

ANZAC DAY – may one day no-one march there at all.

ANZAC Day, April 25th is here again and once again Australians are being asked to stand together and declare “Lest we forget”. Every year though, during the avalanche of militaristic imagery and words that marks this “celebration”, I reflect how it hasn’t always been like this in Australia. During my lifetime I have watched ANZAC day being changed from a fading historical relic to a day elevated to a virtual state religion, central to the mythic narrative of Australian nationalism.

This change is personified by my experiences singing in primary school as a ten year old. Once a week, the highlight of my primary school week was joining the whole class “Let’s sing” session. The old radio would be turned on at the front of the class, we would take out our colorful song books and belt out an eclectic mix of songs together. In 1983, the songbook contained a song that leave a deep impression on me, Eric Bogle’s [“And the band played Waltzing Matilda”](#).

The song is a haunting ballad of the journey of a young Australian man heading off to Gallipoli, cheered off by excited crowds, only to experience the hell of war and return maimed physically and emotionally. Written in 1971 at the height of the anti-Vietnam war movement, it strikes a powerful blow against war and the false “celebrations” of ANZAC day that are meant to sanctify this horror.

The song certainly left a powerful impression on me and I am always struck by the fact it is pretty much my only memory of engaging with ANZAC day from Primary school. The 80’s were a time when the “Vietnam Syndrome” still hung in the air. This

“syndrome” is the ruling classes term for the lingering anti-war sentiment that existed in the mass of the working class after that murderous war. They knew something had to be done and they got to work.

Since the Hawke Labor Government of the 1980's, literally billions has been spent in Australia on constructing a virtual state religion around ANZAC Day. Hawke was the first Prime Minister to make the “pilgrimage” to Turkey on ANZAC Day in 1990. Since then we have had endless speeches, parades, expanded war memorials, documentaries and books. The education system has been flooded with “educational materials” to teach this curriculum including picture books about animals who “fought” for Australia for pre-schoolers! Even when I was teaching history over ten years ago, I would surreptitiously throw out the glossy pamphlets, DVD's etc I was sent each year but now I believe teachers are forced to teach this curriculum.

Australian culture is now saturated annually with militaristic imagery on ANZAC Day. Even this year, under conditions of pandemic, we are being encouraged to mark ANZAC Day by lighting candles in our driveway at dawn. Whilst for ordinary people, the phrase “Lest we forget” may contain some confused anti-war sentiments, the ruling class knows full well the purpose of cultivating this “celebration”. The ruling class has been working for decades to try and ensure that the next generation will be ready when called upon to “make the ultimate sacrifice” in US Imperialism's next bloodbath could be another World War, this time with China and Russia. For the ruling class the phrase “Lest we forget” is not a phrase to mourn the death of soldiers past but to lay the groundwork for murdering more young people in the meat grinder of imperialist war.

How dated the following lines now seem from Eric Bogle's classic:

*"And now every April I sit on my porch
And I watch the parade pass before me
I see my old comrades, how proudly they march
Reliving their dreams of past glory
I see the old men, all twisted and torn
The forgotten heroes of a forgotten war
And the young people ask me, "what are they
Marching for?"
And I ask myself the same question
And the band plays Waltzing Matilda
And the old men still answer to the call
But year after year their numbers get fewer
Some day no one will march there at all"*

However, I remain grateful for being exposed to the truths of this song and the anti-imperialist and anti-war seeds it planted in my mind. One day, when the working class has overthrown capitalism and humanity has thrown off the shackles of mindless nationalism, we can again look back at ANZAC as a ritual from another time, a time when young people were forced to fight for "God and Country" and died in the mud. A time when trillions were wasted on war instead on fighting disease and hunger.

So I will mark ANZAC Day this year by once again listening to the Pogues' haunting version of "And the band plays Waltzing Matilda" and look forward to a future April 25th, when no one will march there at all.