



# Why the Anzac myth matters

GALLIPOLI is an enigma at the heart of the Australian psyche. The initial idea – from Winston Churchill – was for a naval thrust through the Dardanelles and when that failed the hastily assembled “Plan B” was storming the slopes. The result was a disaster. Nearly 8000 young Australians were killed before British High Command called the whole thing off and the survivors silently stole away.

It was an ignominious defeat, yet we celebrate it as a vital element of what it means to be an Australian. And though I have written two books and edited another that touch on the Gallipoli campaign, the true meaning of Anzac has often seemed just out of reach.

As my generation was entering our 20s we used to celebrate the fact that each year the march attracted fewer participants and spectators. That was the 1960s when the threat of nuclear war made Gallipoli seem like ancient history. Our fathers never talked about World War II; and the non-nuclear conflict of the day was Vietnam which only added to our revulsion of war in all its forms.

But as the nuclear threat died away and Vietnam passed into history, Anzac reasserted itself and, to our astonishment, young Australians began flocking to Gallipoli’s shore to pay homage to the fallen. I simply couldn’t understand why.

Then I read a book by Canberra’s Bill Gammage, first published in 1974 by the ANU Press. Titled “The Broken Years”, it drew upon the letters, the diaries and

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the memories of the men themselves, but gathered and edited in such a way that in the reading you were back there on those blood-stained, fly-blown hills sharing the horror, the terror, the rage and the blessed relief to be alive when the battle was done.

But of course, that was just the beginning of the nightmare. The Anzacs reformed their battalions, absorbed the reinforcements, farewelled Johnny Turk and headed for the real enemy: the Germans on the Western Front.

The edition I read was a paperback, which somehow seemed unworthy of its great events and powerful themes. Since then it has never been out of print and – despite the penny-pinching publishers – it has become a genuine Australian classic.

Now, at last, it has received the treatment it so richly deserves. Melbourne University Publishing has created an illustrated edition that is one of the finest examples of the publisher’s art that I have ever encountered. The photos are quite magnificent and beautifully displayed; the maps are a model of clarity, and the design will unquestionably win awards...and all for an astonishing \$50.

But the real value of the book lies in the text. For the first time in my experience it



reveals the reason for the centrality of the Anzac myth in the Australian psyche – not in a single phrase or paragraph, but when you close the final page you just know.

In the epilogue, Bill Gammage writes: “The Great War brought change to the outlook of Australians... for while the boundless eagerness of August 1914 is a world removed from our present time, what began to happen on Gallipoli nine months later is with us yet.”

It is indeed.

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