
Lest We Forget: Military Myths, Memory, and Canberra's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Memorial

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Abstract

The precinct surrounding the Australian War Memorial is saturated in official commemorative narratives of Australian military history, from which the contribution of indigenous servicemen and women is completely absent. Those wishing to remember them must turn to a modest unofficial memorial on the southern slopes of Mt Ainslie, behind the Australian War Memorial. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Memorial is essentially nothing more than a plaque on a rock set in bushland, but over time it has assumed the status of a quasi-official memorial used strategically by different stakeholders for different purposes. Originally erected in 1988 by a concerned white citizen of Canberra, the original story of the memorial has become hidden beneath a palimpsest of different stories, each of which shapes the memorial to the different purposes of its stakeholders.

Keywords: war memory, war memorials, indigenous war service (Australia)

On the southern slopes of Mt Ainslie behind the Australian War Memorial (AWM) in Canberra is a small monument. It consists of nothing more elaborate than a brass plaque fixed to a boulder. The words on the plaque read: “Remembering the Aboriginal people who served in the Australian Armed Services”. They belong to Honor Thwaites, a prominent white citizen of Canberra, who funded and erected the memorial herself in 1988, the two hundredth anniversary of white settlement in Australia.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Memorial, as it has come to be known, is an unofficial memorial whose time has come. When I first encountered it in 1992, it was difficult to find, concealed as it was in the bushland that covers the flank of Mt Ainslie. In more recent years, shifts in Australian identity politics have given it greater visibility, and it has acquired the status of a quasi-official memorial. Yet the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Memorial has remained singularly flexible in its commemorative function. On the one hand, it is amenable to the different purposes of a multitude of stakeholders, and on the other resists any authoritative commemorative narrative. This is in marked contrast to the over-determined nature of the memorials within Canberra's official commemorative precinct.

In 1977, Honor Thwaites had campaigned successfully to have the southern slope of Mt Ainslie gazetted as a park. Her suggestion that it be called “Remembrance Nature Park” was designed to both acknowledge the proximity of the Australian War Memorial to the mountain, and to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the signing of the Armistice. From the beginning of her association with the site, she had been interested in the idea of involving the local indigenous community in some way with the development of the park.

However, it was not until 1988 that this idea crystallised into a decision to erect a memorial to indigenous servicemen and women within the park's precincts. Honor Thwaites had been successful in applying for a Bicentennial Authority grant to regenerate the bushland in the park area. She had been concerned about the divisions between indigenous and white Australians over the way in which the Bicentennial should be marked. In particular, she had noticed an article in the press detailing the unsuccessful attempt on the part of a group of Victorian Aborigines to obtain funding from the Bicentennial Authority to build a memorial to honour Aboriginal war dead.¹ As an adjunct to the regeneration project, and with the encouragement of Lyall Gillespie (a local historian), and Warwick Dix (the Director of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies), she arranged for the installation of the plaque as a gesture of reconciliation.²

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Memorial is located slightly to the eastern side of the AWM, almost but not quite on the Land Axis. This is the principal axis of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin's original plan for the ceremonial centre of Canberra, known today as the Parliamentary Triangle. The Land Axis extends from Mt Ainslie to Capital Hill, where Parliament House now stands.

The great authority on nationalism, Anthony Smith, has observed that “... nations need homelands ... historic territories in which ‘our ancestors’ lived and which we carry in our hearts”.³ The Griffins understood this in 1911, when they placed the topography of the city’s site at the centre of their plan for Canberra. James Weirick, an expert on Walter Burley Griffin, comments that the city’s plan is arranged in such a way as to express a “timeless universal statement on the meaning of the democratic experience”. This has been made specifically Australian through the alignment of the city’s ceremonial centre within the landscape and, in particular, the bushland preserves of Mt Ainslie and Black Mountain.⁴ Built into the plans for the new capital of a new nation, therefore, was an inseparable connection between land, landscape, and the functions of the state.

This connection has come to have specific and complex relevance in contemporary Australia, as white Australians ask themselves how it is possible to feel an uncomplicated sense of belonging to places which we know are “ours” by virtue of their having been forcibly taken from their original inhabitants. At the same time, for indigenous people, the idea of belonging within their own land has had to be negotiated against and between European beliefs and institutions. Until comparatively recently, their complex relationships with land (rooted in cosmology and tribal law) have been discounted by the white legal processes in which power over land in Australia is invested.

Over the years, the Griffins’ original conceptual framework for the ceremonial centre of Canberra has been overlaid by the military nature of Anzac Parade, which forms a large section of the Land Axis. With the AWM at its head, Anzac Parade is home to 11 memorials to various branches of the armed services and to the conflicts in which Australia has been involved. It could be argued that this precinct is a spatial and commemorative embodiment of Australia’s most cherished myth about itself; that we are a nation born on the shores of Gallipoli, and shaped by our roles in subsequent conflicts.

Like all national myths, this narrative, a story of military heroism and martyrdom, cannot tolerate ambivalence or contradiction. It is particularly useful because it bypasses the more vexed account of Australia’s nationhood—anchored in the unpalatable truth that its white inhabitants wrested the land from its indigenous inhabitants—in favour of a story of a nation born vigorous and innocent on an alien shore. This national myth is figuratively “whitened” by the way in which its narration privileges the concept of military brotherhood over any other form of allegiance such as race, gender, or religious belief.

The years 1988-2000 marked a period in which Australia’s historical consciousness was being re-shaped. During this time, new indigenous historiographies were being developed. This, along with the growth of popular interest in family and local history, began to give rise to what Australian academic, Chilla Bulbeck, has described as “the reorientation of Australian history from the deeds that won the empire or nation to the activities of ordinary men and women and the history of local communities”.⁵ Sustained published scholarship on the service of indigenous people in Australia’s armed forces began to appear in the

early 1990s. However, early press articles on the subject, such as those collected by Honor Thwaites in 1988, provided the first corrective to an image of the purely white Australian soldier.

Indeed, the idea of indigenous Australian soldiers was something of an anomaly for some Aboriginal people as well. The story of indigenous servicemen and women was not always central to the interests of many Aboriginal activists, for whom the concept of an indigenous warrior was more compellingly instated in debates about the so-called colonial wars, the struggles between indigenous people, and white settlers for control of land. The indigenous warrior as a symbol of resistance to colonial authority was important at this time when Aboriginal prior claim to territory formed an important part of the struggle for land rights. Moreover, the overtly military commemorative function of conventional war memorials, linked as they were to mainstream white settler values, was problematic for many indigenous commentators and activists.

For example, during the Bicentennial, Djon Mundine, Aboriginal curator and activist, organised an iconic memorial to those Aboriginal men and women who had died defending their country over the period of white settlement. The memorial, consisting of 200 traditional burial poles (one for each year of European occupation) was made by artists from Ramingining in the Northern Territory. The memorial was immediately assumed into the collection of the National Gallery of Australia. When he was asked in 1994 whether this memorial might have been more powerful if it had been located in the AWM, Mundine replied that the AWM was in itself “abhorrent to Aboriginal people”.⁶

However, in the years immediately following the Bicentennial, a renewed interest in the events of World War I, especially Gallipoli as a framing myth of national identity, began to reassert itself in public consciousness. This was after several decades, during which time these ideas seemed to lose their power over the public imagination in Australia. This shift found expression in the interment of the remains of an unknown soldier from the Western Front in the Hall of Memory in the AWM in 1993. Later in the decade, Gallipoli was to be reinstated even more firmly in the national consciousness through the conservative re-inscriptions of Australian history under the Howard Government.

These factors have created a new conservative middle ground in which both indigenous and white Australian people seek to see themselves reflected. The families of indigenous people who served in the Australian forces understandably want to see their relatives honoured as visibly and as fully as white Australian servicemen and women are. At the same time, the stories of indigenous servicemen and women have too often been shaped by racism and oppression, creating disruptions in the seamless narrative of comradeship and sacrifice at the heart of Australia's military mythology.

Neither Honor Thwaites nor her husband, Michael, publicised their role in the making of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Memorial.⁷ Their intentions appear to have been to sow a kind of commemorative seed, which they hoped might take root amongst the indigenous community for whom it was intended.

Their reticence has allowed the memorial's many stakeholders to rewrite its history in ways that allow them to inscribe a range of sometimes contradictory commemorative impulses upon it. In this next section four such engagements with the memorial will be described, focusing on the way in which its bushland setting is co-opted in a variety of ways to construct multiple meanings.

The first such engagement dates from as early as 1992, when Robert Hall, the author of several books on indigenous service in the Australian military, invoked the memorial as a symbol of the silence that surrounded the contribution of Aboriginal servicemen and women in mainstream histories. He wrote: *Each year about one million visitors walk through the imposing entrance to the Australian War Memorial to pay homage at the shrine to the digger legend ... Far fewer people visit the nearby memorial to those black Australians who helped defend their country. In sharp contrast to the Australian War Memorial, this modest memorial consists of a simple plaque affixed to a boulder in a piece of untouched bushland. And where is it? If one were to imagine the Australian War Memorial as a north Australian homestead, this memorial to black servicemen and women would be the woodheap – 200 metres out the back door towards Mt Ainslie.*⁸

Here Hall speaks of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Memorial and the AWM as though they were equivalent, that is, as if they were both official memorials. In discussing their political relationship with each other, he re-configures the “untouched bushland” of Mt Ainslie as a colonised landscape in which white settlers co-opt the land. On the other hand, black inhabitants take up their makeshift camp behind the homestead, where permission to stay is always contingent on the whim of the coloniser.

Hall's position is given extra piquancy by the fact that custodianship of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Memorial is in the hands of ACT Parks and Conservation Department. In 2004, the refurbishment of the site of the memorial both provided an occasion to “rewrite” the history of the memorial and expose the ambiguous attitude of the management of the AWM towards it.

By this time, word of mouth had given the memorial increased visibility within the Canberra community. The refurbishment established signs and a walking trail to the site to reduce the impact of increased foot traffic to the memorial on the surrounding bushland. It also levelled the ground around it to allow for more formal ceremonies to take place there. To best represent the needs of the various stakeholders in the memorial, the Department convened a consultative committee that included, amongst others, representatives of the AWM.

For quite some time, the management of the AWM had turned a blind eye to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Memorial. However, as Aboriginal activists began to agitate for more recognition of indigenous servicemen and women in official commemorative events like Anzac Day, the memorial proved to be increasingly useful to them. For the last few years, for example, it has publicised a commemorative service there immediately after the Dawn Service on Anzac Day. This has allowed the AWM to appear to be responding to the needs of the

indigenous community, whilst avoiding the pressure to incorporate references to indigenous servicemen and women into the Dawn Service itself.

The cost of the refurbishment of the site was entirely met by the ACT Parks and Conservation Department. However, in the small pamphlet produced by the consultative committee to mark the refurbishment, the central location of the AWM's logo appears to give it some kind of official custodial relationship with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Memorial, and this is reinforced by the phrase on the front: "Their service and sacrifice is remembered in the Australian War Memorial". This is particularly ironic, given that in the entire permanent display of the AWM, there is only one explicit allusion to indigenous service, in a reference to home guard militias in the gallery that explores the experiences of the home front in World War II.

In the minutes of the consultative committee, frequent reference is made to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Memorial's "profound significance" and its "national importance". When at one meeting it was mentioned that visitors were clambering on and damaging the rock face to which the plaque is fixed, one member of the AWM staff even referred to the "sacredness" of the site, suggesting that it had another resonance as a traditional indigenous sacred site.⁹

The pamphlet also rewrites the history of the site. Honor Thwaites and her husband Michael are mentioned, but the year of its installation is given as 1993, and the reason for its establishment is connected with the Year of the Indigenous People. Given that Michael Thwaites was on the consultative committee, this is a puzzling mistake. By then he was quite frail and did not attend many of the meetings, and this might in part explain it.

Whatever the reason, the re-dating of the memorial from the bicentennial year to the Year of the Indigenous People does perform the convenient job of detaching its history from the contentious debates between white and indigenous Australians about national identity that characterised the bicentennial year. This, along with the references to the site's "sacredness", could be seen to essentialise the indigeneity of the servicemen and women commemorated by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Memorial, constructing an identity that is part of timeless tradition, outside the forces of history and politics. Such a construction suggests that its bush location is the natural site for the memorial, a site perhaps more appropriate than Canberra's formal commemorative precinct.

Two further engagements with the meaning of the site occur through the two anniversaries that attract the most visitors to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Memorial: the National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week, held each year in July to celebrate the achievements of indigenous communities; and Anzac Day (25 April). These two anniversaries provide an interesting insight into the way in which the memorial's meaning remains in flux. It can be utilised as a military memorial, whilst at the same time allowing another, more ambivalent, register of meaning to remain legible.

The NAIDOC Week ceremony draws indigenous members of the armed services to the site and is invariably attended by senior military staff as well as elders of

the local Aboriginal community. The ceremony is configured along formal military lines, with a flagstaff flying the ensigns of the various branches of the armed services, and a formal wreath-laying ceremony. The local indigenous community also performs a “welcome to country”, the ceremony performed by elders of local indigenous communities signifying that they give their blessing to the event taking place on their land. In the NAIDOC Week ceremony, the bush landscape of the memorial is temporarily converted into the official space of a military parade ground, sanctioned by the indigenous community's own protocols.

By contrast, the Anzac Day service is much more informal: there are none of the trappings of a military ceremony, and people gather at the site in an ad hoc manner. Some lay bouquets and candles at the foot of the rock face, and others simply look on and pay their respects. Usually the service consists of a short address by an indigenous officer, and informal prayers conducted by an armed forces chaplain.

In 2007, a large congregation of visitors made their way to the site, to be welcomed by Dr Margo Weir (a retired, indigenous naval officer), and Tom Slockee (an indigenous army chaplain). Dr Weir welcomed visitors to “our memorial”, proudly pointing out its bush setting, declaring that this was the only place in Australia where a Dawn Service was held for indigenous service people. “We in Canberra,” she said, “we just love this spot.” She, too, had her own version of the story of the memorial, telling her audience that it had been erected in 1979, and that it had been a “cooperative action” between the local Ngunnawal people and other Aboriginal people who had lived in Canberra at the time. Tom Slockee then went on to give a blessing, which is transcribed in part:

Oh Lord, bless this place, a place of remembrance. Thank you for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who volunteered to fight for and defend country ... We remember with love, reverence, and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, including ... Maoris too, who have laid down their lives ... We also pray and bless those aboriginal men and women before the boats came, and when they came, as they became the freedom fighters for their own country. We remember those people too, Lord, and we know that in one way the fight continues. So we dedicate this particular site, a site that is symbolic in many ways, in the bush amongst the trees, the rocks and the animals in natural surroundings, a bit out of the way, out of sight, maybe a symbol of the way in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been treated ... we honour and pay tribute to all people who've paid the price for what they believe in.¹⁰

James Young, in his work on the function of memorials in contemporary society, has pointed out that the real work of a memorial is to return the burden of remembering to the community. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Memorial is one which articulates the fractures, the silences, and the inconsistencies that surround the memory of contentious events.

Robert Hall is able to re-make the memorial as a symbol of the silence that surrounded the story of indigenous servicemen by casting its location as a broader metaphor for the displacement of indigenous people in their own land. The AWM

has adroitly co-opted it as a quasi-official adjunct to their own activities, which also relieves them of the responsibility for incorporating indigenous experience into its own commemorative role. For them, the bush site of the memorial essentialises its indigenous stakeholders in ways that identify them with notions of timelessness and tradition, outside the histories commemorated within Anzac Parade's official precinct.

The two indigenous officers, Weir and Slockee, invoke the memorial not only as a site of co-operation between indigenous communities, but as one that transcends the divided politics of indigenous land rights to encompass it as a site of commemoration of all indigenous warriors, both colonial freedom fighters and contemporary servicemen and women. This is articulated most tellingly in the particularly indigenous inflection of Slockee's phrase "to fight for and defend country", with its emphasis on custodial tradition rather than ownership. At the same time, there is an ambivalent register to his prayer, in which he notes that "the fight continues", and that the memorial's natural site also means that it is out of sight, a potential metaphor for the treatment of indigenous people at European hands.

Slockee's ambivalence might stand for the complexity of commemorating the indigenous contribution to Australia's armed services. Indigenous soldiers can be seen as forgotten heroes, complicit collaborators in a coloniser's agendas, or those whose commemoration transcends race and whose contribution to the defence of Australia is implicit in the many official memorials that line Anzac Parade. Similarly, there is no real consensus amongst indigenous service men and women about the necessity for a dedicated memorial within Canberra's official commemorative precinct. Many do not see themselves as distinct from the military fellowship of which they were a part, whilst others would like to see the indigenous contribution to Australia's armed forces specifically acknowledged on Anzac Parade.

The question that remains, however, is what might be remembered, and what forgotten, by such a memorial? If an official memorial might make the story of indigenous service men and women more visible, that story would inevitably have to be "ironed out" to conform to the agendas of national myth-making that lie at the heart of Anzac Parade. If this is the case, who is to say that their memory may not be more authentically, if contentiously, honoured by the modest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Memorial, and by all those who visit it in its bush setting on the flank of Mt Ainslie?

Endnotes

¹John Lahey, "Two Veterans Raise a Memorial to Honor Aboriginal War Dead," *The Age*, 16 March 1987, 5. Honor Thwaites also clipped an article detailing the role of indigenous servicemen in World War 1: John Janke, "Aborigines for King and Country," *The Canberra Times*, 4 May 1988, 21.

²Minutes of the meeting of the Friends of Remembrance Nature Park, 14 February 1987, uncatalogued papers of Honor Thwaites, National Library of Australia.

³Cited in Julia Martinez, "Problematising Aboriginal Nationalism," *Aboriginal History* 21 (1997), 143.

⁴Cited in Paul Reid, *Canberra Following Griffin: A Design History of Australia's National Capital* (Canberra: National Archives of Australia, 2002), 48.

⁵Chilla Bulbeck, "Australian History Set in Concrete? The Influence of the New Histories on Australian Memorial Construction," *Journal of Australian Studies* 28 (1991), 4.

⁶Quoted in Terry Smith, "Public Art Between Cultures: The Aboriginal Memorial, Aboriginality and Nationality in Australia," *Critical Inquiry* 27(4), (2001), 659.

⁷Michael Thwaites did in fact mention Honor's role in the memorial in a tribute published in the local press after her death.

⁸Robert Hall, "Finding the Black Parts of the Digger Legend: A Guide to Archival Sources on the Aboriginal and Islander Contribution to the Second World War," *Aboriginal History* 16(2), (1992), 58

⁹Minutes of the Consultative Committee for the Refurbishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Memorial, October 2004. Uncatalogued papers of Honor Thwaites, National Library of Australia.

¹⁰I am indebted to video material shot by Ivo Lovric at the Anzac Day ceremony (2007) for the words of Tom Slockee and Dr Margo Weir's account of the history of the memorial.

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Biographical note

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