



Conflict and the Australian commemorative landscape

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ABSTRACT

Australian war memorials have changed over time to reflect community sentiments and altered expectations for how a memorial should look and what it should commemorate. The monolith or cenotaph popular after the Great War has given way to other forms of contemporary memorialisation including civic, counter or anti-memorials or monuments. Contemporary memorials and monuments now also attempt to capture the voices of marginalised groups affected by trauma or conflict. In contrast, Great War memorials were often exclusionary, sexist and driven by a nation building agenda. Both the visibility and contestability of how a country such as Australia pursues public commemoration offers rich insights into the increasingly widespread efforts to construct an inclusive identity which moves beyond the cult of the warrior and the positioning of war as central to the life of the nation.

KEYWORDS

Australian history, Commemoration, Frontier wars, Great War, Second World War, War memorial

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Introduction

In 2008 Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton challenged Australians to imagine what a history of Australia would look like if the only evidence available were the memorials documented in the state and federal heritage databases. Given the number of memorials that now dominate the Australian landscape, there would be no shortage of 'evidence.' Yet as Basil Liddell Hart would have observed, they might be official, but they are not history. For at the heart of all officially sanctioned history is the state. It endorses a version of the nation's story that furthers its own interests and ignores or marginalises anything that challenges it:

There would be few civil or natural disasters of any kind in such an account of the nation unless they highlighted unity in diversity and the indomitable Australian spirit. Migrant communities would be largely silent and Indigenous communities relegated to a brief mention and a footnote ... most of these people would be explorers, pioneers, politicians or people with property. Overall, this would be a history of the forging of a modern nation through sacrifice and the emergence of a masculine Australian identity. (Ashton & Hamilton, 2008, p. 19)

The extent of the recent commemoration of the centenary of the Great War, characterised by one historian as a 'memory orgy' (Beaumont, 2015), serves as a potent reminder of just how pervasive the state sanctioned version of Australian history has become. The growing recognition of the silences in Australian history has done little to dispel the popular construct of it as a grand narrative framed by war and the Anzac spirit (Lake, 2010). It is tempting to see this as a quintessentially Australian phenomenon, but that would be to mistake its ubiquity for uniqueness. For from the very beginning, "the principle of nationalism was almost indissolubly linked, both in theory and practice, with the idea of war ... war was the necessary dialectic in the evolution of nations ... It is hard to think of any nation-state ... which was not created, and had its boundaries defined, by wars, by internal violence, or by a combination of the two" (Howard, 1991, p. 39). Conflict is entrenched into "the very marrow of the national idea" (Samuels, 1998, p. 8), and though Australia has developed a unique *version* of it, the belief that nations are made in war resonates well beyond the Australian context.

Despite the centrality of war to the construct of a democratic and progressive Australia, not all wars or their participants are equal in this process, as is evident in the limited commemoration of the Frontier Wars and the female experience of conflict. The dispossession of Australia's First Nations peoples is "clearly one of the few significant wars in Australian history and arguably the single most important one. For indigenous Australia, it was their Great War" (Reynolds, 2013, p. 248). Fought between 1788 and 1928, the Frontier Wars have fallen victim to a broader process of disremembering, one characterised by William Stanner (1991[1968]) as the great Australian silence. He argued that there has been a "cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale", one that has hidden many aspects of Indigenous and non-Indigenous history, particularly those dealing with invasion and massacres (p. 120). The proof that a war was fought on the Australian frontier, however, is compelling. It ranges from material in archives in major cultural institutions in Australia and Great Britain to oral histories in Indigenous communities. They describe, often in remarkable detail, a series of "massacres that reverberate as ongoing trauma through the generations" (Daley, 2014). Particularly striking are the reports published in newspapers of the time, which:

offer remarkably detailed concurrent and retrospective accounts of frontier violence. Such stories are so often defined by a chilling, deeply disturbing candour, so detached are the killers from the humanity of their victims. But read, as I have, enough of them ... and you'll be impressed with an overwhelming sense that the orchestrated violence was very widespread, well-orchestrated and committed continent-wide from occupation until far into the 20th century. (Daley, 2014)

Conservative estimates place the death toll at 22 000, with 20 000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders killed either in official or non-official actions. Appalling though these figures are, Raymond Evans and Robert Ørsted-Jensen (2014) argue that the real death toll exceeds 65 000 in Queensland alone. This figure is significant at a symbolic level, given that it exceeds the number of deaths incurred by Australia during the Great War, long celebrated as the moment of Australia's coming of age. Yet until recently, one would have searched in vain for a meaningful commemoration of this conflict in a public space. To have even acknowledged the conflict as a war would have been a challenge to both the concept of *terra nullius*, which legally designated Australia as unimproved land still in its natural state in 1788, and the complementary narrative of a benign and successful development of an independent nation.

Although women's wartime history has enjoyed greater public recognition than the Frontier Wars, in terms of memorials, it is still woefully underrepresented. Edith Cavell, the British nurse executed by the Germans in 1915, is an interesting anomaly. There are two memorials dedicated to her in Australia, including a portrait bust (1926) located in King's Domain in Melbourne. Although the controversy surrounding her execution influenced Australian commemorative practices, it did not lead to a wider proliferation of memorials to Australian nurses. There has, nevertheless, been some recent recognition, for example, the *Australian Servicewomen's Memorial* (1999) in Canberra and the *Ex-Servicewomen's Memorial Garden* (2010) in Melbourne. Yet the *Maryborough War Memorial* (1922) is the only local Great War Memorial that includes a figure of a Red Cross nurse. She is positioned beneath a winged victory in company with the figures of a soldier, sailor and airman. There are also a few figures of allegorical females scattered around Australia, such as the bronze figures of 'Victory', 'History', and 'Fame' in Wellington in New South Wales. Even the Queensland *Women's Memorial* (1932) by renowned sculptor Daphne Mayo did not foreground the experience of women. The memorial was an initiative of the Brisbane Women's Club and is still situated in its original spot in Brisbane's Anzac Square. Although the committee consciously chose a woman sculptor for the memorial, it was never a memorial *for* women, but rather was a memorial *by* women, one motivated by a desire to honour all Queenslanders who had given their lives during the Great War. They rejected Mayo's original design of four figures representing a serviceman, a servicewoman, an industrial worker and a woman on the home front in favour of one with a more overt military theme. The final design included all branches of the Australian Imperial Force and was checked for historical accuracy (McKay, 2014a). Mayo did, however, include her only brother (Richard Henry McArthur Mayo), who served with the Australian Mounted Division in the Middle East, and who had died in 1924 aged 32 from health complications due to his war service. He is depicted leading a procession which features a horse-drawn wagon flanked by 23 other men and one woman from all branches of the defence forces. The other figures represent the Royal Australian Navy, Field Artillery, Engineers, Signallers, Infantry, Pioneers, Machine-Gunners, Army Medical Corps, Australian Army Nursing Service, Veterinary Corps and Flying Corps. As McKay notes (2014a), the nurse is barely visible. The changes to Mayo's memorial were indicative of the limited recognition of the breadth of the female experience of war, which included volunteer patriotic work, anti-war activism, and as Mayo tried to acknowledge, the important work of maintaining the homefront (Beaumont, 2000). Even the memorials that do acknowledge the experience of women are far too conservative both in ideology and form to pose any type of challenge to hegemonic narratives. What they do communicate is the reverential nature of Australian war memorials, for though they regularly foreground a "nation-building, exclusionary, sexist and militaristic" agenda (Strakosch, 2010, p. 270), they remain potent symbols of an imagining of war as a central element of the nation's story.

A review of the Australian war memorials from the first great wave of construction after 1918 until the present day offers an insight into commemorative practices and how they reflect, or fail to reflect, an evolving understanding of the national story. Australian war memorials have, however, rarely played a meaningful role in re-evaluating the nation's history. Even Australian counter memorials and monuments, which draw much of their inspiration from Europe, are not as radical in form or ideology as international examples (Strakosch, 2014). The shadow cast by the century long memorialisation of the Great War problematises any departure from traditional

ideas governing what is worthy of commemoration, and what form that commemoration should take. Marginalised groups therefore often find themselves in the invidious position of seeking admission to a well-established and ultimately conservative mythology rather than mounting a sustained challenge to it.

Commemorating the Great War

If one took Ashton and Hamilton's challenge to heart and looked to formulate a history of Australia using official memorials, it would be difficult to make the case that a war has ever been fought on Australian soil. Invasion was a phantom threat in the nineteenth century and then subsequently a more realistic one for some months in 1942. Apart from those commemorating the air raids on Australia's north in 1942 and 1943, particularly on Darwin, Australian war memorials and monuments are almost never in situ; they commemorate events and mourn deaths that occurred 'somewhere over there.' Yet that does not equate to there being a shortage of war memorials, indeed, far from it. No country embraced memorials to the Great War with greater zeal than Australia; in the early 1990s, it was estimated that with over 2000 civic memorials, the nation had built, often at great cost, one commemorative structure for every 30 soldiers killed (Hedger, 1995). This drive to memorialise the conflict and the men who fought it began as soon as battle was joined. Individual casualties were commemorated on church memorial plaques or stained glass windows in an expensive but telling reminder to a local community of the loss of one of its members. As the war progressed, individual memorials were soon overshadowed by community or collective memorials that reflected the extent of the losses, which in time would reach 60 000 dead and 150 000 wounded. The commemorative drive was exacerbated both by the distance from the major battlefields and the decision not to repatriate the dead of the British Empire. The term cenotaph became so emotionally charged that whatever the form of a memorial, it was really, "first and last, an empty tomb" (Inglis & Brazier, 2008, p. 248). As Bruce Scates (2016) observes, the "haunting absence of a body to mourn" ensured that a "host of civic monuments [would] inscribe the Australian landscape with a community's enduring sense of loss." The individual was still represented in a community memorial, usually by the inclusion of a name on a collective plaque, but the eventual construction of a town, city or state memorial ensured that they became the focus of collective and communal commemoration. During the inter-war years war memorials were established as the most accessible and the most evocative public sculpture in a country that had not yet engaged in wholesale memorialisation. Conservatives quickly took ownership of this process, although it now enjoys significant bipartisan support. There are voices raised in opposition, particularly in academic circles, as is evident in the controversy over the proposed half billion dollar extension to the Australian War Memorial and the new museum at Villers-Bretonneux, which in Scates' (2019) view "clung to the old lies: that war is a measure of the greatness of a nation, that the slaughter of 1914-18 was something other than a sordid waste" (p. 207). Beyond that, however, it still enjoys widespread allegiance.

The type of monuments generally favoured by communities in the years after 1918 ranged from arches to columns, pillars, urns, crosses, obelisks, and statues, with some communities choosing clockless towers or cenotaphs modelled on the one designed for Whitehall by Sir Edwin Lutyens in 1920 (Kerby, et al., 2019). The most common Australian Great War memorial outside the capital cities is the obelisk. The figure of an Australian soldier reversing and resting on arms (leaning on a rifle held upside down) is the second. This stance has been a mark of respect or mourning for centuries, reputedly originating with the ancient Greeks. Despite being outnumbered by the obelisk, the soldier figure remains the most recognised, although there is a surprising degree of variation in design (McIvor & McIvor, 1994). In keeping with the newly articulated ethos of an apparently democratic and egalitarian Australia, memorials do not distinguish between rich and poor and often omit the ranks of those who served, thereby creating a sense of unity of sacrifice far removed from perceptions of a class-ridden Britain. Such collective commemoration often reflected the imagery and the imagined identity of a newly emerging Australian national community, one that was reverential in focus rather than utilitarian. While

utilitarian memorials such as soldiers' halls and community halls were also constructed, they did not impinge on the public consciousness to the same extent as memorials, and due to the destructive nature of urban renewal have had less lasting impact on the Australian urban landscape.

War cemeteries, war memorials, and the commemorative activities associated with them, helped create a "church for the nation" (Mosse, 1990, p. 94). Sculptors and designers drew primarily on familiar symbols worthy of this 'civic religion.' There was no place for modernism in war memorial design; instead Edwardian classicism was deemed more appropriate to communicating the innate nobility of the Australian soldier. On Gallipoli and in the Middle East, the Australian soldier had fought close to the cradles of these ancient civilisations, and they would now provide a rich storehouse of symbols with which to commemorate him:

Death was shown through urns and broken columns; mourning through wreaths; remembrance through eternal light and torches; sacrifice through crosses; victory through the laurel, triumphal arches and Winged Victories; mankind through globes; honour through columns; fortitude through lions; regeneration through water and obelisks; and national birth through rising suns. (Hedger, 1995, p. 27)

Across Britain and the Empire these symbols brought together "all that seemed best and most noble in the artistic life of the civilisation they had fought to preserve" (Borg, 1991, p. xii). At the heart of Australian commemorative practices, which sought to reconcile "triumphalism and sacrificialism within narratives of Australian heroism and achievement" (Crotty & Melrose, 2007, p. 681), there was a "cult of the fallen" which "honoured the 'glorious dead'" (Larsson, 2009, p. 79). Their sacrifice had done more than preserve the nation. They had given birth to it.

Honouring 60 000 war dead inevitably required a public veneration that moved beyond the local level. Each state capital and the federal capital of Canberra responded to this imperative, though only two of the seven memorials were completed by 1930. This was far too late to offer therapeutic comfort, but that was, as Inglis and Brazier (2008) observes, never their primary purpose. Instead, they served as "public declarations, acts of formal homage, involving everywhere the governments and parliaments which had collaborated to make soldiers of their citizens" (pp. 266-267). Though the artwork produced for the Official War Art Scheme has been derided by at least one critic as "mediocre", and some of the sculptures chosen by smaller, cash strapped communities are far from being art works in their own right, the same cannot be said of the major state memorials. Their ideology might not have entirely withstood the test of time, but as architectural achievements they are still quite magnificent. Raynor Hoff's work on the National War Memorial in Adelaide is particularly impressive, featuring flattened stylised reliefs of the Angel of Death on the front and the Angel of Resurrection on the obverse. The Angel of Death is immune to the presence of a bronze figure group comprised of a woman, a scholar and a farmer "who pay homage to the dead and who plead with the Angel from their subservient roles. The disregard of the angel heightens the impact and makes the work a symbol of despair" (Hedger, 1995, p. 33). The Angel of Resurrection, who bears a dead soldier away to eternal rest and glory while preparing to crown him with a victory laurel, shifts the viewer from despair to hope. Other states were no less ambitious; for example, Sydney's *Anzac Memorial* (1934) is an imposing Art Deco Shrine, Melbourne's *Shrine of Remembrance* (1934) is one of the largest structures ever built to commemorate the Great War, and Brisbane's *Shrine of Remembrance* (1930) with the eternal flame burning at its heart, is one of the country's most beautiful classical Doric structures (Hedger, 1995). Other impressive works abound: two figurative bronzes, *Wipers* (the soldier's pronunciation of Ypres) (1937) and *The Driver* (1937) in front of the Victorian State Library, *Winged Victory* (1919) in Marrickville, NSW, and *Man with the Donkey* (1935), a statue of John Kirkpatrick Simpson, outside Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance are just four of many.

Educational institutions such as schools also constructed memorials that reflected the needs of their community. The foundation stone of the Brisbane Grammar School War Memorial Library

was laid by the Governor of Queensland Sir Matthew Nathan on Anzac Day 1923. While built as a functioning library, this ornate and disproportionately high octagonal building constructed in the Gothic revival style with its stained-glass windows and Latin inscriptions looks far more like a chapel than a library. Schools, communities, and workplaces across the country likewise commissioned their own memorial to the Fallen. Such widespread grief needed an equally widespread commemoration.

Post-1945 war memorials

Some of the war memorials constructed after the Second World War respond to shifting tastes, but the “artistic tyranny of the Anzac myth” (Garton, 1996, p. 45) remains a powerful force in memorial design. Nevertheless, it was a different world in 1945 than it had been in 1918. Monumentality was out of fashion, and as a result, war memorials for the Second World War generated far less energy, imagination and money (Inglis & Brazier, 2008). Ninety per cent of respondents in a survey conducted in 1943 preferred utilitarian memorials. In 1945, 58 percent opted for additions to the monuments already in existence, and just one year after the end of the war, 20 percent of respondents voted against memorials of any kind. The strength of their opposition was evident in the fact that this was not one of the survey options. Even the Returned Services League, a powerful conservative force at the time, were not welcoming of more statues or monuments (Inglis & Brazier, 2008). Rather than building additional obelisk, cenotaph or soldier memorials, the addition of extra names to an established memorial plinth was seen as a more pragmatic response. Communities habituated to their extant war memorial could see the logic in utilising these spaces for continued commemorations of the absent dead without further elaborate memorials, cluttering the contemplative locations of memorials such as parks.

The creation of a practical memorial was another solution and one that aligned with changing public perceptions of war memorials. After 1945 practical memorials and monuments including the naming of roads such as Remembrance Driveway between Sydney and Canberra, civic halls such as the one in Dubbo in New South Wales, libraries such as the one in Harvey, West Australia, and other community resources such as the St John’s Memorial Organ in New Town, Tasmania became more popular. The post war population boom also led to the proliferation of swimming pools as memorials, such as the *Coral Sea Memorial Swimming Pool* and the heritage listed *Tobruk Memorial Baths* constructed in the north Queensland city of Townsville. The central Queensland city of Rockhampton constructed two distinct war memorial pools, one dedicated to the local infantry unit, the 42nd Battalion and the *Second World War Memorial Aquatic Centre*, originally built in 1960. Despite being redeveloped in 2014 as a modern style aquatic centre, the complex kept the original name (McKay, 2014b). Not all communities were as determined to retain their wartime heritage as Rockhampton. The *Blacktown War Memorial Swimming Pool* was constructed in western Sydney in 1961 but by the time it was redeveloped it served a different community to the one which had commissioned it decades earlier. The revitalised complex was, amidst some minor controversy, renamed the *Blacktown Aquatic Centre*. Collective national identities had evolved, as had collective Australian perceptions of war. As Inglis (2016) foresaw, it is inevitable that they will continue to evolve.

Unsurprisingly, Canberra, the nation’s capital, is a key site of public commemoration. In his survey of the planning of public memorials in Washington DC, Ottawa and Canberra, Quentin Stevens (2015) observes that in each capital “military themes predominate, while many other worthy subjects go un-commemorated” (p. 56). He further notes that these commemorative landscapes “continuously and incrementally develop through decisions negotiated among various political parties, local and national government agencies, civic interest groups, experts in history and design, and mourners, and in evolving historical contexts of struggle between an overarching sense of nationhood and the fates and interests of specific social groups” (pp. 30-40). Perhaps the greatest contributor to the memorialisation process is the Australian War Memorial (AWM) in Canberra. Opened in 1941, to many it remains as its founder Charles Bean conceived of the Anzac

story as a whole, “a monument to great hearted men, and for their nation – a possession forever.” To others, it perpetuates a cult of the warrior (Lake, et al., 2010), one that prevents an appreciation of the achievements of pre-war Australia (Kerby & Baguley, 2020). No museum or memorial in the country so completely embraces its role as a cathedral of the modern age (Prodger, 2016), or encourages an experience of transcendence and an engagement with the sacred so unapologetically. The positioning of the Anzac mythology as a form of displaced Christianity is particularly overt in the AWM’s Hall of Memories, set above the Pool of Reflection and at the heart of the complex. The Stained Glass Windows, which look as though they once resided in a medieval cathedral, celebrate qualities such as Chivalry, Patriotism and Mateship, “quintessential qualities displayed by Australians in war” (AWM, 2019a). The wall mosaics, which commemorate the Second World War are reminiscent of classical Greek sculptures and Byzantine mosaics. The Byzantine dome, 24 metres above the floor, draws the visitor’s eyes upward to a range of religious, spiritual and Australian symbols, each of which “evokes the renewal of life’s forces and celebrates the immortality of those who believed in freedom and ultimately died to defend it” (AWM, 2019b). The tomb of the Unknown Soldier lies in the centre of the Hall, as it has done since 1993. At the head of the tomb is inscribed “Known unto God” and at the foot, “He is all of them and he is one of us.”

It is not just inside the AWM that the Anzac story is presented to the Australian public. In 1965 the Menzies government planned for the placement of ten memorials along Anzac Parade in front of the AWM. It was to be the Australian equivalent of the ‘sacred way’ that had joined Athens to Eleusis, which was flanked by sculptures that commemorated heroes, gods, and civic events, and the Mall in Washington D.C. (Inglis & Brazier, 2008). The order they were built was haphazard, at least in a historical sense: the *Desert Mounted Corps Memorial* (1968), *The Royal Australian Air Force Memorial* (1973, an early journey into abstraction), *The Rats of Tobruk Memorial* (1983), more conventional memorials including the *Royal Australian Navy Memorial* (1986) and the *Australian Army Memorial* (1989), the *Kemal Atatürk Memorial* and the *Atatürk Memorial Garden* (1985) (the only memorial to an enemy commander on Anzac Parade), the *Australian Hellenic Memorial* (1988), the *Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial* (1992), the *Australian Service Nurses National Memorial* (1999), the *Korean War Memorial* (2000), the *Australian-New Zealand Memorial* (2001), the *Boer War Memorial* (2017), and the *Australian Peacekeeping Memorial* (2017). There are some interesting aesthetic choices, such as the *Australian-New Zealand Memorial*, while others respond to a modern agenda, such as the *Atatürk Memorial Garden* and the *Australian Hellenic Memorial*. Some attempt to highlight aspects of Australia’s military history that have been ignored or marginalised, such as the memorials to nurses and peacekeepers, yet there is little that even the most ardent admirer of the state sanctioned view of Australian military history would find troubling.

Taken as a whole, the war memorials in Canberra and elsewhere are often artistically interesting and are at times capable of generating genuine reflection. They are, however, just as regularly sanitised, comforting, and uncontroversial, for example, the visually arresting but undeniably anachronistic *Australian National Boer War Memorial* in Canberra. Some have attempted to appropriate the language of the Anzac mythology as a means of inducting the disparate elements of modern Australia into one of the dominant narratives such as the proposed but now cancelled statue to Brisbane’s *Mud Army* who helped clean the city after the 2011 floods. Others have sought an uneasy accommodation between a style reminiscent of Great War memorials and abstraction (*The Korean War Memorial*, Canberra), or have used the Great War iconography augmented, but never challenged by, the symbols of a marginalised group (*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander War Memorial*, 2013, Adelaide). Some use well known symbols not usually seen in Australian memorials and mount a muted challenge to hegemonic narratives, but in reality seek admission to them on the part of a marginalised group (*Yininmadyemi Thou didst let fall*, 2015, Sydney).

The Australian commemorative landscape has nevertheless undergone some alteration in recent years. The ‘heroic memorial’ has been increasingly replaced, or at least influenced by a

“new breed of abstract and, often, ‘therapeutic’ memorial” (Stephens, 2012, p. 146), such as *Reconciliation Place* (2002) in Canberra. Some memorial designers have completely bypassed Great War iconography and drawn inspiration from ancient standing stones or monoliths and classical stelae to communicate a conservative narrative for a new class of war hero (*Australian Peacekeeping Memorial*, Canberra), or to commemorate service in an unpopular cause (*The Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial*), which is an interesting example of the shift in memorial design:

The memorial provides a contemplative space that is active in storytelling. The stelae forming the perimeter of the space incline inwards producing a feeling of unease amplified by the suspended stone halo overhead. The words and images add to this apprehension but are instructive in the trauma of those who fought in the war. It is dedicated to “all those that suffered and died.” This pensive and anxious memorial is approached from Anzac Parade by a wide ramp that punches through the gap in the stelae. Through its design the memorial manages to convey something of the story of the war and its distressing effects and differs dramatically from traditional memorials that require a different reading steeped in the traditions of classical symbolism (Stephens, 2012, p. 149).

Though 17 000 Australians served in the Korean War, 60 000 in Vietnam, and 26 000 in the Middle East since 2001, for all the political controversies and the undoubted sacrifice of the service personnel, they were not national commitments anywhere near the scope of the Great War or the Second World War. As a result, there are now far fewer Australians who have had a direct experience of war than there were, for example, in the 1920s. As a result, memorials need to tell a different story, one that is symbolically authentic (Stephens, 2012). However, the question of what is authentic is inevitably a contested one. *The Korean War Memorial* (2010) in Sydney was designed by Jane Cavanough and Pod Landscape Architecture. Some observers, though certainly not all of them, saw it as a “welcome departure” from the “heroic monumentality of traditional Australian war memorials” (Ward, 2010, p. 56). This was not a universal view, which is hardly surprising given the plethora of traditional war memorials which have inculcated entrenched views about what is an appropriate aesthetic and what is not. For as Stephens (2012) observes, war memorials “represent a significant emotional and physical investment for any community and their ‘becoming’ is often fraught with complication and (sometimes) conflict” (p. 141). Anne Ferguson discovered how fraught this could be when designing the *Australian Servicewomen’s Memorial* in Canberra. Her flat, abstract design faced considerable public opposition, proof perhaps of Sebastian Smee’s (2000) claim that “publicly commissioned sculptures – especially memorials – almost inevitably disappoint people, if only because there are so many stakeholders with different (often unformed) ideas about what they want that the end result never quite matches their expectations” (p. 371). To understand the difficulties that Ferguson encountered requires an acknowledgement that there are “tensions between traditional memorial design and the current transition in Australian towards memorials that are more overtly abstract and interactive” (Stephens, 2012 p. 142).

Some memorials seek to link more cosmopolitan memories and local issues, for example the use of the pink triangle in *Sydney’s Gay and Lesbian Holocaust Memorial* (2001). Others that deal with traumatic memories acknowledge the role of contemplation, sometimes with distinct spaces set aside for reflection (*Australian Service Nurses National Memorial*, Canberra); others have foregrounded it even further (*Port Arthur Memorial Garden* (2000), Tasmania; *Reconciliation Place* (2002), Canberra and a range of other memorials to the Stolen Generations, Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children forcibly removed from their families by Federal and State government agencies and church missions. Despite the challenges inherent in public commemoration, there is a growing preparedness to acknowledge that there are marginalised voices whose experiences have been excluded from official commemoration. One of the most effective is the *Aboriginal Memorial* at the National Gallery of Australia, completed in 1988 for the bi-centenary. It is an installation of 200 hollow log coffins from Central Arnhem Land, one for each year of European occupation. The logs are, like cenotaphs, empty tombs which commemorate

people who died defending their land; though in this case they fought against rather than for white Australia. In contrast, *Reconciliation Place* in Canberra is far less evocative:

It uses highly abstract counter-monumental forms in an attempt to embrace and integrate indigenous perspectives into the national narrative. It asserts an honest confrontation with history and an attempt to establish a new, more inclusive and “reconciled” understanding of political identity. But many indigenous Australians have received this effort with great skepticism. Rather than seeing it as a genuine form of conversation, they feel further marginalized by the monument’s abstract, sanitized way of representing their long and arduous historical struggle for justice and equality (Strakosch, 2010).

In her discussion on symbolic reparations, Alison Atkinson-Phillips (2020) argues that memorials such as this one can be an act of acknowledgement on behalf of perpetrators of physical or symbolic violence. Ashton and Hamilton (2008) characterise them as an act of “retrospective commemoration: the effort of state authorities at all levels to express a more inclusive narrative of the nation as a result of, among other things, multicultural policies by retrospectively commemorating a wider number of communities and people” (p. 4). Nevertheless, after almost twenty years it steadfastly reflects rather than challenges the “pre-existing understandings of viewers. As a result, it largely fails to challenge the authority of the surrounding traditional memorials, and the story of the victims remains untold and unreflected” (Strakosch, 2010).

The AWM sought a compromise solution to the challenge of retrospective commemoration. The sustained refusal to include displays related to the Frontier Wars did not extend to the service of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen and servicewomen in all conflicts in which Australia’s military has been involved. *For Our Country* (2019) is situated in the grounds of the AWM and features a pavilion set behind a ceremonial fire pit. Behind this is a wall of two-way mirrored glass that reflects the viewer and the memorial. Perhaps channelling Maya Lin, the designer of the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington, the artist Daniel Boyd explained that he was motivated by a desire to “understand the multiplicity of perspectives, or narratives, of how different people relate to country. It’s a space where hopefully people can come to contemplate and reflect on the sacrifices people have made” (Hardy, 2019).

By virtue of their sheer number and the pervasiveness of the ideology they communicate, Australian war memorials have continued to influence all attempts at commemoration, even those with pretensions to being counter-monuments. Where traditional memorials glorify an event or a person or affirm an ideology, a counter monument generally recognises the less celebratory events in a nation’s history and acknowledges the suffering of victims, whether it be of war or persecution (Stevens, et al., 2018). The question of how best to do this remains contentious, for we live in an age “which has not merely abandoned a great many historic symbols, but has likewise made an effort to deflate the symbol itself by denying the values which it represents” (Mumford, 1949, p. 179). Sert, Leger and Giedion (1958) went so far as to argue that memorials might only be possible in periods of history during which there exists a unifying consciousness and culture. Nevertheless, any attempt to write the obituary for memorials is at best premature:

The more fragmented and heterogeneous societies become, it seems, the stronger their need to unify wholly disparate experiences and memories with the common meaning seemingly created in common spaces. But rather than presuming that a common set of ideals underpins its form, the contemporary monument attempts to assign a singular architectonic form to unify disparate and competing memories. In the absence of shared beliefs or common interests, memorial-art in public spaces ask an otherwise fragmented populace to frame diverse pasts and experiences in common spaces (Young, 2016, p. 329).

Young (2016) sees this as representing a shift away from any notion of a national “collective memory” to what he characterises as a nation’s “collected memory.” Through the sharing of “common spaces in which we collect our disparate and competing memories, we find common

(perhaps even a national) understanding of widely disparate experiences and our very reasons for recalling them” (p. 329). Nevertheless, any commemoration of the past is controversial, for memorial “dynamics are fuelled by competing memory paradigms, different and sometimes mutually exclusive groups of victims, shifting present day stakes, and divergent representations of the future” (Silberman & Vatan, 2013, p. 2). Australian culture may not be as resistant to this as it once was, for it is now “saturated with traumatic memories and understandings of victimhood that incite profound sympathy and give voice to those who have suffered.” Australians increasingly view history “as a wound or scar that leaves a trace on a nation’s soul” (Twomey, 2015, para. 17).

Recognising that history is a contested construct, some memorial designers have sought to offer an ‘updated’ narrative that maintains a reverence for past heroes while acknowledging a multiplicity of views (for example, the proposed \$3 million memorial to Captain Cook at Botany Bay touted as a semi-aquatic memorial precinct). Alterations to the Explorers’ Monument in Fremantle pursue the same course through a different, but perhaps more effective approach. Unveiled in 1913 it commemorates three “intrepid Pioneers” killed in 1864 “by treacherous natives” and the subsequent punitive expedition that ended in the massacre of 20 Aborigines. In 1994, during the United Nations Year of Indigenous Peoples, a counter-memorial in the form of a plaque was set in its base which outlined “the history of provocation that led to the explorers’ deaths.” This is an example of dialogical memorialisation, when a memorial is “intentionally juxtaposed to another, pre-existing monument located nearby and ... critically questions the values the pre-existing monument expresses. A dialogic coupling dramatises new meanings beyond those conveyed by each of the works considered individually” (Stevens, et al., 2018, p. 729). As Scates (2017) observes, this approach reminds us that history is seen, not a final statement, “but a contingent and contested narrative.” In this instance, the plaque acknowledges the right of Indigenous people to defend their land from invasion, a view given added bite by the addition of the words “Lest we Forget.” Such a recognition that First Settlement might just as easily be characterised as an invasion strikes at the core of Australia’s self-image:

Unlike heroic struggles, military triumphs, and revolutionary victories – privileged hallmarks of national celebrations and grandiose commemorations – traumatic or infamous pasts do not lend themselves to smooth or self-aggrandizing narratives. Nations are reluctant to exhume a past that is perceived as divisive and detrimental to their official self-image or national mythology (Silberman & Vatan, 2013, p. 2).

Conclusion

Australian war memorials have changed over time to reflect community sentiments and altered expectations for how a memorial should look and what it should commemorate. The monolith or cenotaph popular after the Great War has given way to other forms of contemporary memorialisation including counter memorials or monuments. Contemporary memorials and monuments now also attempt to capture the voices of marginalised groups affected by trauma or conflict. In contrast, Great War memorials were often exclusionary, sexist and driven by a nation building agenda. Both the visibility and contestability of how a country such as Australia pursues public commemoration offers rich insights into national efforts to construct an inclusive identity which moves beyond the cult of the warrior and the positioning of war as central to the life of the nation. Ultimately what we can take away from this survey of the Australian memorial and monument landscape is an understanding that our national narrative is constantly under construction, and each generation will ‘renovate’ the narrative to reflect contemporary values and beliefs. Despite an ornate gothic revival library building and a state-of-the-art swimming pool, the attraction of the Brisbane Grammar School war memorial for teenage male students is probably the German field artillery gun captured by a former student and presented to the school in 1924. This is a physical structure that has a design and form embodying much of what it is intended to memorialise and has remained a favoured lunch site for generations of students. This suggests

that although formal memorials and utilitarian structures can have their place, memorials become what future generations make of them.

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