

Anzac's Long Shadow: The Cost of Our National Obsession

A right-wing critique of Australia's World War I centenary celebrations

Richard Phillips
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Among the multitude of books released by Australian publishers this year as part of the World War I centenary is *Anzac's Long Shadow: The Cost of Our National Obsession*. The author, James Brown is a Lowy Institute analyst and former Australian army officer who served in the US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the Australian intervention in the Solomon Islands.

Brown is also the son-in-law of Malcolm Turnbull, the current federal minister for communications and former leader of the Liberal Party. Brown acknowledges Turnbull's "inspiration" and assistance in writing the book.

Anzac's Long Shadow criticises Canberra's spending on the World War I centenary and the commercialisation of Anzac Day, the annual April 25 anniversary of the start of the catastrophic nine-month Gallipoli campaign in Turkey in 1915. The book contains various exposures of the military remembrance industry.

Anzac Day, the author states, "has a morphed into a sort of military Halloween" that has "Disneyfied the terrors of war like so many ghosts and goblins." Brown complains that "military re-enactors enjoy the same status as military veterans."

According to Brown, "a century after the war to end all wars, Anzac is being bottled, stamped and sold," with the commemorative industry in "hyperdrive."

Anzac's Long Shadow details some of this crass commercialisation—the souvenir industry, military battlefield tourism and next year's Anzac centenary. The Gallipoli anniversary will include a re-enactment of the Anzac Cove landing in Turkey, a surfing boat race across the Dardenelles, a marathon swimming

competition, and an evening concert at the battle site for some 8,000 Australians selected in a national raffle from 30,000 applications.

Brown also targets the entire WWI centenary commemoration, describing it as a "discordant, lengthy and exorbitant four-year festival for the dead." He notes that Australian government and corporate spending will total more than \$620 million, or 200 percent more than is being spent on the four-year centenary in Britain.

Notwithstanding these remarks, Brown's book is a right-wing critique. Rather than spending millions commemorating WWI, he insists that this money should be used to better equip the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and to glorify the veterans of Australian imperialism's involvement in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Brown's main concern is that Australia's political and military elites are not doing enough—ideologically and practically—to prepare for the eruption of military conflict, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region.

Anzac's Long Shadow argues that Australian national myths are at odds with the requirements of contemporary warfare. Brown is particularly hostile to the populist glorification of the lower military ranks. Anzac mythology, he says, "has led the army in particular to focus on egalitarianism and tactics at the expense of officers and strategy. Commemoration has crowded out serious thought."

In Chapter Five, entitled "War is a profession," he deplores popular images of an Australian soldier as one from the lower ranks and not the officer caste.

"Soldiers and officers [are] held in roughly proximate status, and the bonds between mates of more

importance than enforced hierarchies. This, in turn, leads to a ‘somewhat ambivalent relationship’ with authority ... leadership and skills of officers are not highly valued ...

“While care for soldiers is an important quality in officers,” he continues. “Australian officers may have overcorrected ... and thrown away valuable British officer traditions. Hundreds of years of professional military experience led the British to delineate firmly between officer and soldier ... Not all elitism is bad.”

Brown insists that egalitarianism is dangerous and must be stamped out. He could well be drawing on his own experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, where some soldiers in the lower ranks undoubtedly began to question the purpose of these neo-colonial occupations.

Anzac’s Long Shadow also bewails the lack of serious debate on military history and strategy in military and political circles. Brown writes that, contrary to increased numbers attending Gallipoli events each year, “the space between civil and military worlds has been widening ... [and] become a chasm.

“Outside of Anzac Day few Australians see the military ... There are few documentaries on modern military life, few military characters in our favourite television shows ... There are no soldiers toting semi-automatic weapons at our airports and rarely do we see armoured vehicles in formation.”

In reality, under successive Labor and Liberal-National governments, the military has been come to play a far more prominent role, including in disaster relief, the massive security operations surrounding major events and the notorious “border protection” program against refugees. The WWI “celebration,” which Brown criticises, is aimed precisely at what he is arguing for: an even greater militarisation of every aspect of public life and the preparation for new wars.

Since the book’s publication, Brown’s appeal for greater commemorative status to be afforded to veterans of recent imperialist interventions has been acknowledged.

Early this year, Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced that a national commemoration day will be held annually on March 31 for Australian troops who served in Afghanistan and the Middle East. Anzac Day marches this year were led by Australian soldiers who fought in Afghanistan.

Brown’s call for a greater public and political profile

for the Australian military and its senior officers is also being realised. The Abbott government this year appointed former ADF chief Peter Cosgrove as Australia’s governor-general. Cosgrove led the Australian military intervention into East Timor in 1999 and was promoted to armed forces chief in 2002, overseeing Australian involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. As the formal representative of the British Queen in Australia, he is now formally Australia’s head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, with wide-ranging powers.

“A distant shore,” the book’s concluding chapter, warns that the “prospect of war in Australia’s region is growing more real” and points to increased military spending in India, South Korea, Japan, China and Russia. While Brown makes no explicit reference to the US “pivot” and Australia’s key role in this aggressive military build-up against China, he is clearly preoccupied with a future war in the Asia-Pacific.

Without naming China, Brown envisages a naval blockade of vital sea routes or direct military conflict in the South China Sea. The Australian government, he suggests, “may decide to deploy our new amphibious forces as part of a larger coalition, to seize or defend some piece of territory in Asia. Perhaps an island that has become a symbol of larger struggle of political will between two giants.”

Anzac’s Long Shadow is, in effect, sounding a warning to the Australian ruling class that much more serious ideological preparations are required to condition masses of people to the prospect of full-scale war in the region.

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