

EDITORIAL

From the President

Historians are familiar with the challenges of honouring public commemoration while also presenting the past in all its complexity, so often at variance with accepted myths and legends. But 2014 and 2015 find many of us struggling to achieve a balance. On the one hand we need to recognise soberly the World War I centenaries, and on the other we have a responsibility to correct the glaring errors and misguided emphases in so many public statements and events.

The AHA's thirty-third annual conference, held at the University of Queensland from 7 to 11 July this year, achieved a judicious balance of marking the centenary of the outbreak of war with a broad focus on 'Conflict in History'. Thanks to the hard work of the conference organising committee, led by Associate Professor Martin Crotty, as well as several of the Executive Committee, keynote lectures and plenary panels ranged from thematic and theoretical considerations of violence in history; to British, German, Russian and American women's participation in both world wars; to issues within Australians' commemoration of the First World War battlefields over the last century. Indeed, the conference began with Marilyn Lake's presidential address, provocatively titled '1914: Death of a Nation'. Professor Lake built on Henry Bournes Higgins's contention that war and militarism are antithetical to liberalism and democracy, to outline the radical liberal views and values of Australia's founding politicians that are lost in the popular view that Australia began in war in 1915, rather than in relative peace in 1901.

Papers presented in the parallel sessions took the theme of 'Conflict in History' in many interesting directions. Speakers traversed 'conflicts' in environmental terms, covering contests over and differing usage of various natural features and assets, as well as responses to 'natural disasters'. Not surprisingly, several papers addressed 'conflicts' or contests under colonialism, such as episodes of frontier violence in the Australian and New Zealand colonies. Papers on political conflicts ranged geographically from Czechoslovakia to the United States, ancient Rome, East Timor and Samoa. And sites of conflict assessed by presenters included theatre and the media, the Australian honours system, domestic violence services, memoirs, historiography, astronomy, museums and heritage, POW camps and industrial relations. Evidently, a capacious theme such as 'conflict' allows historians ample scope for presenting their research, and ensured a lively week.

A very useful way for scholars to help set national understanding straight, of course, is to write fresh, grounded histories on those topics most bedevilled by inaccurate myth-making. So perhaps it is not surprising that in this centenary year two of the AHA's prizes were awarded to historians whose work on the First World War is both outstanding and timely. The W. K. Hancock Prize, for a first monograph by an Australian scholar, was awarded to Janet Butler for her fascinating and harrowing book *Kitty's War: The Remarkable Wartime Experiences of Kit McNaughton* published in 2013 by the University of Queensland Press. The judges' citation notes that: 'Butler's analysis of Kitty's journals offers rare insight into the human trials, suffering, adventure, professionalism and transformation that characterised the war-time experience' of the more than 3000 Australian women who served as nurses in the Great War. And the Serle Award, for the best postgraduate thesis in Australian history, to be used to help turn the thesis into a book, went to Carolyn Holbrook for her doctoral study historicising Australian public memory of the Great War and its vicissitudes over the last century, published by NewSouth with the brilliant title *Anzac: the Unauthorised Biography*. Holbrook's work, the judges said, 'offers a timely, original and important contribution to our understanding of the historicisation of the meanings of the First World War in Australia, and indeed more broadly of the relationship between histories of war and the construction of national identity'.

Our shared ongoing struggle to balance commemoration with critical appraisal and 'Honest History' (to invoke the name of a scholarly group committed to challenging 'Anzackery') continues unabated next year. The AHA's 34th annual conference to be held at the University of Sydney

from 6 to 10 July 2015 also promises to strike the right note. Its theme will be 'Foundational Histories', offering a broad platform to consider and critique established historical narratives, to offer alternative perspectives and stories, or to raise a range of methodological questions. Like this year's conference, our 2015 meeting will welcome a diverse range of approaches to the theme, and invite us all to re-envision the shared process of writing national, transnational and local stories.

– Angela Woollacott, President, The Australian Historical Association, August 2014