
Looking Back and Looking Around: Notes from Anzac Day

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Abstract

In April 2015, artist Connah Podmore partnered with the charitable trust, Friends of Anzac Bridge, to run a community art project for the region's Anzac Day commemorations. Over a series of open workshops, participants were invited to write messages from themselves to Anzac-related subjects on supplied postcards. This process revealed many of the symbols and expressions now inherent to Anzac commemorations, with many participants using this Anzac rhetoric in their written messages. In this paper, the author examines the social, historical, personal and political guiding forces behind Anzac rhetoric, and the impact that this rhetoric has had in the community project and more broadly across New Zealand. This first-person commentary discusses the desire to remember, and some of the perceived problems arising from what currently is a nation-wide movement of First World War centenary commemorations.

Keywords: Anzac rhetoric, commemoration, nationalism, New Zealand, memorial

i.

This is a country of waiting surfaces, quiet groupings of exposed names.

Quiet but not passive:

They press upon the earth: We move about their weight.

I was in denial when I wrote these words. Their observations bear little similarity to the majority of experiences on, and around Anzac Day 2015, of which I write. A quiet persuasive weight: the notion of a noble pressure: this is instead what I hoped my experience of remembrance would be.

Two thousand and fifteen marked the 100-year anniversary of New Zealand's entry into the Gallipoli campaign, where its soldiers experienced their first extended and large-scale encounter with the disgraceful violence and waste of the First World War.¹ The scale of loss that New Zealand experienced at Gallipoli quickly brought about a desire for commemoration, and Anzac Day was established as a half day holiday, and day of remembrance, as early as 1916.² This day has since evolved to commemorate not only First World War casualties, but all New Zealand and Australian returned servicemen and women, and victims of war.³ Today, the national pride and gratitude evoked by Anzac, combined with what are often deeply felt personal connections to its histories, have elevated this day of remembrance to an almost sacred status. As summarized by political commentator, Bryce Edwards: 'It is considered disrespectful, inappropriate and downright traitorous, by some to express dissent about the day'.⁴ Given the importance placed upon Anzac in New Zealand, it is therefore unsurprising that the centenary of the Gallipoli landings inspired extensive media coverage, public events and exhibitions. Record numbers of New Zealanders attended Anzac Day dawn services across the country,⁵ and queues at Te Papa Tongarewa's exhibition *Gallipoli: The Scale of Our War* were reported to have stretched across the museum's second floor, down the stairs and to the public square outside.⁶ Two thousand and fifteen was the year of 'peak Gallipoli'.⁷ And there I was, upon that peak.

In April 2015, I worked at New Zealand Pacific Studios in Wairarapa as their ANZAC Fellow. As part of the Fellowship, I launched a community art project that would contribute to the Anzac Day commemorations at the local memorial bridge. My project, 'Writing History', constituted a series of workshops in which participants were invited to write a postcard from themselves to someone or something pertaining to Anzac. Many people contributed to this project, and I very much enjoyed it and am grateful for the exchanges with these people. Despite this, however, following the project's conclusion, my main feeling has been one of great unease.

So, here is the chance to properly revisit this experience: to focus on misguided intentions, acts of distortion, and the enormous discomfort that I have come to associate with this project, and with Anzac Day.

ii.

I applied to the fellowship on the back of a previous project in which I made a memorial of sorts for my great grandfather, Frank, who had served in the First World War. ‘A sincere desire to remember events that I never experienced and a man I never met’, was how I described the artwork at the time. And this was a sincere desire. Whatever the place that timeliness played in sparking my interest in Frank’s memory, the thought of his involvement in this history made, makes, my heart sore.

From my Grandma I had acquired a photocopy of a postcard that he had sent home in 1915, while hospitalized in Cairo. Over the course of a year I wrote Frank many letters, and sent them to the 1915 address of this hospital, found at the top right hand corner of the postcard. The letters spoke mainly of my experiences with his memory: of a search for information, and an enormous uncertainty both with the details of his history, and how I should respond to them.⁸

I saw the act of writing letters as a commitment of care. Wanting to take this further still, I decided to make something for him. I cut the carbon copies of my letters into thin strips, and wove them together by hand to create a blanket for his hospital bed. As the blanket grew, I would describe it in my letters:

I love how light it is, and the illusion of its perfect whiteness. In places it’s becoming worn and translucent: light shines through, and the splayed pink-red of my fingertip can just be seen when pushed up against the back of it.⁹

Months were spent making this blanket, and throughout the process of making, I constantly swung between assurance in the gesture and the object, and feelings of doubt and dissatisfaction. I felt it important that the blanket should convey the same sense of uncertainty and searching as my letters to Frank, and for this reason I embraced its diligent and fragile qualities. However, among one of my worries was that the flimsy, paper blanket was an inadequate gesture to the memory of the suffering I was sure he had experienced:

I have an awful image of the blanket half way through its degradation. It will be frayed and yellowing, with patches missing. I hate the idea that a crumbling, neglected object could one day be your memorial.¹⁰

This process of making brought into consideration a whole other host of questions: questions of how we should represent trauma and the lives of others. Of whether it is the thing made, or the action of making that counts. These questions, and the action of writing were forefront in my mind when I began the Wairarapa project.

iii.

The Wairarapa project also began with a letter. I addressed the letter to Alfred Falkner, one of the first settlers in the local Kaiparoro area and the designer and engineer behind the ANZAC memorial bridge, just down the road from the studio. Falkner lost a son and nephew to the war, and both are commemorated on this bridge.

Dear Alfred,

When you first designed the Kaiparoro Bridge, did you know that it would become a memorial?

If so, what a uniquely sad position this must have been: designing an object to carry the load of lives both present and lost. Today I see this duality still: there is something both sobering and transformative in the sight of concrete's everyday weight shaped into graceful arches, painted white.

I suppose you might have found comfort in your concrete bridge: in its calculated strength and claims to permanence.

I would like you to know that it is being looked after, and your son's name remains, etched in its side.¹¹

Falkner's memorial was certainly made under different circumstances to my own. Because it was constructed under an immediacy of grief that is not present in Frank's blanket, the reasons behind its making are certainly different in kind. Nonetheless, I wanted to speak to him as one maker of memorials to another.

There is much that I admire in Falkner's bridge, one of the first utilitarian memorials of its time; returned servicemen built it following the war. A trained engineer, Falkner had an apparent fixation with bridges; in his collected scrapbooks, now kept at the Ian Matheson Archives, there are pages upon pages of pictures of bridges, cut out from newspapers or magazines and annotated by hand.

Falkner's memorial bridge is made entirely of concrete. Before the war, Faulkner had encountered another bridge of this kind while visiting Auckland, and he mentioned it with excitement in a letter home to his friend. I imagine him designing this bridge enthusiastically and with care. Falkner's bridge stands in sharp contrast to my paper blanket: where my offering is fragile and open-ended, he produced a finished, useful object, built to last. However, we are different people, motivated by different interests; and for the purposes of this discussion, I will not be comparing the two any further. I simply think it beautiful that he was able to remember his son by building the thing that he loved.

Figure 1: Falkner's Memorial Bridge from below, Kaiparoro, 2014. Photo: Connah Podmore.



iv.

How can we reconcile this intimate and honest response with the growing spectacle of Anzac commemorations today?

For the Wairarapa project, I more than anything wanted to promote individual and thoughtful responses to history. Drawing from my previous experience, I focused on the act of letter writing. Working alongside the Friends of ANZAC Bridge, a charitable trust created to preserve Falkner's memorial; we held workshops at local libraries, a writer's group, schools and Aratoi Wairarapa Museum of Art and History. Through this partnership I saw an opportunity to reflect upon the acts of memorial making and remembrance, but unfortunately did not place an emphasis upon this. Rather, in my eagerness to promote participation, I condensed the participant brief to a message written from themselves to 'someone or something pertaining to Anzac'. With user friendliness ever in mind, I also supplied postcards for participants to write their messages on. It wasn't until well after the project's end that I realised that these steps actively promoted the use of standard Anzac rhetoric.

Messages laden with familiar commemorative expressions—*courage*, *servicing your country*, *RIP*, *hero*, and symbols of crosses and poppies—surfaced upon the postcards. In looking back, I now realise that the limited word count dictated by the size of my postcards, paired with the participants' natural inclination to use language strongly associated with Anzac, greatly increased the likelihood that participants would use this language. In the face of ineffable tragedy, there is a

tendency to quote important texts; perhaps to mask the perceived inadequacy of one's own words.¹² In the face of Gallipoli, Anzac rhetoric naturally fills this role. Describing this rhetoric, Graham Seal highlights the common use of words such as 'sacrifice' or 'spirit', which are strongly associated with Christian themes. In the case of Anzac rhetoric, these words have been re-aligned as descriptors for the secular qualities associated with Anzac, such as national identity. In this way, he explains, these secular qualities too become sacred.¹³ This is problematic, for reasons that I will get to later, and I feel an acute sense of discomfort when hearing this tongue spoken en masse. With regards to my project however, it feels mean-spirited to criticize the public's natural use of this rhetoric when it is so closely intertwined with the very subject that they were asked to address.

What I have been wondering ever since the project's end, is that when we use these words, is it always done so unthinkingly? Many of those who wrote in postcards seemed to approach the task as Falkner had approached his memorial bridge: they worked with loved ones in mind. While they may have used generic commemorative language in their writing, I believe that many felt what they wrote. In these cases, it is as though the thoughts that they wanted to express clashed with the very words that we use to express them. So, perhaps here lies our problem: words themselves have a history, and they can be far too open.

Furthermore, it is also clear that such responses were not only prompted, but created. I wonder how many participants used such language because they thought that this is what I expected of them? The national-hype and moral underpinnings around Anzac Day created an environment that discouraged opposition to that which celebrated or promoted Anzac. While it must be said that many participants actively resisted using Anzac rhetoric, the majority did not.¹⁴

V.

*Sacrifice, honour, valour and tragedy*¹⁵ intoned television presenter Mike Hosking, on the eve of Anzac Day 2015. Coming from the mouth of this famously self-assured television personality, the utterance of these common Anzac terms suddenly seemed all the more alarming. Hosking's monologue seemed to epitomize one of the more troubling elements of the Anzac brand and rhetoric: its tendency to mythologize the very history that it represents. Commenting on this very issue, historian Daemon Salesa noted that the monumental scale of Anzac commemoration in New Zealand has created a bias in the public's perception of this history. 'If it wasn't for the fact that we landed at Gallipoli' he said, 'I think that most New Zealanders would be able to call it what it was: an imperial action where the people defending their homeland won'.¹⁶ Part of what prevents us from scrutinising what Salesa defines as this 'national myth'¹⁷ is perhaps the simplistic and self-assured nature of Anzac rhetoric. The components of this rhetoric, its symbols and buzz-words, certainly have their uses, for example in triggering memory (or in this case, our memory of a history). If used excessively, however,

as they were in 2015, symbols and buzz-words can be reductive: draining a subject of its colour and complexity until it has reached its most neutral form.

The problem with applying this process to human history is that people are not neutral, but complex, messy and inconsistent. While it may be impossible to uncover all the contradiction and nuance of our forbearers, it is imperative that they are not reduced to and remembered as symbols. Remembering a symbol of a person is not the same as remembering a person. The range of thoughts and feelings that we experience ourselves does not burden a symbol of a person. They are no longer linked to the consequences of their actions. They simply are: simply brave, simply tragic, simply misguided. And it is much easier to manipulate and misappropriate something that is simple.

This brings me to my second concern regarding Anzac rhetoric: its close ties to nationalism and militarism. ‘The tidy symbolism and euphemisms of the way we pay homage to the soldiers of WWI’, writes journalist Alistair Paulin, ‘risks glorifying and sanitising the reality of war’.¹⁸ Further euphemisms may be also seen in the commonly held belief that New Zealand’s national identity was forged at Gallipoli, rather than at home. In such instances, reference to the ‘bravery and unity’¹⁹ exhibited by New Zealand’s soldiers at Gallipoli works to overshadow some of the country’s more divisive histories, for example, the New Zealand wars between some Māori tribes and government forces, during the 1840s and 1860s. ‘Who wants troubling introspection when we can have heart-warming patriotism instead?’ quips historian Vincent O’Malley on this score.²⁰

The sacredness of Anzac, made explicit through its language and symbolism, creates barriers to opposition of what the brand has come to stand for. For if we disagree with the overall sentiments of nationalism and militarism put forward by this brand, then it follows that we also dishonour the memory of those ANZACs who suffered under its banners. Because, do you not agree that they were brave? Do you not agree that the war was a tragedy? My problem is that I do agree and am left with the feeling of being emotionally strong-armed to jump upon the proverbial bandwagon.

vi.

During the Wairarapa project, I came into contact with this force often and must admit that I did not stand up well to it. There were too many times when I did not want to rock the boat and did not want to offend. So, in moments of discomfort, when I should have opposed the suggestions of others, I just let things happen. Despite my aversion to having my artwork associated with nationalism, I let a reporter from a local newspaper take a picture of me and the postcards in front of a New Zealand flag.

Worse still, as if I had not learned from the first experience, I allowed a reporter from the dreaded *Seven Sharp* to attend a workshop.²¹ They came to the region to do a piece on the Kaiparoro community and their involvement with

the Anzac memorial bridge. The community had worked hard to preserve their bridge, fundraising for years to pay for its maintenance. This kind of national promotion meant a lot to them, and I did not want to let them down. So, in full knowledge of the kind of story that *Seven Sharp* would produce, I let them attend. Thankfully, my project did not meet the story brief: New Zealanders who love their memorials. It was not included in the piece.

‘Nothing changes instantaneously’, Margaret Atwood wrote. ‘In a gradually heating bathtub you’d be boiled to death before you knew it.’²² This was what was happening to me. In both of these cases, the people-pleaser in me silenced all internal protest and doubt. Looking back on it, through my postcards, I was also applying this same pressure to others. When casting back to what my project had originally aimed to do; to give participants a platform to make their own commemorative gesture (as Falkner and I once had), I remember some of the more humbling responses that participants submitted, and feel happy in the memory. Mostly however, I remember the feeling of the time: excited crowds attending parades of First World War tanks, and a child creating snow angels in a street laden with paper poppies, and my own feelings of growing discomfort with what I was creating: another addition to the noise and ritual of the contemporary Anzac spectacle.

vii.

I thankfully have a lifetime of chances ahead of me to learn from this experience: to assert my views, to be stubborn in my work. But what of the memory of those who were involved in the war? Those whose photographs and letters are now used to prop up a sentimental, unthinking picture of nationhood. These people no longer have voices to oppose this portrayal of themselves, but I think if they were here now, they would oppose it. I do not think that they would want to be remembered this way. In the words of WWI veteran, Tony Fagen:

Today people would say that we were brainwashed with patriotism. Britannia Rules the Waves on our side, and Deutschland Uber Alles on the other. And now go out and kill each other . . . I finished the war with a nervous breakdown, or shell shock as it was then called, in hospital for seven months. I didn’t wish to talk to people about what had happened to me, and what I had been through. You were well aware that anybody who had not been on a battlefield couldn’t possibly comprehend what you were talking about. How could they understand? And what good was I, and what did I know of anything, after four years of that? I was lucky to get a job and somewhere to live after four years of literally bleeding for my country.

Yes, I still think of Gallipoli. You may well ask if any war is worth it. You may well ask those lines of white crosses under which are buried the finest young fellows New Zealand could produce: Was it worth it? Was it worth your lives? No. No. It was not.²³

I think that these men would have been sick at the thought that their words and images would one day be used to prop up a new kind of nationalism and borderline propaganda. That their own bitter memories, and the memory of their peers for whom they grieved, would be reduced to sentimental fables of a specific New Zealand bravery and pluck, which continues to this day, and has built a way of life that we should be proud to protect.

I have not returned to this subject, and no longer make artwork about this history. I have been sufficiently scared off and fatigued by this experience and now prefer for my subject matter to settle outside of political hotspots.

Indeed, I have not gone to an Anzac Day service since.

But perhaps doing nothing is worse than doing something, even if that something comes out all wrong? I still can't decide.

Endnotes

1. Fought on the Gallipoli Peninsula, in modern day Turkey, this relatively minor campaign of the First World War was conceived as a means to take control of the Dardanelles Strait, a strategic water passage that if captured could allow the Allies to take Constantinople and push the Ottoman-Turks out of the war. The campaign was a tragedy and a failure. Eight months of fighting and stalemate brought about 44,000 Allied, and 87,000 Ottoman casualties.
2. ANZAC is an acronym for Australia and New Zealand Army Corps; a combined force that landed on the shores of Gallipoli on 25 April 1915. Today, the term Anzac especially signifies a shared heritage and culture between these two nations, and is often used broadly, evoking notions of national identity.
3. "The Making of Anzac Day", New Zealand History, Ministry for Culture and Heritage, last modified 22 April 2016, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/first-anzac-days>.
4. Bryce Edwards, "Anzac Roundup: Political Fatigue and Dissent", *New Zealand Herald*, 24 April 2015, https://www.nzherald.co.nz/opinion/news/article.cfm?c_id=466&objectid=11438125.
5. 1 News, "Record Turnouts at Packed Anzac Day Dawn Services", Television New Zealand, 25 April 2015, <https://www.tvnz.co.nz/one-news/new-zealand/record-turn-outs-at-packed-anzac-day-dawn-services-6300165>.
6. John Armstrong, "*Gallipoli: The Scale of Our War*", Museum of Te Papa Tongarewa, April 2015 – April 2019", *The New Zealand Journal of Public History* 5, no. 1 (2017): 59.
7. Daemon Salesa, "Easter over Anzac", interview with Jim Mora, The Panel, Radio New Zealand, 25 August 2015, https://www.radionz.co.nz/audio/player?audio_id=201768117.
8. I have yet to receive a letter in reply.
9. Connah Podmore to Frank McKenna, 27 May 2013, in author's possession.
10. Connah Podmore to Frank McKenna, 11 June 2013, in author's possession.

11. Connah Podmore to Alfred Falkner, March 2015, in author's possession.
12. Vivian makes this observation within his larger analysis of habituated witnessing—or the ways in which modern day forms of witnessing have become a form of memorialization, and societal habits of memorialization have become forms of witnessing. For more see Bradford Vivian, *Commonplace Witnessing: Rhetorical Invention, Historical Remembrance, and Public Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).
13. Graham Seal, "Anzac: The Sacred in the Secular", *Journal of Australian Studies* 31, no. 91 (2007): 137.
14. Participants who resisted the use of Anzac rhetoric often expressed opposition to war and used language typical of anti-war protests. Others drew parallels between their own lives and of those of a different era (e.g. the experience of nervously waiting for a loved one to return). The messages of these more intimate postcards contained a certain humility that is often missed in Anzac rhetoric, which tends to favor notions of bravery, sacrifice and large-scale waste.
15. Mike Hosking, *Seven Sharp*, 24 April 2015, Television New Zealand.
16. Salesa, interview
17. Salesa, interview
18. Alistair Paulin, 'On the brink of WWI overload', *Nelson Mail*, 11 April 2015, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/nelson-mail/opinion/67679161/on-the-brink-of-wwi-overload>.
19. John Key, "ANZAC DAY 2015 Gallipoli Dawn Service John Key Address", video, 25 April 2015, 6:19, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDW1eFMajRQ>.
20. Vincent O'Malley, "Historical amnesia over New Zealand's own wars", *The Dominion Post*, 22 April 2015, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/comment/67944795/Historical-amnesia-over-New-Zealands-own-wars>.
21. Seven Sharp is a New Zealand current affairs programme, particularly well known for its tongue-and-cheek delivery, and playful exchanges between its presenters. The programme's former presenter, Mike Hosking, has variously been criticised for displaying a bias in opinion, and for being out-of-touch with some of the country's population.
22. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), 56.
23. Tony Fagen, interview by Maurice Shadbolt, *Voices of Gallipoli* (Auckland: David Ling Publishing Ltd, 1988), 24-25.

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Biographical Note

Connah Podmore's practice draws from personal experiences, reflecting on memory, subject, and place. Working across drawing and writing, her artwork considers states of contradiction and uncertainty through poetic and intuitive response. Podmore's recent projects have focused on the humble and unremarkable details of her every day, aiming to depict them with dignity and significance. Podmore completed a Master of Fine Arts with Distinction from Massey University in 2014. Recent exhibitions include *Tunnels, Pits, Pools* at play_station (2017), *I'd Rather Be Both* at Blue Oyster Art Project Space (2016), and *Light Makes Soft* at 30 Upstairs Gallery (2016). She lives and works in Wellington, New Zealand.

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