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ANZACS: Putting the Story Back in History

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Abstract
The screening of the television mini-series, Anzacs, took place in Australia in November, 1985. Admired by the popular press and successful in the ratings, it was ridiculed by most of the 'quality' press as a melodramatic exercise in 'Pommy-bashing' which played fast and loose with the true history of World War I. 1 Anything but a low-key docu-drama, Anzacs is full of action, peopled with a rich cast of fictional characters, and, despite an episodic structure, a narrative in the tradition of the 'ripping yarn'. Its use and deployment of history, however, is not to be easily dismissed: firstly, because it is both deliberate and polemical, and, secondly, because it plays a crucial role in the program's objective of contributing not just to television ratings but to Australia's sense of itself.
The screening of the television mini-series, *Anzacs*, took place in Australia in November, 1985. Admired by the popular press and successful in the ratings, it was ridiculed by most of the ‘quality’ press as a melodramatic exercise in ‘Pommy-bashing’ which played fast and loose with the true history of World War I.1 Anything but a low-key docu-drama, *Anzacs* is full of action, peopled with a rich cast of fictional characters, and, despite an episodic structure, a narrative in the tradition of the ‘ripping yarn’. Its use and deployment of history, however, is not to be easily dismissed: firstly, because it is both deliberate and polemical, and, secondly, because it plays a crucial role in the program’s objective of contributing not just to television ratings but to Australia’s sense of itself.

The cultural context in which *Anzacs* was screened is an interesting one. Its first transmission followed hot on the heels of a rash of Whitlam retrospectives (it was the completion of a decade since the dismissal), recording either a key example of the insidiousness of colonial ties, or the fortunate survival of checks and balances to unbridled Australian nationalism – depending upon one’s political point of view. A further element in the cultural context – if more arcane – is the Maralinga Royal Commission, the judicial enquiry into the conduct of atomic tests in Australia by the British in the 1950s. As cultural productions, *Anzacs* and the Royal Commission may seem miles apart, but both have been attacked as cynical exercises in Pommy-bashing. Neither are simply that, but they do occupy similar places in a more widespread revision of Australian entanglement within colonial ties. Importantly, both events offer new narratives of Australian history, and thus of the Australian character, in opposition to British versions. Both see Australian history as overwhelmingly and regrettably the product of British discourses, and attempt to decontaminate the national identity from such discourses.

Although *Anzacs* has not attracted much attention as anything other than a television ‘event’, Maralinga has repeatedly been seen within this wider cultural context. A relatively affectionate parody of the Commission in the satirical *Gillies Report* on ABC TV depicted Justice...
McClelland reviewing a parade of Australian casualties of British power: the convicts, the Anzacs, the Labor Party. For the sketch to be understood, this view of Britain as the imperialist villain must have had substantial currency amongst the audience. A contemporary newspaper cartoon represented the judge in convict garb, confronting a British redcoat in the dock, and the ABC’s *Four Corners* report on the Commission’s findings, screened in December 1985, saw it as a case of ‘the empire strikes back’ and titled the program ‘Atomic Bodyline’.

*Four Corners* reference to bodyline reminds us of another important context in which cultural production must be placed – that of other representations, of other ‘text’. Intertextual links are at least as important as those proposed between the representation and the real, the text and history. The *Four Corners* reference invokes more than the history of that notorious Test series; it also invokes its representation in the Kennedy-Miller mini-series, *Bodyline*. *Bodyline* bashed the Poms as well, although its villains were more specific: the Lords of the MCC not only schemed against the despised Australians but also exploited and discarded their demon bowler, Larwood, who gave the legend its symmetry by migrating to Australia. The history enacted in *Bodyline*, though, is a familiar one and the pleasure it provided was in seeing it recreated convincingly. Although similar in its nationalist ideology, there are important differences between *Anzacs* and *Bodyline*. With the exception of the Gallipoli episode, *Anzacs*’ history is not familiar at all. Gallipoli has become the metonym for our involvement in World War I, and the vast majority of Australian experience in the war – on the Western Front and in the Desert – is buried in soldiers’ memoirs or the imperialistic official histories in which Australians are simply another arm of the Empire. It is a measure of the silence about the bulk of Australian participation in World War I that while many critics attacked *Anzacs* for misrepresentation, few would be in a position to prove their claims; the history has simply not circulated. *Anzacs* intervenes in this situation, constructing a history itself and for this reason is of greater potential interest than *Bodyline*, or the more critically respected explorations of this area, *1915* and *Gallipoli*.

*Gallipoli*, the most natural point of comparison, did little but recycle the standard accounts and mythologize them through beautiful but uninteresting heroes. Although it was visually arresting, and fashionably unresolved, *Gallipoli*’s narrative was organized around myths and images so familiar as to be cliche. Boy met boy, boys became mates; the bush was seen as the core of the Australian character; the Poms were revealed as the real enemy; and the iconic beauty of the two leads became the visual equivalent of C.E.W. Bean’s reports from the front. Thematically, the depiction of the heroes as indices of Australian male innocence carried the argument of the film. War was naturalized as a necessary and inevitable rite of passage from innocence to
experience, both for the characters and their country. *Gallipoli’s* use of history was respectful but this did not make for compelling narrative, so that what now emerges as notable about the film is its conventionality, its helpless dependence upon the conventions which have governed the representation of *Gallipoli* and the Anzacs to date. These conventions are produced by the history, not in spite of it, and they control both story and discourse in order to generate the meaning usually attributed to *Gallipoli* – the thesis of lost innocence.

In poetry and fiction as well as film, the bulk of Australian involvement in the Great War is collapsed into the ‘death of a primal innocence’, located on the cliffs of *Gallipoli*. A central meaning is generated as history is transformed into a myth in which the digger and *Gallipoli* are participants in a national ‘coming of age’. Through the digger at *Gallipoli*, the myth tells us, Australia learned what it is to be a nation. This meaning organizes texts across the full range of cultural production – from elite forms such as poetry and painting, to more populist forms such as film and television.

It is a myth which is anything but radical. It celebrates the catastrophe as the product of nature rather than man, implicitly and paradoxically justifying the British Army’s apparent sense of the need for ‘blooding’ the Australian troops in order to educate and civilize them. The *Gallipoli* myth is complacent and imperialistic; it enshrines defeat and calls it maturity while the cultural values of the mother country are accepted with its praise.

Ironically, this myth has become part of the construction of the Australian character. The components are familiar. In representations of the Anzacs it expressed itself through the naive volunteers, emphasizing (against the grain of historical evidence) their rural backgrounds, their carrying the tradition of mateship from the bush to the battlefield, and their embodiment of the Australian virtues – practicality, endurance, and a dry, irreverent humour. As in other constructions of the Australian character, representations of *Gallipoli* usually have a class dimension, produced by the focus on the ranks rather than on the officers, and by ridiculing the British.

*Anzacs* can provisionally be placed within this paradigm. Mateship is the thematic centre of the third episode, ‘The Devil’s Arithmetic’, and is continually seen as the cement which binds the group together in the face of fear, frustration and death. The opening of the first episode, ‘The Great Adventure’, has the bush mates happily working their cattle, unaware that their lives are about to be disrupted by the call to the great adventure. Largely, *Anzacs’* recruits are from the bush, and the essential Australian character is located there – through TV comic Paul Hogan’s Cleary, among others. The first episode crosses the same terrain as *Gallipoli* and *1915*, the raw country boys confronting the horrors of war with a mixture of good humour, the manly lust for
battle, and a naive disillusionment at the ultimate insignificance of their achievements.

That said, it is also true that *Anzacs* is not wholly determined by these conventions; the version of Australian-ness it advances, its history of Australians at war, differs importantly from that of *Gallipoli* or 1915. In fact, *Anzacs*’ individuality lies in its active attempt to rewrite our myths of the war and of the Australian character, and thus in the attempt to alter their meaning.

The most obvious difference between *Anzacs* and the sub-genre to which it belongs is that it deals with new material, for which there are no strong cultural myths, no specifically Australian history. More importantly, *Anzacs* not only locates the national and individual ‘death of innocence’ at the Somme rather than Gallipoli, but it also questions its traditional importance. The familiar gung-ho innocent, embodied at its clearest in Dick Baker, may be set up in the Gallipoli episode, but it is relentlessly ground down by the four episodes which follow Baker’s death. As the hero, Martin Barrington, says, ‘it’s not the same’ after Dick dies. The blooding of the troops at the Somme is the ‘last day of our innocence’, as Rolly puts it, but the series does not end there; this occurs early in the second episode. A symbolic and consoling loss of innocence is not the achievement the narrative is examining. Subsequently, there is no single ‘innocent’ whose course we follow, no single definition of the Australian character on whom the narrative rests its interest. The scale available to the television mini-series, the size of the cast it must use to fill ten hours of air-time, and the strategy of rotating the focus of episodes amongst a number of central characters, means that any conventional view of the ‘six-bob-a-day tourists’ is at least complicated by the variety of individualized characters and by their attitudes to the war – a primary means of differentiating one from another.

*Anzacs* is representative of most Australian narrative in that it is interested in the group rather than the individual; the hero dies half an hour before the end of the last episode and his girlfriend is rather unceremoniously paired off with Flanagan five minutes after being devastated by Martin’s death. The survival of the ‘originals’ as a group identity matters more than the survival of any one of their number, and while individual acts of heroism are valorized, they tend not to elevate the individual out of the group. Martin is the exception to this, but in addition to his traditional heroics the series recommends Max Earnshaw’s modest decency, Pud’s blind loyalty, Blue’s speechless devotion to his Lewis gun, and Kaiser’s ability to see the enemy as human beings. The proliferation of individual manifestations of worthwhile values – shrewdness and scepticism as well as bravery, loyalty and comradeship – reduces the importance of the individual responsible and constructs the group as the author of the full repertoire
of admirable behaviour. Most important are those acts which speak of the distinctiveness of the group and its repertoire, and which therefore have the potential for particular definitions of heroism. Cleary’s raid on the German-held barn is an example here. It may be the product of bravery and resourcefulness but it has little to do with the war. Although it has an oblique relation to national honour, Cleary’s raid has all the ‘wrong’ motivations: he needs some souvenirs to finance his revenge on the Yanks at two-up. This apotheosis of Cleary’s scrounging, conning and petty theft, however, enacts Australian virtues that may be just as important for the viewer as those in operation in storming a machine gun post. Significantly, they are important not because they serve the war effort but because they are signifiers of intrinsically and distinctively Australian characteristics.

Cleary is a delinquent; he is the scrounger, the holder of the double-headed penny, the shrewd operator whom, therefore, the Australians admire. In Cleary the heroic and the delinquent are conflated in ways that are familiar in Australian mythology; in this series it surfaces in conventional incidents demonstrating an Australian contempt for the Army and for discipline, and in the wider cultural context we see it embodied in the legend of Ned Kelly or modern popular heroes such as Dennis Lillee, the bad boy of cricket. Delinquent, even criminal, acts are frequent amongst the Australians in Anzacs. Robbing the British is seen as a nationalist mission, cheating the Yanks is irresistible, and the most extraordinary example, the killing of Dingo for executing German prisoners and deserting, is left with no recriminations, no repercussions, and apparently without need of justification or remorse.

Paul Hogan’s Cleary is an important discursive element here; the mixture of the shrewd, the worldly and the affable is signified in his face. Paul Hogan, of course, brings a history with him onto the screen which makes characterization almost superfluous because he is serving the same iconic function in representing the nation in Anzacs as he does in his QANTAS commercials. As an icon of the Australian character Hogan has a different meaning to Gallipoli’s Mel Gibson or Mark Lee. In Weir’s film, beauty was equated with virtue; we know Archy and Frank are heroes because they are beautiful. They are like Bean’s Greek Gods, although, as Amanda Lohrey has pointed out, Bean’s description of the faces of Australian soldiers ‘ran more to the Chips Rafferty or Doug Walters mould’. The faces of the stars are primary determinants of meaning in film and television narrative, and in Anzacs the semiotics are very different. As Lohrey goes on, ‘it is impossible to look into the Chips Rafferty or Doug Walters face (or Bryan Brown’s for that matter) and see an iconic image of either good or evil, innocence or experience’. Hogan’s face, too, is in the Chips Rafferty mould, and his signification of Australian-ness is that of the canny rather than the innocent, the pragmatic rather than the idealist,
the wily survivor rather than the heroic victim.

The signification of Australian larrikinism in Cleary is also a signifier of class position. Class considerations structure personal relationships in the series – the affair between Martin and Kate is most clearly seen as one between separate class backgrounds – as well as the treatment of the various social contexts, at home and on the battlefield. Typically, the working class is preferred and privilege attacked. The failure of the British generals, for instance, is sheeted home to class. ‘It’s a pity about the British’, says Monash, going on to deplore their dependence upon a ‘narrow social class’ for their officers. As happens so often in our narratives, the problems of dealing with class, privilege, or authority is displaced onto a problem of dealing with the British – represented by a series of stage Poms saluting, posing and expressing contempt for the expendable Australians. Rules, regulations, callousness, lack of flexibility, lack of experience or useful knowledge – all of which threaten the troops of all the participating nations – are seen to emanate from the British upper class. Even Lloyd George confesses his helplessness before the ‘closed shop’ of the English upper class in his attempt to restrain Field Marshal Haig. Australian staff officers are a different matter. Monash is accessible, reasonable, almost avuncular, while the division’s treatment of Flanagan’s act of mutiny is implausibly sympathetic to the needs of the troops. Harris, the British deserter who killed his officer during a ‘Pathan ambush’, is clearly better off in the egalitarian Australian army.

The series goes to some pains to exclude the working class Englishmen, the infantry, from its condemnation of the race. Stragglers commanded by Barrington are ‘some of the finest men’ he’s ever fought with, and the British lower ranks express the same disgust with their generals as their Australian counterparts. There is some class solidarity here. Upper class officers instructing the Australians in bayonet practice are ridiculed, while officers with regional accents and battle experience briefing the Australians on German machine gun methods are respected. In *Anzacs*, criticism of rank and of the British are attacks on the same evil – a non-egalitarian social system where birth rather than ability determines one’s position. The English in *Anzacs*, however, are not simply class enemies, nor are they simply the opposition against which the Australian is traditionally defined – as they are in *Gallipoli* or, to a lesser extent, *Breaker Morant*. Criticism of the English is a thematic and ideological principle in the series which is produced by, and is used as a justification for, the view of history the narrative constructs.

The promotional program on the making of *Anzacs* took a rather belligerent stance towards Australian war history and the work of the ‘academics and intellectuals’ it was setting out to revise. It is true that Australian military history is a neglected field and that our versions of
Australians at war tend to come from official and Anglophile sources. *Anzacs* does not set out to correct this through a scholarly alternative version. Instead, its narrative appropriates history, using it to redefine the Australian character through the renovation of its myths and the ideology which motivates them.

More than any other medium, television constructs our social myths. Even ‘objective’ treatments of history and science are unable to avoid doing this; a signal example would be the Darwinian myth of deliberate evolution which had fish deciding to leave the sea and wander up the beach as salamanders in David Attenborough’s *Life on Earth*. Often television constructs its myths as a by-product of trying to get the history right – as in *The Last Bastion* or *Bodyline* – but in at least the former case the cultural impact was affected by its relative dullness as television. *Anzacs*’ producers, Geoff Burrowes and John Dixon, seem to have decided to maximize their cultural impact by making their myths in the most deliberate and entertaining of manners. An example occurs in the fourth episode where the fleeing French citizenry is halted by the Australian correlative of John Wayne and the cavalry – complete with brass band. Delighted it is an *Australian* division coming to their aid (‘you Australians will stand and fight’ – unlike, presumably, the French army) the refugees all turn around and go home. Familiar as we are with the experience of scoffing at such scenes in British and American movies, it comes as a surprise to find the same techniques being used to exploit our own chauvinism. The producers seem aware of this reaction, and the scene is both cheeky in its blatant nationalism, and entertaining in its self-conscious cheekiness. Having absorbed images of British and American superiority for so many years, the audience is invited to retaliate by applauding this nationalist excess; such moments are a frequent source of viewers’ pleasure in *Anzacs*.

Understanding the relationship between cultural myth and history better than some of its critics, *Anzacs* does not bother to appear objective or detached; it rewrites history as mythic, even epic, narrative. Implicitly rejecting historians’ views that Australian troops were important but not decisive on the Western Front, *Anzacs* tells the viewer that neither the British nor the Americans won the war – we did. Through the unfolding of this view, a history of failure – Gallipoli – is replaced with a history of success, acknowledgement of which has hitherto, and churlishly, been withheld.

This new history has a number of components. First, and most conventional, is the depiction of Australian troops as different from those of other nationalities. Second, is the sustained attack on British generalship, British estimates of Australians and their contributions to the victory, and Field Marshal Haig. Haig’s famous ‘back to the wall’ directive, traditionally the object of respect, is treated with scorn as Cleary dispenses the orders to his mates for use as toilet paper. As
Peter Pierce has noted in a literary context, the enemy here is not the Hun, but the British staff. Finally – and centrally – is the substitution of the unification of the five Australian divisions under their own commander, General Monash, for Gallipoli as the apex of Australia’s achievement in the Great War. This moment opens the last episode, has been foreshadowed ever since the landing of Gallipoli, and is seen to magically result in the end of the war. In contrast to all the previous battles, Monash’s first engagement ‘runs like clockwork’ and initiates a series of short engagements in which the platoon is apparently responsible for its own battle plans. In a parallel with Flanagan’s attack on his incompetent officer, and Harris’s murder of his cowardly officer, Anzacs’ Australianization of the war wrests control from the British in order to survive, and thus wins.

In Anzacs, Australia’s ‘coming of age’ is the achievement of military and thus ideological independence. This is not the maturity of youth admitting the superiority of older values, but the demonstration of their irrelevance – a rejection of the cultural cringe which placed Australian troops under British control in the first place. Structurally, the narrative is homologous with the myths surrounding Federation – a republican and egalitarian movement away from the colonial power, an assertion of the superiority of Australian values, and the need for independence. In its specific application to the politics of Australians at war, it challenges an orthodoxy which has the Australian nation at Gallipoli learning what it is like in the ‘real world’, demonstrating its potential, and returning home to implement the new ways. Anzacs inverts this view and its meaning in order to propose an alternative in which Australian attempts to deal with this real world are hamstrung only by the prejudices and values of others – the British. As far as Anzacs is concerned, the Australians would have done better without the wisdom of the old world. Instead of being initiated into the real world, the Australians are offered it as their inheritance.

This view of the Australian soldier in the Great War may or may not be true; I am in a similar position to most of the audience in that I do not have the knowledge to judge. For the function of television in the culture, this matters little as long as it is convincing. And it is judged as convincing not as history but as story: as a narrative which incorporates sufficiently familiar myths and values, which constructs models of resolution for conflicts and contradictions symbolized within the narrative that are ideologically acceptable, and which offers the pleasures of story telling. The success of Anzacs does not depend upon its faithfulness to its sources – although it must be said that there is plenty of evidence that it did go to the same sources as the historians it challenges – but upon its discursive and ideological work: the degree to which the meanings it constructs for Australians are, or are made, acceptable or negotiable for its audience. This means that its confident
myth-making should not be seen as manipulative; its final ritual confirmation of the nation inscribes its audience into the text, rather than seduces or misleads them. In its inscription of a nationalist confidence in the Australian character into the final scenes around the memorial, it invokes an existing national audience, self-consciously but nonetheless gratefully endorsing the principles which make the narrative pleasurable — not its plausibility.

*Anzacs* is an attempt to buy back the mythological farm, but its nationalism could be criticized for being as consensual and complacent as the version it aims to supersede. That should not obscure the fact that it is a serious and well made television series. More importantly, as an intervention in cultural history it is probably more aggressive than anything that has preceded it on Australian television. In its attempt to rewrite history through offering a more satisfying, because more Australian, story, it employs the kind of confidence in the power of the medium that is rare in television production in Australia. Love it or hate it, *Anzacs* assumes that television has a positive role to play in Australian popular culture. While it can entertain us and divert us from our work, it is also, importantly, an active participant in the construction of a cultural identity. In this mini-series we have a hint of the potential effect of this participation.

**NOTES**

1. Examples of such reviews include Richard Coleman's piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 November 1985, entitled 'How Hoges Heroes Cleaned up the Fritz — no thanks to the Poms'; or Marion MacDonald's review in *The National Times*, 8-14 November 1985, 'They picked clean every cliche in the drama of warfare'. The titles are representative.


4. Lohrey, p. 32.

5. Ibid.


This essay was written in 1986 and while it could now be revised and updated to account for development in film and television since then, I have preferred to let it stand in its original form.