

Folklore, History and Myth at an Anzac Memorial

by Graham Seal ©



Abstract

This paper uses a small case study of a World War 1 memorial in suburban Perth (WA) to show how the local, the state and the national resonances of Anzac have been mythologised from 1915 to the present. It looks at the folklore of the digger, the official observation and maintenance of Anzac and the relationship between these elements of the mythology and Australian national identity. In closing, this paper also makes an argument for the importance of accounting for myth as well as history in understanding the powerful complexities of remembrance, mourning, nation and identity.

Introduction

This paper revolves around a small case study of a West Australian Gallipoli memorial and the meanings that it has had, and continues to have, for the suburban community that built it and still maintains it. In the grassroots activities associated with the history of this structure can be seen the local manifestations of Anzac that are the driving force of the national mythology it has become.

The meanings of this memorial, built to house a Gallipoli veteran, his family and heirs for all time, stretch from 1916 to the present, taking in World War 2 and Vietnam. The history of the memorial partakes of the originary meanings of Anzac, its wwdeveloping meanings, and also demonstrates the potency of that mythology at all levels of Australian society.

I will talk briefly about Anzac and the digger as essential components of the national mythology and about some relevant folk traditions contributing to that mythology. These will be seen working rhetorically, practically and emotionally in the story of Anzac Cottage.

In closing, this paper also makes an argument for the importance of accounting for myth as well as history in understanding the powerful complexities of remembrance, mourning, nation and identity.

Folklore

Folklore incorporates the expressions and practices generated by, for and about the experiences of those who lived through events at a particular time/s and place/s. It also embraces the subsequent transmission of those expressions and practices, as well as others arising from them, into the future. Thus, folklore is the product both of a set of historical circumstances and of subsequent events and beliefs related to the originary event/s and their initial encapsulation in story, song, poem, custom, belief, etc. This process is often shorthand as a 'tradition'.

It is rare to be able to accurately establish the date at which a tradition begins, which is why folklore studies often lack the kind of chronological specificity important to historians. However, in some cases we can accurately identify the beginning of traditions and so can track their

development over time, learning important lessons about the processes of mythologisation involved and about the cultural imperatives that motivate significant numbers of people to continue to maintain the tradition or traditions.

In the case of the traditions of Anzac and its essential hero, the digger, we can identify pretty much the time, the place and the circumstances that gave birth to what became a national mythology. It was born on 25 April 1915 at Gallipoli among the Australian, New Zealand and British men of the First AIF. In the beginning, Anzac and the digger were one folk tradition. They subsequently diverged into autonomous but integrated traditions that together, produced the powerful national mythology we know as 'Anzac'.

The Digger Tradition

The digger derives from the earlier figure of the Australian bushman, a heroic worker who liked to fight, drink, swear and gamble, was anti-authoritarian, egalitarian and resourceful. This figure appears in Australian bush ballads, literature, and painting and has reached the status of national hero in the ambivalent form of the bushranger Ned Kelly.

Through a combined literary and folkloric process beginning almost as soon as war was

declared in 1914, the bushman transmogrified into the figure that would eventually be known as the digger. By the time the Gallipoli campaign was abandoned in Dec 1915, the digger was well and truly established. Though, interestingly, the word does not become used by him or about him in a generic sense until 1917.



Image above from The Anzac Book

The diggers rapidly developed into a distinctive folk group that reflected a good deal of the bush heritage and also linked that, through the experience of war, to an explicit sense of national identity. This was achieved through the esoteric

and exoteric elements of digger culture. It was a culture that, faced for the first time with close-up contact with significant numbers of other nationalities, quickly fell back upon the by-then well-established Australian xenophobia. This was expressed in demeaning folk speech terms for Egyptians ('wogs', 'gyppos'), Portuguese ('pork and cheese'), British ('chooms', 'poms') and, later, American troops ('yanks', of course, and 'carksuckers').¹

It was also the first time that such a large number of 'Australians' had ever assembled in one place, implicitly posing the questions: 'what are we?' and 'how do we relate to 'them?' There were various ways in which these questions were manifested and mediated through folklore.

Australian speech – by then already distinctive and widely chastised by British visitors to the Antipodes – became a badge of nation that could be deployed against the troublesome 'others' in yarns like this one:

Sentry: 'Halt! Who goes there?'

'Ceylon Planters' Rifle Club'.

Sentry - 'Pass, friend'.

A little later - 'Halt, who goes there?'

Answer - 'Auckland Mounted Rifles'.

Sentry: Pass, friend'.

As the next person arrives - 'Halt, Who goes

there?’

Answer - ‘What the ----- has that got to do with you?’

Sentry - ‘Pass, Australian’.²

While projecting such exoteric angst in speech forms, the Australians also celebrated their own self-perceptions in yarns, song and verse.

Their anti-authoritarianism for example, was expressed through a cycle of yarns concerning Lt-General Birdwood, a Gallipoli commander and a man whose ability to relate to his soldiers earned him their difficult to acquire respect. Birdwood was a ‘digger with stripes’, whose character allowed him to transcend rank, as in the yarn about him talking to a group of high ranking British officers in the Strand.

A digger slouches past, uniform disheveled, fag end dangling from the corner of its mouth and, characteristically, failing to salute the officers. The British officers are outraged and ask Birdwood if he is going to reprimand the soldier. Birdwood replies that while they might not mind being told off in the strand, he certainly does!³

The larrikin values, attitudes and actions of the diggers were manifested and celebrated in many other yarns and in vast amounts of verse and song.⁴

The Anzac Tradition

Fabricated from the telegraphic address of ‘Australian & New Zealand Army Corps’, the acronym ‘ANZAC’ rapidly became the neologism ‘Anzac’. This ‘magic little word’, as a journalist explaining the term described it in 1916⁵, was quickly enshrined in Federal government legislation. In the first *Anzac Bulletin* of July, 1916, a London-produced news-sheet issued by authority of the High Commissioner for Australia, the beginning of the institutionalised Anzac tradition was heralded.

Under the War Precautions Act a regulation was proposed to ensure that the term ‘ANZAC’ could not be used for trade, professional or any commercial purpose. The acting Attorney-General of the time, Mr Mahon, stated in Parliament ‘that the government would not recognise the right of any person to monopolise a word which, on account of the valiant deeds of the Australian and New Zealand Forces, had become a word full of meaning to Australians’.⁶

The ‘magic little word’ became the name by which the AIF at Gallipoli was known, as well as the name of the place itself. It also became the official brand of the preferred national mythology it invoked, a mythology of loyalty, duty, sacrifice and nation. The word was

protected by legislation and remains so to this day, no better indication of its official status.

Importantly, although Anzac has an official ideological placement it continues to invoke and motivate the more demotic folk character, or stereotype, of the digger, the essential hero of the myth.

Anzac almost immediately came to stand for the official version of Australian identity, as refracted through the military experiences of its demotic representative, the digger.

In Anzac the digger appears as a brave, resourceful fighter who answers the call of duty and sacrifices himself unquestioningly for the good of his country. This image was sanctified in the Australian War Memorial’s Hall of Memory and many other official war memorials around the country.

But all this was somewhat at odds with the digger’s own idea of himself as a knockabout, down-to-earth, anti-authoritarian, everyday bloke just getting on with a messy job that needed doing. He liked brawling, swearing, drinking, gambling, fornicating and, when the mood took him, fighting the enemy.

So we are dealing with two traditions – the institutionalised tradition of war memorials, of Anzac Day and the folk tradition of the digger.

These two traditions are the two poles of the armature that powers the mythology that we call Anzac.

Anzac Day

Despite, or because of, their contradictions and ambiguities, these two traditions come together in the powerful complex of custom and belief that is Anzac Day. The 24-hour period of public spectacle and semi-private observance perfectly mirrors the essentials of the two traditions.

The day often begins with a post-figuration of the original 1915 Gallipoli landing. At many returned services clubs there is what is often known as a ‘gunfire breakfast’ involving the symbolic breaking of bread and the taking of a tot of alcohol, usually rum. This is a reenactment of the last meal of the Anzacs before taking to the landing boats for their rendezvous with myth.

The next event is a ceremony at dawn, usually known as ‘the dawn service’, though the religious element is usually low-key or absent. Dawn services take place in communities around the country and abroad, large and small, and are considered by many Australians to be the quintessential expression of Anzac and nation. There are numerous legends surrounding the first dawn service, which is variously claimed by WA, Queensland and NSW.

Unlike the march later in the morning, the dawn service originated as a spontaneous folkloric response to the need for appropriate commemorative modes in the 1920s within a nation devastated by the loss of what was often called ‘the finest flower’ of its youth in four years of bloody insanity. It is a low-key, simple and mostly silent observance that participants and observers usually find deeply moving.

It is an act of simultaneous commemoration and celebration that, reinforced by the experiences of World War 2 and subsequent conflicts, is arguably the single most important moment on the Australian calendar. It is certainly considered more important than the official national day of January 26. As usual with significant rituals, its origins are also contested through various folk traditions that seek to privilege one state or another as its progenitor.

Later in the morning the official antipodes of the dawn service takes place. ‘The march’ is a parade of veterans, sometimes their families, old enemies and, it increasingly seems, just about anyone else, with any link to any of Australia’s military activities. It includes bands, flag-waving, march-pasts and speeches by politicians, dignitaries, and the military and, again in a muted way, the clergy.

It is the great public spectacle, parading the nation’s heroes – the diggers – for all to see, wonder at and acknowledge.

It also draws in the children and grandchildren of those heroes who often march with their ancestor’s medals. Even old enemies and women are now represented on the march as the original protagonists pass away.

The march is over by midday or earlier, sometimes followed by subsequent smaller customary observances such as the cross of sacrifice, the planting of plastic flowers to represent the dead and other similarly folkloric activities that are often peculiar to particular places and their communities. Noon also signals the end of the day’s official activities and the start of the unofficial and convivial elements of Anzac that celebrate the demotic strand of the mythology.

The afternoon of Anzac Day is characterized by reunions of old comrades, the taking of food and, sometimes too much drink. The old yarns are again swapped, perhaps with a few beery choruses of the soldier songs appropriate to their war.

The ‘one day of the year’ is the day on which the otherwise illegal gambling game two-up, will be played while the police, traditionally, turn a blind eye.

Two-up is a folk game of venerable lineage that became particularly associated with the troops at Gallipoli and has ever since been an integral element of the digger tradition and so of Anzac Day. Its brief tolerance on Anzac day is a classic example of cultural inversion in which the otherwise illegal becomes temporarily legal and is allowed to be turned upside down for a few hours within the liminal framework of the Anzac Day rituals.

This then, is a broad overview of the essential formal and informal elements of the two traditions and their simultaneously commemorative and festive display each April 25. Together they constitute the complex mythology we call simply 'Anzac'.

Anzac locks in the whole society and culture, from the official top to the informal grassroots and embraces both folklore and history, gluing together individual emotion, family, nation, commemoration and festivity. There Anzac is thus, like any mythology, a necessary construct that explains, validates and concretizes the usually unspoken but deeply held attitudes and values that most Australians feel typify their nation.

Australia's Anzac mythology has not only maintained its central place as the national myth

but has even been able to expand its power. This has come about through a number of interrelated trends and strategies in which the folkloric has been highly influential. Particularly important has been the ability of the mythology to operate not only as institutional, state-sanctioned tradition but also to continue to invoke its folkloric elements.

Chief among these has been the connections between the local, the state and the national significance of Anzac in ways that are highly meaningful for many, perhaps most, of those who wish to think of themselves as 'Australian'. I will support this by brief reference to a study of Anzac-related activities in Western Australia, undoubtedly the Commonwealth's most reluctant member state.

Anzac Cottage

One manifestation of Anzac and the digger is a longer-term example that provides a very useful longitudinal study of the two traditions – both at their inception, as they developed over time and how they have in recent years continued to invoke and so continue the power of Anzac.⁷

Western Australia's earliest Great War memorial is an unassuming suburban structure known as 'Anzac Cottage'. Its building was initiated in late 1915 through donations of land, money, goods

and labour. It was constructed, it is claimed, in just one day in February 1916 as a home for an Anzac hero and family to inhabit forever. I have written about this in more detail but today want to look briefly at the way in which this early expression of the national, state and local gratitude for the sacrifice of the Anzacs – as well as the subsequent iterations and folklore of the mythology - are enshrined and perpetuated through this community memorial.



Above: Anzac Cottage derelict in 1916

After a lengthy history in which the occupying family raised the Australian flag emblazoned with 'Anzac' each Anzac Day dawn, the cottage fell into decay from the 1970s. After a number of legal battles over ownership, it was eventually vested in the state government, which offered it to the RSL.



Top: Anzac Cottage restored, c. 1998

Above: Reopening of the Cottage 20 April 1997

The RSL declined and so it was offered to the VVAWA - the 'Last Anzacs', as they call themselves - who gladly accepted the building, being in need of premises for their work.

In partnership with a local community heritage

group the cottage was restored with Lottery funds and has, in the process, become a good example of the continuity, adaptability and power of the Anzac mythology.

It is a mythology that is able to accrete and incorporate new elements over time in a variety of national, state and in this case, very local, settings. The subsequent development of the cottage involved a new synthesis of folkloric and mythic elements of Anzac and the digger that made a direct connection with Gallipoli, through the Second World War and the Vietnam War and since. This involved a combination of elements drawn from the two traditions and fused with local concerns and activities, Biblical allusions, relics and representations of Gallipoli, together with sparsely articulated but powerful notions of national identity, as briefly outlined in the following points.

- 1) The voluntary and charitable aspects of the local 'busy bee' and its connection to a strong sense of community purpose. Just as the cottage was originally built through goodwill and voluntarism, so its restoration also involved individuals, organizations and businesses.



Above: 'Busy Bees' clear the bush block that will become Anzac Cottage⁸



Above: Drays full of donated building supplies leave Perth for the Anzac Cottage building site, February 1916.

- 2) The erection of a house in one day. The Biblical connections of raising a house in one day were consciously invoked at its construction and have remained an important element of its local

folklore. This is an example of the characteristic ability of Anzac to evoke the sacred through the secular.⁹



Above: Local residents perform voluntary preparatory work for the restoration of Anzac Cottage.



Above: The laying of the foundation stone

3) The modified Australian flag was and, in its modern copy, is, a revealing metaphorical conflation of the official and the folkloric that is an important part of the cultural energy that fuelled the Anzac mythology.



Above: Progress on the building by 2pm



Above: Raising of the 'Anzac' flag

4) The symbolic power of the names Gallipoli and Anzac, and the motifs that were originally part of the Cottage's decoration also partook of this metaphor.

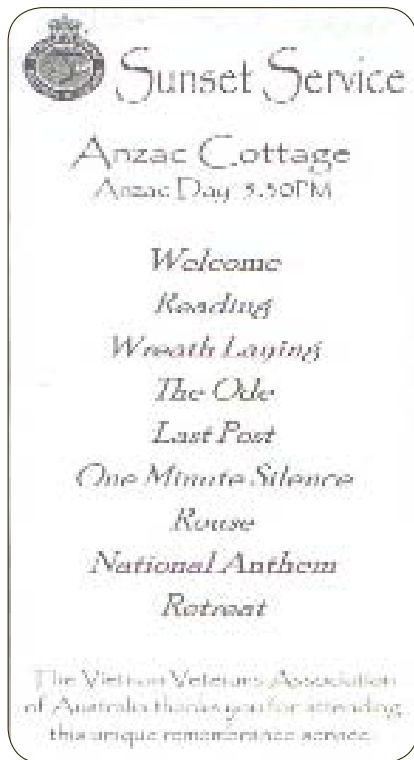


Above: The only surviving Gallipoli feature restored and replaced 1998

5) As mentioned, the Lone Pine seedlings are tangible links with the originary site of the Anzac mythology. When Anzac Cottage was officially re-opened a wooden box containing Lone Pine Seedlings mysteriously turned up as an anonymous donation to the memorial.

6) Finally, that most characteristically simple element of Anzac Day, the Dawn Service (wreath laying, playing of the 'Last Post', a short reading, nothing religious) was appropriated and adapted into a 'Sunset Service'¹⁰, again forging the links with all that Anzac, Gallipoli and the digger

signify. On Anzac Day, 1995, a Dawn Service was held at the Cottage, attracting considerable television and press coverage.



Above: Local flyer for the 2002 'Sunset Service, Anzac Day.

As a result, numerous corporations, businesses and individuals offered to donate goods and services to the restoration project. Because the Vietnam Veterans had other commitments on Anzac Day, it was decided from 1996 to hold a version of the Dawn Service at the cottage at

sunset, thereby establishing a new local tradition that at once acknowledged the local and state associations of the memorial and also and firmly located it within the national mythology.

It could be argued that much of this is mythology, romanticisation, even sentimentality. But even if it is it demonstrates the combination and recombination of these mythic elements that continue to mean so much to so many Australians. And it reveals how the local, the state and the national can be linked, invoked and perpetuated through the mythology of Anzac, that powerful collusion of folklore and history.

Anzac Cottage evokes the essentials of the national mythology. These are the originary site of the myth, Gallipoli; the heroic digger and his connection with family and the local community. It also links these with incipient notions of nationhood that were in embryonic form in 1915-16 and which have since developed through successive wars and further iterations of the digger and Anzac.¹¹ These subsequent iterations are also embedded in the meanings of Anzac Cottage, most powerfully and contemporaneously through its habitation by veterans of the Vietnam War. Thus, this local memorial resonates of all the history and folklore that has occurred since the genesis of

the mythology and of all the powerful meanings that have been infused into the words 'Anzac', 'digger' and 'Gallipoli'. History and folklore are the glue that holds this all together, bonding the local, the familial and the national.¹²



Above: Cover of the Anzac Cottage souvenir booklet, 1916.

Folklore and History

The examples I have given here raise important questions about folklore and history. The relationship between the two is a difficult and contested one, not only as events occur and are folklorised but as historians and folklorists rather differently approach interpreting them.

It is the historian's job to dissolve myth, to seek the evidence and to develop an interpretation of the evidence to produce the 'truth' – or at least a

version of truth called 'historical truth', essentially a rational and logical reading of the available, mostly documentary, evidence. Once this has been done, the mythology that may have built up around that evidence is discarded, consigned to the category of trivial and inaccurate nonsense known as 'folklore'.

In order to understand the continued potency of constructs like Anzac and their profound ability to move people, we also need to understand the traditions that make up a significant part of the mythology. We need to analyse its romance, its sentimentality, its silences as well as its sounds and observe it operating – particularly in its conjunctions and collisions with history. This is the cultural space where mythologies are made and perpetuated.

Understanding this allows us to better understand why Anzac, with all its historical and mythic ambivalence, continues to move Australians in small local groups like those associated with Anzac Cottage and much larger groups like those observing dawn services in Australia and elsewhere in the present and, as looks likely, well into the future.

Endnotes

1. Downing, W., *Digger Dialects*, 1919. Interestingly, the Australian folk speech term for

a New Zealander appears to originate during World War 1, being first recorded in 1916. This is the first time that large numbers of Australians and Kiwis had come face to face.

2. For details of the sources for this yarn, see *Inventing Anzac*, p. 184, note 32.

3. Fair, R (comp), *A Treasury of Anzac Humour*, 1965, p. 11. Also Wannan, W., *Dictionary of Australian Folklore*, Ringwood, 1987, p. 184.

4. For examples see Seal, G (ed), *Echoes of Anzac: The Voice of Australians at War*, Lothian, 2005.

5. *The Daily News* (Perth) April 14, 1916, p. 1.

6. *Anzac Bulletin* No 1, July 8, 1916, p.4.

7. For a more detailed discussion see Seal, G., *Inventing Anzac: The Digger and National Mythology*, chpt. 10 'The Lost Memorial'.

8. All period photographs are from the souvenir booklet for the erection of Anzac Cottage, 1916.

9. Seal, G., 'The Sacred Secular of Anzac', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 91, 2007

10. Established in 1996.

11. The image on the front cover of the souvenir booklet for Anzac Cottage is taken from the then recently-published *Anzac Book*. That work featured a colonial soldier with bayonet rampant in front of a British flag. The change to an Australian flag in the Cottage booklet is a significant one. (The drawing is attributed to Alfred Levido, the architect who also designed Anzac Cottage.

12. One folkloric element of the myth is significantly missing. Two-up is not played at

Anzac Cottage. I suggest that this is because the game is associated with the demotic afternoon festivities of Anzac rather than with the more sombre morning remembrance. As the Sunset Service is meant to mirror the Dawn Service and its serious modes, two-up is not appropriate. See *Inventing Anzac* for further argument on the official/folkloric structure of Anzac Day.