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Over the last decade we have both discovered Anzac in a dualistic fashion. At an academic level we have read, researched, written and taught. At a more personal level we have both explored our family histories, visited some of the sacred sites of Anzac and attended dawn services, amongst other activities.

Because of this we've often pondered the question of how to balance a healthy cynicism towards a key national legend with due reverence to the Anzacs. For both of us this has been a personal question, but we think it's one that Australian society more generally might profitably consider.

Academic history has exposed a considerable gap between Anzac the legend and Anzac the reality. We now know that the great majority of the first Anzacs were not from the bush, that the qualities of mateship and egalitarianism, and even the fighting prowess, of the AIF have been overplayed. We also now know that the larrikin behaviour of the Australian troops extended to the highest rate of desertion of all the armies on the Western Front, some unpleasant misbehaviour during training in Cairo, and even to mistreatment or murder of prisoners.

Historians have also pointed out some of the negative effects of the Anzac legend itself. Marilyn Lake has alleged that the idea that men gave birth to the nation was not only a physical impossibility, but something that has bequeathed to us the idea that Australia is the product of white men, thus downplaying the role of women and of migrants of a non-Anglo-Celtic background. To this we might add the dangers of understanding war as an exercise in good citizenship, or nation-building, when war is about the moral enormity of killing people, and the mortal reality of other people trying to kill us.

But there is an enormous popular resistance to anything that challenges the Anzac mythology, and it comes not just from ex-servicemen and their representatives, nor just from right-wing media commentators, but from students and, it appears, most of the public. The legend makes for a more affirming story, so information that questions it, and the messengers or researchers who present that information, are often treated as heretical, as blasphemers of the holy name of Anzac.

This is a problem we run into every year when trying to discuss Anzac with students. We look at the war experience, at the rise of the legend, its distortions and arguably negative effects, before looking at its sacred dimensions, its positive sides and its benefits. It is, we like to think, a very even-handed and carefully calibrated lecture, but every year there are ruffled feathers. "You're destroying our history" we've been told, and on one memorable occasion an unfortunate student, aware of Martin's background, thumped the table in a tutorial and exclaimed "What really gets on my goat is having a NEW ZEALANDER come and tell us about Anzac!!"

This resistance to critical understandings of Australia's war experience is more than unfortunate - it's potentially catastrophic. War matters, and with Australian troops in Iraq, Afghanistan, East Timor and various other places in recent times, and who knows where in the decade or two to come, Australian society needs realistic understandings of what war is about, and what it can do to us.

Many of the "positives" are stressed every year - lessons in courage, endurance, self-sacrifice, bravery and so on, but other important lessons we could (and need to) learn are smothered in triumphal rhetoric. There is much Australia could learn from the history of ethnic tension in wartime, for example, particularly in relation to anti-

Muslim feeling, or the need to be cautious when committing ourselves to our allies' causes, or the difficulties of repatriation, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, cruelty to the enemy and so on. Through the smokescreen of the Anzac, such lessons can be hard to see.

The resistance to critical examination of Australia's war experience is pointless, because getting it right needn't cheapen Australians' reverence for the Anzacs. There is no need to carry on about them as if they were the greatest fighting force in history, or to pretend that they were all physically mighty men from the bush that were near invincible, that they gave birth to a nation, and so on.

It should be enough that 420,000 Australians volunteered to fight in World War One, that 330,000 or so of those actually did so, and that of those, 60,000 or so were killed, and another 160,000 wounded. And so on for other wars in which Australians have fought.

Their sacrifices, and their bravery, along with their fears, hopes, suffering, failures and triumphs, ought to be sufficient for a meaningful story. If their stories are to speak to maximum effect, we should recognise that these were ordinary people in the most challenging and most awful of circumstances. That includes recognising their failings and shortcomings as well as their successes and triumphs. Historical accuracy and national reverence can _ and should _ sit alongside each other easily enough.

But to lament that people will not listen to us will simply not do. Teaching people about Australia's war history, especially in times like these, seems to us to go to the heart of academics' social purpose. Consequently, we think historians need to take some steps to meet the general reader or the public half-way, to search for areas of commonality rather than difference.

Firstly, historians of Anzac often seem to have little sympathy with the realities of the war experience for Australian soldiers. Cultural historians, in particular, often talk about Anzac as a discourse, a set of mythologies created by men such as CEW Bean, one which has become a central feature of Australian public memory through the powerful agency of the Returned Services League, the Australian War Memorial and a sympathetic political right.

There is an element of truth in this, but the Anzac legend can't be so easily divorced from the realities that underlie it and which gave rise to it. Those very real human experiences, those moments of heroism and triumph, tragedy and farce, success and failure, deserve consideration for what they are - meaningful and real human experiences.

It is also our view that historians should always approach the subject of the Anzac legend and the Anzac war experience with an appropriate degree of humility.

Historians have a legitimate role in questioning myths and legends, but this doesn't entitle them to play tricks on the dead or to be disrespectful.

We are treading on what is for many people sacred ground. We tread lightly when we deal with Aboriginal issues or religious matters in our history; and so should we tread lightly on the turf of Anzac. Reducing it all to a set of discourses, or concentrating solely on the distortions in the Anzac legend, strikes us as disrespectful, and does nothing to maintain the interest of the broader public.

We should also recognise the virtues of the Anzacs, and ensure that we give them due credit. While we should not deny, for example, that many of the original Anzacs enlisted not so much out of patriotic fervour as out of a desire for adventure, and even for the money, we should recognise that many of them did enlist from the highest motives of patriotism and civic duty.

They fought in awful conditions, often heroically, and sadly, on roughly 60,000 occasions in the First World War and on 100,000 occasions throughout the twentieth century across a number of wars, it cost them their lives. And let's remember too, Vietnam apart, that they won. The servicemen and women who have fought for Australia have helped defeat some pretty unpleasant forces, notably Nazism and Japanese militarism in World War Two. That achievement, and those motives and experiences should be recognised and given fair credit. This is ordeal and sacrifice, and triumph, on such a scale that in its presence we can hardly be anything but humble.

We should also recognise that if the Anzac legend has had some arguably negative effects, it has also had many positive ones. If returned servicemen and women have been promoted to a lofty place in Australian culture through the Anzac legend, it might fairly be argued that they deserve it, and that the Anzac legend has functioned well as a way of giving due respect and tribute. The accolades accorded to the returned servicemen after World War One in particular also helped to bring them back into the fold, to suppress disturbing memories, and to give returned servicemen a sense of affirmation, important for their own mental well-being and for the society that was trying to reintegrate them.

And what of the values associated with the Anzac legend, such as mateship, egalitarianism and a fair go, along with those more generic ones mentioned earlier, such as courage, endurance, self-sacrifice and bravery? Historians and cultural theorists have pointed out how in the past these values could exclude as much as include. But are these not reasonable ones to hold to? As historians we know that these values did not always reflect reality, and even now remain problematic, but they still seem useful nonetheless. We could do a lot worse.

We might also remember that the legend has shown a remarkable capacity to adapt to broader changes in Australian society over time - and historians are well placed to understand and explain this. In the 1950s the commemoration of the Anzac legend lauded the Anzacs as the finest of the white, British 'race' and celebrated empire, two notions which have gradually disappeared from the public recognition of the legend and which now appear somewhat anachronistic.

Since Australia has become more multicultural the values associated with Anzac have become more generalised and less specific to the past and have, on balance, become more inclusive. We even allow other nationalities to march on Anzac Day, which is, all things considered, a pretty magnanimous gesture.

And finally, we might consider, criticism notwithstanding, whether the cold light of rationalism and reason is the best way to "get" the whole Anzac legend. It might be our duty as historians to take a critical look at legends such as Anzac, but perhaps too, we should be more open to appreciating its sentimental element, and should allow the spiritual and emotional elements of Anzac to flourish alongside the actual history.

Many of the places associated with Australia's war history have a tremendously strong spiritual element about them. We might deconstruct this and analyse it, pull it apart and see where it comes from, but perhaps too we should be more open to acknowledging it on its own terms.

When one visits the many cemeteries on the Somme containing Australian graves, or or the township of Villers-Bretonneux itself including its moving statue of Marianne, the French national symbol, mourning over the dead Australians, or when one reads the names and ages on the headstones of Australian graves, or the pithy messages from grieving loved ones (such as 'Gone, and all the light of our life gone with him'), it's just a little difficult to believe that the rationalism of the historian is always the best way to approach it.

It is certainly not the only way. We would challenge anyone to visit these places, to engage directly with the Anzac legacy, and deny its emotional, even sacred, element.

What we do think we need to do, is to close this gap between the cynics and the sacred _ or at very least, to allow the differing understandings of Anzac to coexist peacefully, and indeed, to complement each other.

If we discard some of the overblown and unsustainable elements of the legend, if we get the facts right, and if we also acknowledge and preserve its emotive and spiritual aspects, then Anzac will be strengthened, will be more unifying for our society, and will be more instructive in times when we need the lessons, good and bad, from our war history.