

Hank Nelson

Gallipoli, Kokoda and the Making of National Identity

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Before dawn on 25 April 1992 people were gathering at Bomana Cemetery outside Port Moresby. ¹ They walked from the formal front gates up the gentle slope to the hill, cenotaph and rotunda at the far end of the cemetery. A swinging tilly lamp or a brief flash from a torch showed that most of the people were Melanesian. They moved noiselessly over lawns still lush from the wet season. The guard of honour, scarcely visible, moved into position to the beat of a side drum. As the light from the still unrisen sun increased the white uniforms of the sailors in the ranks and on sentry duty, the white headstones on 3,500 graves and the white cross on the cenotaph emerged from the shadows. ² The only sudden and discordant noise was an amplified voice with a Papua New Guinean accent saying, ‘Testing: one, two three’. It was the universal preliminary to public pronouncement.

The ceremony was formal, international and christian. It was conducted by lieutenant Andrew Grimes of the salvation army. The prime minister of Australia, Paul Keating, and the prime minister of Papua New Guinea, Rabbie Namaliu, spoke briefly, the New Zealand minister for defence, Warren Cooper, read a prayer and various other representatives of nations or returned soldiers had brief formal roles. The Australian leader of the opposition, John Hewson, read a prayer for peace. All present were invited to join in the singing of three hymns, ‘O Valiant Hearts’, ‘O God Our Help in Ages Past’ and ‘Abide With Me’. So as the sun burnt the last of the white mist we sang: ‘Heaven’s morning breaks, and earth’s vain shadows flee; In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me’. The Band of the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary played the national anthems of four nations: Papua New Guinea, Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

The official party drove to a gunfire breakfast at the Port Moresby turf club where they looked out from the verandah on to the ragged bush track and the Winfield winning post. Most of the crowd made a quiet progress back to the main gate. Many paused at particular graves. Under the Australian rising sun badge cut into the marble headstone was VX 74121, private G.A Richards of the 2/10th battalion. He died on 28 December 1942 aged twenty. The 2/10th had been at Tobruk, came back, fought at Milne Bay and was then involved in the heavy fighting near Buna. In just fourteen days in December the battalion suffered 298 casualties, about half of those who went into action at Buna. ³ Richards was one of those killed

— within three days of his exhausted battalion being replaced. The message below his name saying that he was ‘Dearly Beloved and Missed by All ...’ was disappearing under lush crotons. Another headstone said that P571 private Etow of the Papuan infantry battalion had died on 21 May 1943. No age was given for private Etow and probably he could not calculate it by any western calendar. He too was buried below the rising sun badge with its inscription, Australian commonwealth military forces, for the Papuan infantry battalion was then a unit of the Australian army. It was called into existence, deployed and commanded by Australians.

By mid-morning another crowd and most of the same dignitaries had assembled at the Ela Beach memorial gates in Port Moresby. There was a tent over the dignitaries, a small stand for selected spectators and the rest of the crowd stood in intense heat behind barriers, climbed trees, sat on roofs or scrambled up the cliffs at the back of the memorial gates. Australian and Papua New Guinean service personnel and Papua New Guinean police and prison warders stood on parade. The police band played, a school choir sang and boy scouts opened the car doors for the official parties. The three main speakers were Rabbie Namaliu, Paul Keating, and Warren Cooper.

For all speakers, and some who did not speak, this was an occasion to take the past and give it national significance. For Namaliu there was much to draw on. He pointed out that it was in Papua New Guinea fifty years before that turning point battles had been fought. He praised the Australians, especially the young militiamen of the 39th battalion who had first encountered the Japanese on the Kokoda trail and he spoke of the carriers who lumped ammunition and stores forward and the wounded back. That wartime relationship between Australians and Papua New Guineans, Namaliu said, had endured: whenever he went to Australia ex-servicemen and their children wanted to speak to him of the bond built between the two peoples in battle.

But Namaliu was also constricted. He did not want to denigrate the Japanese. He spoke simply of an unidentified opposition: 'the enemy'. This was Anzac day a day special to Australians. In the days when Australians governed Papua New Guinea, Anzac day had been a major occasion. Australians, who were a minority, conscious that they were on Australia's frontier, living alongside the great cemeteries at Bomana, Lae and Bitapaka and with so many the senior officials and planters who were ex-servicemen, were likely to gather on this one day of the year. After Papua New Guinea gained independence in 1975 Anzac Day continued to be a public holiday with dawn ceremonies and a march but many Papua New Guineans were uneasy with a day so closely identified with Australia and events unrelated to the history of Papua New Guinea. They decided to have their own day, Remembrance Day. They first chose to celebrate it on 15 August, the day that the war ended in the Pacific but this was a day of international importance and by the far the most significant events had taken place in other parts of the world. Peace came to Papua New Guinea because of decisions in Washington, Tokyo and Moscow. Also, when the emphasis was on peace and the day the fighting stopped, it was difficult to refer back to the fighting itself. The ex-servicemen felt that they were not given adequate recognition. The date was again changed: from 1982 Remembrance Day has been on 23 July. It is the day that the Papuan infantry battalion first went into action against the Japanese in 1942. The Papua New Guinean Remembrance Day is now more like anzac day: it commemorates a battle, a beginning, and a defeat. But the old Papua New Guinean soldiers still like Anzac Day: they have no sentimental attachment to 23 July 1942 and while an attempt had been made to invest 23 July with national significance it has not really succeeded.

Few men of the Papuan infantry battalion were involved in the fighting north of Kokoda in July 1942, and the encounter with the Japanese was brief. The first

battle involving their own soldiers was not known to other Papua New Guineans at the time so there is no popular memory to draw upon. The New Guineans pressed

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into service by the Japanese in Rabaul had been shipped to Rabaul to work for the Japanese and some Papuans uncertain of what was happening and with no reason to be grateful to the Australians, sided with the Japanese. The early battles in the Kokoda campaign were certainly significant for Papua New Guineans but the varied experiences and diverse motivations and responses defy reduction to a narrative to stir a nation. In Papua New Guinea Anzac Day, which is not a holiday, still evokes memories of war and perhaps of nationhood. But Remembrance Day, which is a holiday, touches few people. It has official status but not popular sentiment. In 1992 Anzac Day was a Saturday and there were many people free to assemble. For Namaliu as he faced that crowd there was the subtle problem of not resurrecting Anzac day as a national occasion for Papua New Guineans but at the same time recognising the importance of the war in the history of Papua New Guinea.

While Namaliu undoubtedly saw the war as an extraordinary experience for most people of Papua New Guinea he did not stress its importance in the creation of the nation of Papua New Guinea. Before the war much of the two territories of Papua and New Guinea was lightly touched by the outside world but between 1942 and 1945 perhaps 1,500,000 foreigners arrived and over 200,000 of them died there. More Papua New Guineans travelled, earned cash and suffered trauma than ever before and while they were changed by the experience, it may be that in terms of nation building the war had its greatest effect in its redirection of Australian policy towards Papua New Guinea. When real opportunities opened up for Papua New Guineans from the 1960s then it was those who were children or unborn during the war who moved into positions of power. The men of the wartime generation, with the partial exception of John Guise, were surpassed by the next generation: Somare, Chan, Namaliu, Wingti etc. To evoke the war in association with the new nation of Papua New Guinea is to direct attention to the colonisers and to those Papua New Guineans who endured the *taim bilong pait* but who did not reap the reward.⁴

Namaliu could refer to momentous events in Papua New Guinea of fifty years ago but not the day. Warren Cooper of New Zealand had the day but not the events. He could speak confidently on the 77th anniversary of the landing at Gallipoli but this was also the fiftieth anniversary of critical battles in the Pacific: Coral Sea, Midway, Milne Bay, Kokoda and Guadalcanal. They were obviously more relevant when he was in Port Moresby speaking to a crowd dominated by Papua New Guineans. In the critical days of 1942 when the Australians decided to bring their troops home across the Indian Ocean, the New Zealanders had chosen to leave their troops there. The main New Zealand commitment of ground troops, and the main New Zealand army deaths, continued to occur on the other side of the world. At the end of the war in Europe the New Zealanders were in north Italy. Alongside the 3,400 Australian dead at Bomana there are just six New Zealand airmen. One wonders what it would have done to New Zealanders' perceptions of themselves as a Pacific Island nation if in fact they had fought through the Pacific campaign — if, say, the Maori battalion had fought its way to Wewak or Manila instead of to Trieste? Would there now be a traffic of New Zealanders back to battlefields in Melanesia and southeast Asia, would New Zealanders be reminded in newspapers and film of their role in the region and would New Zealanders be more fixed on

the region to their northeast? In Port Moresby, Cooper could remind his listeners that the New Zealanders had taken part in the recapture of Nissan Island — but that

was a distant, minor campaign, late in the war. It was, in fact, a reminder that the New Zealanders were marginal to the ground fighting in the Pacific.

Around this point in the ceremony the United States ambassador to Papua New Guinea, Robert Farrand, walked out. His leaving went almost unnoticed by the press. He was expressing his grievance about the way the United States (that had done so much of the fighting at sea, in the air and on the ground in the Solomons and, from late 1942, in Papua) was virtually excluded from proceedings. No American ex-servicemen spoke, and he, as representative of the United States government was not given any time before a microphone. It must have seemed strange to Farrand that the New Zealand president of the RSA and the New Zealand minister had both spoken at Bomana and again at Ela Beach. That was nearly one speech for each New Zealand body in Papua, whereas the Americans in 1942 were on their way to losing 3,000 dead in just two major conflicts in the region — at Buna and Guadalcanal. But presumably the Papua New Guinean organisers of the ceremonies were conscious of the day. Events on 25 April 1915 in Turkey and all that had come to be associated with those events, had led them to increase the role of New Zealand in ceremonies commemorating events of 1942 and to decrease the part played by the United States to observers.

Keating's speech was the most significant and it was clearly driven by a purpose beyond the ceremony of the day. He began by referring to the 77th anniversary of 'the most famous battle in Australia's history and in New Zealand's history'. He went on to make a strong statement about the significance of Anzac:

It was sustained between the wars when the monuments were built and the rituals of the nation born at Gallipoli defined. The spirit of Anzac became the canon of Austral-ian life: the ideals to which we aspired, the values by which we lived. War has shaped Australia's history in the twentieth century like nothing else. Shaped and twisted it. At times, it has stifled it.⁵

He said, the world did not stand still. It moved on, and 'Our country must move with it'.

Keating shifted attention to the second world war. He praised Curtin for bringing the troops home. 'John Curtin was right', he said. New Zealand had made the opposite decision, but no one then or in subsequent commentary pointed this out. In 1942 the 'pre-eminent claim' on loyalty, Keating said, was Australia, not empire:

The Australians who served here in Papua New Guinea fought and died not in de-fence of the old world, but the new world. Their world. They died in defence of Australia, and the civilisation and values which had grown up there. That is why it might be said that, for Australians, the battles in Papua

New Guinea were the most important ever fought.⁶

In his final words he again spoke of the Australians fighting for 'the democracy they had built ... the life they had made [in Australia] and the future they believed their country held'.

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The crowd, eager to scramble for vantage points, was not anxious to hear what was being said. Perhaps half of them did not have adequate English to follow the details of the speeches and in any case much of what the visitors said was directed to a larger audience not present — the home country audience of television, radio and newspaper readers. Such is the capacity of the media to cross instantly national borders that a national leader wanting to talk for more than twenty seconds to his own people is best able to do this by exploiting an offshore exotic location. He is abetted by the fact that the media owners, having paid dearly to have their reporters travel with the official party, want a return on their investment. At Ela Beach many in the crowd talked quietly to neighbours and nearly all took a close interest in the ceremonial guard. Every now and again someone in the guard swayed and crumpled in the heat. The crowd with communal sighs and clicking of tongues expressed their sympathy: ‘Ah, tuhat, tuhat (too hot)’. But the crowd was clearly pleased that it was Australians who sagged and sprawled and not Melanésians. Then there was a sudden shout, ‘Wanpela wait meri paldaun!’ All strained to see. It was true that from among the triservices, bigender Australian squad a woman had collapsed. So here were national leaders addressing a dense crowd, redefining great national themes and the crowd was watching but not listening. The crowd was there for the panning, locating shot, just like the palm trees along Ela Beach road.

The next day Keating flew across the Owen Stanleys and at the Kokoda monument he provided the visual image and the condensed statement that dominated Australian media on 26 and 27 April. He knelt and his lips and the garland of flowers around his neck brushed the foot of a monument. In his speech Keating said that if the Australian nation was founded at Gallipoli then its ‘depth and soul’ were confirmed in its defence at Kokoda.⁷ At Kokoda, Keating said, the Australians had fought not for the ‘mother country’ but to secure Australia and an Australian way of life. On that small plateau at Kokoda with the vast backdrop of the Owen Stanleys, Keating claimed to find a spiritual basis to the Australian nation.⁸

Through 1993, 1994 and 1995 the fiftieth anniversaries of the second world war continued. The unknown soldier came home in November 1993 and Australians followed his progress from the western front, to temporary rest in old parliament house, on a last slow march up Anzac Parade, and to his final internment at the Australian war memorial. The audience present and those reached by the media were told that he was one of ‘the 100,000 Australians who have died in wars this century. He is all of them. And he is one of us’.⁹ Old soldiers went back to battlefields in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Monuments, especially of Weary Dunlop and to the dead of the Sandakan death march, were unveiled. The commemorations culminated in eleven months of recall, recreation and recollection: ‘Australian Remembers 1945-1995’. Anzac day 1995 was a popular, stately folk festival. In Melbourne a forest of crosses spread across the lawns near the shrine of remembrance — a paddock of remembering — and in Canberra the children who climbed trees to see the march were born at least ten years after the last Australian soldier came home from Vietnam. Newspapers produced liftout after liftout; the Andrews sisters, Vera Lynn and Glenn Miller were heard by larger radio audiences than ever before; more Australians saw cuts from cinesound and movietone newsreels than in the

years in which they were made; 1940s jeeps and trucks ground their way up the
'track' to Darwin, restored search

lights and sirens flashed and wailed; on VP day Ben Chifley's gravelly voice again proclaimed the end of the war; and 100,000 marched in ticker-tape in Sydney and Melbourne. Sydney's dancing man who doffed his hat to the camera on 15 August 1945 (and has been doing it on screen ever since) was officially recognised as Ern Hill and he joined the prime minister to watch the 1995 parade from the town hall steps.¹⁰ In 1995 every electorate had \$20,000 to spend on recalling the war, 400 ex-service units had government subsidised reunions, every school received an education kit, and the minister for veterans affairs, Con Sciacca, attended an extraordinary number of the 4000 officially recognised Australia remembers events.¹¹ There was a deliberate attempt to embrace all Australians who might have been overlooked in the previous fifty years: the Chinese volunteer ambulancemen of Rabaul, Torres Strait Islanders and Aborigines who served, the Tatura civilian internees, the merchant seamen, ammunition workers and women's units such as the women's land army.

The second world war was remembered with a much greater intensity and broader popularity in Australia than in Papua New Guinea where the impact of war was so much greater, or Indonesia where the nation was born out of the war, or Singapore, or Malaysia or anywhere in the region. Only D-Day, international on 6 June 1944 and international in its recreation, surpassed in scale any Australian commemoration. For sustained communal recollection Australia was supreme.

Through the fiftieth anniversaries the prime minister and others took a consistent line, attempting to shift the emphasis in Australian history and identity from the first world war to the second. They certainly did not say that they wanted to reduce the importance of the first world war but there was an insistence on moving on, on transferring attention from Gallipoli to Kokoda. Why were they doing this?

They did not want Australian nationhood defined when Australia was acting as a junior partner in a distant war, when Australians were so clearly part of the British empire forces, they wanted to bring the symbols of nationhood closer to the nation and they wanted the determining events in the history of the nation to be decided by Australians acting in specifically Australian interests. All of this was consistent with bringing the unknown Australian home, severing ties with the British monarchy and other 'symbolic vestiges', strengthening economic, diplomatic, educational and defence ties with the Asia-Pacific, and never trying to be "Asian" or European or anything else but Australians'.¹² The Australia they spoke of was an 'egalitarian, multicultural and humane democracy ... deeply integrated in the region'.¹³

Can Kokoda support the weight of national significance being imposed on it? Kokoda has two major deficiencies and either may be sufficient to exclude it from being the confirming point of the 'depth and soul of the nation'. It was a ruthless battle, fought in appalling physical conditions and the enemy was arrogant and triumphant early, starving, desperate and dying in thousands at the end but hated throughout. Many Australians will not want to see national identity defined in the violence of Kokoda. And for Australians Kokoda was exclusively male. Yet if Australians are determined to see themselves made in battle is it appropriate to move forward from Gallipoli to Kokoda?

Kokoda was certainly in our region. It was on Australian territory, and a territory that some Australians then thought might one day be an Australian state. It was one of those rare battles fought by Australia in which Australians were responsible

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for the civilians, where they were the dominant force and where they decided the tactics used. In fact, until near the end Australian troops, and the Papuan infantry battalion and Royal Papuan Constabulary commanded by Australians, were the only allied ground forces. In so many other major battles Australians can assume that any incompetent organisation or leadership was the fault of their allies, the bravery and ingenuity of the Australian troops reflected Australian virtues. At Kokoda the long retreat and advance through the Owen Stanleys were Australian by direction and action.¹⁴ The Australians not only fought on Australian territory but for Australia. When the Japanese reached Ioribaiwa in September they could catch glimpses of Port Moresby, less than thirty miles away by direct line. At Port Moresby were the airstrips that would have brought the Japanese aircraft within easy range of eastern Australia.

Kokoda was a turning point battle in a world war. The Japanese had been defeated a few days earlier at Milne Bay but Kokoda was a much more significant moment in the halting and then reversing of the Japanese southward advance. It is true that there was no dramatic final conflict at Imita Ridge: the Japanese were ordered to withdraw by their own distant commanders. But these were Japanese troops exhausted after nearly two months of fighting to Kokoda and through the Owen Stanleys.

If the term 'Kokoda' is taken to encompass all the fighting from the landings at Buna and Gona in July to the final destruction of the Japanese with their backs to the sea six months later, then some 12,000 Japanese, 2,165 Australians, 671 Americans and an unknown number of Papua New Guinean villagers, carriers and soldiers (but less than 500) died.¹⁵ For Australians, these are the statistics of a major battle in the second world war.

It was an unusual battle in that the militia, the 'chocos', did much of the early fighting. Later the AIF and militia fought side by side. The militia, many of them called up as eighteen and nineteen year olds for home defence, had then volunteered (or in some cases were 'volunteered') for service in Papua. The militia, young, briefly trained and going into action for the first time with a sprinkling of first world war diggers gave the Australians on the Kokoda trail a continuity with the past but certainly made them different from the selected volunteers for overseas service that made up the AIF.

There will always be some controversy among Australians about how the Kokoda campaign was directed and about the performance of some troops. Two senior Australian officers, Brigadier A.W. Potts and Lieutenant-General S.F. Rowell, were both unjustly sacked by those who did not know what was going on or were trying to deflect blame from themselves. The 21st brigade that had fought so desperately and effectively in retreat was told by their commander-in-chief, Thomas Blamey at Koitaki soon after they came out of action that the 'rabbit that ran away was the rabbit that got shot'. It left them 'white with rage' at the incomprehension and insensitivity for what they had done and seen and the disrespect for their dead.¹⁶ Dudley McCarthy in his comments on the 53rd battalion makes what may be the harshest criticism in the official history of any

Australian battalion. It is said to have been a 'badly trained, ill-disciplined and generally resentful collection of men' on arrival in Papua and senior officers are quoted condemning it as unreliable in battle.¹⁷

The 53rd was treated unjustly in training, in action and by history, but it cannot be claimed that the Australian performance in terms of planning and command and at particular moments in the fighting is not one of consistent brilliance and heroism. However, it is also true that the Kokoda campaign was marked by extraordinary performances of bravery, endurance and compassion. It was such that men who were there changed for ever their presumptions of what was humanly possible. Kokoda can survive revisionists.

It was on Kokoda that the Australian army first changed to jungle green, and gradually acquired the confidence and tactics to fight a jungle war. By the end of 1942 the common visual image of the digger was being changed. He wore loose jungle greens, hat brim down and carried a sub-machine gun across his chest: he was sharply different from the first world war digger on so many town war memorials.¹⁸

On the Kokoda track relations between Australians and Papua New Guineans were transformed. At Ela Beach on Anzac Day 1992 Keating said the work of the Papuan carriers was 'one of the great humane gestures of the war ... perhaps the great humane gesture of our history'.¹⁹ In 1942 and 1943 Australian perceptions of that humane gesture revolutionised the popular image of the Papua New Guinean. The bond of sentiment and sense of debt created at Kokoda endured. It helped change Australian postwar policies and it continues — it was manifest at the December 1995 opening of the Menari Clinic to serve the Koiari people whose lands are cut by the Kokoda track.²⁰ On Kokoda the Japanese were hated and the Papuans praised: the Australians on Kokoda who had an increasing consciousness of race were not necessarily increasingly racist.

A case, then, might be made for seeing Kokoda as being a significant event and having significant consequences. It is not an obviously flawed choice for those who want to bring the legends home. And it has a further necessary attribute. The name is compact, sharp, and (especially when associated with trail or track) is already evocative. It has the same brevity and toughness in a name that is also found in Anzac, Tobruk, Changi, Jackie Howe and Ned Kelly. But in spite of the swelling of popular sentiment through the Australia remembers campaign, there were problems for those who wanted to shift the focus of national identity from Gallipoli to Kokoda. I will make just four points.

First, the second world war was an extraordinarily diverse experience for Australians. Australians fought major land battles in North Africa, Greece, Crete, Syria, Malaya, Singapore, Timor, Ambon, all over New Guinea from Bougainville and New Britain to Wewak, and in Borneo. The Australian navy suffered important losses in the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, off north-west Australia, in Sunda Strait, off Guadalcanal and off the Philippines. The RAAF flew nearly everywhere there were Australian ground troops and in Europe and Burma. The 5,000 Australians who died in the air war against Germany, so many of them in bomber command, constitutes one of the greatest and least appreciated losses of Australians in the second world war. Then there were many particular groups with extraordinary experiences: the coastwatchers, the merchant seamen and the nurses who were prisoners of war of the Japanese.

Where in the first world war there was one dominant and terrible experience of trench warfare, the second was mobile,

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mechanised and varied by climate, terrain and the relative strengths of the combatants. Australians went into battle when they were inferior in numbers, equipment and knowledge and when they were completely dominant. In such diversity any attempt to elevate a particular moment neglects most of the experiences of most of those Australians involved.

Secondly, there is a discrepancy between many Australian biographies and the sorts of reflections that are made about Kokoda being the locus of the Australian spirit. Con Sciacca, the man who did most to drive the remembering in 1995 was born in Italy just after the end of the war in Europe and he came to

Australia with his parents as a four year old.²¹ When Con Sciacca was called the minister for nostalgia, when he was cheered by Australians at the Dardenelles on Anzac Day 1995, and when he was praised by Digger James of the returned and services league, he was being embraced by a history. The men of the rats of Tobruk association applauded Sciacca's speech to them. Tobruk, of course, had been part of the Italian empire and so these men were accepting that a son of their enemy of 1941 should now articulate how the nation remembered them. To ex-prisoners of war and an assembled crowd in Canberra Sciacca said: 'I ask you to think back to the role Australians played in the tumultuous events of 50 years ago — a time when so many of our young men and women fought a war in defence of the country they loved'²² A distinction was being made between the history of Sciacca's nation

and the history of Sciacca's family. As an Australian his fellow people are Australians and those Australians who went before them are also his people — 'our young men and women' he called them — but those people did not include his parents who were then in another place, in another nation, on another side in a world war and in another history.

There is a single line summary of Australian history that runs from Aborigines through convicts, squatters, gold, selectors, the nineties nationalism, federation, Gallipoli, depression, second world war, immigration, Menzies, Vietnam, and although there are other topics set down on the syllabus the final essays and the examinations are almost upon us, not too many are coming to lectures, and the line fades around 1972. About ten years ago I went to a reunion of the 2/19th battalion, and one very elderly man, Sam Thompson, spoke to his fellow ex-servicemen. He steadied his tall, gaunt frame by resting his outstretched arms on the shoulders of two younger and shorter comrades. Sam Thompson had enlisted in the 1st battalion AIF, he missed the battle of the Wasser in the brothel area of Cairo but was on the picket that was sent in straight after, he landed at Gallipoli on the first day and went up shrapnel gully, he fought on the western front, worked in the New South railways during the depression, enlisted in the 8th division in 1940, went into action against the Japanese in Malaya, was captured in Singapore, started work on the railway in Burma and went right across the Three Pagodas Pass into Thailand, and then in Sydney in his ninetieth year he spoke at an Anzac Day reunion. I thought that if only he had been a convict or found gold at Bendigo he could have covered almost every chapter heading in a popular history of Australia. Ian Mudie's poem, 'They'll Tell You About Me' expresses that same idea and much more:

... I fought at Eureka and Gallipoli and Lae, and
I was a day too early (or was it too late?) to
discover Coolgardie,
lost my original Broken Hill share in a hand of cribbage,
had the old man kangaroo pinch my shirt and wallet,
threw fifty heads in a row in the big game at Kal, took a
paddle-steamer seventy miles out of the Darling on a
heavy dew,
then tamed a Gippsland bunyip and sooled him on to
capture the Tantanoola Tiger and Fisher's ghost and
became Billy Hughes's secretary for a couple of weeks.
Me, I outshore Jacky Howe, gave Buckley his chance ...²³

Ian Mudie's Australian embodies all that Australians have done in legend, literature and history: from writing about Clancy with a thumb nail dipped in tar to shooting through on a Bondi tram.

Only about twenty per cent of Australians in 1997 were over the age of fifty-five. As some of these were also postwar migrants, perhaps less than fifteen per cent of Australia's population could possibly remember events of 1939-1945. 'Australia Remembers' but comparatively few Australians can draw on their own experiences and memories. When Con Sciacca in 1995 invited his audience to 'think back' to events of fifty years ago, he was asking most of them to think about what they had absorbed second hand. The Australian War Memorial recognised the problem when it ran a visitor participation exercise as part of Australia remembers. It asked people to answer the question: 'Where were you on VP Day 1945?', but added: 'If you were there you'll know. If you weren't you can imagine'. The eighty-five per cent who had to imagine were dependent on their formal and informal gathering of information. The man in the pin stripe suit, felt hat in hand, dancing in the streets of Sydney was probably the common learnt image.

The distinctions between national history and collective biography, between national history and collective memory, is all the more significant because of the emphasis that Australians now place on multiculturalism. Even John Howard in his 'The Australia I Believe In' said 'I believe in an Australia which builds on the strengths of our multicultural society....'²⁴ He was unlikely to say otherwise. The national multicultural advisory council asserted: Some experiences which for many were previously fundamental to our sense of identity, for example our involvement in two world wars, are becoming less important with the passage of generations.²⁵ That was simply untrue during Australia remembers, and apparently untrue when measured against participation on recent Anzac Days. What many Australians, old and migrant, are prepared to accept is a multicultural present and unicultural past.

Something like this has been going on in Australia for a long time. The children of migrants have taken over the history of the country they live in: the children of British migrants of, say, the 1920s placed themselves in a national history that went back to gold and Gallipoli. The differences now are the numbers involved, the diversity of backgrounds and the emphasis on cultural plurality in the nation of the present. For those who want to shift attention from Gallipoli to Kokoda there is a problem of deciding what it is that the Australians in 1942 fought for. At

the time they fought predominantly for the defence of their homeland — and that was enough

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— but now more needs to be said. Keating spoke of the men fighting for a ‘way of life’ and about ‘the depth and soul’ of the nation being confirmed at Kokoda. I wonder what those things could be? John Howard proclaimed in the program of action for a coalition government: ‘We will work with multicultural groups to develop the great strengths which derive from the diversity of languages and cultures in Australian society, and to reaffirm the strength of the unifying values we all share’.²⁶ I wonder what those unifying values are and could we be sure they were in the minds of those who fought from Ioribaiwa to Buna in 1942? It is possible that some of the Australians fought to keep Australia white. Kokoda was important and can be evocative when associated with the broadest levels of national sentiment but it is difficult to associate with specific national aspirations in the 1990s. Aspirations we find difficult to articulate.

Keating and others had particular political aims when they committed themselves to the ‘Australia Remembers’ program. Expressed in simple terms they wanted to associate the labor government with a surge of national sentiment, to tie the labor government of 1995 to that of Curtin who brought the troops back home and fought in the region, and to taint the liberals by associating them with those who wanted Australia to play a minor supporting role in the empire that failed to hold our initial line of defence at Singapore. ‘Australia Remembers’ certainly connected with an experience that either Australians had had, or wanted to learn about, or wanted to adopt as their own and it defied an exhaustion of nostalgia to peak on 15 August 1945: it was successful beyond expectation. There was an enthusiasm for bringing the legend closer to home; Keating and Sciacca were praised for what they did and the speeches that they gave but this did not result in increased support for the government. They had fostered a popular nationalism but the nation did not respond with increased popularity for the labor government.

The importance of war in popular perceptions of Australian history and Australian identity remains strong. In 1992 the prime minister was able to assert that ‘War has shaped Australia’s history in the twentieth century like nothing else’. This and other similar statements passed almost unchallenged. The crowds that gathered at the thousands of public occasions to commemorate fiftieth anniversaries testified by their numbers and demeanour to the significance that they placed on war. Other countries much more affected by any measures of physical damage, numbers of deaths and dramatic redirections of the state invested fewer private and public funds into remembering the war.

Australians did this although many of those at the commemorative ceremonies regret the association of nationalism with the violence of war and many are aware that war associates nationalism with men and with particular sorts of male behaviour. Australians chose to remember the war, although so many Australians by age and by origin have no memory of, or family connection with, the second world war in Australia. Yet Australians have been unable to give what Australians fought for in the second world war a particular meaning for the nation now. The crowds and the media reports have responded more to human qualities — those displayed by the nurses on Banka Island or the men on the Burma-Thailand Railway — ingenuity, shared adversity, heroic selflessness and a stoic determination not to be destroyed by any man, physical hardship or disease.

When Keating tried to suggest what it was that Australians had fought to defend at Kokoda he used vague statements: 'the democracy they had built' or the even more elusive claims about the 'spiritual basis' and the 'soul' of the nation.²⁷ When John Howard recently wrote of the 'great Australian dream' he defined it as: employment and home ownership, reward for hard work and risk taking, the realistic hope of self-advancement and the realistic hope of achieving security for one's family within the context of a strong, cohesive community.²⁸ It's a limp dream, not one likely to inspire the men on F Force at Shimo Sonkurai on the Burma-Thailand Railway at the height of the wet season in 1943.

Perhaps it is desirable to be imprecise. Precision may force division. It is critically important for a multicultural Australia to be confident that what Australians hold in common is both powerful and a force to make a better Australia. Australians seem keen to find a cohesion in their past; to adopt a common learnt memory; to become a part of the history of the people and the place that they now belong to — although they may trace their family histories into other communal and national histories. They or their imagined national forbears were there when Jedda jumped, Marjorie Jackson dropped the baton, Ben Chifley saw the light on the hill, Mrs Petrov got off the plane in Darwin; and Daisy Bates married Breaker Marinate; and they sparred with Les Darcey, put money on Fine Cotton, tunnelled on the Snowy, stood with Gough on the steps of parliament house on 11 November, shared a taxi with Bee Miles, found Azaria's matinee jacket, saw the shark cough up the arm, and swam in the Moree pool with Charlie Perkins. Where the cohesive force in a multicultural state is a presumption of a shared past then it seems all that much more necessary for Australians to scrutinise their formal and informal history: it helps determine who we might be as much as who we think we were.

Through the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the second world war, the campaign to strengthen ties with Asia, the Mabo debate and assertions about multiculturalism John Howard complained about a rewriting of history that denigrated the British and marginalised 'mainstream' Australians. Since taking over as prime minister he has been more specific. He has said, 'I sympathise fundamentally with Australians who are insulted when they are told that we have a racist bigoted past, and some Australians are told that regularly'. He thought Australians rejected the idea that it was necessary to tell children whose parents had no part in discriminatory action against Aborigines about a racist past.²⁹ In the contest for the history to be held in common, Howard wanted no Australians to think that they were there at Myall Creek or rode with the police at Coniston or joined the miners to harry the Chinese at Buckland River. In their public claims about the history that Australians should learn two successive prime ministers have confirmed the power that lies in perceptions of the past. The debate about what is remembered and what is celebrated is a debate about the future.

Endnotes

A shortened version of this paper was first given at a seminar on nationalism in the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, in February 1996. I referred

to some of the complexities of anzac day in Port Moresby in the Dalton lecture, James Cook University, 1993.

Hank Nelson

- 1 I took a sound recording, photographs and notes at Bomana and Ela Beach. I did not go to Kokoda in 1992.
- 2 Nearly all are Australian. The cemetery commemorates the deaths of about 4,000 who died in the Papuan and Bougainville campaigns and those who died in nearby seas, but not all have known graves.
- 3 D. McCarthy, *South-West Pacific Area — First Year Kokoda to Wau, Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, Canberra, 1959, p. 484 footnote.
- 4 The ‘time of the fighting’ in Papua New Guinea Pidgin.
- 5 Mark Ryan, (ed), *Advancing Australia: The Speeches of Paul Keating, prime minister*, Sydney, 1995, p. 279.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 280.
- 7 Keating was not the first to claim Kokoda had a significance similar to that of Gallipoli. See Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake, eds, *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century*, Melbourne, 1995, p. 2.
- 8 Transcript of speech, 26 April 1992.
- 9 Ryan *op.cit.*, 1995, p. 287.
- 10 Rachel Gibson, ‘New Dancing Man Leads Sydney’s Parade of 100,000’, *Age*, 16 August 1995, p. 10.
- 11 Marion Firth, ‘The Minister for Nostalgia’ *Age*, 14 August 1995, p. 11. 12 Keating, *op.cit.*, p. 41.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 216-7.
- 14 MacArthur at his headquarters in Australia was receiving intelligence about enemy aims and deployment, he had command at a broad strategic level, and Americans controlled many of the available aircraft.
- 15 G. Long, *The Six Years War*, Canberra, 1973, p. 246.
- 16 H.D. Steward, *Recollections of a Regimental Medical Officer*, Melbourne, 1983, p. 147. There are other accounts of what Blamey said. See also N. Carlyon, *I Remember Blamey*, Melbourne, 1981, p. 111.
- 17 McCarthy, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-5.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 229. The 25th Brigade was the first to wear jungle green, September 1942.
- 19 Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 281.
- 20 *Post-Courier*, 21 December 1995, p. 15.
- 21 The Hon Concetto Antonio Sciacca was born in Piedemonte, Etneo J Italy in 1947 and came to Australia in 1951.
- 22 From Transcript of Speech, by Con Sciacca at the Dardanelles, Anzac Day, Canberra, 15 February 1995.
- 23 J. Thompson, K. Slessor and R.G. Howarth, (eds.), *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, Harmondsworth, 1958, pp. 156-8.
- 24 John Howard, *The Australia I Believe In: the values, directions and policy priorities of a coalition government outlined in 1995*, Liberal Party of Australia, Canberra, 1991, p. 11.
- 25 NMCAC, Report .
- 26 Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
- 27 Transcript of speech at Kokoda 16 April 1992.
- 28 Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
- 29 Karen Middleton, ‘Immigration Influencing Jobless Rate, says Howard’, *Age*, 25 October 1996.
- 30 Our proud sponsors: Australia’s leading [SEO company](#) Melbourne & Sydney; Care1 Disability and [Respite Care](#); Wentworth College - [CHC52015](#) Diploma of Community Services.

