The Frank MacDonald MM Prize 2014
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Question 2: How closely does the ‘Anzac Legend’ reflect the experiences of individual Australian soldiers who fought during World War I?

The torment: remembering what you left behind and even worse; the prospect that you may never return. Watching the eyes of your comrade’s glaze over, while your mind explodes with horror. Nobody can possibly question the fear, the blood, the heartache, and the terrors that haunted those men for the rest of their lives. Sometimes, we just see all soldiers as one body, one personality; we forget that each soldier, though fighting for the same cause, had his own moral and mental battles to attend to. Maybe this is because it’s simply too painful for us to comprehend, or maybe it is due to the generic persona given to the soldiers by the Anzac legend. The Gallipoli campaign, though a terrible tragedy, provided the then newly-federated Australia with an international profile. However the legend that grew from it did not accurately represent the individual experiences of those who fought during World War I. It painted a very strong stereotypical image for what an Australian soldier was; an image that is still potent in our modern culture.

The Anzac legend was born in an era when Australia was, to the rest of the world, merely a land built on the backs of convicts. A vast majority of the colonists did indeed still call the UK home, and on the 1st of August 1914, the Liberal Prime Minister Joseph Cook expressed this by stating; “If the old country is at war so are we.” The globe was scattered with all kinds of economic and ethical dilemmas; Britain’s declaration against the Ottoman Empire - modern Turkey - eventually led to the Gallipoli campaign. The 25th of April 1915 was the cold morning of the Anzac’s arrival. The battalions landed before treacherous hills and rocks, which would have been an immensely daunting experience. Sources say however, that many of the soldiers were trying their best to keep spirits high; hence the Anzac soldiers were known for their ‘courage through adversity.’ Excerpts from war correspondent Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett’s diary actually reveal a bit of excitement at being part of the war; “It was a stirring and inspiring moment when at 2 a.m. the pinnaces towed the boats alongside and the men immediately embarked in them.”

Through all the wonder, it is definitely a given that fear was a very prominent figure. Signaller Ellis Silas kept record of this in his writings; on the 2nd of May, 1915, the unnerved Signaller wrote this of his day:” Up we rushed – God, it was frightful – the screams of the wounded, bursting of the shells, and the ear-splintering crackling of the rifles. In a very few minutes the gully at the foot of the hill was filled with dead and wounded – these poor lumps of clay had once been my comrades, men I had worked and smoked and laughed and joked with – oh God, the pity of it.” The thought of this kind of pain from the soldiers is heart breaking, and I think that that this reminiscence of sorts is something that the legend portrays really well.

Although the troops at Gallipoli didn’t achieve a military victory, they gave their nation something to be proud of, and initiated Australia’s war history, which though controversial, is pretty significant. This swell of pride had a negative impact directly after the war however; it divided the Australian society into soldiers who fought for their country, and the “cowards” who relinquished their duty to the nation. The typical Anzac soldier, or a ‘digger’ as they came to be called, is pictured as white, young, and as a ‘bushman’ so to speak, when in reality, there were many women, aboriginals, men who grew up in the city, amongst others who differ from the general stereotype.
The under appreciation of women during the war is surprising considering how much they contributed to nursing, often without adequate supplies. Nurses were self-reliant and not removed from danger by any means whatsoever; as they attended to the hundreds of bleeding, screaming men aboard cramped hospital ships. Daisy Richmond, on the 11th of August 1915, experienced the mortal dangers of operating in a war zone, as she states here; “We return to Imbros to discharge our light cases, once more return to be refilled … We are well under fire many bullets coming on the decks. I was speaking to one boy, moved away to another patient when a bullet hit him and lodged in his thigh. It just missed.” [Daisy Richmond, in Cheryl Morgan and Richard Reid, We have not forgotten, p.152] When we think of the nurses, who truly do get forgotten in Anzac celebrations, we don’t really take notice of any of this. Not many people are aware that women weren’t altogether sheltered like they are made out to be.

The commonwealth defence act of 1909 excluded Aboriginal people from signing up to the ALF. In fact, the act clearly stated that anyone who was not of ‘substantial European descent’ was not to be considered for any military services whatsoever. Despite this, over four hundred aboriginal men defied the law to fight for their land. Soldiers who came from the city felt that the legend focused on the idea that the skills and characteristics exhibited at Gallipoli were attributes to their bush background, when realistically, there were men from all kinds of suburbs, both metropolitan and rural.

During the 1970-80’s there was a near collapse of Anzac ceremonies due to the irrelevance of WW1 to women and the new multicultural Australia. Some began to argue that the celebrations ‘glorified war’ and allowed it to be justified. This was rivalled by the opinion that the Gallipoli tragedies were a defining moment in Australian history, and that Anzac day had the ability to unify the nation. Those who question the relevance of the Anzac legend today do so in danger of being labelled as unpatriotic and disrespectful, when in reality, the legend leaves a lot of deserving people unrepresented. Many Australians can trace their ancestry back to a person involved in WW1, which means that families tend to have a more emotional attachment to the topic, and they find comfort and pride in the Anzac legend.

Although the legend doesn’t really capture the diversity amongst the people who stepped up to answer the call, nor their varying experiences, it gives depth to our nations history, and shows the raw emotion and the kindred spirit of all the soldiers. There are so many untold stories; so many hidden identities, and although we can never completely rectify that, it is crucial that we seek out the voices that will never get a chance to be heard. When I squeeze in amongst the crowd at the dawn service each year, I remember the ones who aren’t spoken of. I understand that in order to achieve true courage, it takes immense fear; that every life lost was one less body, mind and soul for our nation.
Referencing

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