

# Reading Anzac Square

**Adding insight to a history excursion**

**Brian Hoeppe**



**Every weekday thousands of Brisbane commuters spill out of Central Railway Station into Anzac Square. Most use the well-worn subway tunnel, emerging suddenly from the semi-gloom into the bright, clear light of the square. Mostly, the pace is brisk – typical of early morning in the CBD of any capital city.**

**Sadly, what these purposeful walkers miss is the chance to ‘read’ Anzac Square. For the square is rich in symbols and ‘texts’ waiting to be perused, interpreted and enjoyed.**

**This article highlights the potential of Anzac Square as a place for rich and insightful historical learning. It provides a logical approach which teachers can develop into an excursion for their students.**



## Introduction

As the name suggests, Anzac Square is a public park dedicated to memorializing Australians at war. The most distant war commemorated there is the **Boer War** fought in South Africa more than a century ago. The most recent war commemorated is the Vietnam War which ended over 30 years ago.

Studying the contents of Anzac Square can reveal something of those wars. But, more significantly, a study of the square suggests some fascinating changes in the ways Australians have thought about wars and about how those wars should be remembered.

The 'reader' needs to be careful. Even though the square commemorates wars fought as long ago as 1900, the square itself was not constructed until 1930, and at least one feature was added just a few years ago. So it's a slightly complicated and changing 'text' to read.

So how can the square be 'read'? We'll start at the beginning, with the oldest memorial.

## The Boer War memorial



The Boer War memorial is the last thing that hurrying commuters see as they race out of the square in the morning ... and the first thing they see when they're hurrying back to their trains in the late afternoon. It seems to stand guard at the Adelaide Street entrance. Atop a solid pedestal, above pedestrian eye level, sits the imposing statue of a mounted trooper. The horse stands tall, head high, ears pricked. The rider is upright, rifle in hand – alert to danger, ready for action.



Pedestrians can see the statue only from below. The whole effect is larger than life. The statue sends a reassuring message about pride, strength, determination and military ability. Nothing in the statue suggests weakness or uncertainty. And there is no hint of battlefield chaos or human suffering.

This structure, the oldest in the square, is typical of war memorials of the early twentieth century. Those memorials were sometimes celebratory, sometimes mournful, and sometimes both. This Boer War memorial seems celebratory, especially at first sight. A closer inspection reveals the bronze plaques on the sides of the pedestal, listing the names of Queenslanders who died on the South African battlefields of the Boer War. But they are called ‘heroes who fell’ – a mixture of celebration and mourning in the words.



The Boer War statue was cast in bronze in England, but wasn't actually erected in Brisbane until 1919. Anzac Square hadn't been constructed then, and the memorial stood in another part of central Brisbane until it was shifted to the square in 1939.

By 1939, Brisbane's citizens were already very familiar with the most imposing monument in Anzac Square – the Shrine of Remembrance.

## The Shrine of Remembrance



The Shrine is reached via two impressive, sweeping stone staircases at the western end of the square. A mathematically-minded pedestrian might note that each staircase is in two sections – one of nineteen steps and one of eighteen. And, if they were historically-minded too, they might realize that those numbers are symbolic of the year 1918, the year World War 1 ended. For the Shrine of Remembrance commemorates that ‘Great War’.

The shrine is remarkable. It is built in the style of a 2300-year-old Greek temple. One can almost imagine it being plucked from an Ancient Greek site and placed in the centre of modern Brisbane. The choice of a Greek-style temple reveals a lot about the ways in which Australians of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century commemorated war. World War 1 was seen by many Australians as a ‘fight for civilisation’ against the ‘barbaric Hun’. This temple is a symbol of Classical Greece, the birthplace of democracy and the source of many of our present literary, artistic, philosophical and scientific traditions. How better to commemorate those who fell in the Great War! The memorial situates the fallen in the great story of the growth of civilization, particularly the British civilization that was so treasured by many Australians in the early 1900s, at the height of the British Empire.

Although based on an ancient temple, the Shrine of Remembrance has some special Great War touches. There are eighteen columns, another ‘nod’ towards 1918. Around the top of the columns the names of major battles are recorded in metal lettering. In the centre of the shrine an ‘eternal flame’ burns, a symbol of the everlasting memory of those who died. And under glass panels are

samples of soil from major war cemeteries in Europe – a special touch given that all Australians who died in overseas theatres of war, bar two, were buried in foreign countries.

### **‘Reading’ the square from above**

From the terrace adjoining the Shrine, one can ‘read’ the whole square laid out below. Again, there are symbols. Below the terrace are rectangular pools and fountains. The play of water is a symbol of life. And the fountainheads themselves are in the shape of lions, symbolizing strength and courage and, more specifically, the British Empire itself!

Three paths radiate through the park from the bottom of the shrine, representing the three branches of the Australian armed forces – Army, Navy, Air Force. And the paths pass between trees chosen very deliberately for their symbolic meanings. Palms represent victory, but also are reminders of the Middle Eastern theatre of war in World War 1, memorable for the involvement of the Australian Light Horse.

A common theme runs through everything described so far – a theme of symmetry and order. Clearly, the square was designed to impress! From the larger-than-life Boer War horseman guarding the entrance, along the three neat, radiating paths, up the mirror pair of wide, stone staircases to the crowing glory of the square – the classical Shrine. And, in passing, a pedestrian would see the World War 1 memorial frieze carved into the stone wall beneath the terrace. Sponsored by the women of Queensland, and completed in 1932, it depicts a procession of Australian soldiers – tall, strong, upright – marching along a road, accompanied by a horse-drawn gun carriage. They seem fitting companions to the impressive Boer War horseman at the other end of the square!



Since the 1990s, however, the view from the terrace has changed. All the formal elements are still there. But dotted around the square are four more recent memorials and they offer a quite different sense of war and its memorialisation.

Two of the memorials commemorate World War 2.

## The War in the South West Pacific



One World War 2 memorial refers specifically to the war in the South West Pacific. There are three bronze figures. The attached plaque describes the scene: ‘ ... a wounded Australian soldier descending the **Kokoda Trail** assisted by a strong, dependable Papua New Guinean leading him to safety. They are being passed by a fresh, determined soldier resolute in the task ahead’. – a wounded digger being helped down the Kokoda Trail by a Papua New Guinea ‘fuzzy wuzzy’, and passing them as he heads in the opposite direction towards the battle, a fresh, strong, determined digger.





As they pass, the lower legs of the two diggers brush lightly together, symbolizing their connectedness in the grim battle to save Australia from the invading Japanese. This memorial is unlike those of the Boer War and World War 1 in four notable ways. First, the memorial depicts suffering – the wounded, limping, struggling digger. Second, the memorial depicts an Indigenous Papua New Guinean – someone from outside the dominant story of heroic, white soldiers. Third, the memorial is more ‘human scale’. The figures are little above eye level, and passers by can actually touch these figures easily.





## World War 2 – suffering and support



The only soldier depicted is a wounded digger, head bandaged, naked except for his shorts, lying on a stretcher. He is a figure of pain, weakness and helplessness. Again, the memorial is low-set, so viewers actually look down upon this pitiable man. The other figure depicted is an Australian Army nurse gently tending to and soothing the wounded patient.



In the most touching feature of the memorial, the nurse's left hand gently supports the outstretched left hand of the soldier - a very evocative detail even when rendered in hard bronze.

## Changing styles of memorialisation

These two memorials are remarkable. They depict five people, but only one is a strong, healthy and determined soldier about to engage in battle. Only this one figure parallels the heroic Boer War horseman or the column of resolute soldiers on the World War 1 frieze. By contrast, two of the people are wounded, weak and fairly helpless. Both need help, and the help is there in the persons of an indigenous man from Papua New Guinea and an Australian female nurse.

This all suggests that, between 1930 when the World War 1 memorials were established and 1992 when the World War 2 memorials were constructed, there was a change in the official approach to memorializing warfare. In Anzac Square at least, the focus on larger-than-life, heroic and celebratory memorials featuring strong and determined white men changed to a focus on wartime suffering and on the role of women and Indigenous people in the war effort. Further, the memorials were 'humanised' by the inclusion of simple, everyday objects.

Two further memorials were added to Anzac Square in 1998. One commemorates Australians' involvement in the Korean, Malayan and Borneo conflicts of the 1950s and 1960s.

### The memorial to Korea, Malaya and Borneo



It seems to be a compromise between the older and the newer styles of commemoration. It depicts two Australian soldiers. One, from the Korean War, holds his arm aloft, as if gesturing to the Shrine of Remembrance where his upward gaze is directed. The other soldier – from the Malaya or Borneo conflict – is uniformed, upright, with a jutting jaw, rifle slung over his shoulder. He has much in common with the Boer War trooper or the diggers in the WW1 frieze. He exudes strength, commitment and confidence.

The other 1998 memorial is more remarkable. It commemorates Australia's most controversial military involvement – the Vietnam War.

### **The memorial to Vietnam**



Like the two World War 2 memorials, it depicts raw human suffering. A wounded digger lies at the feet of a standing comrade. Both are bareheaded, something that humanizes the soldiers. The comrade has his arms outstretched and his gaze uplifted towards the Shrine of Remembrance. To the uninitiated observer, he appears to be appealing to the shrine for help or inspiration. But the truth is more mundane. The standing digger is guiding a rescue helicopter to pick up his wounded colleague. There seems little doubt that the designer of the memorial realized the double meaning that this could convey – the simple message of battlefield rescue, and the symbolic linking of the Vietnam diggers with the spirit of their World War 1 counterparts represented by the shrine.

## Conclusion

Taken as a set, the memorials in Anzac Square can be ‘read’ like a time line of Australia’s military involvements over the past century, from the Boer War to the Vietnam War. But they can also be read as a record of apparent changes in the way war has been memorialized during that time. At one end of Anzac Square is the imposing, classically-inspired Shrine of Remembrance. At the other end stands the similarly imposing Boer War memorial. Both are larger-than-life and seemed designed to evoke pride and reverence. Between the two, dotted around the square, are four memorials which depict other dimensions of war – suffering, support, caring – and which remind us of the vital roles of other players in the drama of warfare – the Indigenous men of Papua New Guinea, the nurses of the Australian army, the medivac helicopter crews.

## Postscript: East Timor

The careful observer will find one more memorial in Anzac Square. Simple, unobtrusive and easy to miss, it’s a marble plaque set into the ground in front of a small tree.



Set there in 2001, it celebrates the contribution of ‘Australian Peace Keepers and Peace Makers’. On the plaque the tree is named the ‘Wars to Peace Tree’. The marble was donated by the people

of East Timor. The memorial's ordinariness, its use of a living tree as the centerpiece and its optimistic name seem to take memorialisation one further step away from the grand and imposing towards the simple and human.

## About the author

Brian Hoepper was co-editor of *ozhistorybytes* – the online magazine of the Commonwealth History Project – in which this article first appeared. Brian's career has included substantial periods as a secondary history teacher and tertiary curriculum lecturer.

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## Links

### **Boer War (1899-1902)**

Sometimes called the Anglo-South African War, the Boer War was fought between British forces and the Boer republics over control of southern Africa. It was a cruel and bitter war in which the British Army suffered some early defeats before it overcame the small, irregular Boer forces. Sixteen thousand Australians served in colonial and Commonwealth units in South Africa, of whom 606 were killed or died of illness, disease or wounds. In Australia the war excited strong enthusiasm for and against, though the 'antis' were a decided minority. Some opponents noted how the Boers, though men of Dutch ancestry, were mostly settlers in a rugged frontier land, much like settlers in Australia. Others blamed 'British imperialism', insisting the British wanted southern Africa for strategic reasons and for its natural resources, diamond mines included. Amongst the prominent men who argued against the war, Henry Higgins lost his seat in the Victorian Parliament and Professor Arnold Wood at Sydney University came very close to being dismissed from his chair of history. Two Australians serving in a South African irregular unit called the Bushveldt Carbineers were executed in 1902 for killing Boer prisoners 'in cold blood'. They were Harry Harbord 'Breaker' Morant and Peter Handcock. Quite striking Boer War memorials are to be found in Adelaide and Ballarat, as well as Brisbane.

### **Kokoda Trail**

Sometimes it is called the Kokoda Track, at other times 'Trail'. It was the track or trail across the Owen Stanley Ranges in New Guinea, linking the north coast with the south coast. It was a route of great strategic importance during the fighting between Australian and Japanese forces in mid 1942. The Australians sent north across the track at that time were given the task of halting a Japanese force that was far superior in numbers and experience. Their success in resisting the Japanese has become a cause celebre among the great battles fought by Australian forces in World War Two. As to the terminology – Australian soldiers used the term 'track', but the Americanised 'trail' gradually became standard and was used by the Commonwealth Battles Nomenclature Committee in the October 1957.

## Curriculum connections

In Anzac Square there are lessons to be learned about some of the *Historical Literacies* promoted by the Commonwealth History Project (CHP).

### *'events'*

At the simplest level, Anzac Square relates to the CHP *Historical literacy* called 'Events of the past'. This literacy focuses on 'the significance of different events'. The memorials in Anzac Square stand like a material record of a special set of 'events' – the conflicts involving Australian military forces during the past century or so. Anyone visiting each memorial in turn could compile a list of those conflicts, ranging from the Boer War to post-independence peacekeeping in East Timor. In terms of 'significance', the square as a whole is a sign of how significant military conflict has been in Australia's modern history. Anzac Square occupies a valuable site in the heart of Brisbane's CBD and it seems little expense was spared in the original design and construction of the square – a clear measure of 'significance'.

### *'evidence'*

In terms of the CHP's *Historical literacies*, Anzac Square can also teach us about 'evidence' – an element of the 'Research skills' literacy.

For a start, the various memorials are sources of evidence of the different types of warfare experienced over the past century – from the horse-mounted cavalry of the Boer War, through the line of WW1 soldiers trudging across the Western Front and the exhaustion of the diggers slogging through the mud of Kokoda, to the technological sophistication but intense humanity of the Vietnam battlefield.

The square can also be read as evidence of popular beliefs and attitudes in the past. Perhaps the clearest example relates to World War 1. The Shrine of Remembrance seems to say a lot about what the people of Brisbane thought and felt about the Great War. The Shrine suggests grief at the enormous loss of life (and the determination to remember the dead, symbolized by the eternal flame). But it also suggests pride – pride in the military performance of Australian soldiers, in the role Australia played on the international stage between 1914 and 1918, in Australia's place in the British Empire and (symbolized by the classical Greek style of the shrine) pride in the Western tradition of civilization that many believed was at stake in the war. The Shrine, and the whole square laid out below it, seem to symbolize an unshakeable certainty about the morality and nobility of warfare.

Everything written in the previous paragraph, however, has to be scrutinized critically. It assumes that Anzac Square was a clear expression of the 'beliefs and attitudes' of Brisbane people. We have no way of knowing whether the Anzac Square project was supported by all citizens. We do know that a minority of Queenslanders opposed Australia's involvement in World War 1 for a mixture of political, religious and moral reasons. (Historian Raymond Evans documented that opposition in his ground-breaking book 'Loyalty and Disloyalty' in 1987.) Still, it is probably valid to suggest that the opening of Anzac Square in 1930 would have been applauded by the overwhelming majority of Brisbane's citizens.

That question – whether memorials are evidence of popular support – becomes more vital in the case of the Vietnam War memorial. The Vietnam War divided the Australian nation. When the

last Australian troops returned home, there was no official recognition or celebration. Instead, public criticism, disdain and indifference drove many Vietnam veterans further down a track of depression and anger that, for many, began in the very jungles of Vietnam. It wasn't until 1987 that the Australian government organised the 'Welcome Home' march in Sydney to give the veterans some public recognition.

So it's probably significant that the Vietnam War memorial in Anzac Square was not constructed until 1995 – more than 20 years after the last Australian soldier left Vietnam. Perhaps the delay can be interpreted as evidence of the initial 'abandonment' of the veterans. And perhaps the 1995 memorial can be interpreted as evidence that, twenty years later, Australian society had come to terms with the Vietnam War experience in a different way. However, as above, we have no way of measuring the popular support for the eventual construction of a Vietnam War memorial in Anzac Square.

The issue of a 'time delay' is also interesting when we study the two memorials to World War 2. It opens up debates about 'historiography'.

### ***'historiography'***

Historiography is the study of how history is written. In the CHP *Historical Literacies* it is mentioned in 'Narratives of the past' ('understanding multiple narratives') and in 'Contention and contestability' ('public and professional historical debate').

Put simply, there has been a significant shift in the ways that Australia's past has been depicted. Fifty years ago, almost all histories of Australia were 'celebratory' – tales of the progress of civilization across the continent, of Australian achievement at home and heroism abroad. The figures that dominated such histories were overwhelmingly white, male and prominent.

In the last few decades particularly, these celebratory histories have been critiqued by some historians. More 'critical' histories have been produced. They have questioned many of the celebratory assumptions of the earlier histories. And they have given voice to people who rarely appeared in those histories – Indigenous Australians, women, lower class people, non-European settlers.

It's possible to see the World War 2 memorials in Anzac Square as part of this historiographical shift. As noted in the article, the two memorials depict more ordinary, down-to-earth aspects of warfare. Of the five people depicted, only one is a healthy, fit, ready-for-battle soldier. Two of the figures are wounded, fairly helpless people. And the two others are a woman (female Army nurse) and an Indigenous person (Papua-New Guinean). Neither scene shown is a heroic, triumphant battle scene. Instead, one shows a wounded soldier on the Kokoda Trail at a time when defeat was a real possibility. The other shows a wounded soldier at his most vulnerable – semi-naked, helpless on a stretcher. Here is the ordinary pathos of war. Here are the everyday, anonymous players in the historical drama. And here on the base of the memorials are displayed the everyday items of wartime life.

Perhaps it's also possible to interpret the memorials as evidence of a shift in popular ideas and feelings about warfare. For many, perhaps, the celebratory appeal of warfare has lessened. In its place there could be a greater sense of the tragedy of warfare, and greater empathy for the ordinary lives disrupted, damaged and lost. If so, Anzac Square can help us understand another aspect of historical literacy of 'narratives of the past' – 'the shape of change and continuity over time'. At Anzac Square we may continue to commemorate the involvement of Australians in conflict, but in a changing way.

To read more about the principles and practices of History teaching and learning, and in particular the set of Historical Literacies, go to *Making History: A Guide for the Teaching and Learning of History in Australian Schools* –

<http://www.hyperhistory.org/index.php?option=displaypage&Itemid=220&op=page>