
With the death of the last Anzac veteran in April 2015, Anzac Day became a commemoration without a living memory. Jo Hawkins’ *Consuming Anzac: The History of Australia’s Most Powerful Brand* is a deftly crafted account of how marketing has seen the Anzac legend not only survive without a living memory, but thrive well into this century.

*Consuming Anzac* examines the rise of the Anzac brand, how it has evolved and how it has been exploited. In Chapter One, ‘A national heirloom…more precious than gold’: Anzac in consumer culture, 1915-1921, Hawkins examines how both government and the private sector saw immediate value in Anzac symbolism. While private interests moved quickly to capitalise on Gallipoli, the federal government also rapidly moved to regulate the exploitation of the new national story. The protection of this ‘sacred’ event from the banality of commercialism prevented private interests and even veterans from using the term. If the government of the day had planned on putting an end to the commercialisation of Anzac, its attempt was in vain.

In Chapter Two: ‘You cannot buy Anzac Day’: commemoration and commerce on Australia’s sacred day, c. 1920-1980, Hawkins explores the solidification of Anzac tradition. Government legislators enacted legislation to commemorate the day, and the RSL grew into its role as custodian of the legend. While commemoration of the day became important to Australians, Hawkins argues that there was no consensus over what this commemoration should look like – each state had its own laws around the regulation of trading and leisure activities. The previously hard-line RSL stance on the sacredness of the day began to soften as the general public began to question war commemoration, particularly during the unpopular Vietnam War. Adopting a more pragmatic approach the RSL relented to allow leisure activities in the afternoon which could also raise much-needed funds for veterans’ organisations.

Chapter Three: ‘An absolute flood that takes place all year long’: bestselling Great War books, c. 1980-2015 examines the surge of consumer demand for military history. With the growth of interest in trauma and victims of war, narrative fiction, which could express human emotion, found a willing and receptive audience. Professional historians despaired that Australians were not learning their history but rather ‘consuming emotion’.

Chapter Four: ‘Don’t risk your once in a lifetime Anzac experience’: the transformation of the Gallipoli Dawn Service, c. 1980-2015 looks at the travel industry and how it has capitalised on what was once a cheap and cheerful
backpacker experience at Gallipoli. As the crowds grew, governments intervened to build necessary infrastructure and control both the commemoration and the conduct of its audience. But as the event has become more staged, crowds have been staying away seeking more authentic experiences. This has not deterred promoters though with tours to the Western Front now becoming a staple offering.

In Chapter Five: ‘Let’s play these Anzac Day blockbusters right around the nation’: inventing the Anzac Day Clash, c. 1980-2015 Hawkins looks at the fairly recent “tradition” of the AFL’s Anzac Day Game. The Victorian RSL abandoned its objection to football being played on Anzac Day, perhaps hoping that money from the game could be used for veterans’ organisations. It is sad, however, that of the overall gate takings, only a small fraction is in fact donated, not to veterans’ organisations, but to the Shrine of Remembrance, thus continuing the endless cycle of commemoration.

Chapter Six: ‘Is there any Australian brand worth more?’: Anzac in advertising, 1990-2015 looks at the hits and misses of the use of Anzac in advertising. The general public have been quick to shame those who appear to overtly exploit the mythology. However, the federal government and the RSL have also been quick to see the potential of the private sector in spreading the Anzac legend. Those private interests which have dealt with the subject in an approved manner have not been prevented from using Anzac.

Consuming Anzac is a fascinating account of how the Anzac legend has been commodified and consumed since the Gallipoli landings. While one could take a cynical approach to the exploitation of the nation’s most famous story, Consuming Anzac deals with the topic in a pragmatic fashion, exploring how governments and the RSL have loosened their grip on Anzac to both sustain a unifying national story and to raise funds for veterans’ charities respectively. It would be fascinating to see how the growing influence of social media will eventually shape the Anzac mythology and its consumption. Anzac has been an academic tar pit for those expressing opinions which challenge “mainstream” beliefs. Hawkins has skilfully navigated her way through the minefield to produce an important account of how marketing encourages our consumption of the Anzac legacy and how different interests have shaped the legacy to suit contemporary needs.

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