

‘A Sob Seemed to Shake the Community’

Ian Warden investigates newspaper reports of the first Anzac anniversary, on 25 April 1916

April 2007 brings the 92nd commemoration of Anzac Day with its by now familiar and increasingly well-attended ceremonies, and its familiar expressions of national sentiment. But what of the very first Anzac Day, on 25 April 1916? Using the National Library of Australia's newspaper holdings, what can we discover about how Australians observed it? What seemed to be going on in our hearts and minds just one year after the historic but hellish arrival of the men on the beaches of Gallipoli?

Even when we make allowances for the stirred emotions and sometimes hyperbolic language of 1916's journalists, we can see that the first Anzac Day was an enormous national preoccupation.

'By the first anniversary,' historian Ken Inglis notes in his *Sacred Places—War Memorials in the Australian Landscape* (1999), the new word 'Anzac' 'glowed with holiness'.

In the cities and in the bush, the day bristled with marches, religious services, concerts, luncheons and dinners, recruiting meetings and observances of all kinds. Victoria observed a whole Anzac Week, of which both Anzac Day itself (a Tuesday) and the following Sunday, called Anzac Sunday, saw enormous attendances at events.

The morning after Anzac Day, the *Brisbane Courier* reported that 6434 troops had taken part in an 'imposing march of troops through the city, witnessed by immense crowds', and the *Sydney Morning Herald* thought there'd been 60 000 souls in Sydney's Domain for a united church service. Everywhere, cathedrals, churches, town halls and public places bulged and brimmed over with folk. Some newspapers published special Anzac Day editions, and coverage the next day was considerable.



In at least two very important ways, the character of this first Anzac Day differed remarkably from those today. Firstly, Anzac Day 1916 had an intense grieving quality, because 7600 Australians had lost their lives on Gallipoli and now, a year later, more were being killed in the war in Europe. Almost 14 000 Australian soldiers would eventually be killed in 1916. Secondly, Anzac Day 1916 takes some of its tone from the attempted use made of it as the patriotic engine to propel a renewed recruiting drive for the ongoing war. Enlistment was voluntary, and

Cover of Anzac Day Commemoration program, 25 April 1916 (Sydney: Carter's Print, 1916)



above left:
Unknown artist
Anzac Day Celebrations

above right:
Unknown photographer
Anzac Day in Sydney
both reproduced from *The Sydney Mail*, 3 May 1916
(Sydney: John Fairfax & Sons, 1912-1938)
Newspapers Collection, NX182



pro-recruitment forces hoped that Anzac Day 1916 would stoke some zeal, at last, in the bosoms of the hitherto reluctant young men, and might help shame 'shirkers' into uniform.

Grief flavours so much of what was said and done on that first Anzac Day. The many *In Memoriam* classifieds in the morning's newspapers were almost all for the men who'd died exactly a year ago, on that awful first day on Gallipoli. Two thousand Australians had died in the first 10 days at Anzac Cove. Mourners were everywhere in the day's crowds and congregations, and sympathy for their heartache was usually scrupulously observed. In the speeches and sermons and editorialising, whatever jingoism and recruitment driving there was usually came after the appropriate expressions of sorrow.

On 26 April 1916, the *Brisbane Courier* opened its detailed account of the previous day's multitude of events with the reflection that 'A sob seemed to shake the community yesterday.' In his Anzac Day sermon to 1400 souls in St John's cathedral, the Archbishop of Brisbane said that it was a day for the deep emotions of 'pride and sorrow', but that sorrow had to come first, because 'we are here first and foremost to mourn our loss ... we cannot dwell on it, we cannot

contemplate the cutting off of those bright young lives, so rich with varied promise, without wincing with pain'.

'Is there a family in this land,' the *Sydney Morning Herald* wondered the morning after Anzac Day, 'that has been left untouched by the war?' The *Herald* continued:

Was there one of us yesterday who joined in commemorating 'Anzac Day' who had not had some dear one ... stricken down on the dread field of war? And so when 9 o'clock struck and we 'stopped work' throughout the State, when every train and tram stopped and we gave three cheers for the King, the Empire and the 'Anzacs,' it was a solemn moment because behind the cheering there were the thoughts that could not be kept back—such thoughts as often lie too deep for tears. And so it was again when at the united Divine Service in the Domain the band played the *Dead March* and the buglers sounded the *Last Post*. Was it any wonder that the women sobbed?

In Melbourne, the *Age* reported that at 'the great and impressive service' for Anzac Day in St Paul's Cathedral, Archbishop Clarke had done his very best in a sermon with 'a note of strengthening, of hope and pride': 'in the pews there were many women in the deep

black of mourning'. The reporter was one of many to note how the presence of returned soldiers at the day's events sometimes added to the shocked sadness of the experience. Archbishop Clarke's struggles to sound positive were made all the more herculean by the spectacle of the servicemen there in the congregation:

There was hardly one man of the 500 Anzacs who paraded for the service who did not bear the pathetic marks of wounds or illness. There were sightless men led by their comrades, men all hunched and with trembling limbs that could but shuffle along, men on crutches, men with empty sleeves or useless arms, and almost every face was drawn and haggard, as if even 12 months had not yet effaced the terrible memories of Anzac. There were men, too, who had to be carried into the service. They were laid in invalids' chairs at the steps of the chancel beneath the pulpit.

Almost everyone who spoke from a pulpit or a podium on this 1916 Anzac Day repeated the well-meant mantras about how the never-to-be-forgotten glorious dead (who are not really dead at all but only asleep and in God's care) had died for king and country in a sacred cause. But one wonders how

often all this helped numb any pain.

'The modern world [of the time of the Great War] harboured anti-faiths—atheism, agnosticism—which could offer only a lean secular comfort,' Inglis notes in *Sacred Places*. Many of the *In Memoriam* notices make no mention of any religious or patriotic consolations, and indeed seem full of anguish. No bodies came home, and the grieving were never to have even the slight consolation of a grave to visit.

This is the Benbow family thinking, in the *Age*, of Mervin, 'our dear son and brother ... killed at the Dardanelles':

*No matter how we pray, dear brother,
No matter how we call;
There's nothing left to answer
But your photo on the wall.*

This is Eva Brown, in the same paper, mourning her brother Roy Gardner:

*No one he loved was by his side
To hear his last faint sigh;
Or whisper just one loving word,
Or even say goodbye.*

As mentioned, this first Anzac Day was used—usually at rallies in the afternoon and evening after the sombre pomp and



Unknown photographer
*A Solemn Moment at the
Commemoration Service:
'The Last Post'*
reproduced from *The Sydney
Mail*, 3 May 1916
(Sydney: John Fairfax & Sons,
1912–1938)
Newspapers Collection, NX182

ceremony of the morning's marches and religious ceremonies—as a passionate recruiting opportunity. But how successful was this use of the day? The tone of what's said in speeches at the rallies is often shrill, angry and sarcastic. By this time the reluctance of many young men to enlist was a source of enormous shame for those who thought the Empire's call was a sacred summons. On Anzac Sunday in Melbourne, and in his sermon at Wesley Church, the Reverend Colonel Holden seethed with the thought that men with 'cold feet' ought to be 'rounded up with the stockwhip of conscription'. Newspapers and dignitaries pleaded with, or fumed at, the 'shirkers', and cartoonists scoffed (in the cartoons, even dogs look at the 'shirkers' with reproach)—but the presence in their midst of returned Anzacs was still not enough to galvanise reluctant men into uniform. 'The chief recruiting depot [on Anzac Day] was in Martin Place,' the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported next day.

Many answered the call, but many still held back. At one point a Gallipoli man with one arm missing, failed in the task he had set himself—not a man responded. He was no orator; he relied on the arm that was missing. 'Australia

was there!' he cried. 'Look at me. I've lost an arm and can fight no more, but I tell you what boys—if I had my arm back I'd be over there again. Now I want someone to take my place—who will volunteer?' No one answered. The call was made in vain. Tears came into the soldier's eyes. 'No one?' he said again. No one.

In the days immediately after Anzac Day of 1916, the *Age* found nothing in Melbourne's 'mediocre' recruiting returns to suggest that 'Anzac Day and the stirring march of the returned soldiers through the streets' had given recruiting a fillip. The poor figures 'are fast sounding the death knell of the voluntary system,' the paper prophesied. From a reading of the press coverage of the first Anzac Day (with the newspapers as usual providing the famous 'first draft of history'), perhaps what we see is a poignant snapshot of a woebegone nation which was at least as deflated by bereavement as it was pumped up with pride. A public sob had shaken the community, and the next day the *Sydney Morning Herald* was sure that 'Though the record of Anzac is written in gold, the page is yet wet with tears.'

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below left:
Unknown artist
Diagnosing His Case
reproduced from *The Bulletin*,
20 April 1916
(Sydney: John Haynes and
J.F. Archibald, 1880–1984)
Newspapers Collection, NX252

below right:
Unknown artist
*A Recruiting Sergeant Tells The
'Age' ...*
reproduced from *Punch*,
4 May 1916
(East Melbourne: John Joseph
Halligan, 1900–1920)
Newspapers Collection, NX104

