

ANZAC DAY'S EARLY RITUALS

The RAHS Lesley Muir address, Mittagong, 25 October

2014 Bill Gammage

I never met Lesley Muir, but the Council's choice to name this annual address after her, from so many distinguished historians on its books, is a measure of her service and calibre. To honour her I sought an interest we share, and found it in Lesley's *Canterbury's Boys*, a wonderful record of the First AIF service of 2000 Canterbury district men, plus where possible their civilian lives. She wrote when it was harder than it is now to access First AIF records, and clearly she was a thorough and competent historian, or as she might prefer, historical geographer. So for her I offer this talk on early Anzac Days in Australia. New Zealand too is central to Anzac, but time denies me a chance to report on that here.

Most national holidays in Australia - Australia Day, Empire Day, King's Birthday, Labour or 8 Hour Day - were first promoted by a sectional interest, and only later moved into a national pantheon. Anzac Day began by spontaneous combustion, breaking out in different forms wherever Australians were, and has always mirrored what Australians think about their country, by celebrating or not celebrating, and if they celebrate, how this differs from place to place and year to year.

Since 1916, places large and small have searched earnestly but haphazardly for the right way to mark the day. The search was unprecedented. No other national day marks so much loss for so little triumph, yet so readily became a people's day. Almost everyone feels able to say what Anzac Day should or should not be: solemn or serious, run by clergy or civic officials or the RSL, a holiday and if so what kind, who should participate, should differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics be allowed for and if so how, which hymns if any, what order of march, what should happen afterwards. Countless values, emotions and assumptions contest, and countless home-grown balances are struck.

From 1916 AIF units in Europe and the Middle East marked the day with a march and a church service in the morning, and a carnival, sport, two-up, and celebratory dinner in the afternoon and night. But in Australia in 1916, people divided on whether Anzac commemorations should be held on 25 April or the nearest Sunday, whether there should be a holiday, and whether the day should be for recruiting or remembering, solemn or serious. Who should participate,



Anzacs marching along Macquarie Street 1918 [RAHS Photograph Collection]

who should lead, who should speak, shuffled back and forth across the country and across the years.

Most agreed on a march (usually called a procession until World War 2), but who should march? Where from and where to? What time of day? Again, some opposed a church service, some wanted one but disagreed on its details. Separate services for each denomination? That put church above Anzac. A united service? Where? Who would conduct them? What rituals, what hymns, what prayers? Christian and Jew and Catholic and Protestant would never agree on these things, nor were Protestants of one mind. Sports or carnivals? Some opposed them, some wanted them but disagreed on whether pubs or races with or without betting were suitable.

Small villages and capital cities differed over the day. One or two places held forms of a dawn service in 1916; one or two others didn't have one a century later. Some held events of varying solemnity on 25 April, some on the nearest Friday or Sunday or Monday. Melbourne, and therefore the Commonwealth seated there in 1916, chose, as the Minister for Defence put it, to hold only "informal" celebrations "in a small way". The government was waiting to see, he explained, if 25 April or the day the war ended proved a better day to celebrate. That was a mistake. The King got to hear of it, and on 22 April icily telegraphed the Governor-General: "Tell my people of Australia and New Zealand that to-day I am joining them in their solemn tribute to the memory of their heroes who died in Gallipoli". Panic in Melbourne. There was nothing official there, so the Governor-General and the Governor of Victoria sprinted north to join Sydney's celebrations. They were neither expected nor much accommodated, but allotted a second saluting stand, and amid a crowd of 50-60,000 people largely ignored. Spontaneous combustion had burnt a few fingers.

The Day has now been shepherded towards conformity, yet retains some of its early diversity. What services should be held, by whom, and where? Each place finds its own answer, but in general an RSL branch decides, sometimes and sometimes not allowing clergy to declare the meaning of sacrifice or the importance of memory. Many churches continue to hold special services on 25 April and/or the nearest Sunday, but only for their congregations, not as voices of national commemoration as once they claimed. Should the silence be one minute or two, and should silence or the Ode fall between the Last Post and Reveille (or Rouse, as it has become in some places)? There is no common answer. When should the march be? Afternoon and evening processions have moved to various times in the morning. Where should it finish? Town hall, church, oval and Boer War monument were soon supplanted by that widening spread of Great War memorials which so changed the landscape of the Anzac countries, but not all marches end there – Adelaide's doesn't for example. Who should march? Former enemies, as the Turks did in 1953 and in some places have since? Defence Force contingents not comprising returned men or women? They march now, and they help march organisers, but so do police and council workers, who don't march. Only the

Defence Force marches as an occupation. Next of kin? Most villages and small towns say yes, reflecting community spirit. Bigger places either say no, or confront Adelaide's dilemma, where straggling next of kin groups now out-lengthen any other. They will keep lengthening, until almost everyone is eligible to march: what then? Already the march is as much about ancestor worship as memory. Is this better than no march at all? Perhaps, yet what an Anzac Day it would be, to see the last veteran marching alone, band playing, crowd applauding, symbolically announcing for how long Australia has been at peace.

About the author:

Bill Gammage is an Adjunct Professor in the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University (ANU), researching Aboriginal land management at the time of contact ("1788"). He wrote *The Broken Years* on Australian soldiers in the Great War (1974+), *An Australian in the First World War* (1976), *Narrandera Shire* (1986), *The Sky Travellers* on the 1938-39 Hagen-Sepik Patrol in New Guinea (1998), and *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines made Australia* (2011). He co-edited the *Australians 1938* volume of the Bicentennial History of Australia (1988), and three books about Australians in World War 1. He was historical adviser to Peter Weir's film *Gallipoli* and to several documentaries. He served the National Museum of Australia for three years as Council member, deputy chair and acting chair. He was made a Freeman of the Shire of Narrandera in 1987, a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Social Sciences in 1991, and an AM in 2005.

INVITATION New members' evening

Wednesday 18 March 2015
History House

133 Macquarie St, Sydney 5.00 pm - 7.00 pm

This is a wonderful opportunity for new members to meet RAHS staff, Councillors and other longstanding members.

Come and learn more about the RAHS, its research collections and services for members. More seasoned members who would like to help us welcome new members, are also warmly invited to this event.



RSVP to: admin@rahs.org.au