

A reply to *ANZAC Heroes* author, Maria Gill

Sam Price, Tom Peters
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Maria Gill, the author of *ANZAC Heroes*, responded to the WSWS review of her book, posted on March 24.

The review described *ANZAC Heroes* as “a glorification of war and nationalism aimed at children.” It attacked the book as part of the New Zealand and Australian governments’ multi-million dollar propaganda campaign, which is using the centenary of World War I to “encourage patriotism and respect for the military.”

Gill commented on the review: “Actually, I’m an anti-war person myself and tell these stories so that children can read historical accounts of what happened in the past so that we can learn from them and don’t repeat the same mistakes. I say in the introduction that the men and women enlisted because they thought it was going to be a great adventure but show in the stories that is the last thing they found.” Her full response can be read in the comments section below the original review.

Whatever Gill says now about her intentions, *ANZAC Heroes* is unambiguously a pro-war book. Her claim that she described the hardships faced by ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) troops to make a statement against war does not withstand scrutiny.

For children, or anyone, to learn from the wars of the past, they require an objective and historically accurate account. A genuinely anti-war history book would need to explain the real reasons why governments and politicians sent millions of young people to fight and die. It would also need to detail the mass opposition to war that emerged in the working class, and the ruling elite’s brutal crackdown on dissenters.

Gill’s book does none of this. Her introduction merely states that many soldiers “thought they were signing up for adventure and travel. Instead, they were pawns in a deadly game.” This vague statement avoids saying anything about the real nature of this “deadly

game,” what its aims were, or who was responsible for it. In an epilogue, Gill falsely describes the entry of New Zealand and Australia into WWI as a defensive reaction to the threat of German militarism. In fact, they joined to protect the British Empire and expand their own colonial possessions in the Pacific.

World War I was an imperialist war, the product of contradictions within the capitalist system—especially that between globalised production and the division of the world into competing nation states—which could no longer be contained. Each of the major imperialist powers sought to redivide the world at the expense of its rivals and become the dominant world power. Yet the explosion of violence and barbarism, unprecedented in world history, did not resolve this question; the war was followed just 21 years later with an even more deadly and prolonged global conflict.

Gill’s book is dedicated “to all the men and women who sacrificed so much for us in two world wars.” The truth is that their lives were deliberately squandered by a ruling elite determined to defend the geo-strategic and profit interests of Australian and New Zealand imperialism.

ANZAC Heroes refers to the psychological and physical traumas suffered by ANZAC soldiers, but only to praise them for continuing to fight, despite the odds. In a conscious encouragement of loyalty and patriotism, each profile emphasises the medals and recognition bestowed upon these men.

Gill’s writing style often resembles that of an adventure novelist. New Zealand Victoria Cross winner, Sergeant Richard Travis, who endured the horrors of the Battle of the Somme, is hailed as a “great scout,” an “independent spirit” and the “King of No-Man’s-Land.” Lieutenant Colonel Henry Murray’s company, we are told, “would follow him anywhere, so great was his bravery.” Maori troops in WWII, Gill writes, “won the respect of other nations as fearsome

fighters.”

New Zealander Robin Harper’s profile states approvingly that he re-enlisted in WWII, “eager to avenge his brothers’ deaths” in WWI. It concludes that “Robin and his brother Gordon had given their all for their country.” Gill holds this up as an example for today’s youth.

Interestingly, the author’s sympathies extend only to the New Zealand and Australian troops who suffered in these wars. As David Walsh, arts editor of the WSWS, has noted, “a true anti-war film shows the atrocities *your* country commits against the so-called enemy.” This is a major feature of anti-war novels such as Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Generals Die in Bed* by Charles Yale Harrison, *Johnny Got His Gun* by Dalton Trumbo and *The Thin Red Line* and other works of James Jones.

The anti-war memoir of New Zealand conscientious objector Archibald Baxter, *We Will Not Cease*, and Robin Hyde’s biographical novel *Passport to Hell*, are both notable for their hostility towards the officer class and the brutality of the NZ military in WWI. In Australia, Alan Seymour’s play *The One Day of the Year* is a powerful challenge to the nationalist myths surrounding the ANZACs.

Gill’s book has nothing in common with such works. She does not condemn the atrocities committed by the ANZACs or their allies, Britain and the US, but instead glorifies their actions, including the bombing of Berlin, which killed thousands. German, Ottoman and Japanese troops are demonised and referred to repeatedly as “the enemy.”

It is worth noting that this is not the first time Gill has written in glowing terms about the military. Her children’s book *New Zealand Hall of Fame*, published in 2011, includes a profile of Willie Apiata, who served in the Special Air Service (NZSAS) during the brutal US-led war in Afghanistan.

Gill describes Apiata, who received a Victoria Cross medal, as “New Zealand’s Bravest Living Hero.” She falsely depicts the activities of the NZSAS as “protecting people who cannot protect themselves.” The NZSAS consists of highly trained killers who have been implicated in killing civilians in Afghanistan.

In her comment to the WSWS, Gill defended the government funding she received to write *ANZAC Heroes*, stating that she earned “well under half of what

I would get paid as a teacher” (her previous profession).

The *amount* of money is not the most important issue. The point is that Gill collaborated with the government and the military. The list of acknowledgements in *ANZAC Heroes* thanks no fewer than 10 historians and curators employed by the Australian and New Zealand defence forces.

The result is a book that glorifies the military for young readers, completely in line with the official WWI centenary. This is why it has been celebrated by the media and will, no doubt, find its way into myriad schoolrooms, which are already saturated with Anzac-related material, to condition the younger generation to accept militarism and war as a normal part of life.

Children have been heavily encouraged, for example, in both Australia and New Zealand, to attend official dawn ceremonies on Anzac Day. The April 25 holiday in the two countries commemorates the battle of Gallipoli in WWI in a celebration of nationalism and the military.

Moreover, numerous pro-war books, films, TV shows, plays and exhibitions have been produced for children in recent years. These include WWI exhibitions in New Zealand, the Camp Gallipoli events in Australia, and several picture books including *Jim’s Letters*, *Roly the Anzac Donkey*, *Gladys Goes to War*, *The Tale of the Anzac Tortoise*, *Simpson and his Donkey*, *A Day to Remember* and *Anzac Ted*—to name just a few. Many of these were written in collaboration with the military.

As in the years prior to World War I, war propaganda is primarily aimed at young people. This is because the ruling establishments in Australia and New Zealand are consciously preparing them to fight in future imperialist wars. Far from opposing the pro-war carnival, *ANZAC Heroes* is part of this agenda.



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