veterans who could not march in yesterday’s Anzac Day parade but were spectators”. These women are not asked for an opinion, nor is any explicit reason given for this attention other than their

“Anzac ties”. The entire point of the article would seem to be simply to record that these women were *there* (and in their correct place).

In the more extensive coverage for the 50th anniversary of Gallipoli, *The West Australian* ran an article titled “Great War Nurse Watched March” about Miss Julia Hart who had “served in Egypt, France, Italy and Malta”, been awarded the Royal Red Cross service medal, and then worked in repatriation hospitals until retirement. Though Miss Hart has attended “almost every Anzac Day service” she has never taken part in the parade, but rather has “a place reserved for her each year near the official dais”. The article not only offers recognition of her outstanding service and commitment but also makes note of her endorsement of this situation: “‘A march is no place for women,’ she said. ‘I would never take part in one myself and I would not sanction it for my girls’”. In this way the article recognises women’s work while also endorsing the understanding noted earlier that women were complicit with their position on the sidelines.

In contrast, the 1963 article “AWAS victory after 17 years” highlights women’s dissatisfaction with their exclusion from the march. Ambitiously, and misleadingly, headlined “Thirteen women with more than 60 years’ war service between them yesterday won the final round in the battle of the sexes”, this article sympathetically describes the group’s struggle to be officially recognised in the Anzac march. As members of the “now-disbanded Australian Women’s Army Corps” the women were “permitted to go along, but had no service identification and the group was not mentioned in the official programme”. In the words of the president of the group, who had enlisted at 16: “We had less recognition than the boy scouts.” The previous year, feeling despondent and “tired of being ignored” the women “sat on the grass during the ceremony and designed a banner so people in future would know who we were.”

Though the article celebrates the women's official recognition it re-establishes the women as ex-servicemen's wives with the following concluding observation: the women "were escorted by a muster of husbands—old soldiers to the last man—but the day belonged to the wives".

The last of the four articles foregrounding service women, "Women in March", appears in 1968 and offers a (small) counterbalance to the by now traditional practice of featuring selected men's units. Listing several women's units, the article recognises women as making a contribution in their own right. Singled-out from the "serving and returned members of women's forces and auxiliary forces" are "a survivor from a hospital-ship fleet, a nursing sister who will serve in Vietnam, and women who manned [sic] signal stations and anti-aircraft guns in war theatres". In addition, as occurs in many such descriptions of men's units, the leader's full name, rank and position are given: in this case, "Major Edith Harler, assistant-director of army nursing service, C.M.F., Western Command".

Non-service women

In contrast to the British widow mentioned above, women laying wreaths without RSL approval as part of the official program, and more importantly perhaps, without clear, supportive involvement with the armed services are actively excluded. In 1966, the *West Australian* reports that "20 women members of the Save Our Sons anti-conscription organisation" wishing to lay wreaths during the Anzac Day service in Melbourne were told by the "Shrine trustee" that "wreaths from their organisation would not be permitted in the shrine". In the *West Australian's* account of Anzac Day 1968, attention is drawn to an incident in which

after the laying of the official wreaths, a woman ducked under a rope barrier near the memorial and mounted the steps with a wreath. An R.S.L.

steward moved to stop her, but returned to attention as she placed the wreath among the others.

This suggests resistance on the part of individual women to the exclusivity of the official program along with a deeply felt need to make a contribution, even if unofficially and at some personal risk.

Conclusion

Reportage in the *West Australian* and *The Albany Advertiser* suggests that while women did not take or were actively excluded from a central role in Western Australian Anzac Day observations during the 1960s, there was some development of participation and recognition. This may have been conditioned to some extent by the generational change in values and attitudes that occurred during the 1960s. Certainly, the issue garners more newspaper space towards the end of the period than at the beginning, and this may have been a muted response to the increasing protests by and/or about women. It also seems to have been due to women themselves – at least some women – pressing their case for inclusion in the march as a result of war service, in turn challenging representations of women as not only complicit with but also supportive of exclusion from the march. Women's involvement as reported in this period, however, broadly enacts a gendered politics of inclusion and exclusion in which the seemingly twin functions of providing support and an audience for the masculine tradition are privileged. The 1968 "Women in March" article, though achieving a milestone in the recognising women's combat contributions, on the other hand does little to challenge the overall tradition.

While this study is limited to the media *record* of women's involvement and attitudes, it is nevertheless clear that women had a diverse and nuanced relationship to Anzac Day and its mythology. The reportage in these high-profile Western Australian

newspapers, suggests a complex pattern of gendered relationships and attitudes towards Anzac Day, likely to be variously informed by class, age and race, for example, and that the public record of Anzac Day celebrations offers a rich site for understanding the ongoing politics of a gendered founding mythology.

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