

“You need only look at its origins to see that elements of nationalism and militarism are all there, in fact that’s what it’s about”

An interview with Australian historian Mark Cryle on the origins of Anzac Day

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with historian Dr Mark Cryle, honorary research fellow at the University of Queensland’s School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry. Dr Cryle is the author of a 2015 PhD thesis, “Making ‘the One Day of the Year’: a Genealogy of Anzac Day to 1918,” which analysed the first three commemorations in Australia of the bloody Allied operation in Gallipoli, Turkey that was launched in April 1915.

The discussion was prompted by recent remarks by the federal education minister, Alan Tudge. He complained that a draft national school curriculum allegedly failed to present Anzac Day as “the most sacred of all days in Australia” and depicted it as a “contested idea” instead of ensuring that students accept the official commemoration uncritically. Tudge added that without such an approach, young people are “not going to protect [Australia in war], as a million Australians have through their military service, and 100,000 people have died in the protection of those things, into defending them.”

“In other words,” the WSWs noted, “children must have Australian nationalist and exceptionalist myths drilled into them so that as young adults they are ready to fight and die ‘defending’ the nation against foreign enemies” (see: “Australian education minister demands militarist school curriculum”).

Dr Cryle’s research detailed the militarist motivations that drove the first Anzac Day commemorations, and outlined the distrustful and hostile response these received from many working class people. This historical record is deliberately concealed by the Australian political and media establishment, as a necessary aspect of its promotion of Anzac Day as an unchallengeable and “sacred” part of the national calendar.

Patrick O’Connor: Thank you for speaking with the WSWs. Your research places the origins of Anzac Day within the context of efforts prior to World War I to establish an agreed upon day of nationalist celebration in Australia. There were issues with this—no-one at the time could agree what date Australia Day ought to be marked, and the anniversary of the 1901 federation fell on New Year’s Day so wasn’t considered suitable. Then there were other days promoted by different figures, some of which I’d never heard of before reading your work—Trafalgar Day, Wattle Day, Empire Day. Can you talk about this search—what was the new ruling elite within this dominion of the British Empire searching for prior to 1915–1916?

Mark Cryle: Trafalgar Day and Empire Day both came very specifically out of a need to boost notions of the munificence of the British Empire. They were constructed and invented—Britain didn’t really have a national day, unlike the classic French Bastille Day and the American Independence Day. So these ideas for a national day in Australia were

invented to boost commemorations around the Empire. In essence it was a political move, because there was a growing fear of socialism, which talked about an international brotherhood and questioned nationalistic ideas.

There was a sense that it was important to boost patriotism. I read a few letters to the *Brisbane Courier* in March of 1914, where they’re raising, ‘we need a day, we need a day to commemorate.’ And in a sense what actually happened is that Anzac Day, over a period of decades, became that day. It wasn’t necessarily that day in 1916 or even 1918.

PO: You emphasise that there was not any individual “inventor” of Anzac Day, nor one moment or decision that began the commemoration. Numerous different calls emerged shortly after the Gallipoli landing for the event to be marked each year across the country. At the same time, however, in your thesis you argue that the drive to establish an annual Anzac Day was not a movement “from below,” explaining, “The messages delivered from speakers’ podiums, pulpits, classrooms and newspaper columns came clearly from ‘above.’ They dovetailed with the interests of ruling elites who sought to pursue the war with the utmost vigour.”

MC: When I went looking for the papers of Queensland’s Anzac Day Commemoration Committee one might reasonably have expected to find them in a government archive, but they weren’t. They were tucked away as part of a subset of another organisation, the Queensland Recruiting Committee. Again, one would have expected to find this in a state or federal government archive or perhaps within the army, but the Queensland Recruiting Committee actually launched itself in May 1915 without any government support.

In fact, there were no government members, it was a group of private citizens. I suspect the reason for this is because in May 1915 in Queensland, a Labor government comes to power for the first time in the state, so you’ve got a number of conservatives who are very concerned about the willingness of the Labor government to support the war effort. As it was, their fears were entirely unfounded and the government was very supportive of the war.

It’s in the archives of the Queensland Recruiting Committee one finds the minutes and all the papers of the Anzac Day Commemoration Committee. You need to appreciate that then Anzac Day commemorations are not something that is ever divorced from the idea of pursuing the war. It is not unreasonable to look at Anzac Day today and be concerned about elements of militarism, masculinism, and nationalism—but you need only look at its origins to see that that’s all there, in fact that’s what it’s about.

PO: The Commemoration Committee in Queensland played a significant role in organising and formalising the first Anzac Day in 1916. The head

of that committee was a man named David Garland. Can you speak about his role? Your thesis quotes one of his “war sermons”: “Look first to our faults, our national sins—suffragettes and strikers; selfish lovers of ease and luxury—a distinct forgetfulness of God and consequent failure of duty.”

MC: Garland was an Anglican clergyman and also the secretary of the Recruiting Committee. If you have an opportunity to look at a photograph of the first Anzac Day commemoration in Brisbane, which went down the main street in April 1916, you’ll see there’s a big banner hanging off the Post Office that says ‘Enlist Now.’ So you need to understand that this is about recruiting...

Garland is a hard-core Puritan. He shares a very powerful idea that prevails within the Protestant clergy—essentially that Australia’s going down the tubes and there’s too much “indulgence.” Garland talks about strikers and suffragettes, well you can see where his politics are—he’s a hard-core right winger, even for those times. On the other hand, he’s highly energetic, he’s very well organised, and he does an enormous amount of work to present a version of an Anzac Day commemoration which pulls together different elements. So he’s a major figure.

PO: The 1916 Anzac Day event organised by Garland and the Commemoration Committee included the adoption of four resolutions: the first was a pledge of loyalty to the king, the second, celebration of Anzac soldiers’ heroism and sacrifice, the third, sympathy for those who’d lost loved ones, and a final one that urged everyone eligible to enlist in the military. That was very much the tenor of Anzac Day right from the outset wasn’t it?

MC: It was. Numbers one and four seem to have been excised now, people don’t talk about those aspects. But if you ignore this contextualisation then that’s a disservice, you don’t really understand what’s going on. Resolutions one and four are very much part and parcel of what the Anzac Day commemorations are.

PO: I thought it was quite powerful the way you counterposed the ideological priorities of the Anzac Day organisers—celebrating the Empire and boosting the war effort—with the reaction of ordinary people at the time. Very large crowds of people gathered for the first Anzac Day events in 1916, tens of thousands in each major city, many of whom had lost family members, friends, and colleagues not just at Gallipoli but in other battles as well. There was a mass outpouring of grief, as well as shock at the sight of some of the wounded veterans. Can you please speak on this?

MC: Sure. In part the commemoration was produced to manage public grief. Only two soldiers’ bodies were ever repatriated, one being the unknown soldier and the other Sir William Throsby Bridges, senior Australian commander of the Anzacs, who was killed at Gallipoli in May and buried in Melbourne in September. There were no graves for the loved ones of every other dead soldier to grieve at, and many of them were still listed as missing so their final fate was unknown.

There also had been a mythologising of what a war wound looked like. There were images produced of brave looking men with clean white bandages over their heads, holding up their guns and fighting. But the reality of the wounds was horrific. And it’s the first time that many people saw the damage done by fighting in industrialised war. It was paraded on the streets, and in some ways the whole thing backfired, because people were horrified by what they saw.

The returned soldiers were totally traumatised by the experience. At a commemoration in Toowoomba, Anzac Day organisers initially fired a volley but they had to stop doing that because when the men heard the gunfire they couldn’t handle it, they became incredibly distressed.

So there was a clear indication that people were gathering for a funereal occasion—and that doesn’t quite match with the image of proud soldiers marching along, saying ‘enlist now.’ By 1918, the recruiters were saying forget about recruiting on Anzac Day, it doesn’t work.

PO: You wrote: “Anzac Day was an occasion for the articulation of an

unmitigated and definitive political and moral binary. Fighting for the nation and the empire was virtuous and noble. Not doing so was cowardly, selfish, indulgent and immoral. There were no grey areas and little space discursively for consoling the bereaved or managing the grief of any whose ideological position was not firmly aligned with the pressmen, preachers, teachers and politicians delivering the judgements. Anzac Day in 1917 and 1918 was thoroughly appropriated by the forces of pro-war loyalists to pursue their own ends.” Can you speak further on this?

MC: The stats show that somewhere between 30 and 35 percent of eligible men between 18 and 40 or so actually volunteered. So that means you had 70 or 65 percent who didn’t. By 1917 Anzac Day was an event for the faithful and the faithful only. If you had any doubts about the war, then you had no place there. There was no place for ambiguity at these events.

PO: If we look now at the second Anzac Day events, April 1917, clearly there had been very significant military as well as political developments in the previous twelve months. You noted that on the Western Front alone, Australian forces suffered more than 120,000 casualties, including more than 15,000 deaths. The country’s total population at the time was just under 5 million.

MC: The losses were just horrific, at Fromelles and Pozières in particular. That was all much more horrific than even the losses at Gallipoli, which were bad enough. Nearly every family had been touched by these experiences, and so there was national grieving.

A lot of historical accounts focus on the first Anzac Day so I thought it would be interesting to look at the second and third. Contrary to any assumption that it just carried on as before, in fact the numbers of people involved really fell away in 1917 and 1918. At the end of 1916 there was a major conscription plebiscite, and another one in 1917 [that were both defeated]. These are incredibly divisive, the country is torn apart. There is war weariness, people are sick of it. They just want their loved ones home. It was supposed to have been over by Christmas 1914.

People are having their own private commemorations; there’s talk within the union movement of workers organising their own small gatherings. They’re avoiding the official commemorations because there’s an enormous amount of high-powered rhetoric about sacrificing for the Empire that people don’t want to hear anymore, they’re sick of it. The great irony of the call, “lest we forget,” is that that is exactly what most of the soldiers who came back were trying to do.

PO: Can you speak more about how different working-class communities held their own private commemorations and rejected the official events?

MC: I was interested to look at areas like Broken Hill, other big mining towns, areas around Port Adelaide, Port Melbourne, and Fremantle, to see how Anzac was marked in these very working class, Labor dominated, communities. There were complaints about the appalling turn out at official Anzac Day events—these didn’t have much attraction in these communities, it was pretty obvious. There are images of the Brisbane 1917 commemoration and there are no throngs of people packing in around it. People had worked out that it wasn’t a good way to grieve I think.

PO: The leadup to the third Anzac Day commemoration involved further mass death in the war—157,000 Australian casualties including 19,000 deaths between April 1917 and April 1918. At the same time there had been a very significant three-month long general strike in 1917 triggered by railway workers in New South Wales, and also the far-reaching impact of the Russian revolution.

MC: On the impact of the Russian revolution—you had a militant left in Australia that believed that this was doable. I was reading about a teachers’ union meeting in Brisbane in January 1919, which reproduced a Soviet document from the Commissar for Education Anatoly Lunacharsky, on the new role that teachers should have in society. I

remember thinking that this was not a very militant union, but it shows that these new ideas are being widely considered.

There is a growing militancy in the left. The Labor Party is torn apart by the conscription plebiscites and it's trying to shore up a position, but the industrial left becomes much stronger and increasingly divorced from the political left, the Labor Party. So you have this militancy within the union movement—you can imagine what the conservative recruiters were saying about that. So you had this incredibly divided society. You had increasing rents and rising prices, working class people and the poor are increasingly disadvantaged. There's a lot of material in the left wing press about the capitalist war profiteers.

Society is being torn apart by the experience of war, and there are great fears in Britain of the same thing happening. This is the great rise of the international working class that had been feared since the 1880s and 1890s—and in Australia likewise there was fear that this could actually happen, working class revolution here.

PO: We're having this discussion after the new AUKUS military alliance has been developed by the United States, Britain, and Australia, which is clearly directed against China and heightens the danger of a devastating nuclear war. What lessons do you think can be drawn by people seeking to oppose militarism and war today through a review of the history of the first Anzac days?

MC: I think it brings us back to the idea that militaristic efforts and the rush to war are often a response to domestic political issues. The first country to mobilise in 1914 was Russia, which was fraught with domestic problems, and there was a clear sense from the Tsar and his advisors that a "good war" would settle this down. So there's a way in which the threat of an enemy defuses domestic problems, at least temporarily.

If we consider Australia now—with COVID issues, climate change, and a bunch of other significant domestic issues—if we beat up the Chinese issue, then people's attention will be diverted from other matters. I can't help but be a little bit cynical about that. But historically, if you look at the rush to war, it is often a way to divert attention away from domestic political issues. In the case of 1914, with the rise of socialism in Russia and Europe, there was a sense that nationalist values needed to be reasserted.

PO: I think that the ruling class's fear of socialism is not only a matter for 1914 but again now in 2021 and beyond. Thank you very much for discussing these important historical and political issues with the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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