

## MEMORIAL AVENUES: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there  
(L.P. Hartley 1953).

David Lowenthal, in his 1985 book, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, emphasised the way in which we produce and reproduce the past in changing ways. Heritage, memorials, ceremonies and national identities are all social constructs that reflect both the society that created them and the society that now recreates, cherishes or forgets them. We consider the past, as if visiting a foreign country, selecting those sites that interest us now.

This conference has evoked 1915 in its theme: Gallipoli, that most most potent of national legends, and TREENET is to embark on a project that will link Gallipoli, to the Avenues of Honour, and to rosemary bushes in people's gardens. The flavour of our traditional Sunday roast, or our more recent lamb kebab, is to be connected, or perhaps re-connected to Gallipoli. What I want to do is today is to provoke discussion of the social, cultural, gender and political dimensions of TREENET's project by looking at the history of the Avenues of Honour.

Ken Inglis's wonderful study of Australian war memorials (Inglis 1998) provided a framework for my study of the avenues (Dargavel 1999, 2000). The point I want to make in this talk is that the social construction, meaning and form differed between the stone (or brick) memorials and the avenues, and from war to war. They also differed from place to place.

War	Memorials	Avenues of Honour	Roads of Remembrance
Anglo-Boer	Few	1 at Horsham	
WW1	Local: 4-5000 State: All National: 1	Local: 150? State: 1 (WA)	
WW2	Local: some new, many plaques added. Hospitals, halls, swimming pools	Local: 10? new, 5-10 extensions	Canberra-Sydney, 2-3 others
Vietnam	Local: Some new, some plaques added	Albury, Wodonga, some others	

## **ANGLO-BOER WAR**

The only avenue to the Anglo-Boer war was planted at Horsham in Western Victoria. It was sponsored by a local worthy as an encouragement in patriotism to local lads. However, he was premature in his planting as the war dragged unexpectedly on and the Australian triumphalist mood after the Relief of Mafeking turned sour as the terrible conditions in Kitchener's concentration camps became known.

## **WORLD WAR I**

We don't know how many Avenues of Honour were planted for World War I, although there were surveys in Victoria and Western Australia. All were local initiatives, except for the State-level planting in Kings Park in Perth. They fall into two categories: those planted before the war had ended and those planted after.

The largest avenue was planted at Ballarat by 500 young women, the 'Lucas Girls', from a local clothing factory. They planted one tree for the 3000 men, and a few nurses, who went to war. They were a patriotic group who strongly supported the war effort. Their planting has to be seen in the context of the intense social and political controversy over conscription. Notably, both referenda on conscription were narrowly defeated. Most of the other avenues were planted after the war with one tree for each man who had died. They were expressions of grief rather than patriotism.

Like the stone war memorials, the avenues were created by local committees and were not centrally organised. However, the avenues had a much more domestic and personal ambience and were often planted by women or children. This contrasts markedly with the stone memorials—and the later ANZAC Day ceremonies around the stone memorials—from which women were virtually excluded. The Avenues enhanced the town's amenity by creating a green entry, whereas the memorials took a central position.

## **WORLD WAR II**

It was a different society after World War II with different attitudes to war and to remembrance. The national identity wrapped in British patriotism had been badly shaken. America was more important, but there was little glory to be had from Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Women took a more prominent place and the forms thought fitting for remembrance were more allied with health and youth. Like the Avenues planted after World War I, hospitals, swimming pools and public halls all carried a message of future hope.

Some new memorials were erected, but adding names to the existing one was more common. A handful of new local avenues were planted and some extended. A more grandiose scheme was also started to plant a Remembrance Driveway from Canberra to Sydney. This originated from a central committee and took its inspiration from the American Garden Clubs. Rather than a continuous avenue of trees, stretches of avenues were to alternate with small reserves planted with a ornamental trees and shrubs. It lacked much local support and petered out, only partially completed.

## **VIETNAM WAR**

Australian attitudes to the Vietnam War changed from grudging support to hostility as the war progressed. Nor when it ended were those returning lauded. Forms of remembrance too came late when war service at last gained recognition. Some new memorials were erected and plaques added to existing memorials. New Avenues were planted at Wodonga and Albury, centres for military camps. The initiative came from the Vietnam Veterans Association and the local council.

## **AVENUES OF HONOUR NOW**

Two salient features are worth discussing. First, why is it that we don't know how many were planted, and how many have survived? Second, why is it that so many have disappeared or have no marker? The best data was collected by Haddow for Victoria in 1987. She estimated that 132 had been planted for World War I, of which only 56 had survived. She attributed the losses to planting failure and to road construction or widening. Some of the remaining avenues have been recorded in Heritage Registers, and a few have preservation and management plans in place. However, many have no signs to indicate their significance.

What are we to make of this? If the majority of the avenues have simply faded away, like the people who planted them, has grief passed? Or has their grief become our commemoration? Some evidence can be drawn from the resurgence of interest in Anzac Day by a new generation, and the way in which Gallipoli itself has become a tourist destination. Certainly there is a broadening of participation of which the new avenue at Port Macquarie dedicated to 'those who kept the home fires burning during World War II' is a recent example. Does this trivialise past grief, or express it in a different way?

## **FUTURE AVENUES**

I have tried to raise questions for discussion by showing that the history of the Avenues of Honour contains an intriguing and changing set of meanings about national identity, attitudes to war and remembrance, and heritage. What of the future? Will those who died in our own frontier conflicts ever be honoured by tree planting? Will new avenues be planted for new wars? Will service in Timor, Bougainville or Iraq, for example, be marked. Will arboreal remembrance remain? TREENET is about more than trees.

## **REFERENCES**

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