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“A simple epic”: Gallipoli and the Australian media

an address¹ to the Institute on 28 October 2009 by
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Harvey Broadbent examines the way the media have presented the Gallipoli story over the past 90 years. For the first 50 years, the media presented what Broadbent describes as the ‘tradition message’ viz. that the Anzacs at Gallipoli created a distinctive tradition, which included qualities such as mateship, military prowess and a reputation as the campaign’s most successful troops. The message changed in the 1960s to a ‘myth message’, viz. that this image of the Anzacs was essentially an overly generalised myth perpetuated to assist the realization of a national identity. Since the 1980s, a more balanced blend of these two messages has evolved as new generations of Australians have made pilgrimages to the Gallipoli battlefields. With the centenary of the campaign approaching, it is trusted that this more balanced and nuanced message, incorporating the achievements of other participating nations, especially the Turks, will prevail.

This presentation has two main concerns: the nature of the received knowledge about the Gallipoli Campaign as a founding myth of Australia; and the channels or outlets by which the received knowledge has reached the Australian population since 1915. The media were involved even before the 1915 landings in determining both the way the Gallipoli story became rooted in the Australian psyche and its place as a founding myth for the nation. I define ‘media’ as the various modes of communicating information and ideas relating thereto. It includes: newspapers; radio and television news, documentaries and current affairs; narrowcasting (e.g. on the worldwide web); cinema; theatre; and books.

Received Knowledge

Media practitioners love to reduce knowledge they have acquired for communication to a digestible, even simplistic, message. The received knowledge about Australia’s part in the Gallipoli Campaign can be summarized in two distinct, but contrasting, messages.

The first message, which I call the ‘Tradition Message’, can be encapsulated as: The Anzacs at Gallipoli created a tradition or perception that they were *distinctive* by exhibiting qualities, such as an elevated ideal of mateship and other attributes special to them, which enabled them to be the troops who achieved the most during the Gallipoli Campaign.

The second message, which I call the ‘Myth Message’, contradicts the first. It is that this sturdy image of the Anzacs is essentially an overly generalised myth perpetuated for the purposes of assisting the realization of a national identity that

combines desired qualities in both men and women, such as the fair-go or egalitarianism, concern for one’s fellow countrymen and women and hardiness. Or as Charles Bean advocated, a healthier, fitter, more optimistic transplanted version of the British race, exhibited in their performance first at Gallipoli, and thereafter. Some or many original Anzacs possessed these qualities, but many did not, and other nations’ troops also exhibited similar qualities.

In communicating these messages, at different times the various media modes have been responsive to public sentiment in Australia and generally have attempted to stroke it. The complexity arises when determining:

- how far the various modes of media go in their stroking – public broadcasters such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), and ‘independent’ journals, have a strong record of questioning dominant public sentiment and perceptions;
- how far the media actually influence that collective sentiment; and
- whether public sentiment influences media coverage or *vice-versa*.

So let us look at the nature of the received knowledge about the Gallipoli Campaign and the channels by which the received knowledge has reached the Australian population.

Media Censorship in World War I

After the outbreak of war in August 1914, newspapers, the main source of public information, reported events as they unfolded. The imposition of war-time censorship was a source of frustration for journalists and editors. The measures were excused by Chief of the General Staff, Colonel Legge, as being

¹Attended by 81 members and guests.

necessary to prevent any “unpatriotic disclosures of some of the daily press”. The newspapers complained constantly that the appointed censors, who Legge had described as “hard-working citizen officers, who are doing their best in a difficult task for the safety of the Empire,”² had no real understanding of the newspaper industry. *The Argus* (Melbourne) on 29 December 1914 (p.4) pointed out that those chosen as censors had “no training and possess no aptitude” for dealing with newspaper work, “which they do not in the least understand” and frequently “showed ludicrous ignorance ... and some of them have not the least notion of when to censor or how”. But that was the pattern when the first landings occurred at Gallipoli. The news from the front came through a series of filters, starting with the war correspondent, who was subject to the local high command, and was further scrutinized by various authorities before publication. Frequently the news was minimized to the degree that it misrepresented or put a spin on events and more importantly their war-time implications.

The Gallipoli Landing

The most potent example of this is the reporting of the Anzac landing itself. News of the landing was kept from publication in Australian newspapers until the 30 April, five days after the event. Details, announced by the British War Office, with no contributions allowed from the war correspondents at the front, were reduced to a such a cryptic minimum of nineteen lines as to be frustratingly inadequate given that the landing was the first active service in which the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and the New Zealanders were involved, an historic event. Moreover, the cursory report was inaccurate and misleading.³

However, even with so little information, the newspapers of the day were true to representing the received knowledge as the pre-determined message of Anzac distinctiveness. Since the outbreak of war, newspaper columns had lauded praise born of hope on the AIF and at the landing they followed the already established pattern of substituting facts with hyperbole. The editorials on 30 April, with no real information, knowingly obliged public hope. *The Argus* wrote: “But while in one respect we know little, in another we know much. We know that our troops are credited with ‘splendid gallantry and magnificent achievement’ ... It now appears that the Canadians at Hill 60 [on the Western Front] and the Australians at Gallipoli distinguished themselves in action almost simultaneously”.

Editorials over the next week concentrated on morale boosting in the face of the arrival of the first

casualty lists. *The Argus* of 3 May 1915 (p. 6) stated that “Australians have all the high patriotism and self-control of a ruling race and they will not let their private sufferings dim their eyes to the glory of wounds and death incurred in their country’s cause by its gallant sons”. And with the main message in mind, “Australia could not wish for a more inspiring scene in which to make her European debut as a fighting unit of the Empire ... already our troops have established a superiority that should have a potent moral effect upon the Turk and cause the German to reconsider his views on the solidarity and military resources of the British dominions”. And this without any hard facts of the situation available.

The pattern leading to the Tradition Message is thus established from the outset and it continues when the first war correspondent’s report of the landing arrives and is published on 8 May 1915, two weeks after the event. The report comes not from the official Australian war correspondent, Charles Bean. His report was still under the censors’ scrutiny. It comes instead from *British* war correspondent, Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett. It is a colourful, derring-do, dramatic account, devoid of any tactical reporting or accurate assessment of gains and losses. It is published in newspapers around Australia and in Britain and combines moments of accurate description with less-than-accurate lashings of hyperbole and emotion. It was a heaven-sent report for the secure establishment of the Tradition Message. It reads as if it might have been designed for the purpose: “The Australians rose to the occasion ... it was over in a minute ... those colonials, practical above all else, went about it in a practical way ... this race of athletes proceeded to scale the cliffs without responding to the enemy’s fire. They lost some men but did not worry ... The courage displayed by these wounded Australians will never be forgotten ... In fact I have never seen anything like these wounded Australians in war before. Though many were shot to bits, without the hope of recovery, their cheers resounded throughout the night ... They were happy because they knew that they had been tried for the first time and had not been found wanting ... There has been no finer feat in this war.”

Reaction from Australians was widespread, emotional and pride-filled, and with a sense of relief that the AIF had not, according to a *British* report, been found wanting. This report is highly significant. It colours and influences so much of what follows in Australia relating to the mythology of the Anzac story. Although the Australian press since the outbreak of war had been determined to present the AIF as distinctive, Ashmead-Bartlett’s report published on the 8 May 1915 is the tangible moment that the Anzac legend is born. The anti-imperialist *Bulletin*, always a proclaimer of the Eureka rebellion as the true beginning of Australia’s national history, now stated the landing of the Australian IMPERIAL Force at Gallipoli as fit to stand alongside Eureka as a determiner of nationhood.

²*The Argus*, 29 December 1914, p. 4.

³*The Argus*, 30 April 1915, p. 7.

Charles Bean

And what of Australia's own correspondent, Charles Bean, and his reports? He had gone ashore earlier than Ashmead-Bartlett and had quickly written a less colourful but wide-ranging account of the first and subsequent days, more detailed and more accurate than his British counterpart's. But British military authorities held it over till 13 May and it appeared in Australia on 14 May. The reports were printed on 18 May as an official booklet *Australians in Action: the Story of Gallipoli* for use by senior public school students in New South Wales 'in proud and grateful memory of the bravery of the Australian Troops'.

Gallipoli had entered the Australian consciousness. More and more panegyric accounts of the campaign appeared. A speech by the imperial patriotic author W. H. Fitchett was reported in *The Age* on 25 May in which he concluded that the Anzacs' achievement at Gallipoli equalled Waterloo and surpassed it in one respect. "Wellington's lads", he is reported as saying, "wouldn't have had the initiative and daring to climb that cliff. That was the 'Australian touch'." The audience applauded loudly – this was heady new stuff for the colonial cousins of Wellington's people.

The Bulletin of 3 June 1915 carried a poem by J. A. Allen, which encapsulated the public and official mood in stating that, by the deaths at Gallipoli, "was our new war-saga written – We who 'had no history'".

Inglis (1965, 205) has pointed out that Charles Bean publicised the emergence of *character* that the war-time performance of the Anzacs that began at Gallipoli revealed. This view, which develops to the point where Gallipoli is seen as a defining moment of nationhood for Australians and New Zealanders, sits uncomfortably for some people as Gallipoli was a defeat. But for Bean and others that follow, the achievement was survival, not victory, and the manner of behaving in defeat which is seen as a victory of the spirit.

Charles Bean's other publishing achievement was *The Anzac Book*. Compiled from writings and sketches of Gallipoli men themselves, it became a major best seller both in Australia and with the AIF overseas in Egypt and Europe – 100,000 copies by September 1916, with another 53,000 on order by November of that year. Its appeal lay in its depiction of the 'stalwart Anzacs' as Thomson (1994, 66) states. But Thomson also cites Bean as editing and excluding manuscripts not just on literary merit, but also to "project a certain image of the Anzacs ... the battered but unyielding warrior, and thus implied that Gallipoli was a triumph rather than a failure".

C. J. Dennis

The Moods of Ginger Mick, written in 1915, and published early in 1916, with its doggerel verse, represents the first popular literary attempt to capture and promulgate the Tradition Message. C. J. Dennis published his book *Songs of A Sentimental Bloke* in 1915 and it sold 50,000 copies in the first nine months.

He demonstrated that popular sales were very much in his mind with the character Ginger Mick, who he creates as an archetypal heroic Anzac, when he wrote to his publisher, "I have decided to kill Mick, but I don't know whether to finish him up on Gallipoli or not. If any further news comes through about the Australians I shall have to."

Dennis was timing Mick's death to coincide with public sentiment affected by any long current casualty lists (Thomson 1994, 215). The *character* of Mick at work in the poem and the attributes of the Anzac being transmitted reflect the Tradition Message. Mick becomes a fallen hero at Gallipoli, but he is a larrikin who loves a 'stoush'. He identifies himself as a member of a nation and race:

"The Pride o' Race lay 'olt on 'im, and Mick shoves out 'is chest

To find 'imself Australian an' blood brothers wiv the rest" (Thomson 1994, 215-6).

The film, *Hero of the Dardanelles*

It was not long before the newest mass medium, film, was to play its part in delivering the message. As casualties at Gallipoli began to grow dramatically, by the end of May 1915, the AIF required large numbers of reinforcements. This need was further impacted when Whitehall and Kitchener planned to send a new army out for a new offensive in August. In Australia, the Gallipoli experience was pounced upon by the authorities as a vehicle to entice more recruits for the cause. This resulted in the film, *The Hero of the Dardanelles*.

The message was the same – the new Anzac identity was heroic. You, as a new Anzac, could be a hero. Moreover, it was your duty to be one. A recruiting film it might have been, but it was the Australian cinema's first Gallipoli film and it further cemented the image of the Anzac soldier as distinctive and heroic. It also realised dramatically in moving images a sense or a depiction of the Anzac landing. A scene direction note in the script instructs that "All scenes at Dardanelles to be produced according to Ashmead-Bartlett's report."⁴ This leads to the film's hero, William, meeting a Turk on a cliff edge and "There follows a life and death struggle (as described in cable). Men fall over into water and William drowns his adversary and struggles to the shore badly wounded." The cable referred to did not indicate the Australian survived. In its fictionalized and exaggerated depiction, *The Hero of the Dardanelles* has a number of similarities in approach to Peter Weir's more sophisticated production, *Gallipoli*, 65 years later.

Anzac Day

The Gallipoli story does not end with the evacuations of 1915-16, but continues to the present

⁴Australian Archives Victoria, Accession No. B539, Department of Defence, Correspondence Files 1914-1917, File No. 144-1-274A, p. 2.

day with the media playing an important role in its commemoration. The first anniversary of the landing at Gallipoli was a major national event that received huge press coverage. Although the first official Anzac Day was not gazetted in Australia and New Zealand until the 1920s, the press was echoing the sentiments of many who were calling 25 April 1916 Australia's birthday. Newspapers ran banner headlines and the whole campaign was re-reported. The Melbourne *Argus* (25 April 1916, p. 5) ran a main 'Anzac' page, containing a Gallipoli diary with photographs and a leader by Defence Minister George Pearce, entitled, "What Anzac Means", in which Pearce stated that Australia now had a military tradition. Every unit of the citizen army will now have its tradition. Every soldier of the Australian army will have that inspiring example of the Anzac heroes to live up to in his military work, and we can regard the future with a calm confidence in the military prowess of our soldiers.

As a rite of passage for a new nation, this newly founded military tradition was being presented as a founding myth. The press were reflecting the public mood across the country. In Sydney, a crowd estimated at 80,000 crammed the Domain to welcome home 4000 returned Gallipoli troops. They spontaneously took up *Abide With Me*. A report stated "it was as though the crowd were swayed by a great wind, and sobs and sighs went up on every hand".⁵ The Telegraph (26 April 1916) was already calling the day by its future name as it wrote: "What Made Anzac Day? The test of the qualities of the Britons of the south in a crucible of fire. It is a simple epic ..."

World War II and the 1950s

By World War II, this Tradition Message was recalled for the purpose of recruitment and patriotic morale. The most potent example would be Australian film director, Charles Chauvel's *Forty Thousand Horsemen* – an unapologetic appropriation of the Anzac image to forge a film that communicated anti-German propaganda as well as the recently acquired military tradition, which afforded glorious victory in battle. Although Gallipoli was seen as forging the nation and providing its blood, a World War I victory (Beersheeba) is chosen for the purpose, rather than the honourable defeat at Gallipoli (Simpson and Gnida 2009). The 2nd AIF were told they had a tradition to match and a distinctive character to uphold. The press, radio and cinema newsreels continued the delivery of the Tradition Message and how the 2nd AIF were matching up to the tradition.

World War II boosted Anzac Day attendances and Returned Services League membership during the post-war years, but something starts to happen in the 1950s as surviving original Anzacs pass in to old age

and a new post-war generation, that cannot relate to the commemoration of military events, makes its cultural strength felt. Anzac Day attendances drop and the so-called 'generation gap' makes an impact.

The Myth Message Takes Hold

This becomes manifest across a range of media – broadcasting, theatre, and the press. Alan Seymour's popular play, *The One Day of the Year*, chronicled this change and, in so doing, helped to sustain it. The play focuses on the changing attitude of the new generation of Australian youth, which sees Gallipoli and Anzac Day as symbols of an old and outdated conservatism and irrelevant to them. The Tradition Message is replaced by the Myth Message.

Australia's controversial participation in the Vietnam War further devalues the place of Anzac Day and Gallipoli as the peace movement questions the ethics of conflict and going to war. The news media again reflect and help to influence public opinion. A good example is *The Sydney Morning Herald* (24 April 1965) on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Gallipoli landings, as it runs a full-page debate presenting conflicting views on 'Can Anzac Day Survive?' from prominent people and a representative of Australian 'youth'.

Similar sentiments appear in popular music. 'Protest' songs had appeared in growing numbers in the recorded music industry from the early 1960s and by the 1970s had established a genre of their own. Australia produces its own exponents. At the end of the 1970s, Eric Bogle penned a song, *And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda*, which decries the Anzac Day marches, the futility and horror of the Gallipoli Campaign and, echoing *The One Day*, the commemorations of 'tired old men from a forgotten war'. Bogle is later to state that he wanted this song to refer to the Vietnam War, but that emotional controversy surrounding the war and his sympathy for the Vietnam veterans as victims, led him to use the demise of the Gallipoli memory as a reference to the inappropriateness of war commemoration as it was carried out in marches *etc.*⁶

The Tradition Message Re-emerges

This view of Gallipoli as the 'forgotten war' for the new post-World War II generation is not to persist. Australia, in the 1980s and 1990s, is to resurrect the Gallipoli story and its Tradition Message. The roots of the resurrection can be traced to the mid-1970s in the aftermath of the Whitlam Government's new directions in social engineering, education and the arts, which, together with a corresponding response from the ABC, assisted the re-living of interest in Australian history. In particular, the government's incentives for film industry investments spawn sudden vibrant activity in

⁵New South Wales Parliamentary Diary, 1924, 2nd Series, 98: 2761.

⁶As told to the author in an interview for 'Minstrels of War', Into the Music, ABC Radio National, 23 April 2007.

the making of Australian films, many on historical themes. The government subsidy contributes strongly to the dismantling of the cultural hegemony enjoyed by United States and British television programmes and films. Australian films and television programmes could now reflect our image of ourselves, through current and historical themes.

Weir's 1981 film, *Gallipoli*, comes into being after the phenomenal success of two books, *The Broken Years: Australian soldiers in the Great War*, by Australian historian, Bill Gammage (1975) and Patsy Adam-Smith's *The Anzacs* (1978). The former, with its use of soldiers' diaries and letters, is the first major work to focus on the Australian experience at Gallipoli as it impacted on the ordinary soldier. It will sell 17,000 copies by 1981, while by the same year Adam-Smith's sells 30,000 copies with pre-orders for 15,000 more. Both books are highly influential and widely reviewed in the press and electronic media.

Weir's film emerges from this background and its nationalistic sentiments are received with approval by Australian audiences. The film plays strongly on the triumph of the Australian character against adversity, lauding many of the features of the Anzac identity – sporting and physical prowess, mateship, anti-authoritarianism, egalitarianism. The film is criticized for its one dimensional presentation of the original Anzacs and for incidental misrepresentations, such as scenes showing the Anzacs as heroic victims of British incompetence. As a strong purveyor of the Tradition Message, the film is analysed extensively in Australia and Britain, where its message is less warmly received. And it will be dissected and debated for many years to come by commentators and academics alike, taking its place as a seminal film in Australian film and media studies. Film historian Jane Freebury (1987), as an example, suggests the film has “the rhetorical tone and lack of moral ambiguity of a propaganda film ... it tries to avoid the possibility of setting other meanings, apart from the preferred meaning, into play ...” and it is “not so much about Australians in war as it is a celebration of the national ideology”.

With Weir's film showing the potency and market of the Gallipoli story for an Australian mass audience, a spate of television mini-series and documentaries on the subject appear throughout the 1980s. These films, like Weir's film, communicate the Tradition Message once again.

Gradual Emergence of a More Nuanced Message

So ubiquitous are these 'Anzac' films in the 1980s



Gallipoli – fighting as depicted in popular media of the time.

and the debate they encourage about Gallipoli and national identity, that by the time of the Australian Bicentenary in 1988 this author and Chris Masters at the ABC decide to embark on making *Gallipoli: the Fatal Shore*, as a contribution to the debate on Australian identity. This television documentary film, at 90 minutes in length, will actively encourage more interest in the Gallipoli story, but this time by examining both the Tradition Message and the Myth Message. One effect of the film is that it encourages more people, especially younger people, to visit Gallipoli and to examine the Messages for themselves. The videocassette version is bought in large numbers making it the highest

selling Australian-made video in 1988-89. High school history teachers make up a large section of customers, seizing on the film as a way of making the story and its issues accessible to students. The film wins the Media Peace Award for Television in 1988.

The convergence of these events with the 75th Anniversary of the Gallipoli Campaign in 1990 cements the resurgence of Gallipoli. The Hawke Government spends \$10 million in taking 52 remaining Gallipoli veterans back to Anzac Cove and Lone Pine for the anniversary. Several thousand people make the journey to join them at Gallipoli. Media coverage is massive. The ABC televises the events live from Gallipoli. Two more television documentaries by this author are broadcast: *The Boys Who Came Home: Recollections of Gallipoli*, as television oral history; and *Ten Days of Glory*, documenting the veterans' return to Gallipoli. The former is later released as a book, with the recorded highlights of the day as a videocassette. The programmes win the Australian Television Society's Award for Best Special Event Television 1990.

Since 1990 regular attendances at Anzac Day services at Gallipoli have risen, regularly topping 10,000, and it is common for senior Australian politicians from governors general, prime ministers and other ministers to attend the Gallipoli services. Associating with Gallipoli is often seen as an opportunity to establish populist credentials as television and press coverage is generally guaranteed. Their speeches, broadcast nationally, usually border on platitude and invariably impart the Tradition Message.

A book, *Gallipoli*, by journalist Les Carlyon (2001) becomes a best seller, even though it does not add any new material or research. It re-works previous published research in an idiosyncratic, laconic style that echoes the traditionally held view of the original Anzacs and that has appealed to a popular Australian readership. Another book, *Gallipoli 1915*, by Canadian

historian Tim Travers (2001), by contrast, is not designed as a blockbuster nor as a vehicle for the Tradition Message. Instead it is a dense analytical, highly researched military history, which includes crucial new research and breaks new ground by including original Turkish documentation for the first time. It sells a mere fraction of Carlyon's.

The word 'Gallipoli' in fact has become a brand – hence the large number of books with the same name. Since 2001, books on Gallipoli have appeared each year by journalists and historians, including my own (Broadbent 2005). My publisher pointed out that to maximize shelf sales the title needed to include the word 'Gallipoli', preferably as the first word.

The Australian trend is now being paralleled in Turkey. Turkish Gallipoli books for popular reading are now also ubiquitous as are television documentaries.

The national broadcaster, the ABC, seeking to reflect Australian history and society in all its complexities, has taken the lead in presenting a non-clichéd, non-mythologized Gallipoli to the Australian public. ABC Television presented a live coverage in 2005 of the Gallipoli 90th anniversary ceremonies. It also transmitted a new documentary, *Revealing Gallipoli*, which attempted a broader multi-national view of the campaign, including a substantial Turkish perspective.⁷ Since 2005, the ABC has returned to Gallipoli each year to broadcast the Anzac Day ceremonies.

This year, the ABC has invested \$200,000 to create a pilot project, *Gallipoli: the First Day*, a non-linear depiction of the events from both the Anzac and Turkish sides, which runs from the confused Anzac landing to the end of the first day, when ideas of evacuation were dismissed by General Hamilton. The presentation is multi-media, using 3D imaging and animations, adapted Google Earth renditions of the landscape, sound effects, commentary and background information in text, with still photographs, video clips of interviews with long-dead Gallipoli veterans, and statistics. The plan is to develop the website to cover the whole of the campaign by the centenary in 2015 (www.abc.net.au/gallipoli).

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with a potent example of how Gallipoli can be easily appropriated for a media message. In 2001, the Australian cricket team was on its way to Britain for the Ashes series against England. It was decided to take a stop-over at Gallipoli. The team was filmed, photographed and reported as players visited the battlefield having swapped their baggy green caps for slouch hats. It was a carefully staged media opportunity as the team re-enacted a famous cricket match played on a place called Shell Green by Anzac soldiers late in 1915 in sight of enemy artillery

positions. The soldiers' intention was to fool the enemy into thinking no evacuation activity was under way, that life was normal. The Australian cricket team's intention was two fold – to strike a chord back home and at the same time send a message to the English team that their formidable foes, endowed with the same qualities as their heroic Anzac forbears, were on their way to engage them in battle. The Tradition Message and brand Gallipoli had been well and truly appropriated as a media stunt.

Of course, when this occurs, damage is caused to the military and historical significance of the event, which is complex. It is often said that the first casualty of war is truth. The media, though, can be a force of protection against such damage, or it can compound the casualty. I will be very interested to see how things pan out across the media landscape when the centenary in 2015 is finally upon us.

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⁷Wain Fimeri, director (2005). *Revealing Gallipoli* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation Television and December Films) – telecast by ABC Television on 25 April, 2005.