



“WHATEVER YOU DO, DON’T MENTION THE WAR”

BY ROGER JOYCE/24 APRIL 2014

On a day in Australia when everyone is talking about war, I’d prefer to talk about love...actually. So began an article I wrote on a screenwriting blog, this day four years ago. I’m reminded of my own words, for it’s ANZAC day again and for the twenty-seventh year in a row, there is a sense of disquiet on my Western Front.

If I were invited to be a contributor to the Festival of Dangerous Ideas, my topic would be something along the lines of “what’s the statute of limitations on war remembrance?” or “when is it okay to stop remembering?” I think of this as a “dangerous idea” as of all of the topics I’ve ever got into conversation or robust debate about in this country, anything that whiffs of alternative thinking in regards “ANZAC” is taboo. You can argue about the indigenous population and first settlement, pass the hot potato of republicanism and the flag, debate gay marriage but the questioning of ANZAC is much more a love that dare not speak its name.

I’m reminded of the quote by Bill “Tiger” O’Reilly: “...the world frowns upon those who spit on statues.” I’m English by birth, but migrated here to here, to Sydney, in 1987, not quite, but almost on the eve of ANZAC Day. That first 25 April, I vividly remember thinking “wow, this is a country that like it’s war remembrance.” Maybe it’s because I’d come off the back of 28 years of a different kind of war remembrance.

You see, for me “Remembrance Day” or “Poppy Day” - the closest Sunday to the 11th of the 11th, Armistice Day itself - is always a bleak, grey November day and as a boy, I always watched the sombre ceremony from the Cenotaph in Whitehall on black and white television, with my father.

Elderly men wore long, dark Crombies, the military needed their greatcoats to keep out the ferocious chill that blew down from Parliament Square, all to the soundtrack of a muted drum and Elgar’s Nimrod..

I wasn’t prepared for the sunlight of an April morning in Sydney and children wearing medals (I subscribe to the idea that only he or she who won the medal wears the medal). I also found it difficult to see elderly men deified and borne aloft on this one day and then ignored, left to their elderly shufflings for the rest of the year; the strange old man talking to himself.

My English family’s war story is probably not unlike most of my fellow countrymen and women: my grandfather fought in World War I, I had a great uncle who was a Spitfire pilot and my mother - then a young girl - spent frightened nights sheltering under the dining table of her south London home as the payloads of enemy aircraft fell on her and others; her father absent from his loved ones, out doing his job as a Metropolitan policeman. I grew up in the 1960’s on a “romantic” diet of films detailing “how we won the war”: *Reach For The Sky*, *The Dambusters*, *633 Squadron* and *The Bridge On The River Kwai*.

For me, their are two purpose to war remembrance, two reasons why we pause and reflect: the first is gratitude, to give thanks to those men and women - my ancestors, your ancestors - who made the ultimate sacrifice, for me, for us, so that we might lead the free life that we do. The second reason, is in the hope that the grim recollection of such awful conflict might, just might prevents us from ever warring again.

Alas, the second reason is but a pipe dream. I tend to subscribe to a possible dangerous idea of screenwriting teacher Robert McKee who once said “...as long as there are men in the world, there will be war.”

But here’s where my own idea gets potentially dangerous. In idle moments when I play that game of “If I were Prime Minister, the first thing I’d do is...”, one of the first things I’d do is put forward the idea of a moratorium on ANZAC Day, on remembrance. What if - as an experiment - for five years, we swap thoughts of recollection of war for considerations of peace? Instead of all the column inches written and the minutes of airtime given to talking about, thinking about and breathing in the intoxicating Australian oxygen of ANZAC, we turned our attention to words, images and thoughts that encourage and foster peace? I wonder when it is time to stop looking over our shoulders to worship at the altar the past - for is not ANZAC our new religion - and start to look ahead to be the architects who behold the future?

Earlier in this piece about peace, I talked of my personal “disquiet”, for that is truly what I feel. I don’t want to dismiss history, for we ignore the lessons of the past at our peril, I don’t want to ban or censor all thoughts of war for it is part of the human condition and I indulge as much as anyone. I’ve just finished reading Peter Rees’s *Lancaster Men*, an extraordinarily moving book about the 10,000 Australians who served with Bomber Command in Word War II; men who on returning to Australia, were accused of “hiding in England while we were doing it tough.” So today, an Englishman of 55 years, an Australian of 22, I will pause in thought, I will thank them and then I will turn my mind to peace and love actually.