

Just like being there: technologies of reconstructed experience and First World War commemoration

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The announcement in 2014 of New Zealand's ambitious official four year program commemorating the centenary of the First World War reflected a relationship between the War and New Zealand nationalism that has become settled in popular opinion. Invoking the assumption that the War marked the emergence of the country's national identity, Christopher Finlayson, Arts, Culture and Heritage Minister said 'the Centenary is an opportunity to remember and reflect on all New Zealanders' service and sacrifice during the First World War. It is also a time to better understand what we stood for, and why. Through our experience in this conflict, New Zealand's identity and values became more distinct at home and abroad' ('WW100 Programme Announced' 2014). After testing likely levels of public interest in First World War commemoration in a large-scale public survey in 2013 (Colmar Brunton 2013), the government developed a program focused on public education and participation, organized along themes that tracked New Zealand's experience in and of the War over four years. The Centenary program was budgeted at NZ\$25 million for community projects, and with substantial extra funding for large projects, including a major exhibition on the 2015 Gallipoli campaign at the National Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa. Of this, NZ\$400 000 was allocated for Armistice Day commemorations on 11 November 2018. But the emphasis of the program was on a broad range of public events across the country, with funding for theatre performances and art exhibitions, and popular, participatory history programs, some online.

There has been less criticism in New Zealand than Australia of First World War commemoration, but nevertheless, by 2015, the centenary of Gallipoli, some critics suggested that New Zealand had reached 'peak poppy,' and 'Anzac fatigue', and that commemoration glorified and sanitized the reality of war (Edwards 2015). While this critique has been levelled at traditional commemoration activities like remembrance services, it has also been applied to the more 'entertainment'-focused aspects of commemoration among Centenary projects (Edwards 2015). My analysis in this chapter of New Zealand's commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the Armistice is framed by the debate over the role of both the War itself and its historical remembrance in public discourses of nationalism. I argue that as

the War has receded into the past, and beyond the experience of the living, individual emotional identification with those involved has come to supplant the focus on grief, loss and mourning which characterized Armistice Day commemoration in New Zealand until the outbreak of the Second World War. The Armistice commemoration demonstrates the challenges that formal state commemoration faces in this transition – challenges which can be effectively met through the employment of technology in commemorative exhibitions. As I show, these recast the relationship between the War and New Zealand national identity, shifting from claims about the historical emergence of New Zealand as an independent nation, to an emphasis on the nation's technological skill and capability. New Zealand national identity is thus presented less in terms of military achievement than in practical and technological prowess, demonstrated during the War, and also, significantly, in its commemoration.

I explore these developments by examining the experience of commemoration, through attendance at the national ceremony at the National War Memorial on the centenary of the Armistice (Remembrance Day in New Zealand). I contrast this with the commemorative experience of attending an exhibition linked not to the Armistice, but to the Gallipoli campaign – in which commemorative experience in New Zealand is concentrated. I describe my own experience and responses of commemoration, as well as my observation of the reactions of other visitors to these events. In this way, I capture what Shanti Sumartojo terms a ‘commemorative atmosphere’, constituted by individual responses and perceptions blended with memorial landscapes (Sumartojo 2016). As War commemoration frames and reinforces conceptions of national identity, commemorative atmospheres contribute to this framing – but also, in their incorporation of participant responses, can demonstrate the inconsistencies and failings of state-sponsored national identity construction in commemoration. Reporting on the commemorative experience and atmosphere at the National War Memorial service, I argue that the Armistice commemoration, while an essential part of the Centenary celebration in New Zealand, was not able to mobilize the emotional affect and visitor identification of the technologically advanced and innovative celebration of the Gallipoli experience. Whereas traditional services seek to elicit an experience of mourning, technology-driven exhibits aim to produce a heightened sensory and emotional embodied experience – rather than ‘we mourn them’, the affective aim here is ‘we’re sharing an experience with them.’ The historical distance is thus closed by emotional

engagement, and emotional identification, mediated by technological achievement, is effectively folded in to narratives of national identity.

I begin with a brief outline of the history of First World War commemoration in New Zealand, and its relationship to nationalism projects. I then report the experience of participating in War commemoration on the anniversary of the Armistice, and explore what it represents about the relationship between War commemoration and state-sponsored nationalism.

The First World War and New Zealand nationalism

While in Australia, the War and particularly the events at Gallipoli were conscripted early on into articulations of emergent nationalism, the story in New Zealand has been more complex (Smits 2018). In 1914, New Zealand had held Dominion status, with its limited autonomy, for only seven years, and its white settler population was overwhelmingly British in origin, and regarded themselves as British subjects. There was considerable early enthusiasm for the country's entry into the War. The reduction in numbers of volunteers by 1916 prompted the introduction of conscription over some spirited but minority opposition from workers and pacifists (Belich 2001). Out of a population of about one million, 100,000 New Zealanders served in the War, of whom about 18,000 died – a larger proportion of the population than in the other Dominions (Belich 2001: 112).

Diaries and other accounts suggest that over the course of the War, while serving with British and other Dominion troops, soldiers came increasingly to identify themselves as New Zealanders (Burton 1956) – a term previously applied mainly to the indigenous Maori people. However there is no evidence that at the time or immediately after the War, the experience of it had created a sense of distinctive identity or independent nationalism at home (Belich 2001: 117-118). Rather, the popular view was, as Maureen Sharpe argues, that ‘the soldiers had proved their country’s right to membership in the British Empire’ (Sharpe 1981: 98). New Zealand had established nationhood, but as a British nation overseas. This shaped the interpretation of the Anzac experience: while sacrifice for a greater good was a key Anzac theme in both Australia and New Zealand, in the former, as Mein Smith puts it, the sacrifice was for newly emergent national glory, while in the latter, it was for the Empire (Mein Smith 2016: 194; Sharpe 1981: 104). Unredeemed by triumphalist nationalism, sacrifice remained a consistently powerful theme in War commemoration in New Zealand. In part because of the

relatively high death count of New Zealanders in the War, ritualized grief and mourning, and personal bereavement have consistently been strongly emphasized both in Armistice Day (after the Second World War, Remembrance Day) and Anzac Day ceremonies (Mein Smith 2016).

It is only since the 1980s, with the emergence of a new grassroots sense of independent nationalism, and particularly an independent foreign policy for New Zealand, that the country's participation in the First World War, and particularly the Gallipoli experience, has been actively celebrated as a marker of national identity (Smits 2018: 70-71; Hucker 2010). By the early 1990s, young New Zealanders were travelling abroad in larger numbers and visiting Anzac Cove, particularly on Anzac Day, in company with young Australians for a shared experience of national community. Interest in New Zealand's experience on the Western Front, and the War more broadly is even more recent (Sheehan and Davison 2017). However, the Colmar Brunton survey conducted in 2012 found that 77% of respondents associated the First World War as a whole with New Zealand's national identity (Colmar Brunton 2013). The conservative National government which promoted and led the four-year long War commemoration program emphasized the significance of the War, including both the fighting abroad and social developments at home, in the emergence of an independent national identity.

Commemorating the Armistice, 11 November 2018

My account of memorial events in New Zealand on the anniversary of the Armistice reflects the historical background to the Centenary celebration, the relationship between Armistice remembrance and Anzac, and the relationship between war commemoration and projects of national identity. Attempts to commemorate the Armistice faced a major obstacle, given that Remembrance Day was no longer observed in New Zealand – rendered obsolete by the intervention of the Second World War, historical distance from the death of family members, and the consolidation of Anzac Day in national war commemoration (Robinson 2010: 79-82). The Armistice anniversary must also be viewed in context as the final event (although not the culmination) of a Centenary program extending over an unprecedented four-year period. The key memorial event of 11 November was the Armistice Centenary national ceremony at the Pukeahu National War Memorial Park in Wellington. The ceremony, a formal state occasion attended by the Prime Minister, the Governor General, and

personnel from the armed forces, attempted to combine the traditional emphasis on sacrifice, loss and mourning (coded in current terms as ‘trauma’) with a final celebration of the end of the War and future hopes for peace, recalling the announcement of the Armistice.

I was one of a modest crowd, estimated in the hundreds, who attended the ceremony on a sunny and warm Sunday morning. Most attendees were middle-aged and older, and many were curious tourists with backpacks and maps; while some in a cordoned off area in the front were in military uniform, an earlier dawn, and a later sunset service were held by and for the armed services. The main service, attended by the Prime Minister and Governor General, began with one of two awkward incorporations of multi-media technology into a traditional ceremony: a 100-gun salute, fired not at the Memorial Park, but six kilometres away at the Wellington waterfront, and broadcast to those attending the ceremony on large screens. The broadcast began without preamble, and the crowd’s attention, focused on their immediate surroundings, took some time to focus on the screens. At the conclusion of the broadcast, the ceremony at the Memorial itself began, with a Karanga – a solemn and sonorous exchange of calls led by a Maori woman, and designed to acknowledge the coming together of visitors and hosts, and the beginning of formal proceedings. The official party paid their respects at the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior. In a moment of visual drama, a long red banner was unfurled from the top of the carillon tower, and streamed down. The Peace bell tolled eleven times and the two-minute silence was observed, followed by the national anthem, sung in both Te Reo Maori and English. After the Karakia, a Maori prayer and invocation, the Governor General and Prime Minister delivered addresses invoking not New Zealand achievements in the War, but rather its horrors and losses. Prime Minister Ardern described the long-term suffering of some individual soldiers, and concluded ‘By November 1918, we were a nation reeling’ (Ardern, 2018).

For those of us present at the ceremony, the stately, solemn, measured and formal proceedings, and the Maori chants were affecting, but did not entirely dampen a prevailing holiday mood - juxtaposed as they were with bright and warm Wellington weather, and with birdsong. As the crowd of onlookers behind the official rope was relatively small, it was easy to see the speakers and proceedings, but the monumental structure and layout of the Memorial site, with its imposing flights of stairs and courtyards meant that we were clearly looking on to the ceremony from outside. A retired serviceman quietly passed around the crowd, checking to see if everyone was all right, and if anyone needed water. After the official addresses, the ceremony shifted from formal mourning to celebration of the peace

announcement: a multi-genre arts performance took place, including dance, poetry, song (Maori waiata), readings from the letters and recollections of those serving in the War. This was an official rendering of the response to the news of the armistice on 11 November, 1918: ‘There were songs and cheers, miscellaneous pipings and blastings, and tootings and rattlings – a roaring chorus of gladsome sounds’ (*‘The Armistice Signed’* 1918). The crowd were silent and passive in response to the formal performance piece, and its structured sound contrasted with the spontaneity of the original celebratory noise it referenced, reflecting the self-conscious artifice of an Armistice Day ceremony being held long after annual commemoration of the Armistice had faded away.

[insert Figure xx.1 here]

Figure 1: The Roaring Chorus at the Armistice Centenary National Ceremony, 11 November 2018. © Mark Tantrum

In a second multi-media intervention in the ceremony, a five metre high ‘Armistice Beacon’ was installed in the War Memorial Park, in the public precinct. This was described as an interactive digital installation – a cylinder of screens that displayed messages ‘sent by New Zealanders around the world’ expressing their thoughts and sentiments on the War and the Armistice. Some messages recalled soldiers in their family past who had served during the War, many were expressions of sadness about loss, horror at the destruction of the War, hopes for peace, or that it would ‘never happen again.’ These sentiments often expressed by school children, echoed those popularly expressed on Armistice Day in the interwar period; it is difficult to interpret the meaning they would have had to those contributing them now, given the many similarly devastating wars that have occurred since 1918, and they underscored the inevitable although probably unintended way in which the ceremony incorporated self-conscious historical re-enactment. The situating of the Beacon no doubt indicated an intention on the part of the Centenary organizers for it to symbolize spontaneous public response to the formal events. But from the perspective of visitors, the Armistice Beacon was not well incorporated: its messages played no part in the ceremony, and as a physical structure, its function and purpose were not immediately apparent. Its screened messages could only be read close-up and fleetingly, and few spectators attempted to do so – treating it mainly as an object to negotiate in looking for a place to stand or sit.

[insert Figure xx.2 here].

Figure 2: The Armistice Beacon, Pukeahu National War Memorial Park, Wellington.
Image by author.

The official Armistice centenary ceremony, perhaps more than other events of the First World War Centenary, reflected the inevitable anachronism inherent in the project. While the themes of suffering, grief, sacrifice and mourning which had characterized Armistice and Remembrance Sunday memorials in the past were formally expressed, the hopes for peace and joy at the end of the War could not be authentically reproduced with the hindsight of one hundred years. Moreover, the ceremony functioned as spectacle rather than participatory experience. Visitors watched the proceedings, and could if they wished text messages to the Beacon, but their responses, whether verbal, emotional or textual were separate from the cultural meanings produced in the ceremony. They did not participate either in making the celebratory noise, or in responding to the Beacon – the historical distance between the War and the present remained unclosed. The ceremony invoked a conception of national identity which was grounded, consistent with the history of war commemoration in New Zealand, in the suffering caused by the War, but it achieved very limited affective engagement with audiences.

Armistice commemoration at the Museum

Even on the anniversary of the Armistice, public attendance was much higher at museum exhibitions of the War than at the official ceremonies held in Wellington and elsewhere across the country. *Gallipoli: the scale of our war*, on at the National Museum Te Papa Tongarewa was consistently the most popular of these, and I visited it on 11 November 2018 to explore a commemorative strategy which employs technology to create a very different experience for visitors, and a different framing of national identity from that on display at the national ceremony. *Gallipoli* was co-produced by Te Papa with Weta Workshops, a design and film special effects production studio, co-founded by Peter Jackson, director of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* film trilogies which have been extensively deployed in marketing New Zealand for overseas tourism. Weta Workshops has been a key player in special effects productions for the New Zealand film industry, including for Jackson's films, and for films made overseas. *Gallipoli* was designed to represent a central theme of the Centenary program: that the scale of the War for New Zealand was both extended and magnified – affecting the wider population at home for years to come – and

intimate and personal, in its effects on individuals and families (Ross 2015). Over 2.5 million visitors had seen the exhibition by April 2019, when the government announced that it would remain open for a further three years (Te Papa 2019). The exhibition provides a chronological account of New Zealand's role in the eight month Gallipoli campaign, deploying a mix of soundscapes, visual texts and audio-recordings, drawing on letters and diaries of those at the front, artefacts and recreations.

Much of the display offers up-close and intimate experiences to visitors: a recreated (and sanitized) trench and dug-out; an intricate miniature cut-away diorama revealing the detailed workings of a hospital ship. In addition to displays of original text, a narrative written by museum staff in the voice of an ordinary soldier uses unusually colloquial language and graphic novel-style design (Williams 2015). A specially composed soundtrack, including recordings of music sung by soldiers at Gallipoli creates, powerfully evokes atmosphere and offers an immersive experience for visitors. But the most dramatic and highlighted features of the exhibition are eight outsize silicon and fibreglass reconstructions of human figures, recalling the hyper-realist work of Australian sculptors Ron Mueck and Sam Jinks. These are engaged, in various ways in the pursuit of the War: soldiers in various dramatic scenes, a medical officer at the front, a nurse on the hospital ship. Each is 2.4 times human size, and positioned in a circular chamber of its own, with the reproduced original text on the wall written by each individual character. All are based upon actual historical figures chosen by the exhibition creators from those who left written records, revealing individual personalities.

These monumental figures were designed both to arrest the attention of viewers and to convey personal experiences – particularly the suffering and reflection recorded by the original individuals. Each is depicted engaged in the throes of emotion, vividly expressed: a nurse weeps over letters she had written to her brother, now returned after his death; two machine gunners fire off rounds while a comrade lies dead beside them; a soldier sentenced to death for falling asleep at his post clutches in despair his fly-blown rations. There is a wealth of information on the Te Papa website, in the form of videos and blogs, about the long and complex process of constructing the figures. As Kirstie Ross, the lead curator of the exhibition put it: 'each sculpture is the result of meticulous attention to detail and the use of cutting-edge materials and technologies such as 3D printing, and good old "Kiwi ingenuity"....' (Ross 2015: 26).

The level of verisimilitude of these giant figures and their settings created a distinctive commemorative atmosphere at *Gallipoli*. For visitors, the experience of walking from room to room and encountering the figures was uncanny, in the Freudian sense of *unheimlich* – both familiar and unfamiliar. They appeared so life-like, and yet, in their size, were so obviously not. Each figure was positioned and lit in semi-darkness to draw the gaze, and visitors walked around them slowly and silently. Our perspective was managed by the small size of the chambers – we could be no further from the figures than three meters. This, their size, and the fact that they are mounted on plinths, meant that our gaze was drawn up to the figures as if they were heroic public statues, but then lingered with fascination on the details of reproduction. The pores, fine hairs, and lines of human skin were meticulously reproduced, as was the texture of clothing, the objects they held, the sweat and dirt on their bodies and the flies on their food. In their giant size and gross materiality, they compelled awe and fascination – both at the intimate emotional intensity of the characters and situations, and at the technological achievement of construction. After the arresting moment of confrontation, as we entered each chamber, visitors moved closer to the figures to examine them, and marveled quietly to each other at the ingenuity of the lifelike reproductions. The quiet darkness of these chambers, the drama of the centrally lit figures and the restricted movement of onlookers around them contrasted with the busy chatter and free, multi-path dispersal and motion of visitors in the adjoining larger galleries.

Commemorative technology, affect and national identity

Some historians in New Zealand have criticized the ‘Hollywoodization’ of *Gallipoli* (Phillips 2016) and certainly the influences of film are explicit in the conception and execution of the project. The decision to enter into an unprecedented partnership between Te Papa and Weta Workshops was designed not only to create a distinctive audience pull for the exhibition, but also to ‘animate and expand’ the museum’s approach to exhibition making. It would capitalize on the ‘Wellywood’ brand of New Zealand’s film production industry, and the super-size figures would function as ‘the “X factor” that would capture audiences, especially a younger generation with restless minds and limited attention spans, and generally little interest in the exhibition’s historical subject matter’ (Ross 2015: 26). The influence of film making is evident in the eight giant figures: actual rather than on screen, they nevertheless recall on-film ‘characters’, larger than life and caught up in a drama. Curators at

Te Papa compared them to movie close-ups (Ross 2015: 27). The intention is to emphasize emotional identification with the characters/individuals depicted, rather than to provide a full critical analysis of the events that led to the War and New Zealand's participation in it. The effect of the figures – their realism, size and dramatic arrangement – is, as John Armstrong comments, to prescribe an empathic response (Armstrong 2017). One visitor to *Gallipoli* recorded their feelings afterwards on one of the paper poppies offered to visitors for their responses: ‘This is very different from the unfeeling and emotionally distant historical coverage of a war. I felt a weight in my lower chest as I learned about the stories and suffering of the people, witnessed their rage and despair sculpted on their faces, and felt the ground tremble under my feet. I was immersed by this, and now feel much more sympathy towards these people’ (Visitor’s handwritten message 2015).

While some have suggested that the over-sized figures portray a triumphalist view of the War, my own response, and that of others recorded on Te Papa’s blogs suggest otherwise. Ross argues in fact that an important purpose of the over-size figures was to emphasize individual experience, and to ‘dislodge *Gallipoli* from the received wisdom that the campaign forged New Zealand’s collective national identity’ (Ross 2015: 27). Viewed each alone, the figures evoke empathy for individual suffering. But collectively, they narrativize that emotional response: as visitors move through the chambers, the sequence of the figures’ expressions move from excitement to despair, and finally to resignation. In this, they achieve the affective engagement with visitors that was limited in the national Armistice ceremony.

But while the *Gallipoli* exhibition does not promote the grounding of New Zealand identity in militarism, it nevertheless contributes to nationalist myth-making. This is apparent in the commemorative atmosphere produced by visitor responses in the exhibition. I have described above the emotional engagement of visitors with the figures on display, but also evident was their awed fascination with the technological achievement of the giant figures – both in visitor behavior at the exhibition and in comments left on the Te Papa blog. The museum, identifying strong public curiosity in how the figures were made, features them in a series of online videos explaining the details of construction (Bruce 2015). These tell a story of sophisticated technological innovation by Weta Workshops, combined with featured ingenious improvisation: avocado skin to create the effect of pores in skin! The technological innovation of the special effects industry was of course the reason Te Papa entered into the co-production agreement, and also the basis for the extensive public investment in the exhibition provided by the government (Ross 2015: 24). *Gallipoli*

demonstrates the technological skill and capability promoted by a succession of recent governments as key to economic development. Visitors marvel at the achievements of New Zealand in constructing the exhibition, at the same time as they are invited to admire Ross's 'Good old "Kiwi ingenuity"' and 'no. 8 wire mentality' (an ability mythically ascribed to New Zealanders to solve problems with basic to-hand materials) of New Zealand soldiers. The virtues of practicality, stoicism and resourcefulness, also required for farmers in remote country, and associated with settler national identity, are all on display here both in the subject matter and the development of *Gallipoli*.

Conclusion

Both the national ceremony and the *Gallipoli* exhibition address the fundamental challenge that emerged in the Armistice centenary ceremony. How can state-sponsored commemoration engender 'remembrance' of an event now beyond all living memory, and beyond subsequent cataclysmic conflicts, in ways which engage audiences and reinforce projects of national identity construction? The organizers of the national ceremony recognized the potential of technology to achieve this, but the deployment of interactive social media in the Armistice Beacon had very limited success. It was not incorporated into the ceremony in such a way as to facilitate engagement or identification on the part of visitors and observers, who remained outside and separate from the events. The potential for digital technology and social media to overcome the chronological and affective distance between the War and contemporary audiences is demonstrated in War commemoration projects elsewhere, for example in the innovative use of social media to promote personal interaction with the events of the Gallipoli landings, by the Australian media (Sear 2017). The *Gallipoli* exhibition avoids the historical re-enactment aspect of those social media projects, however, focusing instead on eliciting an emotional response and cathexis with character. Able to identify on an emotional level with characters, visitors are not required to recall distant (and often non-existent) family connections and are able to express a-historical hopes that the horrors of the War should never occur again.

Contrary to the claims of critics, both the traditional Armistice Centenary ceremony and *Gallipoli* framed New Zealand national identity in terms of suffering and loss, rather than militarist triumphalism. But the exhibition presented also an alternative and redeeming account, in its focus on technological skill. New Zealand's performance in the War, and in

commemorating the War are presented seamlessly, as empathetic sorrow is resolved into admiration for and identification with an updated technologically adept, resourceful and ingenious nation. Through the lens of personal experience, exploring affective and sensory responses, we can trace a shift not only in how the War is commemorated in New Zealand, but also in the role it plays in the politics of national identity.

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