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# **An Ambivalent Nation: Australian Nationalism and Historical Memory**

**Matthew Kelly**

The most important national holiday in Australia falls on April 25. Known as Anzac Day, it commemorates the Australian and New Zealander soldiers who died in battle at Gallipoli, in western Turkey, in 1915.<sup>1</sup> Gallipoli's central position in Australian national consciousness is not immediately comprehensible to an outside observer. Bastille Day in France or Independence Day in the United States seem sensible choices for *the* national holiday. In the French case, the storming of the Bastille is a suitable emblem of the transition from the ancien régime to a new political order in which all Frenchmen were to be equals before the law. In the American case, the celebration of independence summons the specter of a national consciousness shaking off the last fetters of British imperial rule and so coming to full bloom. But why should a battlefield located thousands of miles from Australia, and from which Australians derived no material benefit, serve, in an important respect, as the geographic center of the Australian national narrative? Which overlords did the Australians overturn at Gallipoli? From whose imperial yoke did they at last work loose? The last two questions are rhetorical, of course, for neither applies to the Australian case. Not simply,

at least. In the circuitous manner of national narrative, however, one detects the discursive logic of Gallipoli. For it was there that Australian, British and Turkish forces, both military and diplomatic, were brought together with an intensity that could only sharpen the notions of difference and otherness that lay at the heart of national identity. Of course, the narrative reconstruction of Gallipoli in Australian discourse imputes to the battle there a purity of significance only sustainable in nationalist memory. The Australians of the time did sense a coming-of-age moment in their contribution at Gallipoli, but they construed this largely in terms of its forging the unification of Australia's constituent parts rather than its liberating them from British rule. In nationalist memory, however, this sentiment is rendered a teleological precursor of a more fully realized sense of national identity, which separates itself from any larger political unit. The residue of the actual historical trajectory is nonetheless notably conspicuous in the Australian case. Australians of today continue to identify to a large extent with British culture. Anzac Day, celebrating as it does the junior role of Australians in a British military campaign, pays oblique homage to this fact. The centrality of Gallipoli in Australian national consciousness reflects the fundamentally ambivalent nature of Australian national identity: asserting its independence from the erstwhile motherland that it nevertheless continues both to resemble and to reference.

Such ambivalence characterized British-Australian relations from an early period. Given the milieu in which they were raised, the Australian men fighting in the First World War felt a natural<sup>21</sup> affinity for British culture. Australia, after all, was a very British place. One fifth of Australians in the early twentieth century were British émigrés and most of the rest were of British descent. Their tastes in furniture, architecture, literature and fashion tracked closely with those prevalent in the United Kingdom. As E. M. Andrews observes, for many Australians, "the highlight of a lifetime was a trip 'home' to England."<sup>3</sup> Such Anglophilia had its limits, however. Australia itself was diverse, and some of its citizens felt a stronger connection to Britain than others. Those of Irish descent, for example, put much less stock in their British heritage than did their English counterparts. Unlike the public schools, Irish Catholic schools did not emphasize loyalty to Britain in their curricula. They taught, rather, that "a pupil's duty lay to God first and then Australia."<sup>4</sup>

More broadly, while loyalty to Australia was in theory entirely consistent with loyalty to the British Empire, in actual fact the two did not always coincide—and not merely for Irish Australians. Australians generally, like most colonial peoples, viewed with suspicion imperial claims of imminent crises demanding prompt military action, which of course would require their service. Thus, a major source of Australian support for the British effort in WWI derived not from fear of Germany or the Ottoman Turks, but rather from anxiety regarding Japan, particularly after the Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. By drawing closer to Britain, many Australians believed the “hordes of Asia” could be held at bay.<sup>5</sup> When Australian popular attention did shift to Turkey, it often fell short of the unfailing fidelity one might have expected of a loyal colonial dependent. In the midst of the Gallipoli campaign, Brian Lewis recounts, “The war in France no longer seemed important to us. Our little bit of Turkey was what mattered.”<sup>6</sup> More broadly still, the majority of Australians did not move in particularly literate or politicized circles. Like the French peasants of the 1870s for whom “France was taxes” and little more, for most Australians the British Empire was “no more than an abstraction.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, fear of Japanese aggression, the belief that Australian participation in the war effort would nourish the Australian nation, political convenience, and the desire to identify oneself with the triumphs of the white race coalesced to form a widespread base of support for the war that stretched across the Australian social spectrum. The underlying contradictions vis-à-vis the British Empire, however, did not disappear.<sup>8</sup>

A more complete picture of the ambivalence of the British-Australian relationship emerges from examining the British point of view. The British attitude towards their colonial subjects in Australia was typical of the imperial center. Critical to this mindset was a rural/urban binary that fetishized the former as a kind of pure type, unsullied by modern convention. The historian Toby Dodge has noted this phenomenon with respect to the British posture towards Iraqis in the mandate period. There, the “anti-urbanism at the core of British discourse” emphasized the virtue of the Iraqi tribesman who, while “certainly naïve,” was nevertheless “honest, upstanding and ready to make the necessarily slow passage to a better...life.”<sup>9</sup> Popular British portrayals of Australian soldiers featured a similarly

fond condescension. What praise there was tended to focus on the Australians' ruggedness, athleticism and fearlessness.<sup>10</sup> All were virtues, though of a type that appealed especially to the thinking man, who might employ such sturdy fodder for a higher purpose. The implications were not lost on Australians, who would come in the course of the Gallipoli campaign to challenge the British self-portrait, with its emphasis on British competence and, as Edward Said observed, congenital rationality.<sup>11</sup>

Had the Gallipoli campaign been a success, the recriminations and antagonisms partially characterizing British-Australian relations might have remained beneath the surface. British propagandists and their Australian aides certainly did their part to emphasize the imperial brotherhood and racial destiny binding the two groups together. Things did not go as planned, however, and these tensions burst into the open. Rather than forging a sense of unity in which Briton and Australian were joined in the harmony of imperial service, Gallipoli emerged as a marker of difference. For Australians, it became a source of "increasing nostalgia" and "a period of national challenge and proving"; that is, a watershed moment in the realization of Australian national identity—an identity no longer subsumed beneath the purview of British empire.<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that this perspective was not characteristic of the immediate post-war period, but was rather a long-term development that conferred upon Gallipoli a symbolism serviceable to the Australian national narrative. Gallipoli's initial function as a signifier of difference, however, was decipherable in nascent form at the time of the events themselves.

Of course, the Australians did not encounter the British alone at Gallipoli. Naturally, the sharpest distinction in play was that between the Allied forces and the Ottoman Turks. In this connection, one cannot help but see the appeal of Paul Fussell's insights on the unprecedented irony of the First World War.<sup>13</sup> For while the Australians' interactions with their ostensible comrades (the Britons) produced a hitherto unknown degree of acrimony, their internecine encounters with the enemy Turks produced a hitherto unknown degree of respect and admiration. The theme of esteem for one's mortal enemy is, of course, pervasive in the literature of the First World War. One is not surprised to find Henri Barbusse declaring that "equality is the great formula of mankind" and that the specious

divisions upon which war-making relies are belied by the reality that “every modern nation is just an arbitrary geographical unit... peopled by an artificial amalgam of races.”<sup>14</sup> From Stalin’s future hagiographer, such sentiments are perhaps to be expected (in retrospect, at least). But they appear as well in the writings of stalwart nationalists. Ernst Jünger, for example, mentions German encounters with British soldiers “that betokened an almost sportsmanlike admiration for the other.”<sup>15</sup> Robert Graves, writing from a British perspective, repeatedly disparages the myth of the Hun, pointing to instances in which “the Germans behaved generously.”<sup>16</sup>

In the prelude to Gallipoli, Australian depictions of the Turk fit the Hun mold. William Gladstone’s choice description was a case in point: “The one great anti-human species of humanity.”<sup>17</sup> The protean image of the Turk arguably necessitated such overstatement. He appeared in some circumstances (the Crimean War) as “‘Johnny Turk’...a stout ally and resolute soldier” and in others (WWI) as one whose natural condition was “sloth, sensuality and decay.”<sup>18</sup> In the course of the fighting at Gallipoli, the Australians re-discovered Johnny Turk. Brian Lewis reports the regret he and other Australian soldiers experienced at the deaths of over 3,000 Turks and the wounding of another 10,000 at Gallipoli on May 18. The Australians moved from thinking of the “unspeakable Turks” as “savages” to considering them “hopelessly brave men” and “fellow-sufferer[s] in cruel circumstances.” The Turk became “a real gentleman.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the Australians could not help but express high regard for the future father of the Turkish nation, Mustafa Kemal, then a divisional commander. On numerous occasions, Australian soldiers spotted him at the front of the Turkish lines in the midst of battle—a place British generals scarcely dared to tread.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, as E. M. Andrews reminds us, few Australian or British troops ever personally encountered their commanders.<sup>21</sup> Lewis’s praise for the future Turkish leader testifies to the Australian soldiers’ high opinion of him: “History is probably right in giving the credit for the Turkish success to one man, Mustafa Kemal, later ‘Attaturk’, the founder and architect of modern Turkey.”<sup>22</sup>

It is enlightening to juxtapose this conclusion with those the Australians drew regarding the British role in the Allies’ distinct lack of success at Gallipoli. Even in the works of the decidedly discrete official Australian war historian C. E. W. Bean, one finds hints of the

rage Australian soldiers and civilians felt towards the British after numerous costly confrontations with the Turks had produced no significant territorial advances or strategic gains. By September 1915, Bean notes, many British voices were beginning to express discontent with the handling of the situation at Gallipoli.<sup>23</sup> Alongside them, the Australian journalist Keith Murdoch issued harsh criticisms, which, “though overcoloured and in part inaccurate, contained some important truths.”<sup>24</sup> Such truths were common fare in the letters Australian soldiers sent home, which featured consistent complaints about the unexceptional performance of the British soldiers, especially the new recruits. Common as well were references to inept British leadership. By the time the British press caught up to these realities, Australian popular wisdom already held that the “English generals...had muddled everything they touched on Gallipoli.”<sup>25</sup> The one exception was Field Marshal Kitchener, the British Secretary of State for War, though he too came in for censure. The Australian Arthur Lynch declared that Kitchener’s “blunders would stand out like the Rock of Gibraltar in the realms of Blunderdom.”<sup>26</sup>

For Australians on both the home front and the front lines, all of this amounted to a far-reaching disillusionment with the British Empire and, as Andrews puts it, “the superiority of all things British.”<sup>27</sup> The point is easily overstated. Australian relations with the English were the real problem, for example. Most British troops were English, but it remains noteworthy that the less class-conscious, more egalitarian Scottish troops got along quite well with their Australian counterparts. Australian soldiers also directed charges of incompetence at Australian authorities; their criticisms of the British were not, therefore, pro-Australian in any uncomplicated sense. Nevertheless, a general disillusionment with the British Empire did transpire, and Gallipoli’s part in this disillusionment—though it would later be granted undue significance—was salient. Gallipoli promised Australians a significant role in a global drama. The very fact of its remoteness reinforced the notion that Australia was now a major player whose soldiers’ efforts might considerably affect matters half a world away. As Lewis remarks: “We were in the big war and we had been noticed.”<sup>28</sup> Noticed, it must be appreciated, by the British. British approbation, both at Gallipoli and earlier in the Boer War, met with great enthusiasm in Australia. This enthusiasm was self-consciously nationalist in orientation—a fact which stood

in some tension with the need for imperial validation. Thus, while relishing British approval, Australians also delighted in reports of their soldiers' insubordination to British commanders. Such reports bolstered their sense of national autonomy, and demonstrated that Australians "were establishing [their] own traditions."<sup>29</sup>

With so much hope bound up in the Gallipoli campaign, a triumphant outcome might have kept such affective inconsistencies submerged. The actual, abysmal outcome produced the opposite effect. It reinforced Australian distinctiveness. Perhaps predictably, this played out in a manner that mixed fact with fiction in a refashioned, nationalist narrative of Gallipoli. Thus, while British incompetence at Gallipoli was undeniable, the notion that Australian soldiers stood head and shoulders above their British comrades was less than historical. In his official history of the war, Bean twice ignored the advice of James Edmonds, Britain's official war historian, who advised him: "You must differentiate between 1916 and 1918, in which latter year the Australian leading and staff work are classic." In the earlier year and prior, the amateurish quality of much of the Australian force was a major cause of its heavy losses.<sup>30</sup> The myth of the dashing and daring Australian soldier, originally a British concoction, proved too precious to give up, especially as it served as the perch from which to accuse the British of criminal negligence and thus to undermine British claims of imperial authority. (Fussell's thoughts on irony again come to mind.)

Our juxtaposition of the Australian understandings of the British and Turkish roles at Gallipoli is incomplete without a final word on the significance of Mustafa Kemal. Lewis's assertion that Mustafa Kemal single-handedly secured Turkish success, as well as his description of the commander as "the founder and architect of modern Turkey," indicates the decidedly nationalist respect Australians came to feel for the Turks. In fact, this respect was rather widespread. Such eminent personages as Winston Churchill, for example, declared that the Turks would surely survive the corrupt and decaying Ottoman Empire, invoking their rural authenticity and the determination of their threadbare leader as the chief causes of their endurance. By then, Mustafa Kemal's followers had acquired a telling moniker: "the Nationalists."<sup>31</sup> Kemal, soon Atatürk (the Father of the Turks), would shortly prove Churchill correct. The esteem in which both the British and the Australians held him turned



substantially on his having evinced, in Churchill's words, "the heart of a race that...for centuries had contended victoriously against all comers"; i.e., on the Turks' legitimate national credentials. This perspective was spurious, needless to say. Apart from the invocation of racial purity, it could not be argued seriously that the Turks alone had taken on all comers; the men comprising the Ottoman military elite had for many years been non-Turks, after all. For our purposes, however, the point is not the verity of the perspective, but rather its nature. Australians applied the same framework in evaluating themselves as they did in evaluating the Turks. In both cases, the significance of the events at Gallipoli was grounded in a narrative whose endpoint was national consummation. A central and salient feature of this narrative was the role of courageous soldiers in proving the worth of the nation; that is, in proving the nation *qua* nation.

Given the dubious nature of many of the historical claims of nationalist narratives, one is naturally curious about the accuracy of claims invoking the trope of the glorious soldier. We have seen already that the standard depiction of the Australian soldiers at Gallipoli lapses into mythology, ignoring the amateurish quality of much of the Australian force. More interesting, perhaps, is the suspicion that Australian and other soldiers tend to be located not at the centers of the belligerent national endeavors in which they fight—as nationalist histories and realtime narratives would have it—but rather at their bloody peripheries.

The historian Jay Winter has suggested that the most significant feature of the First World War was the enormous waste of human life that it entailed. The powers slinging armies of young men against one another with such seeming abandon were located not at the front, but rather in palaces and government buildings well removed from it. The latter were arguably the real centers of the war. And in no other regard was this more true than with respect to the formulation of the war's nationalistic rationale.

Much of the literature of the First World War reflects this understanding and, in throwing light on the divergent wartime perspectives of front and home front, challenges the nationalist representation of the war. Vera Brittain decries the tendency to frame the experience of battle in terms of national loyalty. She considers such talk "as thoughtless and fervid a faith as inspired the priests of Baal" and

encourages its purveyors to “look at a little pile of sodden grey rags that cover half a skull and a shin-bone...and...realise how grand and glorious a thing it is to have distilled all Youth and Joy and Life into a foetid heap of hideous putrescence!”<sup>32</sup> Graves too notes the intolerance at the front for patriotism, a notion “fit only for civilians.”<sup>33</sup> Barbusse observes a similar disdain among soldiers for the nationalistic rhetoric so often accompanying war. As Bertrand remarks in *Under Fire*: “When war was declared, there was a mad rush to get out of it...I noticed...that it was above all those who shouted loudest about patriotism before...”<sup>34</sup> It appears that at the very heart of the nationalist myth (i.e. the front), nationalism is largely absent. Of all Fussell’s ironies, this may be the grandest.

The literature containing these sentiments raises its own issues about memory and re-presentation of the wartime experience. For present purposes, however, we may take it as a sign that there are, at a minimum, alternative understandings of the war that challenge the nationalist one. (Indeed, it is arguably nationalists themselves that best appreciate this. It was Adolf Hitler, after all, who most systematically pursued the cultural erasure of *All Quiet on the Western Front* from the moment he took power in January 1933.<sup>35</sup>) Patsy Adam-Smith recounts setting out for Gallipoli with the poignant awareness of its centrality to her nation: “It was to me Australia, as much as any of those other legendary outposts.”<sup>36</sup> The impression does not fade, but it is soon tempered by the realization that she will not be able to identify the graves of her uncles, who died in battle there. Their bodies, like so many others, were never identified. She cannot help but be “outraged at the bones of these my kinsmen being scattered down the precipices and valleys 12,000 miles from the green valleys and hills of their native Gippsland.”<sup>37</sup> Her experience contains within it all the paradoxes of nationalist memory. Gallipoli is at once home and alien. It marks a destruction of life so vast that those who fell there cannot be recovered in bodily form, and it therefore yields outrage. And yet, this sense of fury is rooted in loyalty to one’s kin—that is, to one’s *national* kin. Gallipoli, the mythical heart of this nation, is an isolated, arid landscape across whose surface are littered the still visible bones of Australian soldiers.<sup>38</sup> In nationalist memory, the men who died there are preserved in the nostalgic amber of war. Historically speaking, many of them are not preserved at all.

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, in addition to the paradoxes attending all nationalist memory, Australian nationalist memory contains its own peculiar paradox: continued identification with the British, the very nation against which Australia distinguished itself at Gallipoli. The scholar Jared Diamond has observed that this identification has had staggeringly negative consequences for modern Australians, whose British agricultural practices have proven ill-suited to the Australian environment and have contributed to a situation in which “over 99% of [the] agricultural land makes little or no positive contribution to Australia’s economy.”<sup>39</sup> Diamond writes of a recent awakening to the problems stemming from uncritical attachment to British ways, and of an Australian effort to correct this situation. It will be interesting to observe to what extent Australians of the future come to diverge culturally from their British cousins, and to what extent this transforms Australian nationalist memory. Perhaps the meaning of Gallipoli for Australians has yet to reach its consummate stage.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Anzac, often written ANZAC, is an acronym for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps.

<sup>2</sup> 2

<sup>3</sup> E. M. Andrews, *The Anzac Illusion: Anglo-Australian relations during World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>6</sup> Eugene Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976), 51. Brian Lewis, *Our War: Australia During World War I* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1980), 140.

<sup>7</sup> Andrews, *The Anzac Illusion*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 72-73.

<sup>10</sup> Andrews, *The Anzac Illusion*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Rahmi Akçelik (ed.), *Before and After Gallipoli: A Collection of Australian and Turkish Writings* (Melbourne: Australian-Turkish Friendship Society Publications No. 2, 1986), 13.

<sup>13</sup> See Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Henri Barbusse, *Under Fire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 312-316.

<sup>15</sup> Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 57.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Graves, *Good-bye to All That* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), 159.

<sup>17</sup> Akçelik, *Before and After*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-23.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis, *Our War*, 143.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>21</sup> Andrews, *The Anzac Illusion*, 161.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, *Our War*, 145.

<sup>23</sup> Such expressions of discontent appeared much earlier, in fact. As early as May 1915, Churchill was widely—and, according to David Fromkin, wrongly—blamed for the military fiasco at Gallipoli, and faced subsequent demotion within the War Cabinet. See David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Avon Books, 1990), 159-161.

<sup>24</sup> C. E. W. Bean, *Anzac to Amiens: A Shorter History of the Australian Fighting Services in the First World War* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1946), 170.

<sup>25</sup> Lewis, *Our War*, 161-162.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>27</sup> Andrews, *The Anzac Illusion*, 162.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis, *Our War*, 139.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>30</sup> Andrews, *The Anzac Illusion*, 147.

<sup>31</sup> Akçelik, *Before and After*, 34-35.

<sup>32</sup> Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 198.

<sup>33</sup> Graves, *Good-bye*, 188.

<sup>34</sup> Barbusse, *Under Fire*, 116.

<sup>35</sup> See John Whiteclay Chambers, "'All Quiet on the Western Front' (1930): the antiwar film and the image of the First World War," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 14, no. 4 (1994). Also: Modris Eksteins, "All Quiet of the Western Front and the Fate of a War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 15, no. 2 (1980).

<sup>36</sup> Patsy Adam-Smith, *The Anzacs* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson Australia Pty Ltd, 1978), 142.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 144-145.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Weir, visiting the site prior to filming *Gallipoli*, noted with interest the desolate terrain and preponderance of shells and sundry soldiers' paraphernalia strewn about it. He incorporated many of these articles into the movie.

<sup>39</sup> Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 413.