Immortalizing the exploits of the Anzacs

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The Australian War Memorial in Canberra, the familiar sandstone building below the tree-clad slopes of Mount Ainslie (Figure 1), is unique in that its comprehensive collection of war memorabilia and records, paintings and models was formed specifically to serve as a memorial to the Australians who fought and died in World War One. Despite attempts in the late 1970s(1) to remove the word 'memorial' from the title of the institution, this concept has survived and is now firmly embedded in the Australian national psyche. World War Two resulted in widening of the scope of the institution to cover the events of 1938-45. Today the collections include items representing all conflicts in which Australians have fought—even those prior to Federation.

The ceremony which marked the official opening of the building on 11 November 1941 concluded a lengthy period of gestation, for the Memorial's conception can be traced back to Gallipoli, where the Australian press correspondent and future official war historian, C E W Bean (Figure 2), became imbued with a deep and abiding regard for the exploits of the Anzacs. From that time on Bean devoted much of his life to recording the deeds of Australia's fighting men on 1914-18—as war correspondent, as editor of the famous Gallipoli troop magazine The Anzac Book, as official historian, and as the instigator behind the decision that Australia should keep her own war records, which in turn led to the establishment of an Australian museum, of which he was the founder. Bean brought a quasi-religious zeal to the notion that future generations should never forget the sacrifices and sufferings of those years. A strong case has also been argued that as editor of The Anzac Book he substantially contributed to the creation of the Anzac legend itself.(2)

Figure 1: The Australian War Memorial
(photo: Australian War Memorial).
Bean followed in the footsteps of Max Aitken (later Lord Beaverbrook), who had broken new ground with the British military authorities in persuading them to allow Canada to keep her own military records. Assisted by an officer of the Australian High Commission, H C Smart, Bean established the Australian War Records Section in London in May 1917 (Figure 3), whereby Australia gradually took over from the British War Records Office in Chancery Lane responsibility for keeping her own records of war. Commencing with a small staff under the direction of Lieutenant John Treloar, the section quickly expanded its record-keeping function to include trophy and relic collection and to organize the war art programme, photographs, films, publications and, most important of all, to persuade the Australian government to consent to the formation of a federal museum in Australia at the end of the war. Once this permission was granted in August 1917,(3) the section's work was undertaken with missionary fervour which it would be difficult to surpass (Figure 4) and which now looks almost ludicrous, but which in fact is the *raison d'être* of the Australian War Memorial.

Initially the Australian War Records Section was a branch of the AIF. When it disbanded at the end of the war its activities were taken over by the Australian War Museum, the governing body of which had been established in Melbourne in 1918. The museum was formed as a civil institution under the umbrella of the Department of Home and Territories, but many of the military personnel who had worked so whole-heartedly for the Australian War Records Section in London and at the Front became, after their demobilisation from the army, the first staff members of the museum. These included the hard-working John Treloar, who within a year became the second Director, a post which he held until his death in 1952. A number of those who served on the governing body of the museum during its formative years were high-ranking military men, some of whom had strongly wielded their influence with the Australian government to obtain initial approval for its creation.(4) General Brudenell White was one such.

The Australian War Records Section was therefore the precursor of the Australian War Memorial. Its two-year life span (1917-19) not only ensured that Australian war records were properly kept for the first time, but its activities laid the foundation of Australia's war 'memorial-museum', for it was during this period that the idea evolved that the future federal museum, which was envisaged as being a vast repository for relics representing every facet and aspect of Australia's part in the war, would also serve as a memorial to those who had fought and paid the final price.

It was the memorialising concept behind the museum which impelled those working for the Australian War Records Section to act with almost fanatical faith. The future museum became a 'sacred' cause and C E W Bean was, as it were, the Chief Priest of the cult. Bean confessed to not being 'a religious man', referring to his uncertainty regarding 'any allegiance to the Christian faith', but he nevertheless saw the war as a struggle
Figure 3: AIF headquarters in Horseferry Road, London, including the offices of the Australian War Records Section. (photo* Australian War Memorial).

Figure 4: War diaries collected by the Australian War Records Section are a valuable part of the Memorial's archival collection. (photo: Australian War Memorial).
between Christian idealism and 'against other ideas (which) we hold vile'.(5) Combined with his deep-seated nationalism and a keen sense of history, this germ of religious sentiment accounts for his turning the concept of a war museum into one of a patriotic shrine. From his extensive writing on the subject it is clear that there are two shining strands in his philosophy regarding the museum - a desire first, to fully recognize Australian achievements in the war and to further Australian nationhood and nationalism and, second, to immortalize the fallen warriors and their deeds. Religious terminology frequently finds its way into Bean's writing on the subject. For instance when referring to The Anzac Book as being a 'lasting memento of Anzac' he added that it was 'sacred...to any genuine Australian'. He also considered that the man in charge of the AIF should be a 'worshipper' of their qualities, while stretcher-bearers were described as 'angels'.(6)

That the material so assiduously collected by the devoted staff of the Australian War Records Section had commemorative significance is clearly stated in an AIF order of September 1917, which was entitled 'National Collections of War Trophies, etc.'(7) and which provided official military approval for the collection of trophies and relics. This order is a landmark. It not only extended the scope of the Australian War Records Section and was the green light for the notorious Australian trophy scramble at the front, but it concluded with this invocation which officially introduced the memorialising concept:

'The value of these collections will depend entirely on the efforts of all members of the AIF, and it is hoped that every unit will make its contribution to these National Collections a memorial worthy of itself and of the Australian Imperial Force.'

The items collected were to become the AIF's own memorial - the mortar guns, the duckboards, the mud-stained uniforms, the maps and war diaries would speak for themselves in commemorating the fallen and would show to Australians at home and to the world at large that the recently-federated nation was no mere off-shoot of Empire, but a fully-fledged entity of which its sons and daughters could be proud. It had proved itself in war and not been found wanting.

At the beginning of 1918, Bean left the Western Front - where as war correspondent he had been following literally - in the muddy tracks of the First Anzac Corps and returned to London in order to commence his official history. The detailed work of the Australian War Records Section was now in the hands of the capable and fanatically hard-working Treloar, but Bean maintained a keen interest in its activities as he later did, directly and indirectly, in all the major developments of the Australian War Memorial. In March 1918 he composed a lengthy memorandum to Senator Pearce, the Australian Minister of Defence, outlining the past and future development of the museum, in which he wrote:

'It is suggested that the great Federal War Collection if established at the Commonwealth Capital in a building worthy to be a memorial of the Australian Imperial Force, would be the finest monument ever raised to any army. This memorial to the AIF would be a far grander and more sacred monument that the one raised to Napoleon... at the Invalides in Paris. The monument itself would contain within it the records of the Force, the pictures, trophies, and visible relics of its work.'

He went on to suggest that the monument should be of three parts 'the great central building to be the Museum, one wing to be the Gallery, the other wing to be the Library'.(8)

The museum, however, was not simply to serve as a monument to past sacrifices nor as an object lesson on the evils of war. Bean, the fervent patriot, envisaged it as having an on-going role to play in the great future he saw for Australia. When in 1917 the British were considering the establishment of their own national war museum (now the Imperial War Museum) the Colonial Office appears to have considered it proper that the British should have first serve of
dominion trophies. Stirred to the depths of his deep-seated nationalism Bean wrote that the War Museums mean

'far more to Australia than they do to Great Britain. For us, they are the foundation of our national museums; the beginning of a series of national institutions, which I hope will equal anything in the world. One wants to see in Australian centres of study and research of art and culture which are not to play a secondary part to any others in the world...’(10)

By 1918, from modest beginnings in rooms belonging to the British Records Office in Chancery Lane, the Australian War Records Section (AWRS) had widely expanded its activities in London, on the Western Front and in Palestine and Egypt. It would be difficult to surpass the zeal and enthusiasm of its officers, particularly Henry Gullett (later the museum's first director) and his cousin Sid Gullett, who were both instrumental in organising trophy collection at the front, and in educating officers in the correct and comprehensive keeping of records and war diaries. At the end of the war the total staff numbered some 580 persons.(10) There was a crusading spirit about the whole enterprise, clearly shown by Trelawny’s letters. No matter was too small to escape his attention. He wrote regularly to those in charge of AWRS activities at the front, acknowledging their weekly reports and sending detailed and encouraging instructions calculated to improve the quality and quantity of their collecting and recording work.

An incident connected with an exhibition of Australian war art and photographs, held at the Grafton Galleries in London in June 1918, illustrates the seriousness with which Bean and others regarded the memorialising concept behind all the activities connected with the AWRS and the future federal museum. As one of the official Australian war photographers, Frank Hurley had contributed to the exhibition. Rightly or wrongly, Bean considered that Hurley saw the exhibition as an opportunity for self-advertisement rather than a memorial of the sacrifices of the AIF. He even went so far as to write to the Department of Defence in Australia asking that Hurley not have any connection with the exhibition when it moved to Australia and also to the editor of the Sunday Times in Sydney to ensure that Hurley would not receive unduly favourable press comment. A certain Mr Southwell was accompanying the pictures to Australia and it appears was one who had 'proper regard for the great sacrifices, and the sacred memory of the great men to whose bravery these pictures should be a monument’.(11)

On 18 January 1919 Bean left London en route for Australia, via Gallipoli. During the weeks at sea he penned a further memorandum concerning the records and history of the AIF and 'the establishment of a Memorial', which again confirms his intention regarding the philosophy behind the museum. He wrote: ‘The final resting-place of these records and relics would be the AIF Memorial...’(12)

Not only was the building itself to be a monument to the AIF, but the relics, the pictures, the models all acquired almost supernatural significance. As early as October 1917 Bean had written an article entitled 'Australia's Records Preserved as Sacred Things'.(13) He later referred to the relics having 'as much history and sanctity' attached to them as 'the bones of Captain Cook'.(14) The models, and the paintings were to exemplify

'the sufferings, the utter fatigue, or the danger, the feverish unreality which comes over everyday landscapes during battle times... If our Museum contains such things it will become a centre for pilgrimage not only for Australians but for the world...'

Referring to the war artists he commented: 'I cannot imagine a work that would appeal to them more than that of building up the memorial of the sacrifices and suffering, the daring and the devotion of the AIF'.(15)

Despite the fact that between 1919 and 1925 the Australian War Memorial was actually called the Australian War Museum it is clear that it was to be a 'temple' dedicated to the memory of the fallen,(16) but not, as we have seen a dead monument of stone or
marble, nor simply a house of history, but a purposeful, forward-thinking institution. While future Australians would be encouraged to pause in the 'sacred' aura of the Hall of Memory, (Figure 5) the emphasis was to be on respect for and emulation of the bravery, humour, self-sacrifice and versatility of the Anzacs - the attitudes of mind which would contribute to the advancement of Australian nationhood, and which Bean had observed in outback Australia prior to the war. He was convinced that 'the wild pastoral independent life of Australia' which had produced 'superb soldiers' could be further directed towards educational, cultural and technological pursuits. (17)

The Memorial was part of this plan (Figure 6).

The 'memorial' concept is the 'passion' behind the museum. It is what makes the Australian War Memorial in Canberra different from the Imperial War Museum in London and other similar bodies. This feeling is experienced by many of the 1,250,000 visitors who pour into the building each year, for, as Bean foresaw in this first letter on the subject in November 1916, (19) the Memorials a place for pilgrims.

Figure 5: The Hall of Memory and cloisters

(photo: Australian War Memorial).
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3. AWM file 12/12/1.


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7. Australian Imperial Force. Memorandum to Commanding Officers, National Collections of War Trophies, etc. 7 September 1917, AWM 1013/11.

8. C E W Bean, 'The Australian War Records, An account of the present development overseas and suggestions of course necessary to be taken at the end of the War'. AWM 12/12/1.

9. AWM 12/12/1.

10. 'Map showing the location of offices, etc. of the Australian War Records Section in London, June 1919'. AWM Map 553.

11. AWM 16 4378/1/8.


14. Letter Bean to Treloar, 19 April 1925, Bean Papers, AWM 3DRL 6673, Item 667.

15. Bean Diary, 3DRL 606, Item 118.


18. AWM File 12/12/1.