

# Inventing Anzac: The Digger and National Mythology

Graham Seal

Reviewed by Professor Jeffrey Grey



In the 1960s and 1970s, 'Anzac' and its various mysteries were hot academic property. Partly as an offshoot of consideration of the 'bush legend' in the 1950s, able and serious scholars like Ken Inglis, the late Lloyd Robson and Geoffrey Serle examined the form and nature of Anzac observance in Australia, and sought to tease meaning from the various levels of popular and more formal commemoration and symbolism. Much of this work helped to lay the foundation for subsequent academic and scholarly concern with our military history. Inglis, in particular, proved highly influential in shaping the scholarly agenda dealing with war and commemoration, amongst other issues.

While a few, like the late Eric Andrews, maintained an interest in such matters (not least through his 1993 book, *The Anzac Illusion*), more recent scholarship has generally moved on to a fashionable concern with 'memory' (something of an international phenomenon at present), and with the processes of grief and mourning as these have played themselves out in Australian society during the two world wars. Some of this work—Joy Damousi's or Alastair Thomson's, for example—makes an original contribution to our understanding of ourselves, though it must be added that some other, more recent efforts in the field have little to commend them. But the concern with 'Anzac', writ large, might be thought to have passed beyond this stage, and largely into that realm of history that occupies examiners of 4th year honours historiography papers.

Graham Seal's short book suggests that there are still issues worth exploring, and that an older, evidence-based approach to the subject can be productive of useful insight (if there is 'cultural theory' at work in his text, it is blessedly minimalist in approach and effect). Seal is interested in the informal level of Anzac creation and observance and, as befits a folklorist, he spends a lot of the book looking at demotic texts and folk observance of Anzac, essentially in the period between the two

world wars. Some of the best parts of the book examine soldier lore through trench song and popular culture such as the enormously influential Ginger Mick. I'm not sure how much of this is new (since he has published articles in the area before), but it is certainly interesting.

The book's broader context draws on Eric Hobsbawm's notion of invented tradition and its social and political function in twentieth century societies. The concluding chapter, a mere four pages that cry out for expansion and elaboration at some length, teases with the idea that Anzac and its commemoration remains vital in Australian culture and society because of its capacity to reinvent itself with each generation.

The strength of the acceptance of 'Anzac' at the grass roots, its reworking in folk culture, and its seemingly endless capacity to engage at this and at the official and 'high' public levels simultaneously, helps to explain its vitality where similar public legends, such as Vimy in Canada and Delville Wood in South Africa, have long since died with the generation that gave rise to them. There is yet another, whole parallel dimension to consider, involving the subtle differences in Anzac commemoration on each side of the Tasman, that is truly beyond his scope here, but worth contemplating (at least in the luxury of a review).

There is much in this book that is worth pondering, and some parts that are quite fascinating, but in places it somehow reads like less than the sum of its parts, a little at times like a collection of essays rather than a single, unified work. That is, perhaps, the nature of the subject matter, and may reflect the folklorist methodology that Seal draws upon. Well worth dipping into, then, but perhaps not for reading in a single burst. ♦

Graham Seal, *'Inventing Anzac: The Digger and National Mythology'*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2004. 240pp., RRP \$32.95.