The Anzac Legend As A Substitute For Defining The Traits And Characteristics Of Australia’s National Character

While the ANZAC Legend has roots in some truths of Australian wartime experiences, it is vastly based on a romanticised version of the 1914-1918 war. It has become a substitute for defining the traits and characteristics of what it is to be truly Australian with many war correspondents of that era suggesting that the bloodshed during wartime conflict encapsulated Australia’s national character of bravery, loyalty, discipline, endurance, mateship, persistence and initiative. However, the legend inaccurately reflects the experiences of Australian soldiers through its emphasis on Gallipoli rather than other battles, particularly the Western Front, and its focus is entirely on white male soldiers at the expense of indigenous Australians and the experiences of women during the war. It is for these reasons’ that the ANZAC legend is a myth as it lacks inclusivity and it also poorly reflects the diversity of modern Australia.

The Great War began in 1914 and didn’t officially end until 1919 when the treaty of Versailles was signed. Throughout the war, fighting occurred on a number of ‘frontlines’ – locations where the majority of battles occur – and for the ANZAC’s, the Western Front was one of these (Collins, 2019). However, the ANZAC Legend places particular emphasis on the fighting that occurred at Gallipoli disregarding much of the importance of the ANZAC’s role on the Western Front. Australians spent more time fighting on the Western Front than Gallipoli, and the Western Front was also the site of the final success for the allies. This is summarized in a quote from Dr. Glenn Davies (2014) stating, “We as a nation are so transfixed by Gallipoli and the Anzac Legend that it is difficult to look past that… the battles on the Western Front where the war was actually won” (Davies, 2016). The traditional ANZAC legend neglects this important battle, promoting a very selective version of the war and ignores the heroic deeds and actions of the Australians who fought on the Western Front.

The Anzac Legend does not account for a very large majority of people who contributed to the war effort particularly women and indigenous Australians. While many Indigenous soldiers fought equally alongside other soldiers, white male soldiers tend to be celebrated disproportionately (Australian War Memorial, 2019)Although there are no accurate records, it's thought that about 1,000 Aboriginal men enlisted identified through euphemisms such as 'dark complexion', 'curly hair', 'dark eyes' (Grant, 2017). At this time, racism was abundant. Only Indigenous people with one white parent were allowed to enroll to fight, and they were often referred to as ‘half-castes’, a derogatory and dehumanising term. The Indigenous men who fought were subject to horrifying levels of racism from both their comrades and laws that were in play at the time, such as the White Australia Policy, which contributed toward a sub-human status (Scarlett, 2015). During the war, the state held Indigenous servicemen’s wages or widows’ pensions, which have become collectively known as the stolen wages (Noah Riseman and Timothy C. Winegard, 2015). Returned Indigenous soldiers were excluded from commemoration services and war memorials, denied the right to participate in ANZAC Day marches, and refused access to veterans’ benefits because of state restrictions against Aboriginal people handling money (Noah Riseman and Timothy C. Winegard, 2015). Many of these people and their roles still remain vastly unrecognised compared to the efforts of other soldier demographics and still now Indigenous Australians' contributions are not reflected at all in the ANZAC legend.

While thousands of Australian women volunteered in auxiliary roles during the wartime, their roles are almost entirely absent from the ANZAC legend. During the Gallipoli landing, women served in critical and oftentimes dangerous roles as nurses on hospital ships, in field hospitals and as ambulance drivers. Initially they were publicly acknowledged at ANZAC services, however, recognition waned over the years as ANZAC day evolved into a dawn service, afternoon celebrations and sporting events. These types of activities were “akin to going into the public bar of a hotel, something that no respectable woman did in that era” (Harris, 2019). Many ex-service women felt they were regarded as ‘onlookers or supporters’ and were relegated to marching as spectators. Even in 2002, women were still fighting to be recognised for their non-combatant war service with one activist referring to women as “a forgotten race” in ANZAC day services (Mayes, 2015). The role of women in the ANZAC tradition is not just about recognition of women’s contribution to wartime efforts, it’s also about how we define what it is to be “Australian”. Until recently, these characteristics have been reserved for just men, but women should also have equal recognition for their service and sacrifice (Ketchell, 2018).

The ANZAC legend has become a substitute for defining the traits and characteristics of Australia’s national character: bravery, loyalty, discipline, endurance, mateship, persistence and initiative. However, the legend is inaccurate as it focuses on the battle at Gallipoli rather than other equally important conflicts such as the Western Front. Most importantly, the legend lends itself to a definition of a white male soldier – a larrikin and a digger – and completely disregards the service and sacrifices of indigenous Australians and women during the war. This abhorrent lack of diversity does not portray a modern-day multicultural Australia and many now question if the ANZAC legend is really the core of our national identity. While it is important to pay our respects to the fallen, the ANZAC legend is not relevant in today’s society.