

*Gallipoli: The Scale of Our War*, The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, (2014—)

GALLIPOLI: THE SCALE OF OUR WAR opened at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in 2014, as the marquee exhibition of the New Zealand government's WW100 programme. Costing upwards of \$8 million, *Gallipoli* was a collaboration between the national museum and Weta Workshop. The production aimed to commemorate New Zealanders' experiences during the war and 'leave a lasting and impactful memory of this most important of events in New Zealand's history'.<sup>1</sup> With over two million domestic and international visitors in its first four years, *Gallipoli* has been an overwhelming success. Te Papa has subsequently extended the exhibition until at least 2022.<sup>2</sup>

The exhibition design reflected the unique meeting of museum curation and the creative talents of 'Wellywood'. The story of the New Zealand forces at Gallipoli is told through eight giant, hyper-realistic historical figures, specially chosen for the letters, diaries and photographs they left behind. Visitors follow these characters through a cinematic narrative, complete with a specially composed soundtrack and multimedia interactives. Like the film-making process that inspired it, *Gallipoli* is less history and more poetry. Audiences are engaged by an array of visual, textual and spatial languages. Their responses are very much contingent on what they themselves bring to the remembrance.

The title, *Gallipoli: The Scale of Our War*, marks the exhibition as a work of remembrance in multiple ways. In the first place, despite the remit of WW100 to commemorate the 1914–1918 period, Gallipoli is the exhibition's sole focus – as much a memorial site as a geography. People are even encouraged to leave a poppy at the end of the exhibition, much as they would at a memorial after an Anzac Day service.

*Gallipoli* reproduces recent nationalist cinematic treatments of the campaign. The influence of Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* (1981) is evident in the digital artwork and the exhibition's central drama: the massacre of fresh-faced youths. The focus on Chunuk Bair and the person of William Malone (Malone's letters are narrated by a voice actor in a reconstructed Quinn's Post) echoes the work of the late Maurice Shadbolt, whose 1982 play *Once on Chunuk Bair* (adapted to film in 1992) reimagined the campaign as a foundational myth for an assertive New Zealand nationalism. Christopher Pugsley, the exhibition's official historian, was a key contributor to the new histories produced during the 1980s that aimed to bring a greater focus to the 'New Zealand story' of Gallipoli. In emphasizing this site, rather than history, of memory, the exhibition presents Gallipoli's remembrance as natural and inevitable, while reproducing a very narrow and recent historiography of the campaign.

This narrowing of memory is part of the 'scale' of *Gallipoli*. The eight giants, 2.4 times larger than life, are an extraordinary spatial language. They shock and disconcert the audience.

The gigantic is juxtaposed with the miniature, through the 'doll house' hospital ship *Maheno*, the superb digital dioramas of the Gallipoli peninsula, and the red line on the floor that, guiding the visitor on their journey through the exhibition, depicts the growing mass of casualties through tiny red crosses.

The black, cavernous spaces in which visitors encounter each figure have the intimacy of a shrine. Without any contextual explanations, voice narrations and music

guide the visitor's emotional response, in turn evoking resignation, grief, boredom, rage, despair. Visitors feel before they understand. Interpretation is left to this emotional orchestration, itself 'scaled up'.

The exhibition's 'geometry of memory' reproduces classic, vertical modes of war commemoration. The figures, like ancestral pou, demand attention and even veneration. Charlotte Le Gallais ('Lottie'), a grieving nurse, is the archetypal maternal figure. Colin Warden, Friday Hawkins and Rikihana Carkeek fight as warriors to the backdrop of beating drums and the Ka Mate haka. Conversely, rather than the symbolic language of traditional war iconography, the figures' hyperrealism posits 'the past as it was'. *Gallipoli* presents a powerful fallacy: there is no historical interpolation here, only the resonance of memory revealed in absolute detail.

These 'memory regimes' – the frames used by people to structure their recall of the past – embed the exhibition's cinematic 'spirit' in a wider work of memory. Direct personal experience mingles with the symbolic representations of events. Indeed, this is the essential project of memory. Remembrance imagines and communicates past experiences to make collective out of that which was individual.

This victory of poetic remembrance over critical history is elevated in the exhibition's invocation of 'Our War'. The plural-personal-pronoun intentionally confuses the personal experience of the Gallipoli campaign with that of the exhibition itself. 'Our enemy', 'our boys', 'our empire' render the journeys of our central characters more accessible and grounds their community identities outside of war. For example, our Māori soldiers are connected to their worlds of hapū and iwi through whakapapa and karakia. Within the commemorative praxis of the centenary, 'Our War' also collapses the distance, privileged by historians as necessary for historical understanding, between 1915 and today.

Against these 'film stills' of particular experiences of war – personal, social, ethnic, gendered, national and imperial – the collective effect of the exhibition is the palpable sense that the experience of Gallipoli in 1915 (and *Gallipoli* in 2019) has produced something that transcends war. This collective and redemptive meaning is at the heart of memories of violence, emotionally binding groups of people together.

Certainly, *Gallipoli* is a unique production. The exhibition will continue to exert an enormous influence over perceptions of Gallipoli and, implicitly, the stories that New Zealanders tell each other about these events as *New Zealanders*. It is hard to imagine when we will have a similar level of investment to revisit our First World War narratives. Rather than a historical project that, open-ended and discursive, might be developed and revised, *Gallipoli* is a tightly contained cinematic text. This is highlighted in one very practical point: *Gallipoli* cannot travel. The giants are too expensive and too space-specific to be moved and installed elsewhere. The exhibition is no more mobile than a war memorial. This, in itself, is surely a lack of foresight on the part of our national museum.

*Gallipoli* is a missed opportunity in other ways. Remembrance is inevitably selective. The exhibition centres military service over civilian experiences of war and projects Gallipoli as an epicentre of a national past. Yet, given the significant investment and the ostensible reflexivity by its designers about Gallipoli's 'mythic proportions', the exhibition needed to explore how these stories have been re-used in New Zealand over time. Instead, we had the least interesting outcome: an exhibition that, despite the innovation of twenty-first-century digital media, merely re-affirmed twentieth-century narratives of Gallipoli as foundational national myth.

Jay Winter reminds historians engaged in critical histories of commemoration that they are ‘carried along on a fast-moving stream of memory... which we did not create and do not control’.<sup>3</sup> Scholars are but one part of an ‘ecosystem’ of public remembrance. Simultaneously, Winter calls attention to the ‘work’ of memory: the individuals, groups and institutions engaged in reproductions of the past within and between communities. *Gallipoli* is submerged in ‘the stream of memory’; rather than reflecting on this, however, its creators simply go with the flow.

The essential lesson is the need to challenge scholars, curators and artists engaged in the remembrance ‘work’ to reflect on how they contribute to this stream of memory. This is especially important as historians look to engage New Zealanders in debates about commemorating violence through Rā Maumahara. One wonders whether the New Zealand Wars could receive a similar personal pronoun as ‘our wars’. Commemoration is not enough to grow public knowledge about a given moment in history; it also requires an interrogation of how the past has been presented and used by communities over time. This requires scholars versed, foremost, in analysing remembrance and its workings – of which *Gallipoli* is a powerful exemplar.

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#### NOTES

1 Te Papa, ‘Gallipoli exhibition opens at Te Papa’, 18 April 2015: <https://media.newzealand.com/en/news/gallipoli-exhibition-opens-at-te-papa/> (accessed 2 September 2019)

2 Te Papa, ‘Te Papa extends Gallipoli exhibition to Anzac Day 2022’, 24 April 2019: <https://www.tepapa.govt.nz/about/press-and-media/press-releases/2019-media-releases/te-papa-extends-gallipoli-exhibition-anzac> (accessed 2 September 2019)

3 Jay Winter, ‘Historical remembrance in the Twenty-First Century (Foreword)’, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 617 (2008), pp.6–13, 9.