**Pride in the past isn't necessarily a lost cause**

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From: [*The Australian*](http://www.theaustralian.com.au/)

April 24, 2010

**Is it disloyal to criticise aspects of Anzac Day because you believe it involves myth and ritualised militarism?**

TOMORROW our nation pauses to remember. At cenotaphs and shrines across our cities, at memorials in country towns, and indeed on the sandy ridges of Gallipoli, Australians will be greeting the dawn with solemn patriotism.

Anzac Day is for many Australians our true and authentic national day. But for others it is a day that evokes ambivalence rather than pride. Why, some ask, should we lend such sacred importance to a day that glorifies death and war? What is there to be inspired by when the original landing at Gallipoli was a failure and a product of British imperial folly?

In their recently published book What's Wrong With Anzac?, historians Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds argue that the commemoration of Anzac Day involves the militarisation of Australian history.

Our national self-understanding would be better, Lake and Reynolds contend, if we accept the Anzac legend as an aberration of Edwardian militarism and not as a cathartic moment of Australian nationhood.

Of course, the connection between citizenship and sacrifice has a much older pedigree than the Edwardian era. The ancients believed that there could be no nobler act than to lose one's life in war. In the now immortal words of the Roman poet Horace, *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori:* it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country.

Such ideas about patriotic glory date back to the Peloponnesian wars. In a celebrated funeral oration, the Athenian general Pericles said the virtuous citizen must never decline war's dangers but must lay their lives at their country's feet as the most glorious contribution they could offer.

Needless to say, we shouldn't endorse classical patriotism without heavy qualification. Where memory morphs into mythology, patriotism can become a proxy for chauvinism. Does Anzac suffer from this problem?

Raising such questions needn't be dismissed as disloyalty. Debate and dissent are part of any healthy national conversation.

Yet it would be superficial to renounce the Anzac tradition, or even to believe that all things Anzac must involve jingoistic fervour. Equally, it is wrong to believe that any trace of myth must invalidate the Anzac story.

To be a nation is to have a common memory of great deeds that inspires citizens to perform still more. There is nothing wrong with using historical experience as moral guidance, a point missed entirely by Lake and Reynolds.

At its best, the Anzac legend isn't a narrow myth about military prowess or the virile manhood of an Australian race. One needn't have had a forebear who fought on the Western Front or at Gallipoli in order to engage with the tradition.

Rather, the Anzac legend can be an inclusive and unifying story. It symbolises an ethos of egalitarianism and mateship that animates our national life. It serves to remind us that when we are at our best, we are prepared to think about something greater than ourselves, to place duty above interest.

We can appreciate this without succumbing to mindless militarism.

Understanding things this way does rule out one thing, however: the idea that Anzac Day should involve a sentimental celebration of war. This it most certainly should not.

Loving your country is a virtue only when it is based on humility; when hubris is the impulse, we end up with a vice.

Let us not forget that Anzac Day is an occasion for sombre remembrance, not narcissistic triumphalism.

*Readers are invited to suggest subjects for future pondering. The email address:* [*philosophercolumn@gmail.com*](mailto:philosophercolumn@gmail.com)

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