

Frontline heroes: Bush fires, the Coronavirus (COVID-19) and the Queensland Press

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Abstract

During the catastrophic 2019 and 2020 bushfire season and the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020, Queensland's *Courier Mail* regularly celebrated firefighters and health workers as national archetypes. By positioning them as the 'new Anzacs', the *Courier Mail* was able to communicate an understanding of the crises using a rhetoric that was familiar, unthreatening and reassuring. The firefighters, both professional and volunteer, were easily subsumed into the mythology's celebration of national identity. As Queensland's health workers were predominantly female, urban-based and educated, the article used a more modern iteration of the Anzac mythology better suited to this different context. The emergence of a 'kinder, gentler Anzac' in the 1970s and its focus on trauma, suffering and empathy proved equally useful as a rhetorical tool. Both approaches were underpinned by a move away from a narrow military context to the Anzac mythology's standing as a civic religion that celebrates more universal values such as courage, endurance, sacrifice and comradeship.

Keywords

Anzac, bushfires, Coronavirus, COVID-19, firefighters, Great War, health workers, mythology, Queensland

Introduction

In January and February 2020, two of the authors of this article spent five weeks working in the Princeton University Library archives courtesy of a research fellowship. The extended period staying at a nearby hotel, catching the courtesy bus in and out of the campus each day and engaging with the local populace ensured that there were numerous opportunities for informal conversation with a reasonably wide selection of people. Almost without exception, when the authors were identified as Australians, conversation

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turned to the bushfires which were then raging across large swathes of the country. Television news programmes in the United States regularly played footage of the fires, often with limited context, but always with an emphasis on the extent of the destruction. Even more than the heartrending images of destroyed homes, still smoking as residents moved through the rubble, it was the dead and injured koalas that appeared to best communicate the 'true' nature of the tragedy unfolding 10,000 miles away. At times it appeared to American audiences that Australia was *literally* a continent ablaze. By mid-February 2020, more than 46 million acres (72,000 square miles) of land had been burned in thousands of fires. The destruction was enormous: 34 dead, \$20 billion wiped from the economy, \$20 billion of damage to agriculture, property, livestock, a billion animals dead (including over a third of the koala population) and nearly 3000 homes and several thousand buildings destroyed (Centre for Disaster Philanthropy, 2020). As the hotel's bus driver observed, 'it looks bad, real bad.'

As though their countrymen and women were destined to suffer a run of the Old Testament's 10 plagues of Egypt, in late January and early February 2020, there was widespread flooding in the Sydney basin, the Blue Mountains, the central west to the north of New South Wales and parts of southern Queensland. Having endured fire and flood, Australians were then confronted by an even more unpleasant challenge. By February 2020, it was clear that the Coronavirus was going to be more than an isolated outbreak restricted to China and a few unlucky international travellers. The first case was recorded on 25 January 2020 in Victoria. Queensland had its first confirmed case four days later and on the same day became the first state to declare a public health emergency. On 1 March, Australia recorded its first death which was followed by increasingly more stringent controls regarding international and domestic travel. On 13 March, the National Cabinet, a form of national crisis cabinet similar to a war cabinet, was instituted. This marked the first time such a cabinet has been proclaimed since the Second World War, and the only time in Australian history that a crisis cabinet has included state and territory leaders. By the second week of April, the death toll stood at 65, though the total across the world had already exceeded 100,000, with Spain (20,002), Italy (22,745) and the USA (36,607) particularly hard hit. Tragically, by the time this article was completed in early December 2020, deaths in Australia had exceeded 900, with the numbers for the US (293,398), UK (62,033), Italy (61,240) and Spain (46,646) making for equally sobering reading.

It was quickly evident, however, that there were in fact two versions of each tragedy unfolding, connected but quite distinct. There was the 2019/2020 bushfire catastrophe and the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, both historical events. Then there were the 'imagined' events being mediated through print media, broadcast news and the internet, and well-entrenched views about national character. One university colleague, angered by the decision to keep Queensland schools open during the early weeks of the virus, tweeted that 'Teachers are the 2020 version of being sent over the trenches in the first wave without ammunition or bayonets' (Riddle, 2020). He was far from being alone in his determination to 'imagine' the bushfires and pandemic through the lens of the nation's foundation mythology, which is grounded in war. Firefighters, many of them volunteers and health workers, most of them female, were quickly inducted into the nation's pantheon, where they were sometimes joined by teachers, police and the hardy

souls restocking supermarket shelves stripped bare during the shopping panic that characterized the early days of the virus. The appeal of the Anzac mythology was hardly surprising given that it is one of the few symbols of national unity that attracts bipartisan political support and a wide, though certainly not universal allegiance. Though it is far from being uncontested and continues to evolve, it still possesses considerable emotional power, one that politicians and public figures question at their peril (Kerby and Baguley, 2020). The more fragmented and heterogeneous a society becomes, the stronger the urge to unify wholly disparate experiences and memories (Young, 2016); the Anzac mythology is well positioned to frame the nation's understanding of crises, as the nation's media understands only too well.

In contrast, many of the other grand narratives of Australian history have either been discarded or are increasingly under threat, particularly those tied to European settlement: the continuing struggle to address the dispossession of the nation's Indigenous peoples, the awkward fact that Australia Day marks the first day of the European settlement that instigated it, and the fact that the nation's flag (and all of the state flags) include the Union Jack in the top left-hand corner, all act as ever present reminders of an Imperial past. By positioning firefighters and health workers as the 'new Anzacs', Queensland's main newspaper, the *Courier Mail*, was able to communicate an understanding of the crises using a rhetoric that was familiar, unthreatening and reassuring. For, like all national myths, the myth of Anzac simplifies the past (McKenna, 2010). In this case, it does the same for the present. These events are no longer unknowable any more than they are new and unfamiliar. The message conveyed is that the nation has endured before. It will endure again.

Method

The authors chose to analyse the *Courier Mail's* use of war-time mythology in the reports on the bushfires and the pandemic for two reasons. Widely perceived as a conservative publication, it has the fourth highest circulation of any daily newspaper in Australia. It therefore offers an insight into the conservative press's use of Australia's military history to explain contemporary events. In addition, the findings may lend themselves to extrapolation given that the paper is owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp Australia, one of Australia's largest media conglomerates. It owns approximately 142 newspapers (23% of newspapers in Australia) and publishes the national paper, *The Australian*. The reports appearing in the *Courier Mail*, written either by its journalists or reprinted from one of News Corps' other papers, are part of a long tradition that almost from the moment Australian troops landed on Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 has seen conservatives take possession of the 'spirit of Anzac' (Gammage, 1990: 308). It was a process that reached its apogee during the prime ministership of John Howard (1996–2007), who 'sensed that in a volatile international climate, the Australian people were particularly receptive to the "Anzac spirit" as the means through which they could express their common values and their dependence on one another' (McKenna, 2010: 126). Under his leadership, the Anzac legacy was further installed as a 'sacred parable' and a 'true source of national communion' (pp. 137, 141). Yet this was part of a much older process for, by the Second World War, the Anzac myth had become sufficiently hegemonic that it seemed natural

even to those who were not part of the elites that created it (Beaumont, 2013). The same remains true in 2020, for the journalists interviewed in the course of this research did not consciously draw on the mythology, but instinctively adopted its language conventions and its understanding of national identity. Nor were they conscious that as employees of an organization widely perceived as politically conservative, their language choices were in any way constrained. As Janet Fife-Yeomans (2020) observes, 'I just write the same for all of the papers. You just write, who, what, when, where, how.' Michelle Collins, (2020) who writes for the *Courier Mail* and the *Sunday Mail* concurs: 'If you look at the things that I wrote about COVID, there was no way that the political orientation of the paper, if there is one, was a consideration.'

The Anzac mythology, the bushfires and the pandemic

The newspaper reports appearing in the *Courier Mail* from mid October 2019 (as the bushfires approached their peak) to mid-April 2020 (as the Australian government grappled with the timing of a re-opening of the economy once the initial fears of thousands of deaths dissipated in the face of relatively effective countermeasures) were informed by adaptations of the Anzac mythology, some more modern than others. The traditional celebration of the Great War Australian soldier or 'digger' as a 'superb fighter, something of a larrikin, instinctively egalitarian, distrustful of authority, endlessly resourceful, dryly humorous and, above all, loyal to [his] mates' (Beaumont, 1995: 149) was easily adapted to a crisis such as a bushfire. This celebration of anglo-masculinity (Douglas, 2018), which is still part of the officially sanctioned Anzac mythology espoused by the Australian government, is usually associated with John Treloar, Sir John Monash and Charles Bean. In particular, it was Bean as a journalist, war correspondent, editor and chief writer of Australia's Official History of the Great War, and founder of the Australian War Memorial (AWM) who helped forge a 'cult of the individual as hero, who because of the influence of the bush and his frontier background is already a natural soldier who has only to pick up a rifle to be ready for battle' (Pugsley, 2004: 47). It has been challenged by any number of respected historians, including Joan Beaumont (2015), Peter Stanley (2014), Michael Caulfield (2013), Carolyn Holbrook (2014), Robin Prior (2009) and Alistair Thomson (2019) among them. They have criticized its reliance on sentiment and nostalgia, its jingoism, its simplistic view that nations are made in war, its militarization of Australian history and politics, and that it is, in short, poor history.

The *Courier Mail* did not, however, engage in a slavish devotion to Bean, for Australia in 2020 is a different country than it was during the Great War. As Alistair Thomson (2013: 218) has argued, there is no 'universal Anzac template'; there are 'excluded or marginalised individual experiences that do not fit the homogenous national legend'. Indeed, the *Courier Mail*, engaged with this 2020 iteration of the Anzac mythology in a manner that, while owing at least something to the work of Bean and his disciples, also embraced its modern positioning as a national civil religion (Cranitch, 2008; Fischer, 2012; Melleuish, 2010; Welborn, 2002). It is a religion that serves a much broader church than it did in 1918. Indeed, as Joan Beaumont (2013) observes, the values of multicultural Australia have necessitated a move away from a narrow military context. Instead, it celebrates the civic virtues of courage, endurance, sacrifice and 'mateship', virtues as

relevant to a bush fire or a pandemic as they are to war. These values are inscribed on the memorial unveiled at Isurava on the Kokoda Trail in 2002, 10 years after the then Prime Minister Paul Keating attempted to sanctify the struggle against the Japanese in the Second World War by kissing the ground at the village of Kokoda:

They affirm the behaviour that a materialistic and individualistic society still requires for the purposes of social cohesion and national security. Hence the mantle of 'the Anzac spirit' can now be claimed by any citizens who subordinate their individual desires to needs of the collective or team. (p. 553)

The *Courier Mail's* approach to the pandemic was even less reliant on Bean because Queensland's health workers were predominantly female, urban-based and educated. Instead, the paper relied even more heavily on a more modern iteration of the Anzac mythology better suited to this different context. The emergence of the construct of a 'kinder, gentler Anzac' during the 1970s transformed the mythology from one 'grounded in beliefs about racial identity and martial capacity to a legend that speaks in the modern idiom of trauma, suffering and empathy' (Holbrook, 2014: 19). Health workers were therefore able to take their place, with the firefighters, in the national pantheon. Instead of khaki, however, the new soldier is, if the rhetoric of the *Courier Mail* extends beyond its readership, part of an 'Orange and Yellow Army' or if they are a health worker, wearing 'scrubs' and facemasks.

Bushfires, landscape and masculinity

When seeking to communicate an understanding of the bushfires and the firefighters who struggled heroically against them, the *Courier Mail* emphasized continuity rather than disruption. In seeking to identify what had sustained the Australian troops on Gallipoli, Bean (1941: 607) believed the answer 'lay in the mettle of the men themselves'. Their devotion to an idealized construct of Australian manhood ensured that 'when help failed and hope faded, when the end loomed clear in front of them, when the whole world seemed to crumble and the heaven to fall in, they faced its ruin undismayed.' Eight decades later, journalist Jeremy Pierce (2020: 1) searched for language appropriate for a report on a battle by firefighters to save a family home. He may not have been aware of Bean's words or Anzac as a civic religion, but he was clearly a product of a world view shaped by Australian war mythology. Writing under the headline 'Mate, that's *the* spirit', he told the story of a crew of volunteers who had promised to do all in their power to save a couple's home from a 'raging hinterland inferno'. It took 'mateship and an astonishing nine hours of pure Aussie spirit', or as the journalist helpfully added, 'five hundred and forty minutes of bravery', before they finally 'won the battle'. As if the point being made was not obvious enough, an image accompanying the article showed one of the firefighters with an Australian flag draped over his shoulders.

This confrontation between man and environment (for it was characterized as such) had revealed a new national archetype, though his qualities were anything but new. Firefighters, the personification of civic virtue, risked 'their lives to save others' ('Hot fires reveal softer side', 2019), they had 'battled on while awaiting re-enforcements' (Clarke and O'Neale, 2019: 5) and were now 'the stoic face of resistance of Queensland's

last line of defence' (Read et al., 2019: 10). When facing defeat, as their ancestors had on Gallipoli, the 'weary Rural Fire Service volunteers with soot covered faces sat in stoic silence knowing there was nothing they could do' (Morphet, 2019: 7). As Christmas approached with no sign of victory, the *Courier Mail* made even further use of the Anzac rhetoric by noting that 'Thousands answer the call to arms as fire catastrophe fuels community spirits' (Burgess, 2019: 24–25). One report drew more heavily on Bean than the designers of the memorial at Isurava to describe a 'firefight' outside the town of Peregian Beach on Queensland's Sunshine Coast. Firefighters stood between the town and a fast moving fire, unable to conduct back burning because of the conditions. There was no hope of air support as water tankers did not fly at night. As befitting the warriors of legend they had become, they calmly set up their equipment and 'waited for the fire'. It was here, one fire fighter recalled, 'where we . . . made our stand to protect the houses and the businesses'. Some took to the balconies of the homes and used 64 mm hoses to douse the flames, while crews on the ground fought it in a manner that was all but identified as hand to hand combat. By 'standing shoulder to shoulder' the firefighters saved the town (Billings, 2020: 4). Other observers continued to focus on civic virtues rather than battle, but the ease with which both visions could exist side by side is indicative of the extent to which they are now part of a construct of Australian identity so hegemonic that journalists and the people they interview instinctively draw on them to describe a contribution to the common good in times of peril. One assistant fire chief described the firefighters as being 'community minded, quick thinkers, problem solvers, team players, physically fit and healthy, and able to use good judgment and initiative' (Burgess, 2019: 24–25). Another firefighter observed that 'we live in the community and it's our houses under threat. I'm part of this community and it's a part of me' (p. 25).

It was not, however, all about victory. In any war, there are casualties. When two 'civilians' were killed defending their home, the headline read 'Dad, Son went down fighting' (Fife-Yeomans et al., 2020: 2). In another town, a 'larrikin and town legend' was found dead inside his home after having refused to leave. His niece said that:

he was a tough man who did not believe in running, even for his own life . . . he would always have defended [his home]. He was old school . . . he believed you don't run from anything . . . if he was going to die, he would be happy to die there than anywhere else. (Hurley and Koubaridis, 2020: 6)

The death of a firefighter added a sense of martyrdom to their sacrifice, as one headline made clear when for the third time, a volunteer was killed in the line of duty: 'Third Hero lost' (Gellie and Fife-Yeomans, 2019: 11).

Even in late January when the headlines began to mention a 'killer virus', the deification of firefighters continued:

For 77 days and nights, members of the Lower Beechmont Rural Fire Brigade stood shoulder to shoulder, fighting towering flames as they battled to defend their beautiful Gold Coast hinterland community against the most ferocious fires any of them had seen.

Undeterred, they then

went north to Bundaberg and south to Jinden in NSW to support besieged rural fires there. (Stolz, 2020: 10)

Though the language here is redolent of images of war time heroism, Greg Stolz does not characterize it as the result of a conscious choice on his part. Though he uses language that is ‘colourful’ and communicates a ‘sense of the dramatic’, his rhetorical choices are instinctive and informed only by his assessment of his readers’ expectations:

. . . the general perception of the public is that these guys are pretty brave and they’re on the frontline. They’re doing what few of us or what a lot of us wouldn’t have the guts to do . . . in times of crisis the community looks to heroes to save them and to save their properties, to save their lives . . . As we’ve seen it in the pandemic as well where the doctors and nurses in the hospitals who are working around the clock to save people from COVID-19 are also seen as heroes. It’s just become part of the Australian vernacular. (Stolz, 2020)

Michelle Collins (2020) also acknowledges that she employs terms that are ‘being widely used’ as they allow the reader to ‘get into the story, because they’re terms that they’re familiar with and they’re terms that we all use in our discussions with family and friends anyway. I think it just makes it easier for the readers to engage and know where you are coming from.’

The *Courier Mail* journalists and those at the other News Corp papers may, like Stolz and Collins, not consciously adopt a war-time rhetoric. Nevertheless, they approach their subjects in a manner reminiscent of Australian war correspondents. To some extent, all of the Australian war correspondents during the Great War, Bean foremost among them, acted as publicity agents for the Australian soldier by characterizing him as an ‘exemplar of heroic racial characteristics’ (Gerster, 1987: ix). This approach set the tone for Australian war writing for a century. The *Courier Mail’s* journalists in 2019 and 2020 dispensed with any identifiers such as race and class, but they regularly celebrated the firefighters as a peculiarly Australian type of hero. Few, however, were as emotive as Peta Credlin (2019a: 63): ‘To me, there’s no doubt which group of Australians represent our best selves. It’s the grimy, sweaty heroes, of all ages and both sexes, emerging from the fire lines after many hours of backbreaking work.’

It was not just the firefighters, however, who answered the call. As befitting any celebration of civic virtue, civilians showed themselves worthy of veneration. ‘Heroic locals’ in one town in northern New South Wales ‘were forced to fight the flames by hand using makeshift fire trucks made from water tanks’. Women were not absent from the struggle, yet their portrayal followed strict gender lines. They were onlookers, victims, or the beneficiaries of the heroism of the firefighters. One woman had fought the fire unaided for an hour, but it was in the absence of her partner, who was on duty with the Rural Fire Service (11 October, 2019: 15); another sheltered for three hours in a local creek with a dog under each arm and a wet blanket covering them while her partner was likewise out ‘protecting other people’s homes’ (Stolz et al., 2019: 6). One female journalist escaped the bushfires only to drive past fire trucks headed in the opposite direction:

In awe, we watched as countless red fire engines, sirens flashing, whizzed past us in the opposite direction on the Princes Highway – firefighters headed directly into an escalating situation,

unprecedented weather conditions and certain terror. These people could have been with families celebrating the imminent arrival of a new decade, but they were rushing towards the flames to protect entire communities . . . While we were outrageously lucky to have fled the approaching blaze, the fires surged towards it with the single-minded mission of keeping people and homes safe. (Barraclough, 2020: 13)

The sense of being more than a witness and something slightly less than a participant also influenced the language choices of journalists. Michelle Collins (2020) was well aware that her stories about the pandemic often had a purpose beyond the factual communication of events; they were ‘to give hope, to show people that there were nice things happening out there in what was a not very nice time, that they were an example to other people’. Significantly, she acknowledges that reporting on people and businesses in her own community made it ‘more personal’. Jack Morphet, a journalist with the *Sunday Telegraph* whose reports were also published in the *Courier Mail*, experienced the fires at a particularly personal level. As a writer for a tabloid, he has to ‘have people at the heart of every story’. Indeed, in one instance, he and his photographer sheltered in a shed with residents of the New South Wales town of Balmoral as the homes and businesses burned. The firefighters, as befitting national archetypes, ‘stood shoulder to shoulder and formed a ring around the shed’. Morphet subsequently wrote his story in the first person, having, even just momentarily, crossed the line between observer and participant. Though not fully cognisant of it at the time, reporting from inside a disaster zone was for him something of an immersive experience:

. . . it does feel like a warzone. I was in Port Macquarie for 10 days on the trot and you are constantly coated in smoke and then you strap on your fire kit because we’ve got to wear the yellow fire protective suit and then you go down to the café and there’s out of town fire fighters getting their coffees. Then everyone loads up into their trucks like you would imagine watching the movie *Black Hawk Down*. Then you get your sitreps [situation reports] and then you find out what the conditions are for the day and where we have to set up the fronts to stop people being killed or overrun. Everyone feels under siege. I think that’s why the journalists would perhaps unthinkingly, subconsciously or inherently write in a militaristic tone because it does feel as if you are constantly reporting on a battle. I mean you are, essentially. (Morphet, 2020)

Sometimes journalists had to travel a little farther afield for historical precedent. Just after New Year’s Day 2020, a thousand residents were evacuated by boat from the Victorian town of Mallacoota. With only the evacuation from Gallipoli to draw on, *The Courier Mail* looked to British military history for inspiration, with one headline reading ‘Flotilla share Dunkirk spirit with the stranded’ (Royal et al., 2020: 8). Although in the minority, female firefighters were sometimes the subject of reports. They were portrayed as being worthy of respect but, on the whole, their efforts were subsumed into the masculine discourse, as has often been the case with the story of Australian nurses at war.

Another pillar of the Anzac mythology well suited to a bushfire is the belief that the Australian people have a special relationship with the land. In effect, they have shaped, and been shaped by it, over generations of struggle. During the Great War, many Australians found ‘stunning similarities’ between the Australian outback and the battlefields of Europe and the Middle East (Hoffenberg, 2001: 118). The physical environment

of the battlefield became a hostile foe, the confronting of which echoed the struggles of frontier life. Before 1915, white Australia had few home-grown warriors on which to build a national tradition. Before the Great War, the explorers, both in their bravery and in their martyrdom, proved 'acceptable substitutes' (Hirst, 1982: 17). During Australia's bushfire crisis, the positioning of the environment as a foe to be confronted and defeated did not require too great an imaginative leap. 'Brave and exhausted firefighters' battled the fires in the 'difficult and inaccessible terrain of state forests and national parks'. As 'seasoned firefighters' they had 'taken the fight into the forests. Looking more like a wartime battlefield than a national park, firefighters risked great blackened gum trees falling from the sky like mortar shells.' Their struggle against the elements had left residents 'full of praise for the heroic men and women on the front line' (Billings, 2019: 6). One local who saw his community at Lake Conjola destroyed was of a like mind. It was 'like a war zone. Or something out of a movie' (Gellie et al., 2020: 6). A member of another community went a step further than Hollywood and used the Bible as his reference point. It was 'apocalyptic' (Hurley and Koubaridis, 2020: 6). In drawing on cultural and religious touchstones, these survivors acknowledged that though this landscape possesses a physical nature, it is just as accurately characterized as a construct of the mind (Tuan, 1979: 6), one malleable enough to suit both war and peace. This was not a unique phenomenon. For landscape is never 'inert; people engage with it, re-work it, appropriate it and contest it. It is part of the way in which identities are created and disputed, whether as individual, local or nation-state' (Bender, 1992: 3).

In such a heightened emotional atmosphere, honouring the sacrifice of the firefighters became a measure of one's loyalty to the nation and its values. One letter to the editor argued that the 'extraordinary bravery from the gutsy volunteer fire fighters', these 'stoic examples of humanity', should see them elevated to Australian of the Year (9 December 2019: 24). The *Courier Mail* was of a like mind, and when it came to nominate 2019's 'Sunshine State's Finest', an award for civic virtue in everything but name, it suggested an author, police commissioner, tennis player, Indigenous campaigner, chef, swimmer, rugby league referee, a seven-year-old survivor of a sinking and two lobbyists. The only group award went to the 'emergency service heroes'. In mid-January 2020, the Lord Mayor of Brisbane announced a ticker tape parade through the streets, which the *Courier Mail* characterized as a 'March of the Heroes' (Gleeson, 2020: 1). The newspaper that day also included a souvenir 'lift out' as a 'small gesture of gratitude toward the brave, real life Heroes' (21 January 2020: 1). It was comprised of 16 pages of messages from actors, singers, celebrities, sport stars and survivors. Each found a way to express gratitude and respect for the firefighters, with one even noting that their 'Anzac spirit really shines through during this disaster' (McLochlan, 2020: 5). A former Australian test cricket captain observed that 'this brave army of quiet Australians defend strangers' homes as if they were their own. You are special people who give not just at times of disaster but all year round to make this the amazing country we all love' (Clarke, 2020: 7). Another celebrity was a touch more combative in acknowledging that 'these gruelling fires have tested us, upset us, stolen from us – but they won't break us' (Knowles, 2020: 8).

Peta Credlin, who had once been conservative Prime Minister Tony Abbott's Chief of Staff but now worked as a journalist, identified those who existed outside of this loyalist

and masculine construct. Ironically, this approach had echoes of the poisonous political culture that existed in Queensland during and just after the Great War (Kerby and Baguley, 2019). During a period when Australian politics was ‘bitter, divisive, faction-ridden and erratic’ (Glenister, 1984, cited in Andrews, 1993: 120), many people saw the war as leaving people with a clear choice – were they loyal to the nation and its interests or were they disloyal. The stress of sustaining a population through 52 months of war had pitted conservative forces, for whom imperial loyalty had ‘all the depth and comprehensiveness of a religion’ (Robson, 1982: 16) against an eclectic grouping of striking unionists, anti-war activists, Irish Catholics, Lutheran churches, the local Russian community, and people who had voted ‘No’ in the conscription plebiscites. One hundred years later, Credlin sought to divide the nation in two. She anointed the community volunteers, such as firefighters, the Salvation Army and the Country Women’s Association (CWA), as loyal to her particular vision of a politically and socially conservative Australia. The disloyal, in her eyes, were personified by the radical left-wing extinction rebellion protestors who until recently had been blockading sections of major cities protesting climate change. It was, she believed, ‘the clash of two nations’, one that raised existential questions such as ‘who we are, and who we might end up being’ (Credlin, 2019a: 63). Regardless of how hegemonic a civic religion has become, there are still, it would seem, non-believers.

Credlin contrasted the civic virtues of the firefighter with the climate change protestors who she ridiculed as needing ‘a good bath and a scrub, not least a washing machine and a haircut’. Credlin believed that they were the antithesis of the volunteer, who ‘instead of complaining, or blaming others, do what they can individually and collectively to make things better’. The protestors, in contrast, are ‘nothing more than just the hard left and some willing dupes campaigning for socialism in the guise of saving the planet’ (p. 63). Credlin doubled down on this world of binary opposites a month later when she further observed: ‘These days there are two types of Australians: the person who sees a problem and gets involved trying to help; and the person who sees the same problem and demands that someone else fix it, usually “the government”’ (Credlin, 2019c: 56).

In the same way that the Australian people have long seen the achievement of the Australian soldiers given added lustre by virtue of the fact they were an all-volunteer force, Credlin and others likewise went to great pains to emphasize that many of the firefighters were volunteers defending their own communities:

When we see a problem, our inclination is to think of others and want to help, to roll up our sleeves and deal with it. We are renowned the world over as a nation of volunteers. We take it as a commonplace thing that volunteers patrol our vast coastline to save lives, put out fires and patch up storm damage, but overseas that’s not how it’s done. And we are better for it as a country. (Credlin, 2019b: 59)

Credlin saw the courage and devotion of the volunteer firefighters as a measure of them as individuals, but also of the nation: ‘As many of our volunteers make clear, it is the stuff we do for love that defines us, not the stuff for which we are paid’ (p. 59). Without saying it explicitly, Credlin perhaps understood what many Australians came to

acknowledge after 1918. The war had exacerbated pre-war divisions, but the one that it created in its entirety was the uncrossable divide between those who had served and those who had not. When ‘trouble strikes’ she reassured her readers, ‘we rally round and do what we can to help . . . There were the people who couldn’t wear a uniform making sandwiches and giving donations for those in the front line’. (Credlin, 2019c: 56)

Scott Morrison, Australia’s conservative Prime Minister (2018 – current) adopted the language of civic virtue as enthusiastically as anyone. While visiting ‘traumatized residents’, he praised the ‘courage’ and ‘incredible spirit’ of fire-affected communities. He had never been ‘more proud of Australians than in moments like this . . . They just show incredible spirit, incredible heart, incredible generosity, and that’s what we’re seeing on display.’ Wherever he went, Morrison saw ‘Australians supporting Australians’ (Armstrong and Rose, 2019: 7). He urged his countrymen and women to ‘take comfort in the amazing spirit of Australia’. For ‘in the worst of times, we can see the best in our country . . . We’ve witnessed heroism, grace and generosity from Australians everywhere.’ Again, though, it was the firefighters and the emergency service personnel who ‘led the way . . . Their courage has been extraordinary, even as they grieved the loss of mates’. Their bravery was ‘unspeakable’ (Fife-Yeomans et al., 2020: 2). It was not just the prime minister who found the fire fighters extraordinary. Janet Fife-Yeomans, who has enjoyed a long and successful career with the *West Australian*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian*, and now at the *Daily Telegraph*, probably speaks for many of her colleagues when she observes:

I have to be impressed by the firies and the rural fire service volunteers, even though for the firies, that’s their job and the rural fire service volunteers volunteer for it, what they did during the bushfires went way beyond what you would expect anyone to do. They just wanted to save people’s lives, their homes, and they were devastated when they couldn’t. Some of them lost their lives doing it. (Fife-Yeomans 2020)

A kinder, gentler Anzac: The Coronavirus (COVID-19) and the women who fought it

Although the *Courier Mail’s* journalists and their colleagues at other News Corps publications again leaned heavily on a war rhetoric during the Coronavirus crisis, the heroes in this narrative were not cut from the same cloth as the firefighters. Three quarters of Queensland health employees are female. In nursing, they account for 93 percent of the workforce (Stone, 2018). Despite the growing recognition of the experience of nurses during wartime and the 2013 decision to allow women to serve in combat roles in the Australian Defence Force, the Anzac mythology has traditionally cast women in the role of supporters and onlookers. Nevertheless, since the 1970s, historical scholarship concerning women in wartime, as Bart Ziino (2016) demonstrates, has shown an evolution in focus. Some historians argue that the war entrenched gender stereotypes (McKernan, 1984; Shute, 1975), while others have sought a middle ground, arguing instead that war both reinforced stereotypes and provided opportunities to disrupt them (Lake and Damousi, 1995). Others, like the *Courier Mail*

during the pandemic have attempted to integrate the female experience into the Anzac mythology (Young, 1991).

In late January 2020, the *Courier Mail* was already making it clear to its readers that the state was facing another, even more insidious enemy. The headline on 22 January read ‘Killer virus alarm’, while another in the same edition read ‘Viral threat goes global’ (Miles, 2020a: 1, 2020b: 4–5). The next day, the news had worsened, although it had not as yet made the front page. The headline ‘Deadly virus sure to reach Australia’ coming so soon after the worst of the fires probably did not have the impact that in retrospect seems warranted (Rose and Miles, 2020: 12). As the extent of the crisis unfolded, journalists again adopted the language of war, and in doing so took advantage of a modern reinvigoration of the Anzac mythology, one that had its origins in the 1970s. One feature of this new iteration was particularly useful in the reporting on the virus. The increased salience of trauma and victimhood in Western culture (Holbrook, 2019) has ensured that. Australians are now far more predisposed to view history ‘as a wound or scar that leaves a trace on a nation’s soul’ (Twomey, 2015: para. 17). The recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 1980 and the narratives of trauma it both unleashed and legitimized (Twomey, 2013a) ensured that trauma and traumatized individuals became a central part of Australia’s war mythology:

In the post-1980s incarnation of Anzac, the warrior-like capacity of Australian veterans is seriously underplayed – it is the suffering of veterans, their psychological fragility and the horrors they have witnessed that provide an important, if not an exclusive, framing device. (Twomey, 2013b)

This facilitated, among other things, a reinvigoration of the mythology because it ‘provided a point of entry for empathetic identification and placed emotion and affect at the very centre of Anzac commemorative practices’ (Twomey, 2013b). A recognition of the horror of war could thereby sit comfortably with a commemoration and a celebration of it. It was this approach, and the dispensing with the Great War image of the Australian soldier as a natural killer, which facilitated an adaptation of it during the 2020 pandemic. Bean’s vision of Australian Anglo-masculinity was not an easy fit, particularly when, perhaps inevitably, the journalists at the *Courier Mail* firmly cast female health workers in the role of carers and nurturers. They possessed their share of civic virtue, perhaps more than their share, but their Australia was far removed from the one that Bean inhabited, both at a literal and figurative level.

In early April, well after the extent of the crisis became widely known, the *Courier Mail* published a small article under the headline ‘Battle led by women’ in which it was recognized that ‘Australia’s war on coronavirus is being fought mainly by women’ (7 April 2020: 8). This recognition inevitably feminized many of the reports: ‘Angels in masks’ (22 March 2020: 1) firmly positioned women in the traditional role of nurturers while ‘Nurses fight to keep their heads above water’ (Pennells, 2020: 9) emphasized the potential for trauma, now a central pillar of the Anzac mythology. One article about a female research scientist could not quite make the rhetorical shift. Instead, it offered a headline that identified her as one of the ‘Bad Ass Heroes waging war on killer virus’ (*Courier Mail*, 29 March 2020: 17). Yet, even given the absence of examples of physical

heroism, the use of wartime language was pervasive. Pathology workers were ‘the front-line soldiers of Australia’s coronavirus battle’. They were, however, only some of the ‘thousands of health heroes’ (Strength in testing times, *Courier Mail*, 4 April 2020: 15). Using the same historical reference that had once been used in descriptions of the Australian Light Horse in the Middle East during the Great War, one journalist described them as ‘Corona Crusaders fight[ing] on the front line’. She then gave herself over almost entirely to the rhetoric:

The medics in the trenches of Queensland’s war against COVID-19 are surprisingly fresh faced and have a cheeky sense of humour. There is nothing about the demeanour of these frontline hospital workers that shows fear or uncertainty even though they are in an unprecedented situation, exposed every single day to patients who could be carrying the coronavirus. Like soldiers they buoy each other with laughs and optimism. They are well aware the full force of the viral enemy is yet to come. (Sinnerton, 2020: 9)

Other articles looked to broaden the catchment area for these frontline heroes. Those called on to make ‘heartbreaking sacrifices’ and ‘to risk their lives’ included ‘thousands of doctors, nurses, paramedics, and emergency service personnel’. One report even included the ‘unsung supermarket heroes’ (Read et al., 2020: 10). In risking their lives, they became the embodiment of civic virtue by surrendering self to the needs of the collective.

At the end of March 2020, the Prime Minister and state leaders enforced an even more stringent lockdown, which gave the police power to issue on-the-spot fines. In Queensland, this was in the amount of \$1,334 for individuals and \$6,672 for businesses. Pubs, clubs, cinemas, casinos, churches, play centres, pools and a host of other businesses were ordered to close by 12 midnight on 31 March. As the crisis deepened, so did the engagement with the language of war. On 1 April, the *Courier Mail* introduced the term ‘Care Army’, which had its own antecedent in the 2011 floods when volunteers in their thousands who engaged in a clean-up of Brisbane were dubbed the ‘Mud Army’. Michelle Collins (2020) observes that:

All of the stories I did were about volunteers and how people were coping in the community [and] I very quickly used the analogy of the care army. We very quickly picked up on the, this is going to be our next mud army and so therefore we reused those terms, so it was a care army, it was the battle against COVID, it was enlisting people to support the elderly in their communities and I used all those terms . . . I did it really without consciously thinking about it. I think that’s because once we started to use the mud army analogy, those terms just come automatically. I looked at some of the stories other journalists were writing around the country and they were using similar terms, but it wasn’t a conscious decision.

The Care Army was further sanctified by the adaptation of the iconic rising-sun badge, the official insignia of the Australian Army mostly worn on the brim of a slouch hat. It usually has a semi-circle of bayonets radiating from a crown but, in this instance, the words ‘The Australian Army’ were replaced by ‘The Care Army’ and the crown was

replaced by a heart. The by-line that accompanied it was equally grounded in a military sensibility:

They're at the forefront making a difference every day, now there's something you can do. Answer the Call. An army of volunteers and professionals will be deployed to protect the state's senior citizens from the Corona pandemic, with new recruits urged to join us now. (Maruzalek, 2020: 1)

Conclusion

As the weeks of lockdown continued into the middle of April and beyond, the focus on the frontline heroes began to wane. Without the benefit of stirring images of exhausted firefighters, walls of flame devouring buildings and towns, or smoking ruins, journalists went further and further afield for human interest stories. The virus demanded a quiet courage from health workers. Laudable though it was, it was unlikely to sell newspapers or advertising space. Civic virtue in this context was not as appealing as the image of exhausted but determined firefighters holding the line. There were still daily profiles of 'frontline heroes': a nurse who 'felt scared and worried about what might happen – fears come up about contracting COVID-19 myself or passing it on to my partner' but stoically believing that there 'is no greater privilege to be caring for people when they are most vulnerable' (Read, 2020: 2). A male doctor also engaged with the spectre of trauma by discussing the stress of working during the crisis and the impact on the mental health of his colleagues (Egan, 2020: 6). However, there was no drama to it, just a quiet determination to keep calm and carry on. The success of the Australian government's response and the country's isolation from the disease hotspots had begun to lessen the sense that we were all in this together. The gradual dissipation of this sense of shared purpose was particularly evident in the often ugly conflict between the Victorian state government and the Federal government, as well as a variety of squabbles between the state governments. The ongoing criticism of the Victorian government as it battled the second wave of the virus, during which it suffered 90 percent of the nation's 905 fatalities, best illustrates how brittle the sense of national solidarity could be and why a national mythology that emphasized unity was so appealing. Throughout the bushfire crisis and through the early days of the pandemic, the language of war resonated with a people predisposed to seeing courage and tragedy presented in familiar ways. Almost three months later, with 'only' 63 deaths (all of them tragic to the families and communities concerned), the focus of those not directly affected by the virus shifted to the impact of social isolation and economic disruption. Yet the image of the Anzac remains, a version of which the journalists of the *Courier Mail* and other News Corp newspapers turned to with great effect in late 2019 and early 2020.

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