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978-0-521-19360-3 - Red Coat Dreaming: How Colonial Australia Embraced the British Army

Craig Wilcox

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RED COAT DREAMING

HOW COLONIAL AUSTRALIA EMBRACED THE BRITISH ARMY

In *Red Coat Dreaming* art, artefacts and life stories combine to evoke a period when the British army was also Australia's army.

From the first British settlement to the First World War, some Australians were indifferent to and even disdainful of the military force that fomented the Rum Rebellion and shot down gold miners at Eureka. Yet many were proud of the British army's achievements on battlefields far from Australia. Hundreds of Australians enlisted in the army or married its officers and rankers; thousands had served in it before settling in Australia, and hundreds of thousands barracked when the army went to war.

Red Coat Dreaming challenges our understanding of Australia's military history and the primacy of the Anzac legend. It shows how few Australians were immune to the allure and historic associations of the red coat, the British army's sartorial signature, and leaves readers thinking differently about Australia's identity and experience of war.

Craig Wilcox lives and writes in Sydney. He has worked for the Australian War Memorial.

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For Lynne Ashpole and Peter Stanley

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In one house where I went
on irritable sewing errands for my mother,
there was a large tapestry of, was it Waterloo?
a classically chaotic canvas
of snorting, dappled chargers,
their fetlocks folded under swollen bellies,
their nostrils dragonish, smoking,
the bursting marble eyes elate with fear.
Their riders were a legion of dragoons
Sabre-moustashed, canted on stiffened rein.
Their arms crooked in a scything sweep,
vaulted a heap of dying,
one in the stance of a reclining Venus,
as casual as Giorgione,
surrendering the standard to a sergeant
bent low and gamy as a polo player,
the whole charge like a pukkha, without blood;
in the tainted, cry-haunted fog,
in the grey, flickering mist,
no mouth of pain,
every chivalric wound
rose-lipped, dandiacal, sweet,
every self-sacrifice perfumed;
my head roared with gold.
I bled for all. I thought it full of glory.

From Derek Walcott's *Another Life*, 1973

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DEBTS

I grew up in a suburb of Sydney called Narrabeen, in a run-down former holiday house that backed onto a beach. On the other side of a grey paling fence and a hot glaxis of sand was the sea: indigo, aqua and olive by day and an ominous black at night. Across the sea, I learnt early on, were The Islands. My grandfather, who lived with us, had been there in some previous time called The War. Puffing and sweating, marooned on his bed like a beached whale, he'd tell me about The War whenever I asked him. He was inclined to tell the truth, and what he told seemed unexciting – plenty of mangroves and mechanics, a few Catalinas and crocodiles, only rare, almost desultory appearances from an enemy aeroplane. Apparently, this was the same conflict I was watching on television whenever *Combat*, *Twelve O'Clock High* or *McHale's Navy* came on. My grandfather's part in it seemed to fall short of Ernest Borgnine's clowning, let alone Rick Jason's and Robert Lansing's weekly heroics. Perhaps that's why The War took on dull and disappointing shades in my mind, shades it would never lose no matter how many television battles I saw or, later, how many histories I read as I began to learn what The War was really about and what it ought to mean to me, an Australian growing up safely, happily, innocently, in the last ripples of its wake.

Two or three generations of men like my grandfather had pulled on slouch hats to fight in North Africa and New Guinea, on Gallipoli and the western front during the First World War, and in South Africa during the Boer war. What they'd done, and the hundred thousand lives they'd given to do it, was spoken of proudly, reverentially, every

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25 April, the anniversary of the Gallipoli invasion and a *de facto* national birthday known as Anzac Day for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps to which Australian troops had belonged early in 1915. In summary, almost everyone agreed, those deeds and those deaths had made Australia a nation. When I was ten or eleven years old I joined in the collective worship of the slouch hat, one year being charged with laying my primary school's wreath on the local war memorial. It was a very brief career as an altar boy in what a perceptive historian called Ken Inglis was characterising, not that I knew at the time, as Australia's civic religion. Before I could do my duty that Anzac Day I fainted, perhaps from the sun, though more likely from nerves.

A few houses away from us were two small hints of other, older wars of which my grandfather and other 'returned men', as veterans were called, seemed to know nothing. Our street intersected with a Waterloo Street to one side of our house and a Wellington Street to the other. *The Pictorial Encyclopædia of British History*, which a primary school teacher nudged me to read, told me how these streets got their names. Wars had been going since what the book called Earliest Times. Somewhere between Earliest Times and now, a brilliant young Corsican had wanted to be master of Europe. Whole armies had united against him and banished him to Elba, wherever that was. He escaped, but 'at the battle of Waterloo, his authority was ended forever' by a duke, Wellington, whose 'gifts as a statesman were less conspicuous than those he possessed as a soldier'. Here was real drama, and real colour too. In this book, the paintings of armoured vehicles, which the authors and illustrators clearly respected and probably knew from experience, were all very well, but what really stood out for me was a visual timeline of British army uniforms, including 'Infantry Officer 1660' in embroidered sash, 'Coldstreamer 1742' in cocked hat and high gaiters, grenadiers in bearskin hats, a moustachioed lancer and, finally, in dull khaki, 'Infantryman 1915' from the First World War. Apart from him, the others were a riot of blue and white and, above all, brilliant red.

I began to think about these colourful wars and colourful soldiers a year later when I reached high school and met the Sykes brothers. Their father, apparently divorced, cast metal soldiers, an activity almost as interesting as the pile of *Playboy* magazines he kept in his room. He and his sons painted the soldiers in vivid tones, assembled them in strict ranks, and ordered them to metaphorical death or glory in wargames that called on satisfying reserves of knowledge about war and about colour – *carabiniers*, not grenadiers, in a French light infantry regiment; *aurore* braid, not yellow, on some uniforms of Napoleon's imperial guard. Old

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wars and old armies filled my imagination for the next few years until I learnt, by the age of 16, to be ashamed of the fact. Napoleon's army grabbed much of my attention. But despite the ingenious efforts of ardent apologists such as R. F. Delderfield, whose *Imperial Sunset: The fall of Napoleon* I borrowed from the local library until I could recall much of it by heart, I knew Napoleon had been a tyrant and his victories a calamity for Europe. My real allegiance went to the army whose language I could speak and whose flag still beamed from the corner of my country's flag, to the redcoats I'd discovered in the *Pictorial Encyclopædia of British History*. I thrilled to read of Napoleon's army in battle but also of Wellington's, to look at illustrations of their uniforms or draw my own, to paint my own legions of model soldiers, usually made of cheap Airfix plastic rather than expensive metal, in their image. These strange activities – though they were less strange in the 1970s, when many boys engaged in them – helped define who I was, and to a great degree whose company I kept. When I wasn't thinking about Napoleon's army, or about music or art or girls, I was – as I'd now put it – Red Coat Dreaming.

That Red Coat Dreaming might have been a common condition in an earlier Australia occurred to me three decades later, when I returned to Sydney after a few years in smaller, even younger cities. For the first time I was struck by how many nineteenth century street names recorded British army victories and generals, by the city's main art gallery having spent so much in its early years to buy a painting of the defence of Rorke's Drift, above all by the marble plaques to several redcoated dead in Sydney's oldest church, St James', whose walls seemed to me a kind of alternative Australian War Memorial, the great Canberra cathedral of slouch hat worship where I'd worked on and off for the past decade. Still, working at the Memorial laid the ground for the insight, as did my other forays into crafting history. Robert Nichols, editor of the Memorial's magazine, had recently given me a copy of Richard Holmes' book, *Redcoat*, an affectionate overview of the object of all this veneration. My boss at the Memorial was Peter Stanley, who'd likewise given some of his youth to Airfix and antique armies but turned the experience to something socially useful, his book *The Remote Garrison* constituting the first real history of the British army's presence in Australia from 1788 to 1870. Before working for Peter I'd had the luck to become a student of Ken Inglis who, in his delightful book *The Australian Colonists*, had reminded everyone of how colonial Australians had responded to wars before slouch hats – how elated some were by news of victory at Waterloo, how eagerly others had followed what the army was doing

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in the Crimea. I'd written some history too, notably of Australia's part in the Boer war – the failed altar boy had somehow grown up to be one of the civic religion's minor theologians. Now, back in Sydney and spotting so many redcoat relics, it seemed to be time to look beyond the slouch hat, to draw on boyhood reverie and what Peter Stanley and Ken Inglis had perceived, and write a book about the place the British army had once occupied in Australian hearts. Not the well-remembered wailing at redcoat rule over early convict settlements and the shooting down of Aborigines, bushrangers and a few dozen goldminers, or the even better remembered disillusionment that followed mass service beside the modern, khaki-clad British army of the world wars, but the almost forgotten respect, admiration and even wonder for redcoats, which, after Gallipoli, would pass to slouch hats.

And to write the book in a certain way, inspired by relics as much as words. I knew what Thomas Hardy meant when he wrote in *The Trumpet-Major* of the power of 'lingering remains' to evoke a lost past better than anything else. But I'd also learnt over the previous decade how little time or, in thankfully few cases, how little interest some museum and gallery curators had for teasing out the meaning of objects and artworks in their charge. Their interpretation, to use the jargon for captions put on gallery walls and for essays on objects contributed to exhibition catalogues, tended to the shrivelled and stereotyped, squeezing most military objects and artworks into tiny, prefabricated niches of a national military story in which what happened to men fighting in Australian uniform and to their families was everything and the rest was irrelevant or, at best, colourfully quaint. Some captions I'd seen reminded me of makeup mirrors in the way they faithfully reflected the beholder's narrow gaze. Wanting a telescope to lift my gaze from the world I already knew, and hint at how complicated, how awkward, how gloriously alien an object or artwork might be, I thought wistfully of Susan Sontag's characterisation in *On Photography* of an essay by the radical art critic John Berger as an extended caption. Here, I decided, was the way to structure the book and give it, at the risk of sounding lofty, a higher purpose. It would have redcoat relics as its starting point, and it would interpret those relics in loving, lazy detail.

Words still mattered, of course, especially the signposts left for me by historians. These included the work of Australians such as Inglis, Stanley, Jeffrey Grey, but also historians of other societies that once hosted British troops. Back in 1965 the American historian John Shy had concluded in *Towards Lexington* that, even as relations soured with London and the redcoated instruments of its will, 'many Americans could not help

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liking the color and pomp of military organization, nor help envying army officers and wanting to meet and please them' (pp. 384–5). In British imperial historian John M. Mackenzie's 1992 survey of popular enthusiasm in Britain for the army that policed an empire, Dave Russell reported the astounding popularity of a sentimental music hall evocation of the battle of Balaclava and the fate of one of its veterans. Four years later Scott Hughes Myerly's *British Military Spectacle*, a brilliant study by a social and cultural historian, weighed up the popular appeal of red coats and the rest of the army's martial theatre; four years after that, Stuart Semmel traced 'British tourism, collecting and memory after Waterloo' in the Berkeley journal *Representations*. Then there are the confessions of those most easily seduced by that theatre, even into our time, such as Derek Walcott's long autobiographical poem *Another Life*. Reverie was never restricted to the white race that ruled the empire. I would draw on all such writing. Indeed, this book would not have existed without it.

But I found no other full study of the subject – of widespread respect for the army, of basking in its victories won and last stands endured, of barracking loudly from the sidelines as the troops went to war, of occasional enlistments and living among veterans, of the way almost no one was quite immune to the beguiling colour and historic associations of the red coat, the army's sartorial signature, above all of the reverie about redcoats that filled so many minds. As I wrote, this reverie seemed best described by an Australian word, *Dreaming*, coined to describe something quite different and indescribably ancient. It may seem strained or even sacrilegious to sense something like the spirit life of Australia's original inhabitants in the cooler martial imagination of their conquerors. Still, if *Dreaming* is a way of thinking as much as a body of thought, if it dissolves time and distance and physical constraints to unite someone with powerful figures from far away or long ago, if it crafts a mental landscape almost as important as the material one and if it demands ritual or at least some form of art, there may be no better way to describe the place of the British army in at least some colonial Australian lives.

Red Coat Dreaming, then, is the result of childhood yearning, of other historians' wisdom, of wonder at the redcoat relics still around me, and of longing for longer accounts of relics that at first glance seem irrelevant and out of place. Most chapters of this book take their bearing from a physical fragment of an almost forgotten military past – a tunic or a medal, a diary or a book, a portrait or battle painting, even a pub (my grandfather would have liked that). They then follow the fragment's tangible and intangible connections between colonial Australia and the

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old British army – respect for the redcoated garrison, say, or vicarious participation in one of the army’s wars in Asia or Africa. I concede the defects of this approach, or at any rate of my limited talent at employing it. Some questions need rigorous analysis – whether, for example, an influx of British army veterans to a town or street in Australia subtly shifted the place’s tenor and beliefs – and, frankly, don’t get it. Some subjects – such as the little contingent sent from Sydney to the Sudan in 1885 – are touched on across a couple of chapters, but only lightly. In compensation, the format of telling the stories of these fragments has all the advantages of – well, of telling stories, as the American social scientist Charles Tilly recently reasoned in the third chapter of his book *Why?* Story-telling, Tilly thought, simplifies causes and effects, reduces the number of actors and actions to the essential, and allows for the singular as much as the general, in doing so making accessible ‘at least a portion of the truth’, as he prudently put it. So you’ll get a sense of whether I’m right in seeing Red Coat Dreaming in Australia without needing to be well read in military or social or Australian history, and along the way you’ll encounter some Australians whose lives were compelling, whatever interpretation I’ve given them, and who deserve in any case to enter the collective memory about Australia and war. Besides, it seems right that a book that ultimately began in reaction to stories my grandfather told me forty years ago should adopt that same honourable but often underestimated form for handing down experience and insight.

Part of the chapter ‘Colonial Coriolanus’ was researched and scribbled down while I worked at the Australian War Memorial, and ‘Scarlet fever’ was written when I was a visiting fellow at the National Museum of Australia. Research for ‘Dear Spicer’ was made possible by Evan Petrelis, then the Australian head of the Afrijours tour company, who paid for my visit to Perth. ‘Hero of Waterloo’ descends, after much thought and research, from a tentative and very early wondering about Red Coat Dreaming in the pages of the Australian War Memorial’s magazine *Wartime*. ‘Canvas and cadmium’ is a result of more recent explorations of the subject in a passage written for the Australian War Memorial book *Artists in Action*, in a talk given at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, in a paper read to the annual Shamrock in the Bush history conference in Galong in rural New South Wales, and in an article published in the *Australian Literary Review*.

This book couldn’t have been written without the encouragement of the editors of the publications just mentioned, without Australian War Memorial staff (who I hope will forgive what I’ve just said about curators) such as Peter Burness, Peter Londey, Robert Nichols, Jane Peek and

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Lola Wilkins, or of National Museum staff such as Anne-Marie Condé, Anne Kelly, Richard Reid, Martha Sear, Deborah Spoehr and Denis Shephard, without the librarians of the Mitchell and Art Gallery of New South Wales libraries, especially Arthur Easton at the Mitchell, without the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, which I've plundered for most biographical details in this book, or without the work of historians before me who've investigated the redcoat in Australia. The best of them, Ken Inglis and Peter Stanley, have been mentors to me as well as friends, as has Beverley Kingston, who knows the heart of colonial Australia better than any other historian. I owe much to their ideas, encouragement, energy and nimble minds. I've also received insights or support or both from others along the way, including Baron Alder, Rosemary Annable of the Royal Australian Historical Society, Frank Bongiorno of the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, Andrew Chang of the Sydney Retina Clinic, Peter Cochrane, Patricia Downes, Ted Gott of the National Gallery of Victoria, Brad Manera at the Historic Houses Trust and his partner Genevieve Thompson, Stephen Matchett at the *Australian*, Terry and Cathy McCullagh with the *Australian Army Journal*, Joan Meagher, Robert Nash of the Huguenot Society of Australia, Matthew Needham, Micaela Pereira of the Art Gallery of Western Australia, and Christine Wright. The State Library of New South Wales, the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Museum of Australia kindly reduced or waived the normal picture reproduction fees as this book came together. Sandra Goldbloom Zurbo deployed, much to my advantage, her own talent as a writer when editing this book. Everyone I worked with at Cambridge University Press was capable and encouraging.

I'm more grateful than I can express to Peter Stanley, who encouraged and inspired me so regularly.

My greatest debt, though, is to Lynne Ashpole, who supported me every day as I researched and wrote, rewrote and revised.