

# Community meaning and heritage of Western Australian war memorials.

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## **Introduction**

A significant recent feature of Australian cultural life has been the rise of commemoration manifest in new monuments devoted to war remembrance. Examples include the new Australian War Memorial in London opened in November 2003 and the extensive addition to Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance in the same year. In Western Australia commemorative keenness has been apparent in large and impressive memorials such as the HMAS Sydney Memorial in Geraldton (November 2001) and the controversial Mandurah War Memorial completed in April 2005. While recent memorials have been constructed to commemorate civilian tragedies, such as the Bali Bombing in 2002, the majority of new memorials still commemorate wars or associated events. Western Australia is replete with memorials that celebrate Australian involvement in wars during the twentieth century, providing significant environments for on-going commemorative focus and ceremony. In this context, this chapter outlines a contemporary academic study of war memorials in Western Australia which attempts to uncover their past and present community meaning and the significance of their heritage, design and commemorative use. Specifically, the chapter discusses the proposed innovative theoretical framing used in the research and how this might work in practice using a local memorial, the Canning War Memorial, as a case study.

War memorials have been the physical focus of war commemoration in Australia since the war in South Africa from 1899-1902. However it has been memorials to the First and Second World Wars that have dominated the Australian landscape - lately joined by those commemorating Korea, Malaya, Borneo, Vietnam and the Gulf Wars. Fuelled by the *Australia Remembers* campaign of 1995 and the contemporary rise in pilgrimages to Gallipoli, Australians appear intent on recovering a national story and identity through the phenomenon of Anzac. On the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, the *Australia Remembers* campaign was a controversial but successful consciousness raising effort by the Keating Government to promote the idea of an independent national identity forged in war. The concept of Anzac looms large in the Australian national consciousness. Born in the carnage of the Gallipoli campaign in 1915, Anzac, as a nationally binding spirit of bravery, duty and sacrifice, still has the power to motivate Australians. In many respects Anzac has the elements of a civil religion – especially in its forms of commemoration and ritual. Australia and New Zealand consider Gallipoli as a “coming of age” when both showed their mettle as sovereign countries on the world stage.<sup>1</sup> “The power of Anzac is its ability to connect the potent notions of community, nation and war” (Seal 2004, vii).

While there have been very good recent academic studies of Australian war memorials and commemoration such as Ken Inglis's *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape*, little has focussed on Western Australia (Inglis 2005).<sup>2</sup> So far, studies on Western Australian have concentrated on

inventories of war memorials rather than critical research. To answer this deficiency academics from Curtin University and the state branch of the Returned and Services League (RSL), which is the foremost Australian service organisation for ex defence force people, have a joint project to uncover the community meanings of war memorials and to re-locate them as significant heritage. This is a three year study called *Remembering the Wars: Community Significance of Western Australian War Memorials*. The project will also address a parallel concern of the RSL about the need for public education of the role of memorials as instruments of citizenship and their future treatment and conservation. No uniform informed framework for the management of war memorials currently exists in Western Australia resulting in many memorials receiving less than sympathetic treatment.

The Canning memorial discussed in this chapter is part of a larger pilot study involving two other related memorials, the Victoria Park War Memorial and the Canning Districts and Victoria Park RSL Sub-branch war memorial. The pilot study was initiated to help refine the proposed methodology and the memorials were chosen for convenience – they are all in relatively close proximity to each other, used by the same RSL sub-branch and offer an interesting ground for study.

### **The Project**

To help guide the project we ask several questions - what are the connections between the material characteristics of Western Australian war memorials and practices of memorialisation? Are there specific and local emotional relationships between memorials and community or individual practices of remembrance? Have these changed over time as the meanings of these memorials change? The project also asks how the design and symbolism of war memorials relate to these issues given that there is traditionally an intimate association between the architectural and decorative symbolism of memorials and the messages they are meant to convey.

More particularly the project advances the use of ‘cultural biography’ of war memorials as a novel and innovative way of uncovering the meanings of memorials over time. This genealogical approach extends the current historical study methods of memorials which tend to document the point of origin rather than a life history. To be fair, such studies do exist in formal heritage assessments in Western Australia. However, these tend to document fabric changes over time for the purpose of establishing physical integrity rather than ongoing relationships between a monument and the community.

The research is limited to monumental memorials that have ritualistic purpose. In Australia – as elsewhere in the British Commonwealth and the USA– there are other forms of commemorative objects including honour boards which record the names of those that served – usually hung in a local office or hall – and buildings accorded the title of “memorial” such as a memorial library or hospital wing.

In physical terms the project requires archival research and oral histories of people who have had contact with their memorials. Forty memorials state-wide have been chosen for assessment. These have been selected through criteria of geographic distribution, design typology, ethnic or political intent, age and diverse settings. Memorial age ranges from 1917 to 2003. The chosen distribution is also

affected by the tendency of memorials to concentrate around more populated regional areas and because many districts built memorial buildings and used honour boards rather than ceremonial memorials. From this sample about ten memorials will be chosen for concentrated study representing the richest sites for study and available documentation. However, in order that the project rests on firm academic grounds the study is supported in a framework of previous commemorative work and methodology which it also seeks to extend.

### **The Framework**

Australian war memorials - uniquely in heritage - are not embedded in “place” but rooted in a collective memory for a distant place and event that may have had profound effects for a local community. In a present landscape they are deliberate and evocative mnemonics which evoke and celebrate the past. However memory and representations of the past are also political matters. Heritage is often born in tension, raising such questions as – whose heritage, whose memory and under what canonical conditions? This applies equally to war memorials. In this context, ideas about memory are crucial. Jay Winter observes that memory and commemoration are part of a world wide phenomena. There is a “memory boom” that is at the heart of many commemorative projects, many of which seek to provide a point of stability as a response to the threats posed by globalisation and national security issues (Winter 2001, 54). In the Australian context, forms of collective remembering such as those around the Anzac tradition coalesce around notions of national identity and indicate the status of memory in a culture which shares a layered – if sometimes uneasy – relationship with history writing and personal memory (Hamilton 1994, 20).

As Tanja Luckins indicates, it is not helpful to frame a study on a singular definition or “knowing” of what memory was and is. Memory and memorialisation is a complex and fluid process which is sometimes located in cultural forms themselves. As she argues, there are subtle shifts between experience and memory that sometimes change, negate or strengthen commemorative memories across generations (Luckins 2004, 18). Therefore our project rests in the broad realm of collective memory theory to assist analysis of the meaning of memorials to communities over time. Originally proposed by Maurice Halbwachs in 1925 it has evolved as a set of ideas that memory is in part a social phenomenon, - not just psychological. Collective memory theory stresses the socially shared representations of the past rather than its institutional and political uses. In this context history is “constructed out of memory – traces, oral tales, written narratives and repetitive rituals with high emotional value for participants” (Hamilton 1994, 92). There are many complexities surrounding the notion of collective remembrance, with ambiguity and contestation at the heart of the process (Winter and Sivan 1999, 9). In this context Pierre Nora argues places like war memorials are sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) whose purpose is to “...stop time and block the work of forgetting ... to immortalise death, to materialise the immaterial...” (Nora 1989, 19).

In particular, we are using and developing the key work of Alex King on British memorials of the Great War (King 1998). Traditional responses to the study of memorials stress the architectural symbolism used to convey ideas and emotions – associations such as the cross to convey sacrifice or the funerary connotations of

the cenotaph and obelisk. King has approached the problem of the meaning of war memorials by acknowledging that – beyond traditional symbolism - there is difficulty in connecting the design and planning of war memorials with the original intentions that they were meant to convey. However he notes that, despite the fact that they were the sites of contested, multiple and ambiguous meanings, a united public observance emerged. He argues that to make adequate sense of memorials it is superficial to merely reveal the meaning of underlying symbolism, and that it is also necessary to “describe the process by which people came to see meaning in them” (King 1998, 11). Local interpretations were *elaborations* of the symbols where these elaborations were contingent on specific environments.<sup>3</sup> The creation of memorials was a reconciliation of conflicting communal intentions and desires - a creative process that resulted in new meanings for traditional memorial forms. The production, use and continuing use of memorials have been the focus of collective activity which has not itself proposed making sense of war but has allowed an opportunity for people to express ways of attributing meaning to them. Hence by examining the relationship of community participants in commemoration and the institutional power applied in forming and managing these relationships it is possible to analyse war memorials as a cultural and creative activity.

King’s work is to be taken a step further by exploring the connections between memory practices and the material characteristics of memorials in Western Australia through the notion of “cultural biography”. Originally proposed by Igor Kopytoff this approach seeks to establish how objects are invested with meaning through social interaction (Kopytoff 1986). “The central idea is that, as people and objects gather time, movement and change, they are constantly transformed, and these transformations of person and object are tied up with each other” (Gosden and Marshall 1999, 169). The present significance of an object is the accumulation of a life history of associations with people and events to which it was connected. In this context the meaning of an object, such as a memorial, is a product of its political, social and physical environment and a change in environment results in a change in meaning. We believe that following a memorial through its life history is a novel way to uncover changes in meaning and the relationship of the memorial to community memory practices and the physical aspects of the memorial and help recognise “the role of material culture in the (re) creation of the social identities of people” (MacGegor 1999, 259).

With this background in mind the following section seeks to briefly describe the cultural biography of one particular memorial in the pilot study as a case study to test the efficacy of this genealogical approach. In particular, this biography stresses the connections between the design and setting of the memorial, and its social life.

### **The Canning War Memorial**

As with many community war memorials, this memorial was initiated at grassroots level by the local branch of the Returned Servicemen’s Association who approached the Queens Park Roads Board in 1919 suggesting a permanent memorial to the fallen be erected.<sup>4</sup> During the war, the Roads Board had actively supported recruiting rallies in the Town Hall by presiding over meetings addressed by members of the military. (Recruiting Rally n.d.). Consequently the district volunteered 230 men - nearly all of those available - to the conflict. Forty three

died on active service or afterwards of their wounds. At the instigation of the Roads Board, each contingent was given a rousing send off as they were "...prepared to give all to keep our homes intact, and our womenfolk and children inviolate" (Flyer, 1916). It was perhaps fitting that the Roads Board was active in the commemoration of the dead soldiers.

Whilst there was a general national movement of war memorial construction it was left to local communities to initiate and pay for their memorials. However, in many cases, such as at Canning, it depended on particular personalities to get things moving and the debates over the form of memorialisation were usually dominated by organisations such as the RSL or RSA and local councils peopled by businessmen and other civic elite. This was also the experience in Britain and New Zealand (King 1998) (Maclean and Phillips 1998). The Roads Board at this time included gardeners, shopkeepers, farmers, nurserymen and an estate agent. At Canning, a war memorial committee comprising members of the Returned Soldiers Association (RSA) and the Roads Board was formed and it went about "gathering information on the subject" (Queens Park Roads Board 1919-1921, 15). Unfortunately there is little documentary evidence about the origins of the siting and the chosen appearance of the memorial. Conflict over location and form was often a hallmark of memorial projects in Commonwealth countries including Britain, New Zealand and Canada. (Inglis 2005) (King 1998) (Maclean and Phillips 1998) (Shipley 1987). Western Australia was no exception. For instance the erection of the Wagin war memorial in the south west of the state was positively poisonous over contested opinions on the location of the memorial. The original memorial committee was opposed by a contesting memorial committee championed by the local newspaper who publicly and churlishly withdrew free advertising support for the original committee (Wagin Argus 1925). Likewise, the fate of the State War Memorial in Kings Park hung in the balance in 1925. A section of the community tried to hijack the memorial debate and direct funds towards a new hospital wing enlisting the support of the Premier of the state Philip Collier. This attracted the wrath of the RSL (Listening Post 1925). However, it must be stressed that the level of debate could also be quite benign. In December 1920 the Canning community met in the Town Hall to hear the decision of the memorial committee and to discuss the way forward. There are no records of this meeting but if there were any serious debate it was not reported in the press nor did any person write to the Roads Board complaining of decisions made.

The fact that the committee had retained the services of an architect is interesting as the majority of war memorials in Western Australia were usually designed by local monumental masons or chosen from their war memorial catalogue. The designer, Robert Henry Burnside Downes, was an established architect and engineer who most probably rendered his services gratuitously as was the custom (Richards 1996). At this time there was so much concern about the doubtful aesthetic merit of some community war memorials, that New South Wales, for example, required designs to be vetted by a committee acting under the Local Government Act 1919. Other states established war memorial advisory boards composed of artists and architects who advocated that communities seek professional design help. Although Western Australia was the one state that did not set up an advisory board, published advice on memorial design was available to communities. This included a comprehensive bulletin produced by the NSW Department of Local Government in 1920 and the often re-published variations of advice originally circulated by the Civic Arts Association in London in about 1917

(Department of Local Government 1920) (Civic Arts Association c1917). At Canning, the presentation of a sober professional design may have helped to smooth the decision on what to build and where. The paucity of information on the origins of this memorial points to possible problems with the project when the documentary evidence runs dry. However, the large number of memorials in the initial survey and our present experience suggests that enough material will be found to keep the project secure.

Fundraising for the Canning memorial became a wider community affair through the holding of dances, balls and concerts in the Canning Town Hall on the Albany Road. These were organised by local women reinforcing the view that, as in other parts of Australia, New Zealand and Canada it was women who engaged most closely in fundraising for memorials (Inglis 2005) (Maclean and Phillips 1998) (Shipley 1987).



**Fig. 1** Canning memorial in its original position  
Courtesy Canning Districts Historical Society

The foundation stone was laid by the governor Sir Francis Newdegate in February 1921 and the memorial of Donnybrook stone was completed soon after. The ‘archway’ as it was described in the press, cost £300 - a considerable sum for a small rural community (Western Mail 1921). The memorial was in the form of a gate structure punctured by a pointed arch with the tablets containing the names of those from the district that had died mounted either side. Over the top of the arch in large relief on both sides of the memorial were the words “Lest We Forget”. The arch was located outside the Canning Town Hall on the same axis as the front door, but some distance from it, so that patrons of the Hall would walk the path to the door through the arch. Later two machine gun trophies were mounted on the top of the arch. Trophies were captured guns and other war paraphernalia used as militaristic decoration on Australian war memorials. These were distributed

through the Australian War Museum Committee and state committees in recognition of a community's war effort. Distribution and the number of trophies were regulated by a formula based on the size of population and were often very contentious. War trophies were linked to status and there was anger at the time that the distributors had not given Western Australia its fair share. The local Roads Board was one of the many municipalities that had endorsed a complaint. The district had been awarded only one trophy (Queens Park Roads Board 1919-1921). Perhaps the complaint bore fruit as this allocation was increased to two.

The form of the memorial as an arch was an interesting choice especially since the memorial was to the fallen and did not include all those who had enlisted, as did many other Western Australian memorials. The enlisted and fallen were commemorated on an honour board placed in the entry lobby of the adjacent hall. Oline Richards suggests this is a "victory" arch however I feel that this is unlikely (Richards 1995). The design of the memorial and its status as a memorial to the fallen indicates a more sombre purpose and imagery. Firstly, the monument was originally called a "soldiers memorial arch" (Sunday Times, 1921). Secondly, this interpretation is also supported by the trend at this time to design memorials that avoided glorifying war or presenting a gloating image. D. N. Jeans points out that memorials evoked deep feelings in the Australian community about the appropriate forms that would carry messages into the "symbolic future". In order to avert community friction memorials tended to be rather bland, generally avoiding overt religious symbolism or the glorifying of war (Jeans 1988). This also appears to be the experience in the parallel war memorial phenomenon in Britain and New Zealand where war memorials were open to conflicting interpretation and where any sign of aggression or gloating could attract harsh criticism (King 1998) (Maclean and Phillips 1998).

Jeans comments that memorial forms chosen by communities were subject to more "...complex meanings beyond the conventional arches, obelisks and marble soldiers" (Jeans 1988). The Canning memorial may be seen as triumphal only in terms of heroism and the victory of memory over death. The arch in this case functions as a gate. Gates were sometimes employed as memorials to represent the gates through which the fallen passed through into the hereafter. The power of this symbolism is also attested by Tania Luckins in her study of the gates at Woolloomooloo (Luckins 2004). These were the timber gates to the wharf at Woolloomooloo which were popularly known as "the gates of memory". It was through these gates that soldiers had marched on their way to the transport ships in the First World War. To many mothers and wives this was the last time that they saw their menfolk and they were treated as a memorial. On Anzac Day they became the focus of mourning and attention, festooned with flowers and ribbons, sprigs of rosemary and cards with personal messages to the loved ones that had passed through the gates as soldiers (Luckins 2004). Similarly, although on a larger scale, the Menin Gate at Ypres, Belgium (1927) was conceived by the architect Reginald Bromfield as a memorial arch which replaced the original town gate on the site through which soldiers – including Australian – marched on their way to the Ypres Salient. It has the form of a triumphal arch but this has been appropriated to hold approximately 56,000 names of missing soldiers.

The shape of the Canning arch may have some religious symbolism as a form of Gothic arch – actually a four centred Tudor style arch - but the whole assembly, with its plain flat pilasters, has a Moorish air which might appropriately refer to the

foreign climes where the soldiers fell. In its original setting it had an intense didactic purpose and was situated so that people passed under the large words “Lest We Forget” in both directions. In this context the arch was a constant reminder of the sacrifice of those listed on the tablets to those going to and from the hall and those travelling the Albany Road to the south west of the state.<sup>5</sup>

The local Roads Board appeared content to maintain the memorial and there was no real threat to it except from the cattle which managed to get over the small chain fence protecting the structure. In 1926 additions to the Canning Town Hall decreased the distance between the Hall and the memorial. The extensions coincided with extending the function of the Hall to serve as a picture theatre. Little changed over the years except that the machine guns were removed from the structure in 1940 - ostensibly for security purposes. After the Second World War there was dissatisfaction with the location of the arch. Its close proximity to the Hall was interfering with Anzac Day services and there was minor damage by vandals (Carden 1968). Apparently some of the damage was being caused by the patrons of the picture theatre. Young lovers were smooching against the memorial and the constant rubbing was erasing the soldier’s names. Besides the damage, the local RSL considered that this was disrespectful and not an appropriate way to treat a memorial to the fallen (Parker 2005). It was felt that the time had come to find it a new home.

A memorial fund was set up and the community, including local businesses and groups such as the Boy Scouts, and led by the RSL moved into action. A site on the corner of Albany Highway and Manning road was chosen. This was land originally resumed by the Main Roads Department for truncation purposes. In what appears to have been a significant community based effort, the memorial was disassembled and removed to the new spacious location. Here it was placed on a diagonal axis with the corner of the land facing the junction of the two roads. In front of the memorial a large apron of paving was constructed with rose gardens on each side and a flagpole at the far end on the axis. A small structure to the rear of the memorial was erected to hold tablets inscribed with the names of those who had been killed in the Second World War. The first Anzac service was held here in 1956.



**Fig. 2.** Canning Memorial in new location.  
J Stephens 2005.

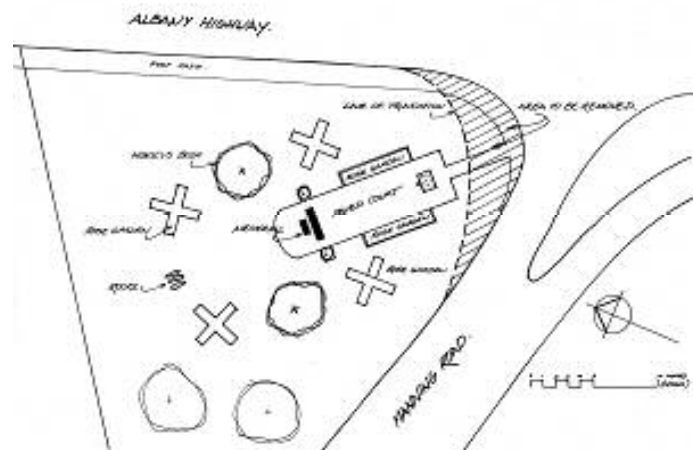
The new setting provided fresh narrative for the memorial. Landscapes are important conveyors of stories and as pointed out by Potteiger and Purinton “[i]t is through narrative that we interpret the processes and events of a place” (Potteiger, M., & Purinton 1998, 6) Landscapes and the objects they contain construct narrative meaning through tropes such metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche. In this context the garden landscape of the Canning memorial narrates meanings about its purpose as a commemorative site. For example it is a synecdoche, troping on a small scale the war loss of the district to the larger loss of life in the nation.

As a metaphor, the arch tropes the notion of an opening where soldiers have passed “to the other side” as previously discussed. Sarah Tarlow believes that metaphors are useful to explain material culture and are a more flexible way of understanding how relationships between objects and concepts are maintained. (Tarlow 1999) As such, it is an abstracted pictorial metaphor that mirrors the gateway to the hereafter as well as masking the true horrors of war and the violent circumstances of soldiers’ deaths. To be a true place of memory and emotional healing, memorials need to mask violence from relatives who depend on the memorial as a focus for their grief and remembrance. Arising from late nineteenth century sensibilities about death the Canning memorial acts as a euphemism for mortality without overt reference to religion. The nature of death was hidden in metaphors such as sleep and journey where the dead were merely “asleep” – with the prospect of waking – or on a journey or ascent to heaven where the bereaved may one day join them. These cultural forms paralleled a closer affinity that Victorians developed with their dead where, by the end of the century, a synchronic relationship had developed between the dead and the bereaved. People had an ongoing relationship with their departed rather than just a future one in heaven (Tarlow 1999). After the First World War these intensified connections between the living and the dead were made even more poignant and important to those whose only connection with the remains of a relative was a memorial and where behind each inscribed name was a real person.

The surrounding garden acts as a frame narrative for the Canning memorial. Emanating from the nineteenth century Park Cemetery Movement in the USA, garden landscapes have long been used in cemeteries and memorial gardens to provide a proper setting for contemplation and remembrance and is tied firmly to the metaphor of resurrection. “Nature is constantly used not only to symbolise hope but also to induce tranquillity, to calm anxiety and fear, a function it fulfilled in war cemeteries as well” (Mosse 1990, 129). Garden memorials heighten the effect of commemoration through the conveyance of tropes of decay and renewal and convey ideas of cyclic regeneration and linkages between the fragility of nature and human existence. (Gough 2004). Further, as Mosse argues, commemorative gardens obscure and transfigure war death by representing it as natural and eternal. As in Britain, the fallen in Australia were associated with the pastoral. For instance the poppy was appropriated as the symbol of renewal and sacrifice and still strongly figures in Anzac Day ceremonies. Its associations come from the growth of red poppies in the battlefields of Flanders and which came to symbolise sacrifice through the shed blood of soldiers and resurrection through their hardy growth over the bodies of the fallen. In Australia it was flowers, at times from home gardens, which were offered in ceremonies at war memorials. Rosemary, as the herb traditionally associated with remembrance, is conspicuously planted at the head of the apron at the Canning War Memorial, which is located and framed in an ordered verdant landscape. This formal organization not only

functionally facilitates the rituals associated with the place but allies the landscape with purity and wholesomeness through the themes of order and efficiency. As an ordered and regulated place this landscape is “anti-disorder”. Mary Douglas offers purity and order as the enemy of disorder, ambiguity and compromise and that the moral ritual conditions of rites depend on correct order. (Douglas 1978). In this context the formal garden at the Canning memorial has the added aspect of a moral order which in turn moralises the rituals that it contains.

Since 1956 the memorial has continually attracted one of the largest Anzac Day gatherings outside the Perth War Memorial in Kings Park and appears to have been a well kept and loved memorial. All seemed well until one day in September 1992 when the State Energy Commission dug a hole in the turf on the site in preparation for further roadwork that would have meant a substantial reduction of the memorial land. The Main Roads Department had plans to truncate the corner but had unfortunately failed to discuss this with the RSL.



**Fig. 3.** Plan of the Canning memorial site.  
J Stephens 2005

The community was naturally angry about the proposal and the RSL was aggrieved that they had not been consulted and that holes had already been dug. It was revealed that the ashes of ex-servicemen and their families had been scattered in the rose bushes and over the lawns. The RSL considered this sacred and consecrated ground. The truncation would also remove so much land as to make Anzac Day services very difficult. It was claimed that dignitaries would be isolated on a median island, tribute bearers would be in the middle of a busy road and wreaths would lie in the gutter. (Canning Times 1992).<sup>6</sup> The Main Roads Department denied the circulated rumours that they had plans to knock down the memorial and apologised for not contacting the RSL but were not going to back off that easily. The Department was reported as saying that they were sorry about the process but as the land was theirs they were going to take 12 metres of it which would not require the memorial to be removed. An official of the department was reported as saying “I can only suggest that if the ground is hallowed with ashes we will remove the turf and replant it somewhere” (The West Australian 1992).

The local RSL was incensed and voted unanimously to take “any steps necessary to stop work proceeding” (The Canning Times 1992). Others waded into the fray including the Canning and Districts Historical Society and their patron local MLA Graham Kierath. The Federal MP Kim Beazley also championed the cause and commissioned his own study on whether the truncation was necessary at all. Letters of complaint were sent to the Premier Carmen Lawrence by the person who uncovered the plan, cemeteries historian Mrs R. A. Watt. A large petition was sent to Parliament. Eventually the Main Roads Department abandoned its planned truncation and settled for a slight modification that actually increased the land on which the memorial stood. If the truncation had proceeded, it could have had serious consequences for the memorial as a heritage object, its recognition as sacred place and its ability to function as a serious focus of commemoration.

The design and planning of the memorial was important for proper observance of Anzac Day rituals and as a setting for an object that represented the mourning of the district. In both locations of the memorial – outside the Canning Town Hall and in its present situation - the idea of an appropriate setting and the proper ceremonial observance of Anzac Day became threatened. In its first location outside the Town Hall it was reasonably certain that the memorial could be moved without significant loss of ritual utility although its role as a gateway might have been compromised. At the new site it gathered a new accruelement of symbols in a prominent landscaped setting with trees and rose gardens that emphasised the symbols of regeneration. Within this landscape, the memorial was given a formal and sensible setting with a large apron in front so that there could be a respectful approach to the memorial with participants lining both sides. The truncation would have removed enough land to make this difficult as participants would not be able to congregate at the head of the apron before proceeding in procession to lay the wreath at the foot of the arch. The setting of the memorial and its gardens would also have been damaged through its close proximity to the corner and reduction of visual impact. In its present setting the memorial is set back from the roads and appears as a contemplative and uncanny landscape amid the cacophony of commercial buildings and car yards.

These aspects are important if the memorial is to retain its power as a sacred place with meaning and presence in the current landscape. Furthermore the potential removal of land was seen as blatant disrespect for the place as commemorative site. The community was angry because the memorial had significance and the proposed works would have changed the setting of the memorial and its power and utility to provide for ritual. It would also have meant that even with the added sanctity of burial the memorial was not valued as heritage by the wider Western Australian community. In this respect the support that the memorial received signifies that the grassroots aspect of Anzac is still a force to be reckoned with.

## **Conclusion**

In the context of the objectives of the *Remembering the Wars* project the cultural biography of the Canning War Memorial reveals a number of interesting aspects. One of the most important is that the memorial was, and still is, a grassroots enterprise underpinned by the continuing phenomenon of Anzac. Another important point is that there has always been a clear relationship between

the physical characteristics of the memorial and its setting and the community that uses it.

A feature of the biography so far is the lack of recorded conflicts over the original design and siting of the memorial. Documents on this area of its history are sparse so that it cannot be said for certain that there were no arguments or political directions. Although the memorial was part of an Australia wide memorial building phenomenon and the larger landscape of national Anzac values, at Canning it had community roots. Sarah Tarlow eschews the claim that memorials were purely the effect of nationalism and that, at a general level, most people were more interested in commemorating loved ones. National forms of commemoration were supported by communities and were not *imposed* by national agendas (Tarlow 1997). This view appears supported at Canning where money for the memorial was secured by the community, as was the design through a local architect. The memorial was a grassroots enterprise with support throughout its history coming from the community even if that community was often represented by vocal and influential groups such as the RSL.

In the original planning of the arch, its purpose as a gateway through which one passed, supported by the words writ large “Lest We Forget”, is obviously stated. Also, the symbolism inherent in the memorial was probably that of an entrance to the “other side” offering a dual symbolism for the living and the dead. This was a departure from the traditional imagery of arches as triumphal structures and is an “elaboration of the symbol” recognised by Alex King in his study of British memorials previously mentioned.

What the cultural biography of Canning memorial shows so far is that there has been a strong relationship between the physical characteristics of the memorial as an arch memorial to the fallen, its siting and its meaning/message to the community. These aspects are highlighted by the relocation of the memorial to the new site and further highlighted by the recent threat to its setting. Removal of the memorial to the new site appears to have come about to avoid physical damage to the structure and damage to its meaning through an inappropriate use and setting - indicating that the community still had significant emotional investment in the structure. Also, communal remembrance practices such as Anzac Day were rendered more difficult in its location in front of the Town Hall endangering commemorative relations between the community and the physical memorial. The new site on corner of Manning Road and Albany Highway fostered a significant change in meanings. In its new setting it took on a much clearer ceremonial function. It was still an arch/gateway but not one that physically encouraged passage through it. The brick paved apron delineated by rose gardens either side clearly marked its ritualistic function and emphasised the memorial as an object of commemorative focus. The formal rose gardens and precisely placed trees that grew up around the memorial reflected new meanings to do with order and regeneration and increased its dramaturgical potential.

This dramaturgical potential is emphasised in the use of the place for Anzac Day ceremonies. As a ritualised place of performance there is no mistaking its purpose, unlike many other Western Australian memorials that have gradually been hemmed in by roads and built works to the point where no ritual of meaning is possible. Canning Memorial is transformed from Henri Lefebvre’s passive representational space into a dynamic landscape of ideology and what Brian

Osborne calls an “ideologically charged site” (Osborne 1998, 436) closely tied to the ideals of nation and citizenship that Anzac conveys. As a background to Anzac ceremonies the landscape engenders new stories through each ceremony. In some respects the constant regeneration of vegetation at such places not only has connotations of the regeneration of life but through their close monitoring and gardening care, the constant regeneration of commemorative forms such as the Anzac ceremony. This means that the ordered arrangements of memorials and their preciseness add to their power to convey messages and impose a moral condition. Once ordered patterns are destroyed such as in road realignment or an unsympathetic development the monument has less power to support rituals and convey messages and therefore its moral condition may be compromised.

Intimate connections between the community and the material characteristics of the memorial highlighted by the biography are demonstrated by its continuing function as a well attended ceremonial space and by the vigorous defence of the memorial and its spaces when challenged by the authority of the Main Roads Department in 1992. This indicates that the memorial still has particular meaning for the community who use the place. When community commemorative practice was in danger through the actions of the Main Roads Department the relationship between those practices and the physical setting of the memorial was protected. Although the memory of the original soldiers it was intended to honour may have faded, the memorial still operates as a physical focus of remembrance and identity which is further charged by each ceremony held at the place. In this sense the memorial place is being continually “reconstructed in the context of the present” (Osborne 1998, 432). The memorial is now experienced as an interactive theatre that, reinforced by the formal arrangement of its elements, is a stage set for commemorative drama connecting material characteristics and commemorative practice.



**Fig. 4.** Anzac Day 2005 at the Canning Memorial  
J Stephens 2005

A significant factor in the layering of new meanings is the practice of interring the ashes of ex-servicemen and their families in the gardens. This is an interesting development since it enhances the idea of sacredness. During the truncation furore the WA manager of the Australian War Graves Office revealed that since the

Karrakata War Grave site (the official war cemetery) could not hold ashes, many ex servicemen asked that their remains be scattered at the war memorial in their district (The West Australian 1992). The interring of ashes has occurred at a few memorials in the metropolitan area and it adds an interesting dimension to the war memorial as a sacred place. As Ken Inglis reveals, war memorials in Australia have become sacred places in their own right through the phenomenon of Anzac and its linkages to Australian identity. Applied to war memorials the term is not new. It is often invoked when memorials are under threat and owes its arguments to similar claims by Aborigines for their sacred places (Inglis 2005). The ex servicemen from the Canning Districts and Victoria Park RSL Sub-branch indicated that they were also inspired by Aboriginal claims of sacred places in their defence of the place - especially since the ground had been scattered with the ashes of diggers and their families (Hill and Jiminez 2005). In this context the Canning memorial takes on the added role and meaning of a war cemetery - a landscape that could be considered twice sacred and a landscape that morphs from a memorial into a shrine.

Questions remain about what this new understanding of the memorial may have on the continued significance of the place as a heritage site and its conservation. It is clear that the present arrangement of the elements of the site produce an authoritative landscape. Even in its current setting amid the detritus of commercial properties it has a powerful presence. In this instance it is not only the memorial that must be protected but the spirit of the landscape as well.

From this case study we can say that using the cultural biography methodology for the *Remembering the Wars* project has sound potential making connections between commemorative practice and the physical characteristics of memorials and their settings. It also provides the means of examining how new meanings can attach themselves to established formal memorial landscapes. Studies on the two other memorials in the pilot study previously mentioned, of which the Canning Memorial is a part, have revealed quite different biographies and relationships between commemorative practice and the material characteristics of these places. Under these conditions the project promises to reveal the rich tapestry of commemoration in Western Australia and perhaps provide a better understanding of the intimate connections between the community and their memorials.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Turkey also regards Gallipoli as a great national trial which ultimately led to the emergence of their modern nation.

<sup>2</sup> K.S Inglis in “Sacred Places” mentions a number of Western Australian memorials but does not provide focus on the state’s experience. The only serious study has been by Oline Richards (Richards 1995) and (Richards 1996)

<sup>3</sup> It is acknowledged that there may be differences in these elaborations between Britain at the centre of empire and Western Australia at the edge. However the framework provided by King highlights and celebrates those differences, which is a quality useful to the study.

<sup>4</sup> The original Roads Board district was Queens Park and the memorial was called the Queens Park Soldiers Memorial. In 1921 the district was divided and the Roads Board changed its name to the Canning Roads Board and memorial to the Canning War Memorial. To save confusion the memorial is referred to as the Canning War Memorial throughout the chapter.

<sup>5</sup> Arches have been employed in other Western Australian Memorials such as at the Collie War Memorial Park where it is a gateway into the park. It has the names of wars where soldiers fell on both sides of the arch structure.

<sup>6</sup> Mrs. R.A. Watt, a National Trust cemeteries historian was reported as saying this in the *Canning Times*, 12th September 1992. It was Mrs. Watt that initially alerted the RSL to the Main Roads intentions.