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MAKING SENSE OF AUSTRALIA'S WAR MEMORIALS

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Abstract:

War memorials are an important part of the Australian landscape and culture. This essay suggests five possible explanations for this: a) imperial loyalty, at least initially; b) the warrior cult; c) guilt at the loss of so many young people in a seemingly senseless fashion; d) the demise of formal religion; and e) the insecure nature of Australian nationalism. Please note: this Abstract does not appear in the paper version of this article.

Article:

One of the remarkable aspects of Australia's landscape is the prevalence of war memorials. These memorialize Australia's wide military involvement, including the Boer War, World Wars I and II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the Gulf War, and now the conflicts arising out of the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. War memorials are most visible in country towns, where often the town centre is dominated by an obelisk, inscribed with the names of those killed and injured. Sometimes the names of all those who enlisted from within a region or town are inscribed on the monument, with a cross beside the name if the person was killed. War memorials are perhaps less visible in larger urban centres, although for who know where to look often these can be located. Schools and churches will often have a special plaque in a strategic location, listing those who served and those who were killed in war. Parks are often named as war memorial parks. Australia has yet to embark on a large scale upon the phenomenon of constructing walls of remembrance, although there are some. The reason for war memorials might seem obvious, although it is interesting to ask exactly why such war memorials have become so widespread in the Australian landscape. We need to make sense of Australia's war memorials, and this essay suggests five reasons for such memorials.

Before presenting these reasons, there should be some notes of explanation about the nature of war memorialization and commemoration in Australia. This focuses on the national day of war commemoration, Anzac Day, April 25, which marks the day Australian, New Zealand and British forces invaded the Dardanelles Peninsula at Gallipoli in 1915. This actually involved Australian forces invading another country,

although this fact is not normally mentioned in the national discourse surrounding Anzac Day. It was thought that war commemoration would fade away, although in recent decades there has been a remarkable resurgence in the popularity of war commemoration. Australian writer Michael McGirr refers to this as “creeping Anzacism”, wherein the Australian commemoration and glorification of those who fought and died now extends well beyond one particular day. It should also be recognized that war commemoration in Australia has now extended [276/277] to the electronic media and indeed online. Thus when we speak of making sense of war memorials, this should be taken also to include all forms of war memorialization.

The first possible way to make sense of Australia’s war memorials relates to Australia’s colonial history. It is interesting that most of Australia’s war memorials were established after World War I, and this gives a clue to one of the reasons for Australia’s war memorials. Australia’s involvement in World War I was very much a matter of imperial allegiance. Indeed, there was little strategic reason for Australia’s alliance with the Allied forces other than the fact that Australia was still effectively part of the British Empire. Stories of German war atrocities were publicized to assist build up the war effort, although these had not yet circulated when Australian joined the war on the side of Britain. The relationship between imperialism and nationalism is always a complex one. However it is noteworthy that most inscriptions upon the World War I war memorials indicate that the service and sacrifice provided by service personnel was a matter of service and sacrifice to the Empire. It may be true that World War I provided an important impetus to Australian nationalism – yet the reality is that most war memorials from the time celebrate Australian commitment to the British Empire.

A second possible explanation for war memorials is the cult of the warrior, which of course is a phenomenon not limited to Australia. This cult entails aspects of glorification of sacrifice and death, heroic struggle, commitment to a cause, courage in battle, patience in enduring adverse conditions, and patience even in enduring incompetent leadership. These values are celebrated in war memorials, often with classical or biblical quotations to provide legitimacy. The most common quotation in Australian war memorials is from John 15:3 – an application of the Christian Scriptures which obviously misses the point of the life of Jesus. Indeed one of the interesting aspects of the cult of the warrior is that what a warrior actually does tends to be obscured within this cult. Bertrand Russell famously pointed out that patriots always talk of dying for one’s country, but never killing for one’s country. The warrior cult is usually framed in terms of suffering, whereas the reality of war is that the objective is killing others. This, of course, is why the use of the quotation from the Gospel of John in Australian war memorials is so deeply ironic, in that the

objective of war is killing others, and yet the commitment of Jesus was to non-violence.

A third possible reason for the proliferation of war memorials in Australia may be, paradoxically, a sense of guilt about the senselessness of the loss of so many young people in war. Just as the warrior cult is a complex phenomenon, so too is the impact of the loss of loved ones in war. This might seem contradictory to the celebration of the warrior cult, although not necessarily so. It is interesting that most war memorials in Australia are erected in the years immediately following the end of a war. For instance, most war memorials pertaining to World War I were erected in 1919 and the years immediately following. During time of war, attention is often caught up in war fever; [277/278] after the cessation of hostilities, it is not uncommon to wonder about what the loss of life was for. There is often a sense of guilt among the living that those who died really did not need to die. Thus war memorials often emphasize that those who did “give their lives” in time of war did so for the empire, for our nation, and for our freedom. It is almost as if those who have lost loved ones seek some reason to assure themselves that the death of their loved ones was necessary.

A fourth possible reason for the proliferation of war memorials in Australia relates to the demise of formal religion in Australia. Australia has always been a surprisingly secular country, and in some ways nationalism can be seen as a secular religion in Australia. The sacrifice around which this secular religion centres is the loss of young life in time of war. It is not co-incidental that, in popular discourse, war memorials are increasingly described as being sacred spaces and Anzac Day is increasingly thought of as a sacred day. Australian historian Ken Inglis thus refers to the “cult of Anzac” as a civil religion, and war memorials as religious shrines. It is interesting that the force of popular nationalism and the civil religion associated with war commemoration also poses serious challenges for formal religions in Australia. A major part of the population wants to see religion continue to legitimate war. Thus we find clergy often participating in war memorial ceremonies. Others are uneasy about such participation, especially given religious teachings on peace and nonviolence.

The final possible reason I want to suggest for the proliferation of war memorials in Australia centres on the nature of Australia as an emerging nation-state and the related insecure nature of Australian nationalism. The notion that Australia established its nationhood in time of war was originally mooted by the official Australian war historian Charles Bean, although this theme has found renewed emphasis in recent years by Australian governments. The World War I memorials generally celebrated the commitment of Australians to Empire. However more recent memorialization tends to focus on the importance of the sacrifice of service personnel towards the

freedom and independence of Australia. Of course, the linkage between nationalism and war is not something unique to Australia. However the fact that Australia is a young country, at least in formal terms, tends to mean that Australians are more insecure about identity. Emphasizing the great sacrifices which others have made for the country is one way of confirming the importance of that country, and also defining the national character as one of heroism and self-sacrifice.

Of course, there is a deep irony in the situation that many Australians seek to commemorate and even celebrate the national experience of war. The rhetoric of war commemoration often centres on the importance of defending Australia. The irony is that Australia is in fact a colonized continent. The European invasion of Australia and the consequent frontier wars are never [278/279] commemorated in war memorials. If there were to be a logical approach to war commemoration, then this reality would surely be remembered. The fact that war commemoration is so selective suggests that, in Australia, this is more about boosting national self-image than about genuine reflection. The Ode of Remembrance, recited daily at the Returned Services Leagues clubs in Australia, enjoins Australians to remember those who were killed in war. However this does not extend to the invasion of Australia.

War memorials are now ubiquitous and the growth in the commemoration of war is something which is not unique to Australia. Jay Winter has written of a global memory boom, which impels individuals around the world to seek meaning and identity from past events, especially war. No doubt part of this is the global postmodern shift, whereby old certainties and old meta-narratives are no longer perceived as being valid. Yet there are special factors which assist explaining just how widespread war memorials are within the Australian landscape and why war commemoration in Australia seems stronger than in other countries. Ultimately war memorials in Australia say something about how Australians regard themselves, their own self-confidence and self-image. It is much more than merely how Australians regard war.

Recommended Readings

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[End 279]