

# The exploitation of Anzac and other myths

1 Comment

Andrew Hamilton | 06 May 2015



In many contexts it is inflammatory to speak of myths. When Scripture scholars describe Biblical stories as myths they are quickly taken to task.

As are those who describe such significant national events as the landing of the Australian and New Zealand troops at Gallipoli or the Battle of the Boyne.

To describe events as mythical is always open to misunderstanding, because in common speech myth is opposed to reality. When mythical stories are seen as unreal, the deep significance they have for individuals and groups also comes into question. So a hostile response is to be expected.

Given these predictable responses, why might we want to speak of the Anzac myth or of the myth of the Israelite liberation from Egypt? The use of the word 'myth' recognises that any historical event embraces the actions and suffering of many people who plan it, help realise it, or are affected by it. Because countless relationships are involved, the event can

be seen from many perspectives.

The landing at Gallipoli can be described as the invasion of Turkey by foreign troops in the prosecution of a European war. It led to the death of very many Turkish soldiers, many French soldiers and slightly less Australian and New Zealand soldiers. Many on both sides fought with great courage, some with less. There were acts of great generosity and some of meanness on all sides. The invasion was badly planned and failed in its goals. And it affected the lives and livelihood of many rural communities in Australia.

To understand such complicated events involving hundreds of thousands of actors, we need to interpret them. Australians look at Gallipoli from the perspective of the Australian soldiers there, seeing the other actors through that lens. When we interpret we highlight some actions, overlook others, making some connections central and overlooking others.

When interpretations are popularly received, they are often embodied in sayings and doings that are emblematic of the interpretation. The capture of a machine gun nest is enshrined as an act of heroic gallantry, the mercy missions of Simpson and his donkey for dogged courage and self-sacrifice. Such actions are taken to represent the whole event with its multitude of actors and sufferers, its mixture of strength and weakness, motives and accidents, and variety of possible perspectives.

It is at this point we can speak of the Anzac myth. The word does not deny that the events described happened, that people did not die and live as they are described, or that they did not display the virtues the story gives them. It says that this is a partial, simplified and rarified account of very complex events.

The gap between the events and the interpretation becomes larger still when the qualities shown in the selective interpretation of the events are applied not only to those events, but also to people and events at a distance from it. The mateship and initiative displayed by soldiers at Gallipoli are then taken to be typical of Australian soldiers generally, or at an even further reach, of all Australians.

These self-attributed qualities can then be used to differentiate Australian soldiers from Turkish or United States soldiers, or Australians from British people, and so on. Australian soldiers who were baptised with fire at Gallipoli then anoint Australian soldiers fighting in Iraq and the politicians who send them, and eventually the whole Australian people, with the Anzac spirit. This spirit becomes available for sporting contests and all kinds of unlikely events.

It is at this point that myth separates itself totally from reality. We enter a world of self-delusion, sometimes harmless, sometimes dangerous. The myth in this free-floating form can be commercialised – we, too, can be

part of the spirit of the past by buying the appropriate ticket. We can share in the high country values shown by the explorers by driving our 4WDs complete with GPS along dirt roads. We can share the Anzac spirit by being in the stand at the big match on Anzac Day.

This appropriation of myths can be dangerous. When a colonial nation indentifies with the liberation from Egypt and the campaign to take possession of the promised land, the myth will justify theft and barbarism.

Even when the popular cooptation of a myth is a harmless indulgence, it is important for us periodically to ground the myth again in the messy, multi-faced reality of the original event, We must look at the Anzac landing through Turkish eyes, also shining with mateship and bravery, through British eyes, and through the eyes of the sardonic soldiers as they realise that their officers and politicians have once again stuffed up. Periodic vigilance will protect us against new generations of lords and masters who exploit national myths to lure us into enterprises born in timidity and corrosive of mateship.

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*Image: Carpaccio's Flight into Egypt, 1500 ([Wikiart](#))*