

# ANZAC DAY ADDRESS TO COBURG R.S.L.

Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 2007

Over Easter I read, among other things, a fine essay by John Carroll, Professor of Sociology at La Trobe University. He says every culture has a fixed and sacred primordial site, with stories to be handed down to be retold by each new generation. Australia's story is that of the hero. The ancient Greek writer Homer's book The Iliad described as the archetypal hero the great warrior Achilles, who was not only godlike in his form in battle, but also gained dignity through suffering – tragic dignity in the face of death.

In Australia a single story carries the public imagination – Anzac.

Anzac as legend was very much the creation of one man, C.E.W. Bean, whose greatest legacy was his first six volumes of the official History of Australia in the World War. His two volumes on Gallipoli are written with evocative timeless force, celebrating the mettle of the soldiers, by a man who saw most of the campaign at first hand. John Carroll says Captain Bean's work can be thought of as the Australian Iliad.

Why Gallipoli? It is arbitrary in relation to Australia. The Dardanelles lie on the other side of the world, with no British traces, and the military campaign was, as is well known, a failure.

John Carroll says that on a clear day, with the help of binoculars, from the heights of Anzac you can see the ruins of the ancient city of Troy, site of The Iliad. Australia's sacred origins are remarkably close to the birthplace of the West.

And then there are the First World War memorials, thousands of them, which sprung up around Australia in a tidal wave of unparalleled public tribute. Here Australia moved away from the notion of the classical Greek hero. It is not the great individual – an Australian Achilles – who we remember. Australia remembers the men, and above all their character, not the individuals. There was no statue to any individual soldier before 1936, when Simpson was unveiled in Melbourne. Even then the work is titled "The Man with the Donkey", and what is honoured is not so much warrior prowess, but rather selfless service.

Captain Bean ends his first volume asking the question, "what carried each man on, when he realised he had been cast into some god-forsaken Turkish wilderness without food or sleep, the dead and wounded all around, the cause seemingly hopeless?". Bean's answer was character.

John Carroll's Essay provides one clear answer to the question, "why do we gather here every year to retell the Anzac story, and why are the crowds who gather to hear it getting larger rather than smaller?" It is because this story defines us as Australians. It tells us who we are, and where we've come from, and each generation needs to hear it and re-tell it.

But I think there is a second reason also. It is that each generation has its own battles to fight, its own challenges to confront, and in facing those challenges courage and character are just as important as they were at Gallipoli.

There are two big battles which have crept up on us in this new century. They are the threat from terrorism and the threat from global warming. The threat from terrorism needs the skills of our defence forces, but it is also a battle about hearts and mind and values, and facing it requires courage and character.

It is the same with global warming. It is now absolutely clear that global warming poses a major threat to this planet, with the prospect of ever more serious droughts and water shortages, floods, bushfires, cyclones and extreme weather events, melting polar caps and spreading tropical diseases.

In the face of such a threat it is easy for people to be passive, throwing their hands up in the air and saying "what can I achieve? - the challenge is so massive and I am but one person".

But this was precisely the situation facing the Anzacs at Gallipoli.

I believe the courage and character they showed back then is not some museum piece, to be taken down and dusted off and admired once a year and then put back on the shelf.

It should inspire us to fight the battles of our own time.

There are many things we can do as individuals, and demands we can make of our governments. They may involve some sacrifice, but they are necessary in the common good.

The ANZAC legend endures because we have need of it today, and because our children will have need of it tomorrow.