

# Trophies, Triumphalism and Martial Nationalism in the Australian War Memorial, 1922-35

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The Museum is rich with the individual genius of the Australian soldier [...]. The true significance of the greater part of the exhibits lies, not in their character as battlefield curios, but as emblems of those splendid qualities which made the Australian soldier — to quote the words of Marshal Foch — ‘the greatest individual fighter in the war’.<sup>1</sup>

Excerpt from Foreword of the Australian War Memorial’s first guidebook

The telling of stories and the display of artefacts are key components of national identity. Stories form traditions and myths which tell nations who they are, while artefacts provide a physical link between generations.<sup>2</sup> The national institutions holding these objects and telling these stories have an important role to play in nation-building processes, and exert a degree of influence over national identity. As public arenas for exposition and narrative, institutions such as museums engage the intellect, senses and emotions of visitors, and their possession of artefacts enables them to array the power of the “actual object” to materialise their assertions.<sup>3</sup>

Among the most powerful national stories are those concerning warfare. In war, nationalism is seen at its most intense, with the sense of common danger and the distinction between friend and foe sharpening perceived national identification. In particular, citizen soldiers fighting and dying for a national cause fosters a sense of the nation as a sacred entity that is inherent in the very concept of a nation based on land, blood and tongue.<sup>4</sup> The feeling that the memory of war dead is sacred, also strongly fostered by conflict, blends with and enhances this perception of sanctity.

The First World War was a national war *par excellence*, with rivalries leading to it, the principle of self-determination established by it (however uncertainly it was then applied) and several nation-states founded as a consequence of it. The commemoration of the war dead became one of the most significant patriotic acts in many countries, and the manner in which it occurred was determined by cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Australian War Museum, *The Relics and Records of Australia’s Effort in the Defence of the Empire, 1914-1918* (Melbourne: s.n., 1922), Foreword.

<sup>2</sup> See Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> The literature on nationalism is vast; some important works include Carlton J.H. Hayes, *Nationalism: A Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1960); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Myth, Programme, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Growth of Nationalism* rev. edn. (London: Verso, 1991); Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, eds, *Nationalism*, Oxford Readers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*.

patterns arising from the unique historical experience of each.<sup>5</sup> As such, commemoration is a fruitful arena for investigation, casting light upon cultural forces at work within nations at this time.

In Australia, the First World War was an epochal national event. It was variously claimed to have created a nation, or to have revealed it to itself.<sup>6</sup> The public memory of the Australian overseas war experience came to form the first and most profound Australian tradition, the Anzac Legend.<sup>7</sup> This was a compound of the cultural production of a great many individuals, groups and institutions, beginning shortly after Australian troops were first engaged in the European theatre at Gallipoli in Turkey on 25 April 1915. In the post-war years, the most significant institution was the Australian War Memorial, the museum which became the first cultural institution to be officially designated "national".<sup>8</sup>

The Memorial offered Australia's most potent blend of story and artefact, but its stories have been neglected in scholarship.<sup>9</sup> The following article seeks to redress

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<sup>5</sup> On the patriotism of commemoration, see Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 80-1.

<sup>6</sup> John F. Williams, *Anzacs, the Media and the Great War* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1999), pp. 24-6.

<sup>7</sup> The literature on the Anzac Legend is considerable. See for example K.S. Inglis "The Anzac Tradition", *Meanjin*, Vol. 24, 1 (1965), pp. 25-44; K.S. Inglis, "The Australians at Gallipoli", Part I, *Historical Studies*, Vol. 14, 54 (April 1970), pp. 219-30, Part II, *Historical Studies*, Vol. 14, 55 (October 1970), pp. 361-75; Marilyn Lake, "The Power of Anzac", in M. McKernan and M. Browne, *Australia: Two Centuries of War and Peace* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial in association with Allen and Unwin, 1988), pp. 194-222; E.M. Andrews, *The Anzac Illusion: Anglo-Australian Relations during World War One* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Joan Beaumont, "The Anzac Legend", in Joan Beaumont, ed., *Australia's War, 1914-18* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1995), pp. 149-80; "Anzac Legend", in Peter Dennis, Jeffrey Grey, Ewan Morris and Robin Prior with John Connor, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 42-9; Bruce Kapferer, *Legends of People, Myths of State: Violence, Intolerance, and Political Culture in Sri Lanka and Australia*. (Bathurst: Crawford House, 1998); Williams, *Anzacs, the Media and the Great War*; Graham Seal, *Inventing ANZAC: The Digger and National Mythology* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Hereafter referred to as the Memorial, for the sake of simplicity and to reflect its supporters' attitude that it was the nation's memorial to its war dead, regardless of when that official designation came to it.

<sup>9</sup> Recent studies of the Memorial include Michael McKernan, *Here is their Spirit: A History of the Australian War Memorial* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1991); K.S. Inglis, "A Sacred Place: The making of the Australian War Memorial", *War and Society*, Vol. 3, 4 (September 1985), pp. 99-126; K.S. Inglis, assisted by Jan Brazier, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press at Melbourne University Press, 1998), pp. 333-47; Peter Stanley, "Gallipoli and Pozieres: A Legend and a Memorial: Seventieth Anniversary of the Gallipoli Landing", *Australian Foreign Affairs Record*, Vol. 56, 4 (April 1985), pp. 281-9; Catherine Styles, "An Other Place: The Australian War Memorial in a Freirean Framework", PhD Dissertation, Australian National University, 2000; Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 122-3, 133-40; Ann Millar, "Gallipoli to Melbourne: The Australian War Memorial 1915-19", *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, Vol. 10 (April 1987), pp. 33-42; Kimberly Webber, "Constructing Australia's Past: The Development of Historical Collections, 1888-1938", in Patricia Summerfield, ed., *Proceedings of the Council of Australian Museum Associations Conference, Perth WA 1986* (Perth: Western Australian Museum, 1986), pp. 155-73; Jenny Bell, "The Australian War Memorial: A Misunderstood Institution", *Australian Historical Association Bulletin*, No. 66-7 (March-June 1991), pp. 44-52; Fiona Nicoll, *From Diggers to Drag Queens: Configurations of Australian National Identity*, (Sydney: Pluto, 2001), especially pp. 1-34; Margaret Browne and Jeffrey Williams,

this oversight somewhat by bringing the museum's displays to the forefront of analysis. It examines one major theme of the displays, triumphalism, and one major type of artefact, the trophy, both of which were at the core of the Memorial in the inter-war years. The paper is based on my doctoral dissertation, which examines the Memorial in much greater detail, looking at a wide range of themes.<sup>10</sup> National stories and the institutions which tell them need to be analysed in their roots, objectives, composition, and political and social affiliations, and the present paper represents only one small part of this project.

## I

In the aftermath of the First World War, many belligerent countries erected national war memorials as tributes to their war dead. Australia's memorial was unique, taking the form of a military, technology and social history museum, originally called the Australian War Museum and later known as the Australian War Memorial. First opened in the Melbourne Exhibition Building on 24 April 1922, the Memorial's inter-war exhibitions incorporated war *matériel* which the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) had taken from the Germans and Turks during the war, commonly referred to as "trophies," and objects used by the Force, known as "relics".<sup>11</sup> Conceived and guided by Australian Official War Correspondent and Historian, utopian nationalist and master propagandist C.E.W. Bean, the Memorial was designated as the Australian National War Memorial in 1923, following intensive lobbying by Bean and certain of his allies.<sup>12</sup>

The collection and display of trophies was at the heart of the Memorial's distinctiveness as a national memorial, leading to the most profound points of difference between Australia's national war memorial and that of other belligerents. The very display of trophies within a national memorial was unique in itself, but in addition, as the Foreword of its first guidebook asserted, many of the Memorial's objects were embedded in displays seeking to prove, first, that Australians were superior soldiers, and second, that this was due to moral virtues inherent in the national type. In addition, the Memorial's principal founding document dealing with trophies stated that the Memorial would take and display

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"A Museum as a Memorial", *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute of Australia*, Vol. 6, 1 (April 1983), pp. 69-74; Margaret Anderson and Andrew Reeves, "Contested Identities: Museums and the Nation in Australia", in Flora Kaplan, ed., *Museums and the Making of "Ourselves": The Role of Objects in National Identity* (London: Leicester University Press, 1994), pp. 79-124.

<sup>10</sup> Craig Melrose, "'A Praise That Never Ages': The Australian War Memorial and the 'National' Interpretation of the First World War", PhD dissertation, University of Queensland, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> The Memorial's Melbourne exhibition ran from 1922 to early 1925, when the displays were moved to Sydney and housed in its Exhibition Building until 1935. The Melbourne exhibits were seen by 776,000 people, and those in Sydney by over 2,000,000 (with the first million viewing the exhibits in the first two years). This was a considerable vote of popularity; the attendance figures were above those for museums such as the Australian Museum in Sydney (whose 255,000 visitors for 1925 were more than matched by the Memorial in its first three months.) See AWM 265 17/2/3 and Table SR 123-130: "Visitors to Museums and Art Galleries, Australia 1906-1927", Wray Vamplew, ed., *Australians: Historical Statistics* (Sydney: Fairfax, Syme and Weldon, 1987), p. 391.

<sup>12</sup> Legislation was passed to this effect in 1925, the Memorial being legally created by an *Act to Provide for the Establishment of the Australian War Memorial and for Other Purposes. No. 18 of 1925*, assented to 26 September 1925.

those whose story of capture was expected to become one of “the most prominent traditions” of the Australian nation.<sup>13</sup> Thus, triumphalism — which might be defined as the public remembrance of specific victories or of Australian military supremacy in the abstract — was yoked to nation-building through the medium of the trophy. Further, the Memorial’s first task, even before organising exhibitions, was to coordinate the provision of a large number of captured enemy field guns, mortars and machine guns to Australian municipalities, with a view to their being displayed in public areas.<sup>14</sup> The distribution was popular, with over 3,500 localities accepting nearly 6,000 weapons, and helped link the national memorial with local commemoration in much of the country.<sup>15</sup> The trinity of trophies, triumphalism and nation-building illustrates most clearly one of the most profound, yet seldom explored, influences on the Memorial, martial nationalism.

Martial nationalism was a major pre-war doctrine, originating in Europe, which insisted *inter alia* that a true national history was founded on important military actions, predominantly victories. Its influence on Bean was profound, and he positioned the Memorial within martial nationalist tradition, linking it to its manifestations ranging from Nelson’s Column and Richard Westmacott’s statue of the Duke of Wellington as Achilles to the nationalist military propaganda of W.H. Fitchett, and even, with important limitations, the work of the radically pro-war German writers Friedrich von Bernhardi and Heinrich von Treitschke. Martial nationalism provided both the broad objectives and many of the rhetorical specifics of the Memorial and its displays of trophies and triumphalism.

This is an important consideration, for alternative visions of war were available for the creators of the Memorial to follow, if they had so desired. Anti-war writers such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, for example, argued that it was the horror of war which ought to be remembered.<sup>16</sup> Bean rejected this “modern memory” of the war, and denounced Modernist, anti-war art as “freak art” and useless for commemorative purposes, an insult to the relatives of the dead.<sup>17</sup> In 1933 the Memorial published *Australian Chivalry* to counteract the perceived evils of books like *All Quiet on the Western Front*.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Australian War Museum Committee (AWMC) Minutes, 31 July 1919, “Outline of Scheme”, Appendix E: “Trophies: Principles: Allocation”. AWM 170 1/1.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Clayton, “To the Victor Belongs the Spoils: A History of the Australian War Trophy Collection” Parts 1-2: “The Trophy Tradition”, Part 3: ““One for Every City””, *Sabretache*, Vol. 36, 3 (July/ September 1995), pp. 11-22; Vol. 36, 4 (October/ December 1995), pp. 12-29; Vol. 37, 1 (January/ March 1996), pp. 3-26; McKernan, *Here is their Spirit*, pp. 70-2; Inglis, *Sacred Places*, pp. 178-9.

<sup>15</sup> Press Release, November 1929, p. 4. AWM 93 20/1/1A. See also Inglis, *Sacred Places*, pp. 178-9.

<sup>16</sup> Two seminal studies of such literature are Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Macmillan, 1980).

<sup>17</sup> Inglis, *Sacred Places*, p. 342. See also Bean’s evidence to the Public Works Committee hearing, in 1928. Commonwealth of Australia, *Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works Report Together with Minutes of Evidence Relating to the Proposed Australian War Memorial, Canberra* (hereafter, *Standing Committee on Public Works Report*), (Canberra: Government Printer, 1928), p.320.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Pierce, “Is War Very Big? As big as New South Wales?”, *War and Parochialism in Australia in the 1920s and 1930s* (Canberra: School of English, University College, University of New South Wales, 1996).

However, any tendency to simple glorification of war was tempered by Bean's complex, honest and compassionate vision for the Memorial, and the museum's official dedication to the display of nothing "except what is an exact representation of fact".<sup>19</sup> Many of the excesses of European martial nationalism — such as Napoleon's tendency to depict himself as a conquering Roman Emperor — were not replicated in the Memorial.<sup>20</sup> In addition, as a result of Bean's desire to show "the sufferings and misery of war", the Memorial dealt sensitively and honestly with defeat, death and the wounded, although these subjects were treated so as to play down their horror and emphasise Australian triumph over them.<sup>21</sup>

## II

A number of martial nationalist notions influenced the Memorial's conceptualisation by Bean and his many powerful supporters, such as the Minister for Defence, George Pearce, the Prime Minister, W.M. Hughes, and a whole cadre of generals who had directed wartime operations. The first of these was that war had a positive effect on nations; as martial nationalist Friedrich von Bernhardt argued in his *Germany and the Next War* (1913), "the common danger" faced by citizens in war "unites all in a common effort [...] This union contains a liberating power which produces happy and permanent results in the national life".<sup>22</sup> Bean certainly agreed with Frederick the Great, as quoted by Bernhardt, that war "opens the most fruitful field to all virtues"; the Foreword announced that the Memorial's displays provided examples.<sup>23</sup> Inherent in this acceptance was a rejection of the bleak view of war seen in anti-war literature.

There were, however, important limits to the influence of this view of war on the Memorial. In Bernhardt's view, as in that of Frederick the Great, war was really a magnifying force for humankind. Its "brutal incidents" would "vanish completely" before the glory of this magnification, which the fortunate nation, saved from the shams of peace, would be experiencing in its wake.<sup>24</sup> The Memorial did not by any means claim that the brutality of war was of no consequence; indeed, its displays frankly, and at times graphically, depicted "the misery and sufferings of war", in a deliberate programme.<sup>25</sup> All the same, the Memorial's fundamental message was

<sup>19</sup> AWMC Minutes, 31 July 1919, Resolution 2 (d). AWM 170 1/1.

<sup>20</sup> See for example Napoleon's column at *Place Vendôme* in Paris. It was covered in reliefs, each constructed from captured cannon and deliberately fabricated in imitation of Trajan's Column in Rome — itself highly triumphal — with a statue of Napoleon as Caesar atop it. On Trajan's Column see Lino Rossi, *Trajan's Column and the Dacian Wars*, J.M.C. Toynbee, trans. (London: Thomas Hudson, 1971), pp. 98-120, 130-212; Alan Borg, *War Memorials: From Antiquity to the Present* (London: Cooper, 1991), p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> *Standing Committee on Public Works Report*, p. 324. Issues such as the Memorial's treatment of defeat, death and the wounded are beyond the scope of this paper. I hope to address them in future articles.

<sup>22</sup> Friedrich von Bernhardt, *Germany and the Next War*, Allen H. Bowes, trans. (London: Arnold, 1913), p. 20. On the glorification of war by German intellectuals, see Michael Howard, "Prussia in European History", in *The Lessons of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 49-62.

<sup>23</sup> Bernhardt, *Germany and the Next War*, p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> See Bean's evidence, Commonwealth of Australia, *Standing Committee on Public Works Report*, p. 324.

strikingly similar to Bernhardt's, with its focus on moral virtues, unity of purpose, and the "happy and permanent results" for the nation which were perceived to have issued from the war.<sup>26</sup>

Two other relevant martial nationalist concepts were the twin notions that a national history was based upon great battles, and that military glory and martial virtues had popular appeal and could be used to form popular national traditions.<sup>27</sup> Both ideas were inherent in Bernhardt's arguments, while a leading exponent of them was W.H. Fitchett. An Australian, whose popular volume titled *Deeds That Won the Empire: Historic Battle Scenes* was first published in 1894, Fitchett made it clear that he wrote to promote "emotional" nation-building, building up a "sentiment" through tales of heroic triumph. In so doing, he mirrored some of the German nationalists' positive attitudes towards warfare:

The tales here are told, not to glorify war, but to nourish patriotism. They represent an effort to renew in popular memory the great traditions of the Imperial race to which we belong.

The history of the Empire of which we are subjects — the story of the struggles and sufferings by which it has been built up — is the best legacy which the past has bequeathed us. But it is a treasure strangely neglected [...]. There is real danger that for the average youth the great names of the British story may become meaningless sounds, that his imagination will take no colour from the rich and deep tints of history. And what a pallid, cold-blooded citizenship that must produce!

[...]

What examples are to be found in the tales here retold, not merely of heroic daring, but of even finer qualities — of heroic fortitude which dreads dishonour more than it fears death: of the patriotism that makes love of the Fatherland a passion. These are the elements of robust citizenship. They represent some, at least, of the qualities by which the Empire, in a sterner time than ours, was won, and by which, even in these ease-loving days, it must be maintained.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Despite the invective later heaped upon German nationalist thinkers by Australians during the war, the notion that war was good for a nation was extremely popular in Australia before and during the war. For example, Henry Lawson had written:

A nation's born where the shells fall fast, or its lease of life renewed.  
We in part atone for the ghoulish strife,  
and the crimes of the peace we boast,  
And the better part of a people's life in the storm comes uppermost.

Henry Lawson, "The Star of Australasia", in *In the Days When the World Was Wide and Other Poems*. (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1896), pp.116-123, p.122. Denunciation of the German position during the war was multi-faceted. Professors George Arnold Wood and Ernest Scott, amongst others, provided intellectual denunciation, while Bill Gammage records similar attitudes amongst soldiers in the AIF. See John Anthony Moses, *Prussian-German Militarism 1914-18 in Australian Perspective: The Thought of George Arnold Wood* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1991); Ernest Scott, "The Nature of the Issue", lecture delivered in the Masonic Hall, Melbourne, on 15 June 1915, University of Melbourne War Lectures (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 1915), pp.19-28; Gammage, *The Broken Years*, pp.221-3.

<sup>27</sup> As Michael Howard asserts, "France was Marengo, Austerlitz and Jena: military triumph set the seal on the new-found national consciousness. Britain was Trafalgar — but it had been a nation for four hundred years, since those earlier battles Creçy and Agincourt. Russia was the triumph of 1812. Germany was Gravelotte and Sedan. Italy was Garibaldi and the Thousand (and there remained perhaps a frustrated sense among the Italians of the Giolitti period that it had all been too easy, that there had not been enough fighting, that Italy had not fully proved herself)." Michael Howard, "War and the Nation State", in *The Causes of Wars and Other Essays*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp.23-35, pp.26-7.

<sup>28</sup> W.H. Fitchett, *Deeds That Won the Empire: Historic Battle Scenes* (London: Bell, 1905), Preface.

What Bernhardt described as an ideal Fitchett was actively seeking to perpetuate, to immortalise — and to instil into his compatriots.

As correspondence between Bean and Pearce in early 1918 makes clear, the Memorial was designed to ensure that the “great” names of *Australian* history — those thrown up by the war — were not forgotten, and, through the inspiration of tales about these Australians, to create strong, robust citizenship. Bean and Pearce were of a mind that Australia was creating “real” history for the first time in its existence, and that the material evidence of this history was wanted for nationalist education of a quasi-spiritual nature. On 3 March 1918, for instance, Pearce wrote to the British Colonial Secretary seeking control of Australian trophies, for he felt that his country needed these more than did Britain:

A nation is built upon pride of race and now that Australia is making history of her own she requires every possible relic associated with this to educate her children in that national spirit thereby ensuring loyal adherence to and defence of the Empire of which she forms part.<sup>29</sup>

This was a succinct exposition of martial nationalist ideology in its most Imperially-loyal, Anglo-Australian guise. “Pride of race” was inseparable from the war which had given the nation a “history of her own”.

Bean congratulated Pearce on this cable, and shared his own view that the objects “mean to us our history and tradition”, and would aid the Australian nation through their utilisation in “the education of our children in the national spirit, which Australians would wish to animate their country”.<sup>30</sup> The scope of Bean’s nationalist vision was wide and considered, based upon wartime observation of the AIF:

The War has given one an immense belief in the youth of Australia, and I believe that our countrymen are capable of any achievement, provided a high, unselfish national incentive can be encouraged in them; and no-one is readier to be seized with this than the youngsters of Australia, if given the right leadership and opportunity.<sup>31</sup>

Such leadership to instil the “national spirit” would operate within commemoration, Bean continued, and would form its most fundamental basis:

Australia has lost thousands of her best and finest men, but I believe the history of them, and the appeal which their lives make to young Australians, through the galleries and museums and, not least, the histories of our country, will be the greatest of several great results of their sacrifice.<sup>32</sup>

Bean linked remembrance of the dead firmly and overtly to a nationalist education project which he was eventually to carry through to completion with the opening of the Memorial’s permanent home in 1941 and the publication of the final volume of the *Official History of Australia During the War of 1914-1918* in 1942.

These were two definitive examples of martial nationalist reactions to the war — acknowledging death, but concentrating on positive national lessons that could be drawn from the conflict. Although both Bean and Pearce understood the costs of

<sup>29</sup> Cablegram, Secretary of Defence to Administrative Headquarters AIF London, including text of message to Colonial Secretary. No. WT 18, 3 March 1918. AWM 38 3DRL 6673, Item 621.

<sup>30</sup> C.E.W. Bean to George Pearce, March 1918, AMW 93 12/12/1, Part 1.

<sup>31</sup> Bean to Pearce, March 1918.

<sup>32</sup> Bean to Pearce, March 1918. As a point of comparison, British martial nationalist stalwart H. Rider Haggard wrote of the British war dead in *The Times* on 10 October 1914 that “the history of these deeds of theirs will surely be a beacon to those destined to carry on the tradition of our race”: quoted in Wendy R. Kratz, *Rider Haggard and the Fiction of Empire: A Critical Study of British Imperial Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 59.

the war in terms of suffering and loss — Bean had seen more of it than any Australian — they were looking beyond these to what inspiration would emerge from the war: pride of race, a new national tradition built on military achievement. They were not looking at horror or bereavement in this correspondence, and were gazing beyond commemoration *per se* to Bernhardt's "happy and permanent results" of the war.

When the war was over and Bean was able to implement his vision, he drew up a plan of deliberate nation-building, based upon military success and to be conducted chiefly (but not exclusively) through the public display of trophies. This was adopted at the first meeting of the Australian War Museum Committee (AWMC) following Bean's return to Australia, held on 31 July 1919, and encompassed two major cultural initiatives: the distribution of trophies to the States and the establishment of the Memorial.

The collection of trophies obtained during the war formed a major element of the plan.<sup>33</sup> It was to be divided into two categories. One would be kept by the Federal Government, and used to create the Memorial; the other would be distributed to the States, for display in prominent public space. In classic martial nationalist fashion, Bean felt that trophies ought to be distributed "with due regard to the sentiment attaching to their capture", as they were "of the greatest value and interest in the places where their captors are personally known".<sup>34</sup>

The Memorial was to retain and display material "to which the romance of some particular national story is attached".<sup>35</sup> This could include trophies "connected with some particular outstanding character or unit in the AIF [...] [and] those connected with some historical action or event whose actual author or unit is not known".<sup>36</sup> These would be chosen on the principle that "if the event is of such national importance that it is likely to form one of the most prominent traditions of Australia, the exhibit should be required for Australian Museum".<sup>37</sup>

The Memorial, then, was in significant part to exhibit objects captured in battle with the expectation that they would form "the most prominent traditions" of the new nation. It would thus form a nexus between nation-building and commemoration, formed by trophies and triumphalism. Not only would the dead be remembered, but so too would the victorious actions in which trophies were captured.<sup>38</sup> Through the dissemination of information about these battles, they would become national traditions. Throughout the whole scheme and the resolutions adopted on 31 July 1919, the strongest emphasis was on the public acknowledgement of victory through the display of its tangible symbols.

A final martial nationalist notion relevant to the development of the Memorial was that successful participation in war proved a nation's mettle, providing it with

<sup>33</sup> AWMC Minutes, 31 July 1919, "Outline of Scheme", pp. 1-10, p.1. AWM 170 1/1.

<sup>34</sup> "Outline of Scheme", p.2; AWMC Minutes, Appendix C (i), "Suggested Letter to the States' Premiers", paragraph 2. AWM 170 1/1.

<sup>35</sup> "Trophies: Principles: Allocation".

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Such actions could be, and often were, smaller parts of battles which the Australians failed to win, or which were pyrrhic victories.



international respect and status. Bean argued to Pearce in 1918 that the histories they wished to make had foreign policy considerations:

The more [American troops] know of our men, the greater will be the sympathy between the two countries [...] I was very much impressed by the fact that a wise Australian propaganda, if conducted on tactful and enterprising lines, might greatly help our country in doing everything possible in future to pull the United States and the British people together.<sup>39</sup>

Ten years later, he confirmed that the Memorial was part of such “tactful and enterprising propaganda”. Giving evidence to the Public Works Committee hearing into the plan to construct the Memorial’s permanent home in Canberra, he spoke of his fear that “historians in time will say, ‘What was there, after all, in this fighting reputation of the AIF?’”<sup>40</sup> Worse, he felt that “both in America and elsewhere the Australian claims will be challenged unless we can establish them by closely-reasoned proof”.<sup>41</sup> The Memorial was, he declared, an integral element, along with the *Official History*, of his project dedicated in significant part to ensuring that such closely-reasoned proof was perpetually available. In the Memorial’s case, its displays were designed to provide such proofs in a public arena, and were principally addressed, not to Americans, but to the Australian public itself.

### III

Both the distribution of trophies and the Memorial’s displays were to achieve their martial nationalist aims. Trophy guns served several important symbolic, emotional and ritual functions in Australian commemoration. First and foremost, they symbolised Australian military supremacy. Mark Clayton points out that the 173 guns captured by the AIF on 8 August 1918 at the Battle of Amiens “were all shipped to Australia and subsequently unveiled as war memorials, affording the only material evidence of Australia’s crowning achievement”.<sup>42</sup> Some municipalities objected that their allocation was unworthy of their effort.<sup>43</sup>

Secondly, trophies served as war memorials, immediately becoming integral parts of commemorative services. Being distributed quickly and free of charge, they were the first war memorial in many areas. Even after masonry memorials were constructed, the trophy gun remained part of the overall memorial, being seen, as Ken Inglis puts it, “beside, or within, or on top of, just about every kind of monument. Some [...] were even made a central feature.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, as Clayton observes, they “remained for many years integral, if not central, to the annual Anzac ceremony”.<sup>45</sup>

As Bean had prophesied, trophies proved to be the objects of considerable emotional attachment. For instance, in May 1928 the *Sydney Morning Herald* claimed that the weapons were “the last gifts of fallen soldiers themselves to their country, gifts meant by them to be a speaking record of the AIF’s adventures, its

<sup>39</sup> Bean to Pearce, March 1918.

<sup>40</sup> *Standing Committee on Public Works Report*, p. 321.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Clayton, “To the Victor”, Part 3, p. 22.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-9; Inglis, *Sacred Places*, p.179; McKernan, *Here is Their Spirit*, pp. 71-2.

<sup>44</sup> Clayton, “To the Victor”, Part 3, pp. 3-22; Inglis, *Sacred Places*, pp. 178-9.

<sup>45</sup> Clayton, “To the Victor”, Part 3, p. 22.

efforts, and its sacrifices". They created, the paper continued, "direct personal links to the heroes we would honour".<sup>46</sup> Trophies also aroused strong passions, often linked to wartime politics. For instance, when the ALP Lord Mayor of Sydney, William Lambert, refused a gun for a local war memorial in Sydney in 1921, *The Bulletin* ridiculed him in a cartoon in which the Little Boy From Manly levels two devastating questions at "The Pacifist" which actively link militarism with Australian identity: "Doesn't that stir your blood? Aren't you an Australian too?"<sup>47</sup> The link between captured arms and nation-building is readily apparent.

## IV

Martial nationalist rhetorical themes predominated in the Memorial's trophy-displays. The two principal ones were Australian victory and the moral qualities revealed through them. A considerable number of displays addressed Australian military success. None, for example, symbolised it more than the colours of the Turkish 46<sup>th</sup> Regiment, referred to in Bean's guides to the museum in terms of their historic importance and the casual military superiority that their appearance in the displays embodied:

Regimental colours are most coveted trophies, and are generally captured only after desperate fighting. In the war of 1914-18, however, few regiments took their colours into the field, and the capture of such a trophy was a unique event. As far as the AIF is concerned, the colours of the 46<sup>th</sup> Turkish Regiment were the only ones captured. They were secured by the 9<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiment, which encountered and completely disposed of this Turkish regiment near Khan Kusseir, near Damascus, on the 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1918.<sup>48</sup>

The argument that Australians tended to "dispose" of their opponents was bolstered by a description of captured German shoulder-straps, "displayed", Bean stated, "under the brief but apt title, 'Huns we have met'".<sup>49</sup> (See Fig. 1.) Other displays implied that "meeting" the Australians had been fatal for the "Huns". For instance, the label of a cigar case stated that the trophy had been "Taken From a Fritz Killed at Chipilly on the 9<sup>th</sup> August".<sup>50</sup> Supporting this display was one of several cups, taken during what its caption referred to as "A Fine Little Stunt".<sup>51</sup> This was successful, the label elaborated, because it had seen the "killing [of] a number of Huns" and the capture of machine guns and prisoners.<sup>52</sup> A final example, incorporating clear triumphalism, showed "conquerors" taking a great trophy, the enemy leader's personal banner:

### VON FALKENHAYN'S FLAG

<sup>46</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 May 1928, p. 12.

<sup>47</sup> *The Bulletin*, 3 February 1921. It was a sign of the militarist turn *The Bulletin* had taken that in 1905 it had ridiculed the British Empire as being an "Empire of JINGO ideals": quoted in Souter, *Lion and Kangaroo*, p. 116.

<sup>48</sup> *Relics and Records*, September 1922, p. 17; April 1928, p. 18; December 1931, p. 20.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>50</sup> Unnumbered label: "Cigar Case Taken From a Fritz Killed at Chipilly on the 9<sup>th</sup> August". Curator, Australian War Memorial, Sydney (Les Bain) to Director, Australian War Memorial, Melbourne (John Treloar), 23 August 1928. AWM 265 21/4/5, Part 1.

<sup>51</sup> Label AWM.776: "A Fine Little Stunt". Attachment. Bain to Treloar, 28 December 1932. AWM 265 21/4/5, Part 7.

<sup>52</sup> "A Fine Little Stunt".

During the latter portion of his service with the Turco-German army in Palestine, General von Falkenhayn established his headquarters at the Fash Hotel in Jerusalem. Upon entering the city towards the end of August, 1918, the conquerors saw this flag flying over the Hotel. It was removed at the instigation of Corporal Coles of the AAMC, who later presented it to Major W.R.C. Mainwaring.<sup>53</sup>

The standard of the enemy commander was an even more valuable trophy than regimental colours, and certainly proof that Australians had been “conquerors”.<sup>54</sup>

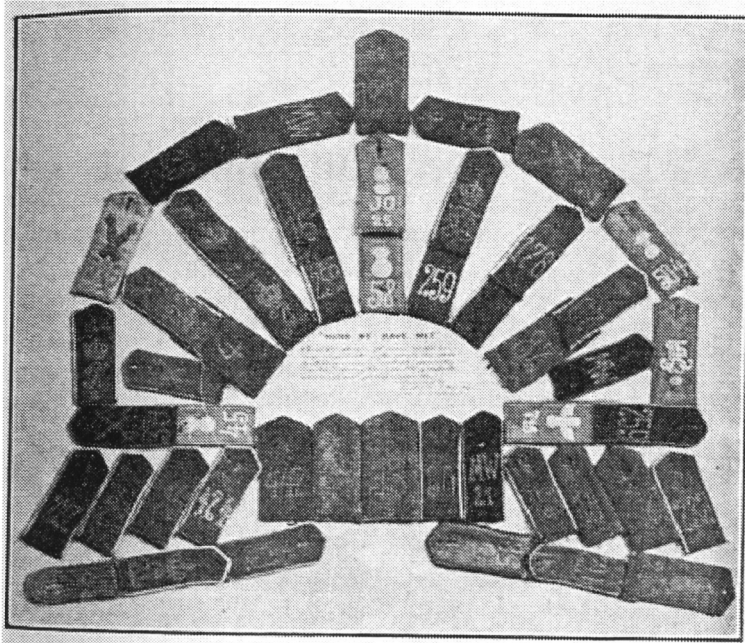


Figure 1: Showcase 28: “Huns We Have Met”, Australian War Memorial, 1922

Source: *Relics and Records*, September 1922, p. 37.<sup>55</sup>

Australian superiority was further underscored in stories of perceived enemy fear of the Australians that had all the verve and mockery of any of Fitchett’s stories. One such narrative was attached to a German machine gun taken from a captured aeroplane. Despite Bean’s assertion that “we do not believe the banal war-time jokes

<sup>53</sup> Bain to Treloar, 23 July 1928. AWM 265 21/4/5, Part 1.

<sup>54</sup> However, in a letter of 23 July 1928 from Curator Les Bain to Treloar the former mentioned that further investigation, based on the information of returned officers, had proved that the flag displayed could not, in fact, have been found in the hotel, for Falkenhayn had never used it as a headquarters. The display was removed from the Memorial as a consequence. Bain to Treloar, 23 July 1928. AWM 265 21/4/5, Part 1; *Relics and Records*, April 1928, p. 18 stated that “the German flag was found flying over Fash’s Hotel, Jerusalem, the headquarters of General von Falkenhayn, the senior German officer with the Turkish Army”. The reference had been excised by the time the December 1931 guide was printed.

<sup>55</sup> See also *Relics and Records*, April 1928, p.29.

about our enemy always running away”, the gun’s label — “THE BOCHE WHO WOULDN’T FIGHT” — made it clear that the plane’s occupants had not been able to match it with their Australian counterparts.<sup>56</sup> Then there was the tale of the German 184<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment who, one label remarked, opposed an Australian attack in France: “The regiment apparently felt keenly the ceaseless harrying of Australian patrols and raids, and their morale was poor. One N.C.O. prisoner said that, a few nights before, the whole of his machine gun crew ran away when they heard some Australians approaching.”<sup>57</sup>

It was through these and other similar displays that proof was offered of Australian military supremacy. Wedded to this evidence was a series of exhibits making the case that Australian moral virtues were responsible for the success. Not all such displays focussed on relics, but those that did were among the most militarist within the Memorial. The first of these moral virtues was ferocity, the desire to get to grips with the enemy, to kill his soldiers and vanquish him on the field. This was a primal impulse which was much praised by wartime propagandists, for it was intimately linked with military success. One of the most striking examples of such a link within the Memorial, still on display in Sydney as late as 1932, adopted the devil-may-care ferocity of the most bellicose martial nationalist propagandists:

#### A RAID BY THE SIXTH

At midnight on the 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> July [1918], B Coy. raided the Huns near Meteren. At first the Germans showed fight, but when the raiders got close to them they turned and ran. The Lewis gunners with the raiders, firing from the hip, gave the fleeing Huns a warm time. Among the captures were 2 prisoners, 2 machine guns and this spade.<sup>58</sup>

The jocular ferocity in the story-telling tone here, in which “the fleeing Huns” were given “a warm time”, expressed a distinct desire to exterminate the enemy, and a joy in his destruction that made the Memorial unique as a National War Memorial. It was characteristic of wartime propaganda and the “big-noting” literature identified by Robin Gerster as typical of Australian soldier-writers, but had a ferocity and an antipathy seldom used in the inscriptions of masonry war memorials. Masonry memorials with bellicose themes were very rare in Australia, and provoked considerable controversy when they were seen, which the Memorial did not. The latter’s status as a museum was fundamental to this difference in reception.<sup>59</sup>

Coupled to ferocity, and also leading to victory, was initiative, or “decision” as it was often termed in the early twentieth century. The AIF were routinely claimed

<sup>56</sup> C.E.W. Bean to John Treloar, 4 December 1929. AWM 38 3DRL 6673, Item 747; Bain to Treloar, 28 December 1932. AWM265 21/4/5, Part 7.

<sup>57</sup> Label AWM.829: “The Huns Who Opposed the Australians at Ville-Sur-Ancre”. Attachment, Bain to Treloar, 28 December 1932. AWM 265 21/4/5, Part 7.

<sup>58</sup> Label AWM.821: “A Raid by the Sixth.” Attachment, Bain to Treloar, 28 December 1932. AWM 265 21/4/5, Part 7.

<sup>59</sup> Inglis. *Sacred Places*, pp.223-4 discusses the stormy reception of C. Web Gilbert’s *The Bomber*, a thoroughly “traditional” heroic representation of a Digger hurling a grenade.

to be superior in initiative to other troops, both allied and enemy, in the Memorial and elsewhere. In most cases an explicit link with AIF victories was asserted. The Memorial followed a similar course. For example, there was the action at Broodseinde Ridge during the Third Battle of Ypres. This was a heroic tale of quick-thinking Australians defeating their German enemies man-to-man despite their being seriously depleted in numbers from a surprise artillery barrage before the action began:

Just before dawn, the 1st and 2nd Divisions were subjected to a murderous bombardment, which killed or wounded no less than 20 per cent. of the men in some of the units.

When the moment of the attack came, and the men rose, they had advanced some 30 yards only when they discerned, in the dim light ahead, a line of Germans rising to their feet not 50 yards away. The Australians realised in an instant that an enemy attack must have been planned for the same hour, neither side knowing the intentions of the other. The Australian Lewis gunners dropped on the ground and began to fire; the German line broke, and the Australians rolled over it and seized the ridge. One of the helmets of the Germans who were killed in this incident can be seen, covered with sandbag cloth.<sup>60</sup>

The Australians' superior martial ability once again secured an important victory; this time the AIF succeeded (albeit with some outside help) in capturing a height which for three years the Germans had held, making the British trenches "precarious".<sup>61</sup> The "individual genius of the Australian soldier" was here displayed in a pure form, and there was a trophy taken from the enemy dead to prove it.

Through triumphalist displays of trophies such as these, then, the Memorial did much to offer the "closely-reasoned proof" of Australian military supremacy promised by Bean in his evidence to the Public Works Committee and the Foreword to the Memorial's guides. There is little doubt, viewing these displays, that the Australians achieved a marked superiority over the Germans and Turks in 1918. In objects from the Meteren spade to the colours of the 46<sup>th</sup> Turkish Regiment, the displays proved the point. In doing so, they provided a foundation to the Memorial's commemoration that Bean, Treloar and others felt to be vital. As a result, trophies, triumphalism and martial nationalism became entwined at the heart of the Memorial project in the inter-war years. They formed the core of its displays, speaking a message of victory directly to Australians, while the distribution of trophy guns connected the country's first truly "national" institution emotionally with individual municipalities throughout the nation.

## V

It is a mark of the influence of martial nationalism on Australian commemoration in the 1920s that the Memorial's insistence on Australian success placed it firmly in the mainstream of Australian commemoration in the immediate post-war decade.

<sup>60</sup> *Relics and Records*, September 1922, p. 22; April 1928, pp. 24-5; December 1931, p. 26.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

It was, in fact, a good deal less triumphal than much of it, particularly the work of soldier-writers.<sup>62</sup> However, the public commemoration of war in Australia underwent a profound change during the inter-war years. Highly triumphal during the 1920s, it was far sadder by the late 1930s, although the underlying influence of martial nationalism remained visible throughout the period.

The immediate post-war period was one of high triumphalism. This pre-occupation with victory had several sources. As indicated, martial nationalist influences were vital. For instance, in the first post-war decade, wartime victories were praised as “great events in Australian history”, as wartime Prime Minister William Morris Hughes told a rapt audience of 1,600 at the 1928 dinner celebrating the Battle of Amiens on 8 August 1918.<sup>63</sup> In addition, the development of a new national mythology — the Anzac Legend, based on the nation’s warfront experience and heavily influenced by classical warrior traditions and by pre-war notions of history as military victory — complicated, and largely shaped, commemoration. More prosaically, the prominence of triumphalism stemmed from victory in a long and terrible struggle against an enemy perceived as “frightful”, a horde of barbarous militarists who would enslave any whose territory they could overrun. The defeat of Germany, and thus of Prussian militarism, was seen as worthy of great rejoicing in the early years after 1918. Only in the 1930s did Australians widely and publicly question the value of the victory.<sup>64</sup> Many triumphal symbols — physical objects displayed in public places, for example — remained visible in the public domain in the years of Hitler’s rise to power and Japan’s increasing aggression in Asia, but writers and orators became filled with a profound sadness and sense of failure. This they often expressed in traumatised lamentation, ignoring the narratives of triumph that had filled earlier commentaries on the meaning of the war for Australia.

The early post-war years were the most important to the Memorial, because its displays tended to reflect the commemorative mood of 1922, and once these were established it was very difficult for them to be radically altered. Bean and Treloar wrote all the labels between them, and the staff was small. Thus the Memorial did not change a great deal, while the rhetoric of commemorative days, be it on the platform, at the pulpit or in the newspaper, underwent considerable revision. The Memorial accurately reflected the Australian commemorative climate of 1922, but by 1935 there were great differences of emphasis, tone and method.

Thus the Memorial’s displays, which carried “the spirit of 1922” without significant change until 1935, were an important factor in the persistence of a triumphal memory in Australia throughout this time. Such memory was based firmly on martial nationalism, and helped imprint this conception of the nation upon Australian identity. Our nationalism, as is common to many modern nations, is at its most strident, its most passionately-felt, when focussed by war or its

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<sup>62</sup> See Robin Gerster, *Big-Noting: The Heroic Theme in Australian War Writing* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1987).

<sup>63</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 August 1928, p. 12.

<sup>64</sup> For instance, a poem in the *Age* on Anzac Day 1939, written by a woman whose sweetheart had died on Gallipoli, observed “the war-clouds, the fear, the greed among us”, and asked tormentedly, “Do we mock you and set you at naught, And rob you of final achievement?” *Age*, 25 April 1939, p. 3.

memory. It is a commonplace to say that the First World War made Australia a nation, but it is less common to infer from this that some of the values and virtues of the warrior, such as ferocity, determination and ruthlessness, have become infused into the very fibre of our collective identity, at least in its dominant forms.

Triumph remains observable to this day in Australia, transformed and largely sublimated since the Second World War by service and sacrifice, but nonetheless alive and influential. The many developments in commemoration, the media, literature, the arts and politics, to name but a few factors, since the mid-1930s, have altered triumphalism, but not destroyed it. Thus, in a spirit of self-improvement for which Bean might have argued, it may be time to examine this element of our collective psyche more closely, in an endeavour to learn more about who we are as a group, and where we wish to go.