

ANZAC DAY 1920

Dr Boxer's Service and the Making of Anzac Day

100 years ago Anzac Day 1920 — the fifth anniversary of Gallipoli — was declared the most solemn and impressive to date. Unlike the spontaneous first Anzac Day in 1916, and the muddled observances that followed, this was the result of a conscious effort to make Anzac Day 1920 a sacred day.

For the first Anzac Day in 1916 the call for a day of remembrance arose spontaneously around the country. The government proclaimed a half-holiday on 25 April and suggested church services and recruiting meetings.¹ Recently returned from Gallipoli, soldiers preferred a simple combined service similar to those held at the front. The fact that most towns accepted this form of service testifies to the belief that soldiers had earned the right to speak on such issues. The New Zealand Returned Soldiers' Association (RSA), formed three days later on 28 April 1916, quickly assumed the role as guardian of Anzac Day and successfully lobbied to protect the word 'Anzac' from commercialisation and to withhold licenses for race meetings on Anzac Day.² It was the beginning of the sanctification of the word and the day.

In the following years Anzac Day was marred by confusion. In 1917, with 25 April set aside for local elections, the government suggested that Anzac Day be transferred to St George's Day on 23 April.³ The fact that many communities still observed 25 April reveals the sanctity that the actual date had gained by 1917.⁴ The RSA began to lobby to have Anzac Day legislated as a 'close' holiday (with shops, hotels and cinemas closed).⁵ The government hesitated to act and then suggested to the British government

¹ In the end government offices as well as many businesses closed for the whole day as a result of Anzac Day falling on the Tuesday following Easter Monday: see Under-Sec IA to Heads of Departments, 20 Apr 1920; and minute by P. Kellehar, Asst Under-Sec IA, 23 May 1916, IA1, 13/2/20, Part I, ANZ; *New Zealand Gazette*, No. 38, p. 989 (6 Apr 1916).

² *New Zealand Gazette*, No. 93, p. 2893 (31 Aug 1916); DEC meeting, 28 Apr 1917.

³ Decision of Solicitor-General, 21 Feb 1917, minute by Under-Sec IA, 22 Feb 1917, and Cabinet minute, 22 Feb 1917, Internal Affairs Series IA1, 13/2/20, Pt 1, ANZ.

⁴ NZRSA Dominion Executive Committee (DEC) meeting, 28 Apr 1917, RNZRSA National Office, Anzac House, Wellington; Gen-Sec NZRSA to Min IA, 14 May 1917, IA1, 13/2/20, Pt I, ANZ.

⁵ DEC meeting, 4 Jul 1917.

one commemorative day for the whole empire.⁶ The RSA believed that the first priority was recognition that 'Anzac Day is a New Zealand Day, a National Day.'⁷ The government's inaction meant that Anzac Day in both 1918 and 1919 was marked by considerable confusion, with some businesses remaining open, and on Anzac Day 1919 irate Auckland returned soldiers called out offending firms as they marched down Queen Street.⁸

Despite this unsatisfactory situation, Anzac Day 1920 was widely considered the most impressive yet held.⁹ The day fell on a Sunday and provided the 'close' conditions that the RSA was lobbying to achieve by legislation.¹⁰ In Auckland, Anzac Day also had the presence of the Prince of Wales on a worldwide 'thank-you' tour. But the occasion was enhanced too with the adoption of a new Anzac Day service.

In a move intended to secure uniformity in the manner of observance throughout the country, RSA national president Dr Ernest Boxer promoted a model Anzac Day service that represented a symbolic re-enactment of a burial at the front.¹¹ It came complete with a solemn parade of returned soldiers behind a gun carriage accompanied by a uniform bearer party that later formed a catafalque guard, with bowed heads over reversed arms, around a symbolic bier consisting of wreaths and a soldier's hat. Addresses were confined to mourning and remembrance. Marches and hymns were also deeply mournful. The climax came with the symbolic burial service conducted by an army padre, the silent pause symbolising the committal. The service concluded with a gun salute, followed by the sounding of the Last Post.

Boxer, effectively choreographing a ritual of mourning, stressed that the essential aspects of the service was to create a 'sacred place' and to achieve 'the right mood for its sacredness'. Participants, for example, were to be

⁶ Mentioned in Gov-Gen to Secretary of State for the Colonies, tel., 30 Jan 1920; Min IA to NZRSA, 11 Feb 1920, and reply 7 Apr 1920, IA1, 13/2/20, Pt 2, ANZ; DEC Sub-Committee, 30 Mar 1920.

⁷ *Quick March*, Apr 1919, p. 37.

⁸ *Quick March*, May 1919, p. 30.

⁹ *Quick March*, Apr 1920, p. 51.

¹⁰ Some local authorities still inquired whether the holiday could be transferred to the Monday: letters from the Mayors of Invercargill and Christchurch, 14, 16 Apr 1920 respectively, IA1, 13/2/20, Pt 2, ANZ.

¹¹ *Quick March*, Mar 1920, pp. 73–5.

requested not to applaud during the service. Although run by the RSA the mood was appropriate for the thousands of families who had been deprived of the solace of funerals for loved ones lost overseas. Boxer acknowledged that returned soldiers 'may not feel this [mood]' but that the relatives 'certainly will'. Returned soldiers would have ample opportunity to remember in their own way within the confines of RSA receptions later in the day. It was the start of the private and public ritual of Anzac Day.

Many centres, such as Dunedin, adopted the entire 'Boxer Service', as it was known, while others incorporated parts of it into the service that they had developed over the preceding years.¹² More than the form, however, it was the sentiment that was universal throughout New Zealand, an appropriate mood during the immediate postwar period. Although reformed in later decades, the 'Boxer Service' ritualised the solemn mood of Anzac Day observances in New Zealand, in stark contrast with the more celebratory nature of the observance in Australia.

A century ago the Anzac Day Act, 1920 might have been the end of the story but for a late amendment by Prime Minister William Massey that inadvertently allowed some businesses to remain open and the impact, according to the RSA, was to make Anzac Day 1921 a 'muddled holiday'.¹³ The Anzac Day Amendment Act, 1921 responded to the widespread demand for Anzac Day to be 'a holy day, as a Sunday'.¹⁴ The making of Anzac Day as a holiday and a holy day had been completed.

¹² *Otago Daily Times*, 26 Apr 1920; 'Anzac Day at Dunedin', 1921, film, F10327, Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision https://www.ngataonga.org.nz/collections/catalogue/catalogue-item?record_id=67937

¹³ *NZPD*, 11 Aug 1920. vol. 187, pp. 126–32; *NZPD*, 10 Nov 1920. vol. 189, p. 891; Anzac Day Act, 1920 *New Zealand Statutes*, 1920, No. 78; Gen Sec NZRSA to Acting PM, 8 Jul 1921, IA1, 13/2/20, Part 2, ANZ and *Quick March*, May 1921, p. 36.

¹⁴ William Downie Stewart, Min IA, *NZPD*, 7 Oct 1921, vol. 191, p. 385, 26 Jan 1922, vol. 193, pp. 697–8; Anzac Day Amendment Act, 1921 *New Zealand Statutes*, 1921–22, No. 44 and RSA satisfaction *Quick March*, May 1922, p. 24.