

# Remembering the Battle for Australia

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## Introduction

On 26 June 2008 the Australian minister for Veterans' Affairs, Alan Griffin, announced that 'Battle for Australia Day' would be commemorated on the first Wednesday in September; this proclamation fulfilled a Labor Party election promise and followed a ten-year campaign by returned soldiers and others to commemorate the battles that constituted the Pacific War. The very recent inauguration of this day enables an examination of the dynamics of the processes involved in the construction of national commemorations. The aim of this article is to identify the various agencies involved in the process of 'remembering the Battle for Australia' and the channels they have used to spread their message; to trace the political and historical controversies surrounding the notion of a 'Battle for Australia' and the conflicting narratives to which they have given rise; and to outline the 'chronopolitics,' the shifts in domestic and international politics that 'over time created the conditions for changes in the memoryscape and, sometimes, alterations in the heroic narrative as well' (Gluck 2007: 61).

The title of this article is intended to recall Jay Winter's insistence that the terms 'remembering' and 'remembrance' be used, rather than memory, in order to emphasise the active role of agents in the creation and perpetuation of memory and acts of commemoration (2006: 3). Timothy Ashplant, Grant Dawson and Michael Roper, in a broad ranging study of war memory, emphasise the role of constituencies, or agents of remembrance in the process of memory formation and the struggle to articulate distinct and often competing memories in the array of arenas available. Agencies of articulation

include the official bodies of the nation state, political parties, the organisations and movements of civil society and more localised face-to-face groupings (Ashplant *et al.* 2004: 16–17). In the complex and evolving relationship between these agencies we can begin to find an explanation for the sanctioning of certain memorial days, and the ‘forgetting’ or overlooking of others. Ashplant *et al.* identify two other aspects of the articulation of memory: narratives and arenas. Narratives of articulation ‘refer to the shared formulations within which social actors couch their memories’ (16), the templates or ‘schema’ through which experience is understood, and memory framed. Such narratives often call on templates offered by dominant national, but also religious and political, discourses, on existing ‘cultural narratives, myths and tropes’ (34). Arenas of articulation refer to ‘the socio-political spaces within which social actors advance claims for the recognition of specific war memories,’ for commemoration and memorialisation, and for the benefits that may flow from recognition. They range from networks of families or kinship groups, through communities of geography or interest (returned soldiers of a particular unit or battle), to the public sphere of nation states and transnational power blocs (17).

It seems necessary to add to these three categories that of ‘modes of articulation’: the channels through which memories are revived and constructed, that may include film and documentaries, novels, biographies and autobiographies, and the publications of professional and amateur historians. Modes of articulation influence the framing of memories and their emotional impact, the ease of dissemination, and the symbolic weight or significance attached to them. The role of the media, and of new technologies such as the internet, is particularly significant today in creating virtual communities of interest, in facilitating campaigns, and indeed in creating virtual *lieux de mémoire* online, through the design of sites that include archival material, images, maps, and testimony.

A crucial passage in the perpetuation of memory occurs when it moves from popular, informal arenas of remembrance, maintained at the level of family and communities of interest—referred to by John Bodnar (1992) as the ‘vernacular’—to the level of official representation by State and Federal governments, recognition that brings into play crucial financial and organisational support. It is misleading, however, to assume that the ‘vernacular’ represents an accurate and authentic version of events because based on

direct, personal experience. This case study draws attention to some of the limitations of individual and collective memory and therefore of oral history. It also illustrates the problematic and sometimes conflictual relationship between history and memory and poses the question of whether, as Pierre Nora asserts, memory has come today to challenge, and even dictate to, history (1989).



Battle for Australia cenotaph, 2008 © Matthew Graves

### **The history of the term 'Battle for Australia'**

The expression 'Battle of Australia' was used on only a few occasions during the Second World War, most notably by Prime Minister John Curtin when he told the country on 16 February 1942 that the fall of Singapore 'opens the Battle of Australia' (Day 2005: 272), echoing Churchill's speech that the fall of France (Dunkirk) opened the 'Battle of Britain.' The expression was taken up with a slight modification as the 'Battle for Australia' in a 1944 Department of Information photographic booklet (Stanley 2008a: 165) but was then almost forgotten as a concept for fifty years, until the term was 'resurrected in the 1990s by groups of veterans and those concerned that the sacrifices of the war years were being forgotten, overshadowed by the traditional focus

on Gallipoli' (Stanley 2008a: 246). Adopted by James Bowen in a letter to the National President of the Returned and Services League of Australia (RSL) in 1997, it became the focus of the Battle for Australia Commemoration National Council, formed in 1998.

The problem, however, in using the expression 'Battle for Australia' is in knowing exactly what it covers. Does it refer simply to the period 1942–1943, the years when the Australian government mobilised the country under the apparent imminent threat of Japanese invasion? This is the period that most of the official commemorative speeches in September 2008 chose to highlight, and that James Bowen's 'The Battle for Australia, 1942–1943' website also selects (Bowen 2001). Or should the 'Battle for Australia' designate the years 1942–1945, from the fall of Singapore to the Japanese surrender, as the Battle for Australia Commemoration National Council proposes on its website (n.d.)? Martin Evans argues that remembered wars are those that tend to possess 'temporal coherence'; in other words, clear chronological boundaries mark their beginning and end (1997). A second and related difficulty lies in locating the 'Battle for Australia' geographically: even if the period is limited to 1942–43, a wide range of battles could be included, ranging across land, sea and air.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the cliffs of Gallipoli, whose distinctive geography carries a clear visual resonance, the 'Battle for Australia' is not represented topographically in the national imagination.

A third difficulty refers to the choice of a specific commemoration date. Various possible candidates appeared on the national calendar, including the dates of the Coral Sea battle, 4–8 May. Coral Sea battle commemorations, which involved the Australian and US governments at the highest level, had been held since the first week of May 1946. In the mid-1950s these events were described, in a briefing paper written for the US representative, General Doolittle, as the second most important national commemoration after Anzac Day (Doolittle 1956). Another option was 15 August, Victory in the Pacific (VP) day, which marked the surrender of the Japanese and had been commemorated since the end of the war. 19 February marked the date of the bombing of Darwin, and, indeed, the organisation of veterans involved in the defence of the city, 'the Darwin Defenders,' argued that this date should be selected to commemorate Battle for Australia Day (Jones 2008). Finally, a date might have been

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<sup>1</sup> James Bowen, for example, explains that he initially proposed that the 'Battle for Australia' be limited to the Battle of the Coral Sea and 'three vital battles'—the Kokoda Track, Milne Bay, and the Beachheads Buna, Gona, and Sanananda—but expanded the term's scope after discussion with David Horner (Bowen 2001).

chosen to mark the battle along the Kokoda track, since this protracted struggle resonates strongly in the contemporary national imagination, but it was not.

The decision was instead made, partly it seems under the influence of Bowen's arguments, to commemorate Battle for Australia Day on the first Wednesday in September, the date of the Battle of Milne Bay, the first land victory over the Japanese.<sup>2</sup> Although this date and battle had little public recognition, the day is now the principal state-sanctioned date commemorating World War II: Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, in his speech on the day of the first commemoration in September 2008, noted that the nation had finally, after half a century, settled the question of the date on which to commemorate the war. He made clear, however, that the date and the phrase 'Battle for Australia' were intended to represent all the engagements of this period, thus including them in a narrative of unified military and national purpose, with Rudd careful to refer also to the role of civilians on the home front (Rudd 2008).

It was Serge Moscovici who pointed out the power of 'objectification': conjuring up a coherent and unitary entity through the creative power of naming (1984: 43). Ashplant *et al.* recognise this power in naming wars and the same may be said to hold true of battles: 'the willingness or refusal of the state to recognise and name particular kinds of violence as "a war" in the first place together with its bestowal of names upon particular wars, are fundamental to the construction (and contestation) of the national narrative and official memory' (Ashplant *et al.*, 2004: 53). The significance of, and the reasons behind, the attribution of a single nomenclature—'Battle for Australia'—to a wide range of military engagements are explored in the rest of the article.

### **Agencies and arenas of articulation**

James Bowen (2001) traces on his website his own role in initiating the campaign for the recognition and commemoration of the 'Battle for Australia.' A historian with a particular interest in the Pacific War, an Honorary Counsel and a State Executive member of the Victorian branch of the RSL, he wrote in 1997 to the RSL national president, Major General 'Digger' James, to press for a commemorative week in September 'whose specific purpose would be to enable children to appreciate and

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<sup>2</sup> Between 25 August and 7 September 1942, a major Japanese assault sought to secure Milne Bay in New Guinea as a base for sea and air attacks on Port Moresby. The Allied defenders, including 4500 Australian infantrymen and RAAF Kittyhawk fighters, had by 6 September driven the Japanese forces back to their main base.

acknowledge the heroism and sacrifice of the Australians who held off the Japanese invaders in the Australian Territory of Papua, and forced their retreat in September 1942' (Bowen 2001). The proposal was refined and adopted by the National Executive of the RSL in late November 1997, and confirmed at its 1998 conference, when the Battle for Australia Commemoration National Council was formed.<sup>3</sup> The RSL is accorded a privileged role by State and Federal governments and agencies, the media, and the wider society, in representing the point of view and interests of ex-servicemen as their authentic voice. The RSL is thus endowed, in Bourdieu's terms, with symbolic capital (1993). It also has the resources and a countrywide network of organisations to disseminate information and mount campaigns. A private initiative was thus taken up by a powerful agency and given a national platform and a semi-official status, since the committee included representatives from the Department of Veterans' Affairs. At the 1998 RSL conference, then Prime Minister John Howard expressed his support for their campaign—but did not promise to inaugurate a national day of commemoration.

The Council takes a broad view of what this battle comprised, seeking to 'honour and learn from the heroism, sacrifice and service of all those who fought between 1941 and 1945 to defend Australia, its territories and national interests from attack and ultimately to expel the Japanese from Australian territory and waters.' Although the expression 'national interests' could be read to include other theatres of war, the focus in this and other of the Council's statements is on the Japanese threat.<sup>4</sup> They identify as the key battle that of Milne Bay, in which Australian army, navy and air forces played the major role, united for the first time under one commander, the Australian major general Cyril Clowes, a Duntroon graduate. The website quotes Field-marshal Sir William Slim: 'Australian troops had, at Milne Bay, inflicted on the Japanese their first undoubted defeat on land ... some of us may forget that, of all the allies, it was the Australians who first broke the invincibility of the Japanese army.' These details, which draw attention to the crucial role that Australians played, and the casualties they suffered (Australian casualties were many times greater than those among US forces), help to explain the choice of this battle as the focus for commemorative activities. They also, perhaps,

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<sup>3</sup> After disagreement with the Council, in May 2001 James Bowen set up his own website, 'The Battle for Australia Historical Society,' which has a URL very similar to that of the National Council.

<sup>4</sup> In December 2008 the author interviewed for this article the then NSW representative on the Battle for Australia Commemorative Council, David Cooper. He has prepared a map that portrays graphically the battles and forces engaged in the South West Pacific War between 1942–45 and the line of the Japanese advance.

suggest one reason for the marked decline in recent years in commemoration of battles such as the Coral Sea, in which Australian forces played a lesser role.

To explain why the Council was set up at this point in time, I suggest we look to the challenge of intergenerational transmission and the significance of the passage from ‘communicative memory’ (living oral memory based on personal recollection) to ‘cultural memory’ (cultural representations that lack the immediacy of firsthand recollection). The passing of the WWII generation and, therefore, the imminent end of communicative memory of this period, has seen a final battle waged over the content of the future cultural memory, of which this is an example. The emphasis in the literature produced by the Battle for Australia Commemoration Committees on educating children about the ‘momentous events of our national history between 1942 and 1945’ is striking. Reference is also made to the age of the veterans of the Pacific campaigns and the need to preserve the memory of their sacrifice and commitment.<sup>5</sup> However two further factors have a bearing on the campaign for recognition of this day: the ‘political wars’ and the ‘history wars.’

Carol Gluck argues that the activities of voluntary groups or agents of remembrance alone have little chance of success unless the political context is propitious (2002: 61). Certainly the arrival in power of the Rudd Labor government in November 2007 was a crucial factor in the success of the campaign. In gazetting the first Wednesday in September as Battle for Australia Day, the Labor government was continuing an orientation towards commemoration of the Pacific rather than the European theatre of WWII that had begun, at least, with the former government of Paul Keating. In 1992 Keating kissed the ground of the Kokoda track, Papua New Guinea, that had been defended in 1942 by a largely militia force as the Japanese sought to consolidate their positions along the arc of islands to Australia’s north. Keating declared the ground sacred to Australia: ‘There can be no deeper spiritual basis to the meaning of Australian nation than the blood spilled at this place’ (quoted by Edwards 2001). In ‘shift[ing] the epicentre of Australian nationalism from Gallipoli to Kokoda,’ Keating was, writes James Curran, asserting the ‘defence of Australian self-interest over the call of British sentiment’ (2002: 484). The conservative side of Australian politics—the Liberal/National Coalition—, on the other hand, has invested heavily in the

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<sup>5</sup> In pamphlets supplied by David Cooper and on the National Council website.

commemoration of Gallipoli as the most significant national day and is accordingly suspicious of the motives behind the push to commemorate the Pacific War. These party-political differences are further expressed in conflicting interpretations of the conduct of Churchill and Curtin during the war, as the ‘political wars’ of 2005 made clear.

### **Conflicting narratives of the events of 1942: ‘The political wars’**

In May 2005, then Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer gave a speech, ‘Freedom, the Spread of Democracy and Contemporary Challenges in Foreign Policy’ (the Earle Page College’s Annual Politics Dinner lecture at the University of New England), and wrote several articles in *The Australian* offering a strong critique of what he called the Labor Party’s weak and inept role in pursuing war in the 1940s, and referring to the party as foreign policy appeasers whose weak-minded attitudes continue to this day (Teichmann 2005: 67–68). His strongest attack was turned against the Labor war-time Prime Minister John Curtin, accused of failing to acknowledge the threat posed by Nazism and of panicking when he demanded the return in 1942 of the Australian troops that Churchill wanted to send to Burma. One of the aims behind Downer’s attack was no doubt to undermine Labor’s credentials in criticising the war in Iraq and Afghanistan at a time when these wars were going badly, but his arguments reflect a broader ideological difference between the two parties.

Downer’s arguments were widely criticised, even in *Quadrant*, known for its conservative orientation, where Max Teichmann wrote a nuanced account of the policies of both Labor and the Liberal and Country Parties in the 1930s and early stages of the war (Teichmann 2005; see also McMullin 2005 for a more robust response). Kevin Rudd, then Foreign Affairs spokesman for the Opposition, wrote a rebuttal also published in *The Australian*, in which he defended Curtin and, turning the tables, accused Menzies of hesitation in defending Australia’s national interests (Rudd 2005). Rudd’s defence of Curtin and of his demand to Churchill that the Australian troops be brought home to defend the country, demonstrates the continuity in the Labor Party’s perspective on WWII; it is the logical extension of Keating’s pilgrimage to the Kokoda Track in 1992.

This political confrontation is explained in part by adherence to two strands of nationalism. An older form, linked to the commemoration of Gallipoli, has come to



represent the original ties with Britain; this is paradoxical, one might think, since one strand of the Gallipoli legend suggests that ANZAC troops were betrayed by the incompetence and stupidity of British generals. To draw attention to the events of 1942, on the other hand, associated as they generally are with the fall of Singapore, the failure of British protection and Churchill's intransigence, is related to a partial rejection of Britain and its heritage, and the assertion of the right to make new alliances in the national interest, even though, again paradoxically, the new alliance both during and since WWII has been with that rather overwhelming ally, the USA. These ideological differences, which do not usually translate into clear strategic distinctions, should not be exaggerated: John Howard, for example, made much during his period as Prime Minister of Australia of being the USA's closest ally. Moreover, Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister has distanced himself from Keating's radical nationalism, and specifically from his dismissal of the significance of Gallipoli (Shanahan 2008). However, gazetting the 'Battle for Australia Day' enabled the Labor party to mark (and perhaps even exaggerate) a political difference from the conservative side of politics through a largely symbolic gesture.

### **Conflicting narratives of 1942: The 'history wars'**

The 'history wars' that have been waged around this issue are a lesser-known example of the controversies that have inflamed academic and public debate over recent years in Australia. The most notorious of the recent 'history wars' in Australia, no doubt, are those concerning the early relations between the white settlers and the Aborigines, 'wars' over issues ranging from the extent of early massacres to the intentions behind the removal of the 'stolen generations.' But another set of history wars over the existence of a 'Battle for Australia' has been rumbling along since the late 1990s and has become intertwined with the broader political controversy over the interpretation of history and its relevance to contemporary policy.

The political and the history wars both gained heightened intensity in 2005 and 2006 with Alexander Downer's lecture (2005), Peter Stanley's article in the *Griffith Review* (2005), and the Memorial Oration given in 2006 by Stanley, then Principal Historian at the Australian War Memorial (Stanley 2006). Stanley's fundamental argument, developed at greater length in his book *Invading Australia* (2008), is that since there was no Japanese plan to invade Australia, the use of the term 'Battle for Australia' to

refer to a disparate range of battles is misleading and historically unjustifiable. His condemnation of the campaign to recognise a Battle for Australia is severe: ‘people who accept the Battle for Australia thesis, especially in its more extreme manifestation, have abandoned any claim to be judging the past according to the classic tenets applied by Western historians over several centuries.’ He accuses them of allowing feeling to overwhelm reason—‘the only basis for these beliefs is an emotional one’ (2008a: 248)—and of parochialism, showing interest only in those battles that most closely affected Australia and its region, thus overlooking or downplaying the broader, world-wide conflict and the values that Australians fought for in all the theatres of war and on behalf of many oppressed peoples. The push to recognise a Battle for Australia Day links disparate battles ‘into a single dramatic saga of threat and salvation,’ a powerful narrative, in Ashplant’s terms, and one that, as Stanley argues, ‘stitches together a raft of unconnected events to give the impression that the Japanese wanted Australia and would have got it except for this battle’ (Stanley 2008b: 7).

The ‘Battle for Australia’ claim is a revisionist one, Stanley argues, that overturns sixty years of historical research, during which the consensus had been that, although there was discussion of the possibility of invasion put forward by some middle-ranking naval officers, these proposals were strongly opposed as a practical impossibility by the army, and Japan never drew up plans to invade Australia. This represents a different situation, therefore, from the threat posed to Britain by Germany, which had drawn up concrete plans to invade. Although for some months in early 1942, the Australian intelligence community and the government considered invasion a real possibility and took measures accordingly, including mobilising the population to greater effort, by mid-1942, and particularly after the sea battles of the Coral Sea (May) and Midway (June), there was sufficient clear evidence and advice for the government and Curtin to know that the threat of invasion was remote. If Curtin did not acknowledge this publicly until mid-1943, this was no doubt in order to keep the population mobilised in the war effort, and perhaps because of Curtin’s own caution.

Stanley has been supported by some military historians, including Jeffrey Grey (2008) and John Connor (2008), and more provocatively by Stephen Barton, former Liberal staffer and now a political scientist at Edith Cowan University. In an article in *The Australian*, published not coincidentally on the eve of Anzac Day 2006, Barton argued

against the new commemorative focus on the Pacific War: ‘The elevation of Kokoda to the great defining Australian battle is a reflection not of the importance of that battle, or indeed the unique suffering and fighting ability of the troops, but because it can be absorbed into a mythical quest for Australian independence’ (Barton 2006). He concluded:

Keating once observed that the Labor Party writes Australian history, it creates the heroes and villains. In this, at least, he is quite correct; the ALP and its coterie of sympathetic historians, such as Manning Clark, David Day, Ross McMullin and Stuart Macintyre, are the standard bearers for the dominant view of Australian history. They embrace the battle of Kokoda because it can be twisted to fit their preferred narrative: Australian troops abandoned by the perfidious English, fighting alone, with plucky Labor man Curtin battling Churchill, as well as the Japanese (Barton 2006).

### **The counter attack**

Stanley’s position has been under sustained attack since 2002, when he gave the ‘He’s (Not) Coming South’ conference paper, an attack that was renewed after the *Griffith Review* article in 2005 and the Memorial Oration in 2006, and climaxed with the publication of *Invading Australia*. The charge has been led by James Bowen on his Battle for Australia website (2001). Relying heavily on a small number of historians, notably Henry Frei (1991) and David Horner (1993), Bowen mounts a direct and virulent attack on Stanley—referring to him on more than one occasion as ‘British-born Stanley’<sup>6</sup>—or his ‘one-sided myth argument and his constant diminishing of Curtin’s wartime role.’ Stanley’s position as Principal Historian at the Australian War Memorial rendered his views all the more galling to his critics, and pressure was placed by Bowen and others on Major Steve Gower, Director of the Memorial, to dismiss him. Stanley resigned from the War Memorial in December 2006 and has since moved to a position with the National Museum of Australia.

Stanley’s views were subsequently opposed at greater length in Bob Wurth’s *1942: Australia’s Greatest Peril* (2008a). Although Stanley is referred to only in a footnote (Ch 1, fn 3: 373), the whole weight of Wurth’s argument, using extensive research into Japanese archives, seems designed to contradict Stanley’s thesis and emphasise that ‘influential elements of this great navy [the Japanese] wanted to invade Australia in 1942’ (2008a: 3). While Wurth concludes this statement with the concession that ‘they never got as far as issuing orders to invade,’ he and other critics maintain that Stanley underplays the threat of invasion and pays insufficient attention to the evidence in

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<sup>6</sup> The implication, of course, is that Stanley lacks an Australian national perspective.

Japanese navy archives, biographies and officers' autobiographies that 'the Imperial navy's threat to Australia was both real and imminent' (2008b: 7). He emphasises the 'hopelessness of the Australian situation by March 1942' (2008a: 173) and the military justifications for the belief by Curtin and the High Command in the imminence of invasion.

Four major books were published in 2008 and 2009 devoted to Australia's role in the Pacific War and addressing directly or indirectly the question of whether Japan intended to invade (Stanley 2008a; Wurth 2008a; Thompson 2008; Grose 2009). The debate was carried on in late 2008 in articles and book reviews in many newspapers and journals, including *The Australian* and the tabloid *Sun-Herald*, sometimes involving the confrontation of the opposing positions. It was pursued online on the website framed around Wurth's book and was also the topic of radio programs and talkback radio: Peter Stanley participated in an ABC Radio National 'Australia Talks' program in August 2008 with Peter Thompson, author of *Pacific Fury: How Australia and Her Allies Defeated the Japanese Scourge*. Thompson seeks, as he writes in the Introduction, through the evidence gleaned from interviews with survivors, war records and diaries, to convey the deep fears and suffering of the Australian population of the period. Like Wurth, he does not refer directly to Stanley by name in his book, but his approach offers the vivid, emotional counterweight of lived experience to Stanley's dispassionate review of the actual risk of invasion.<sup>7</sup> The investment of the media in this issue can be explained by the clearcut, even virulent differences of opinion, always good copy, that involved questions not merely of academic interpretation but of the lived experience of a considerable section of the population. The talkback program elicited many responses from listeners who had lived through the war and referred to the 'proofs' of the imminence of invasion, which I discuss below.

### **The limitations of communicative memory and oral history**

The uneasy relationship between history and memory in the contemporary world is well illustrated in this debate. As Stanley emphasises, one of the primary sources for the widespread belief in the narrowly avoided invasion by the Japanese are the memories of those who lived through the war: 'A deep lode of family memories informs the popular

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<sup>7</sup> It is not the aim of this article to assess these divergent positions; nor is the author qualified to do so.

understanding of 1942' (2008a: 233).<sup>8</sup> Civilians were subjected at the time to visually colourful and terrifying propaganda posters depicting, for example, a giant, gun-wielding Japanese soldier marching south, with accompanying highly charged text; a government poster from 1942, for example, stated: 'He's coming south. It's fight, work or perish.' Participants in the talkback forum recalled seeing 'invasion money' printed by the Japanese in preparation for the occupation of Australia, seized overseas by Australian troops; and hearing rumours of actual landings that were hushed up by the government, of the existence of the 'Chinese map' showing the route of Japan's planned invasion, or of the 'Brisbane line,' the line above which Australia would be handed over to the invaders. Stanley however has shown with a wealth of documentation and research that this 'evidence' is entirely unsubstantiated, and on these points he has generally not been challenged.<sup>9</sup> Another powerful source of memory is to be found in the memoirs of Australian prisoners of war who were told by their captors of the planned invasion—and even sometimes of its success (Stanley 2008a: 236–37)—for reasons that can be imagined readily.

These erroneous 'memories' illustrate the limitations of the vernacular, and of cultural memory and oral history. Oral history may reveal—as little else can—the lived, subjective experience of the participants, but its usefulness and its accuracy as a source of historical knowledge are questionable, not only because of the limited perspectives and knowledge of the participants but because of the extent to which memory is reformulated by the 'scripts which later generations form and disseminate about significant events in the past' (Winter 2006: 278). Moreover, personal memory can be influenced both 'downstream' of the events it records, as 'scripts' re-write and overwrite original experience, and 'upstream' by existing narratives that provide the 'templates,' scripts, frames or schema through which experience is understood. Ashplant *et al.* suggest that individual subjects represent their experiences, even the eyewitness memory of war, 'through the pre-existing narratives fashioned by the agencies of the nation-state and civil society' (Ashplant *et al.* 2004: 33), but also, I might add, under the influence of the stories and images offered by popular film and literature, such as the fictional representations of invasion from the North that had been common in the

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<sup>8</sup> Stanley quotes an opinion poll from the *Daily Telegraph* in 2005, showing that more than three-quarters of respondents shared this belief (2008a: 239).

<sup>9</sup> The military historian Jeffrey Grey concludes his review of *Invading Australia*: 'Stanley's almost forensic analysis of the claims advanced in support of invasion has effectively demolished their evidentiary basis' (2008: 46).

pre-war period (Walker 1999; Stanley 2008a). It is not nowadays well remembered—and this is a striking lacuna in memories of World War II—that a strongly hierarchical view of race was the dominant ideology before and during the war years, and that the ‘claim of effective proprietorship over the continent’ for the British race was not felt to be secure (Day 2005: 237). My own research into the relations between Australia and New Caledonia has revealed the extent of the concern in Australia throughout the 1930s that their near neighbour might provide the launching pad for a Japanese attack.

### **Conclusion**

Pierre Nora (1989) identifies a tendency in the contemporary world for cultural memories to challenge, dictate to and even replace history. Certainly the debate over the Battle for Australia has been characterised in part by the confrontation between those claiming fidelity to memory and the defenders of historical method: on the one hand, the evocation of lived experience; on the other, the more dispassionate analyses of Japanese strategic planning. Should a truce be declared in the ‘war’ between history and memory? Jay Winter proposes that they be viewed as ‘describing a field of force in social thought and social action’ (2006: 288). Therefore, through the ‘creative engagement’ of those outside and within the academy we might arrive at a public history in the field of remembrance that recognises the complexity of the interaction of subjective experience, official record and historical research.

Perhaps the closest expression that exists of a ‘public history’ of 1942 is the article that appears on the Australian War Memorial website. Under the heading ‘Australia Under Attack, 1942–1943’ and the subheading ‘The Battle for Australia,’ it covers the two-year period by treading a subtle line between recognition of the widespread belief in the imminence of invasion and the historical assessments of its improbability:

The attacks on Australia in early 1942 had created the belief that invasion was imminent. Allied victories in the second half of 1942, in the Coral Sea, around Midway Island, at Milne Bay, at Guadalcanal and on the Kokoda Trail, halted the advance of Japanese forces in the South-West Pacific Area. Although the Japanese high command realised that an invasion of the Australian mainland was impossible as early as March 1942, continuing air attacks on northern Australia and enemy naval activity off the east and west coasts encouraged Australians to believe that the threat persisted.

The Australian civilian population, encouraged to maintain a high state of alert and starved of detailed information on the state of the war, fell victim to rumours. Many believed, wrongly as it turned out, that a plan—the Brisbane Line—existed to abandon the north and west of the continent to the enemy in the event of invasion and only commit to the defence of the most populated areas of south-eastern Australia. There was no such plan.

By mid-1943 Allied victories in the South-West Pacific Area reassured many Australians that the threat of invasion had passed. (Australia Under Attack 2010)

As the quote demonstrates, the article leaves ambiguous the legitimacy of the public belief in an imminent Japanese invasion and the responsibility for it: was it simply the attacks by the Japanese that created it? What was the role of Curtin and the government in ‘encouraging’ this belief? In ‘forgetting’ the areas of disagreement in order to arrive at an anodyne document on which all could agree, there lies perhaps the risk of draining the life from national debate in a way that Winter probably would not endorse.

What else must be forgotten in the creation of a new national day? Such forgetting includes not only the divergent interpretations of the threat posed by the Japanese, but also the role of the Allies, relegated in the section ‘Australia Under Attack, 1942–1943’ to a sentence—‘By mid-1943 Allied victories in the South-West Pacific Area reassured many Australians that the threat of invasion had passed’ (Australia Under Attack 2010)—in the Australian War Memorial’s account. The statement occludes the presence in Australia of hundreds of thousands of US troops from April 1942, and the fact that supreme military command was given to the US General MacArthur, who was not always mindful of Australian national sensibilities and who declared that the USA’s war aim in the defence of Australia was not intended as the defence of Australia for its own sake but part of the USA’s strategic reconquest of the Pacific.<sup>10</sup> This ‘surrender of sovereignty,’ in Gavin Long’s words (quoted in Long 1973: 181), has been all but obliterated from the commemoration of the Battle for Australia—Kevin Rudd’s speech on 8 September 2008 contained just one reference to the US allies.

That the politicised debate over the validity of the ‘Battle for Australia’ continues can be demonstrated in the article by the military historian Peter Ryan, published in September 2009 in *Quadrant*. Ryan dismisses as ‘nonsense’ the existence of a ‘Battle for Australia,’ and voices the fear that the recent focus on the Pacific campaigns will detract from recognition of the role of Australian forces elsewhere. Going beyond Stanley and even Downer, Ryan asserts, while acknowledging that the National Council is made up of veterans and not politicians, that the decision to commemorate the day is principally the result of partisan left-wing politics. A passing slight is also cast on the advisory role accorded by the Battle for Australia National Council to the Australian History Teachers’ Association, an organisation that will no doubt, suggests Ryan, fall in with this leftist conspiracy to rewrite history.

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<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere on the Australian War Memorial’s website, however, there are many references to the role of the USA in the Pacific conflicts.

More broadly, Ryan's article reveals its rootedness in the 'old nationalism' when Australian identity was principally derived from belonging to the 'British race' and occupying a place within the British Empire. This explains his endorsement of the legacy of Gallipoli, his reference to Australia's delusions of independence and self-importance enshrined in the myth of the battle for Australia, and his opinion that Curtin was 'desperately distraught' when he 'loosely' referred to a 'Battle for Australia,' the implication being, of course, that Curtin's demand to Churchill that Australian troops return to defend their country was an unjustified, indeed hysterical, over-reaction. These familiar themes have characterised both the political and the historical debate over the 'Battle for Australia' for the last ten years, a debate that is clearly far from over.

The virulence with which the debate has been pursued, the *ad hominem* attacks, suggest just how much is at stake in the interpretation of the war legacy as it passes into cultural memory and becomes increasingly reliant for transmission on public institutions such as schools, the academy, museums and state-organised commemorative activities.

Moreover, the virulence and attacks confirm the extent to which the officially sanctioned narrative of Australian national identity is still associated with military feats. Strangely, the collection of essays published in April 2010 under the title *What's Wrong with Anzac: The Militarisation of Australian History*, does not include a single reference to the inauguration of the 'Battle for Australia' day, which nevertheless provides support for their thesis that 'the commemoration of war and understanding of our national history have been confused and conflated' (Lake & Reynolds 2010: vii). It remains to be seen, however, whether public enthusiasm for Battle for Australia Day will carry the same emotional charge as Gallipoli and whether a change in 'chronopolitics'—the future return to power of a Federal Coalition government for example—will see the day relegated to the sidelines of official commemoration.

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