

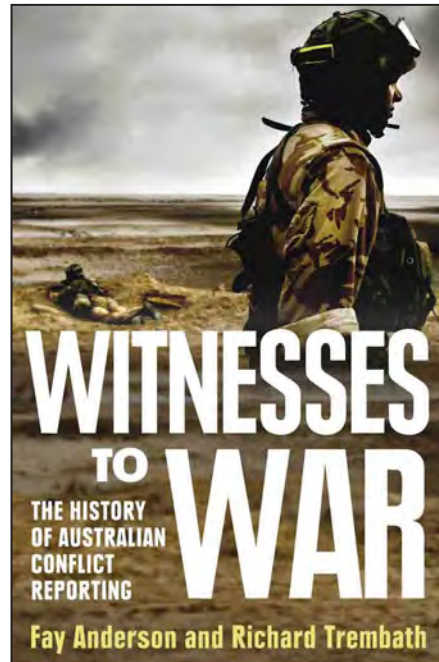
DR GILES DODSON is a lecturer in communication studies at UNITEC, Auckland.

## ‘Digger’ media out-manoeuvred by military

***Witnesses to War: The History of Australian Conflict Reporting***, by Fay Anderson and Richard Trembath. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2011, 501 pp, ISBN 978-0522856446 (pbk)

**W**ITNESSES to War: *The History of Australian Conflict Reporting* provides a thorough-going account of the developments and, importantly, of continuities which have characterised Australian reporting of foreign wars since the 19th century. It is a welcome addition to the growing body of conflict reporting literature, in particular to that which concerns the local experience. It is clear the forces which structure Australian war journalism have remained relatively constant throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Also maintained has been an avowed determination among journalists to provide a clear and accurate account of the experience of war. The persistent censorship of the Australian



military has nonetheless countered journalistic endeavours. A culture of suspicion and distrust characterises Australian military-media relations, and this situation largely continues in the present era.

As *Witness to War* suggests, this sentiment is misplaced; in times of war journalists do tend to fall in behind the nation, military policy and ‘the troops’. Overt Australian nationalism, most clearly expressed as the Anzac-legend, celebrating the common Aussie ‘digger’, is an ever-present theme in Australian war reporting. As Australian journalists comment, both in this volume and

elsewhere, the general tendency to champion the 'diggers at war' results from journalists being swept up and carried away by the excitement of conflict reporting, particularly when ingratiated to their frequently tight-lipped military sources (Anderson & Trembath, 2011; Dodson, 2010).

Notably, Australian war journalism was first practised in New Zealand. Howard Willoughby covered the invasion of the Waikato for the Melbourne *Argus*, to which colonial Australian troops contributed, in their first imperial military adventure. Willoughby, although an enthusiastic imperialist, took a relatively even-handed approach to the Māori (in the context of racist Victorian attitudes), commending Māori technological and strategic prowess. It was his descriptions and representations of the Australian soldiers, however, which have become a central frame for all Australian conflict reporting that followed. The 'incipient characteristics' of the common soldier would come to define Australia's troops ever after. As Willoughby wrote sympathetically, the Australian volunteers would 'have to march without beer, they have to fight without beer' (Anderson & Trembath, 2011, p.25).

It was not until the catastrophe of World War One, however, that a distinctly Australian perspective

emerged. As *the* great cultural event of the time, WWI altered forever how men and women thought about the world and themselves.

For Australians, a powerful sense of distinctive nationalism was born, drawn from the disastrous Anzac experience at Gallipoli and the Western Front. It was the commitment of Australian journalists, particularly official war correspondent Charles Bean, to the soldiers and to the language and imagery of traditional imperialism, which firmly established the foundation myth of the Anzac in the public mind and national culture. As the authors correctly argue, however, the imperial zeal with which Australian journalists covered the war failed the men whose experiences they were documenting:

The fundamental flaw in reporting was that it obscured the reality of war. It was impossible to distinguish between defeat and success. By writing only about valour and courage, the press obliterated the terror, the sounds and stench, the bodies in death and the soldiers' vulnerabilities (2011, p. 67).

As Bean wrote of the atrocious Battle of Fromelles, where 5300 Australians died in a single day, the casualties were, 'slight when the extraordinary difficulty of the operation is considered' (2011, p.70). *Witnesses*

*to War* provides numerous accounts that support Knightley's (2004) argument that the media are always outmanoeuvred by the military, given their dependence on military sources and protection and the media corp's frequent ignorance of military or political affairs. Indeed, the Australian military has proven to be secretive, controlling and paranoid in relation to the press in virtually all its wars.

The Australian Defence Force stands in contrast to the US military, which has been commended widely by journalists for its relative openness and willingness to facilitate war coverage. *Witnesses to War* would be a better book had this dimension of conflict reporting undergone greater explanation. The ADF is, after all, renowned for its secrecy and yet the military have benefited greatly from the mythologising, action-focus and outright jingoism that has characterised Australian war journalism to a great extent.

The volume is for its earliest sources reliant on memoirs, diaries and letters of the journalists under discussion, most famously, Charles Bean and Keith Murdoch. For discussion and detail of more recent conflicts, the authors rely very heavily on oral testimony with journalists themselves; indeed for narrative of the post-1970s period, including the conflicts of Viet

nam, East Timor, Rwanda, Bosnia, the Gulf, and the post-9/11 wars, the verbatim accounts form the basis of the discussion.

The scope of this rich material is to be commended. However, the history is lent a narrative quality, which ranges so widely little space is left for analysis and explanation of the continuities of Australian journalism. It appears that Australian journalism, like much elsewhere, basically left the issue of East Timor alone between the 1970s and 1990s; was perplexed, confused and stunned by the horrors of the conflagrations of the 1990s; and fell in behind the coalition war machine during the Gulf War and in the post-9/11 era. Why?

Why is Australian journalism similarly incapable of remaining staunchly independent from the military it covers, when this is its avowed aim? Why does a strong preference for action and colour override sustained and intelligent analysis? And why, most pressingly, do journalists continue to 'go along with' a military-controlled media system which they freely acknowledge both structurally subordinates and stringently controls them, in contradiction to their avowed professional values?

These questions have been addressed elsewhere in the journalism studies literature; however a deeper

discussion would have contributed much to the richness of the present material. The question, of course, is how we should treat analytically the testimony of journalists, invited to comment on their experiences after the fact. The answer is, I believe, most likely in the straight-forward manner in which it was given, and this treatment serves this volume well.

However, the examination may have been made more thorough by a sustained comparison between the avowed principles, interests and activities of the journalists under investigation, and the news-product they produced. It is one thing to profess the lofty ideals of a free and independent press and quite another to consistently file uncritical reproductions of military PR.

The question of how a professional journalist's avowed aim, to provide accurate, balanced and fair coverage contends with a patriotic sympathy for the troops she covers is a central condunrum of war journalism studies. As the authors describe, there exists 'a complex relationship of dependence and antipathy between the armed forces and media in time of war' (2011, p. 3). This tension is exacerbated by the confusions of war, the frequent naivety of reporters and vagaries of distance and communication, which compound to debase the accuracy of foreign reporting.

In general, although *Witnesses to War* provides a thorough-going overview of Australian war reporting, much could have been done to delve deeper into the cultural, political and institutional contexts in which a largely supportive and nationalistic reportage has been created, particularly in the contemporary era.

'Technologies of immediacy' (Allan & Matheson, 2010) have in recent years profoundly altered the practices and consumption of war journalism. The technology-enabled editorial and consumer demand for 'instant news' provides a crucial prism through which to understand the challenges of contemporary war journalism. Commercial demands for 24/7 reporting, live-updates, constant, multi-format deadlines and visually driven coverage, frequently constrain contemporary journalism, rather than providing richness. *Witnesses to War* reinforces this conclusion, which has been reached by authors elsewhere.

Iraq War reporting, for example, was characterised in general by homogenisation, 'high concept' packaging (Jaramillio, 2009) and sensational, graphic coverage, resulting in a surfeit of coverage, but frequently a deficit in understanding. It is remarkable how the experience of modern journalists substantially resembles that of previous era. Technological change

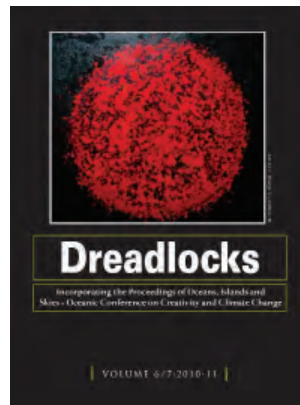
notwithstanding, the same pressures of commercialism, cultural ideology and military censorship continue to powerfully shape contemporary journalism.

Notwithstanding the criticisms above, as history, *Witnesses to War* is a welcome contribution to our understanding of Australian journalism. This volume's oral testimony concerning the contemporary period is a contribution to knowledge of substantial scope. The task remains however, for further scholarship to continue to examine the particularities of the distinctive Australian experience of reporting war.

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## DREADLOCKS: OCEAN, ISLAND AND SKIES SPECIAL EDITION



Edited by  
Mohit Prasad

This special edition of the literary journal *Dreadlocks* incorporates proceedings from Oceans, Islands and Skies - Oceanic Conference on Creativity and Climate Change. The conference highlighted the role of writers, artists and the media in environmental challenges in the Pacific. The conference was held from 13-17 September 2010 at the Laucala Campus of the University of the South Pacific in Suva.

PACIFIC STUDIES | Vol 6/7 |  
ISBN 978-1-927184-02-8  
MARCH 2012, RRP: \$35  
PUBLISHED BY: PACIFIC WRITING FORUM  
AND THE UNIVERSITY OF THE  
SOUTH PACIFIC, SUVA, FIJI; PACIFIC  
MEDIA CENTRE (AUT UNIVERSITY),  
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