Quarterly Essay

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Quarterly Essay is published four times a year by Black Inc., an imprint of Schwartz Publishing Pty Ltd  
Publisher: Morry Schwartz  
ISBN 186-395-1822  
ISSN 1832-0953

Subscriptions (4 issues): $49 a year within Australia incl. GST (Institutional subs. $59).  
Outside Australia $79. Payment may be made by Mastercard, Visa or Bankcard, or by cheque made out to Schwartz Publishing. Payment includes postage and handling.

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Design: Guy Mirabella  
Printer: Griffin Press
Like John Birmingham, I am interested in the Australian way of war and “the renewed esteem of the military in our core culture”. Unlike Birmingham, however, I do not draw comfort or satisfaction from this “reconnection”, and cannot see it, as he does, as evidence of the maturation of an “adolescent, derivative culture”. Nor am I surprised that there has “been surprisingly little sustained critique in Australia of what appears to be new and rapidly evolving doctrines such as pre-emption”.

The re-emergence of the martial spirit in Australia is no accident of history. The “strange, contrary shift in both mass and elite opinion”, the “reconnection” Birmingham writes about, is something that has been socially and politically engineered, from the mid-1970s onwards, by a coalition of interests intent on rebuilding Australia’s armed forces after the demoralising lows and accumulated debilitating legacies of the Vietnam War era, including the domestic HMAS Voyager tragedy (1964).

Post-1972, Australia’s armed forces, particularly the army, found themselves without an enemy, and with major problems regarding strategy, organisation, leadership, funding, morale, recruitment and equipment—all in a national cultural mood that was anti-war. The new, confident military mood that is the focus of Birmingham’s essay is the end result of this rebuilding by politicians, defence personnel, lobbyists and an energetic international armaments industry, helped along the way by media-savvy defence interests, and by a legion of journalists, educators and historians who variously became part of the process. International terrorism, particularly in the wake of the 1978 Hilton bombing (Sydney), increasingly provided the enemy and rationale the Cold War no longer could, and the mythologising of Australia’s military history overcame the anti-war legacies of the 1960s.

Birmingham touches on this mythologising process in his section “The
Ghosts of Battles Past", but I regard it as central to the new military mood in Australia. There is a dark complexity in the Australian cultural soul where Nation, Sacrifice and Blood mix, perhaps best expressed during the Boer War, years before Gallipoli and the Anzacs brought it all together, by the Australian poet who wrote:

A nation is never a nation
Worthy of pride or place
Till the mothers have sent their firstborn
To look death in the field in the face.

Before this, in 1885 when the colony of New South Wales sent a contingent of troops to support Britain during the Sudan crisis, the NSW politician H.S. Badgery expressed his hope that military involvement would act as a social cohesive, overcoming the colony's class and religious tensions, and "cement the people in this community of all classes and creeds in one common feeling".

Part of the "reconnection" process, as Birmingham acknowledges, is the "breathless idolatry that now accompanies every Anzac Day". Again, I suggest, this has not come out of the blue, but is part of the rebuilding process mentioned earlier. Just how it has happened, chapter and verse, awaits future historians, but involves politicians, the ADF, the RSL, veterans' organisations, the Department of Veterans' Affairs, the growing body of war historians, journalists, the travel industry (with a range of battle-site tours), among others, the end result being a general perception, one often expressed at Anzac Day commemorations by school student speakers, that "the freedoms" we have today are due to the sacrifices of Australians in wars past, and that the nation was forged at Gallipoli.

These are big calls, given that Australia's military involvements stretch from the land-grabbing participation in the Maori Wars during the 1860s (the troops were rewarded with grants of confiscated Maori land) to the present-day controversial involvements in Afghanistan and Iraq, with the only real threat to the nation coming during the Second World War. Sadly, the notion of the nation being forged by war sidelines and diminishes the long, complex, intricate, peaceful, creative process of nation-building that resulted in Federation in 1901.

The mythologising process distorts history, best seen in the passing of "The Last Anzac", Alec Campbell, in 2002 at the age of 103. Accorded a state funeral and eulogised by politicians and the media for his six-week career at Gallipoli as a sixteen-year-old soldier in 1916, there was little public acknowledgment that
Campbell had, for most of his adult life, thought war a futile activity and devoted much of his life to the trade union movement and the cause of peace. Indeed, so far as being "The Last Anzac" was concerned, he didn't even rate a mention in the book The Last Anzacs (1996), the mythologising process only catching up with him between 1996 and 2002 when he was, arguably, far from being in control of his own destiny.

The "religious tenor" of contemporary Anzac Day ceremonies noted by Birmingham should come as no surprise. Historian Dr John A. Moses, an ordained Anglican priest, has examined the theological roots of Anzac observance in "war theology", the idea among Australian clergy during the First World War that the British Empire had to be defended because the Empire provided the God-given opportunity to spread the Gospel into places it had not reached, that our troops were latter-day crusaders, that we were locked in a battle against anti-Christian forces; the first commemoration of the Gallipoli campaign was initiated by the churches (in Brisbane, 1915) and the first proceedings to establish Anzac Day as a commemorative event was dominated by the churches (in 1916), an aim being to establish a sacred day to "re-activate in all Australians, regardless of denomination, a sense of spiritual community under Almighty God".

Finally, a cautionary note. Despite Birmingham's sense of national maturation associated with Australia's new military prowess, I have reservations. There is a jingoistic tone about it all, flagged on the lapels of some of our leading politicians. In other cultures the manipulation of notions of Nation, Sacrifice and Blood has sometimes led to profound military misadventures abroad, even been a prelude to domestic authoritarian political practices. Here, I think, we need to be aware that the Australian martial tradition, aside from involvements overseas, also includes the use of the armed forces for domestic peace-time political purposes, a tradition stretching back to the strikes of the 1890s through to the breaking of the 1989 industrial campaign of the Australian Federation of Air Pilots. Recent changes to federal legislation under the justification of fighting the War on Terror potentially extend the basis upon which military force may legitimately be used against the civilian population.

Rowan Cahill