

# Centenary of the Battle for Chunuk Bair

Keith Rankin, 3 August 2015

This coming weekend marks the centenary of the Battle for Chunuk Bair. This battle is often regarded, as in the overview to the 1991 movie *Chunuk Bair*, as "a formative NZ nationhood moment". Indeed it was the principal moment by far in New Zealand's Gallipoli campaign of World War 1.

I don't agree with the view that our national identity was forged at Gallipoli, despite the rah-rah about this in the week leading up to Anzac Day. New Zealand's identity was forged way before that, probably in the 1870s when our quasi-federal system of self-government came to an end, when our globally itinerant goldminers had to settle down or leave, when our communication networks connected our provinces with each other, and when we saw ourselves as distinctively different from our Australian fellow colonisers. The Gallipoli 'birth of the nation' argument was based on a common misunderstanding of our hitherto relationship with Britain, the 'Old Country'; a relationship that in reality had been far from subservient.

What concerns me now, however, is our lack of respect for our own history. We did the centenary Anzac Day thing for a week in April, and then, on 26 April, our remembrance was instantly forgotten. We completely ignored the centenary of the Second Battle of Krithia in May. As a pure debacle, that battle at Cape Helles was second in our military history only to Passchendaele. At Chunuk Bair, there was at least some 'glory' amidst the gory.

Why have we switched off? Why are no TV or Radio programmes about Chunuk Bair scheduled for the centenary of what many regard as the most important day ever in New Zealand's military history? I could find no mention at all of Chunuk Bair in any of the two most recent issues of *The Listener*, usually a reliable guide to important commemorations.

It's a particularly strange juxtaposition to our new-flag debate. So many people say we should keep the present flag because it's the flag our soldiers in that war fought under. (Again, the alleged relationship to that particular flag represents part of the myth that New Zealand in WW1 was simply a subservient cog in the British Empire.) At the very least, TV1 or TV3 should be screening that 1991 movie, [Chunuk Bair](#).

On the peak of Chunuk Bair on the Sari Bair Range of the Gallipoli peninsular, from which the all-important Dardanelles could actually be seen, on 8 August 1915 the Wellington Infantry Battalion fought a 24 battle (indeed a 'victory' at the time) which left 90% of that battalion as casualties. (Two days later, after the New Zealanders were 'relieved', the peak was lost. It's hard to really imagine any other outcome in the days and weeks following. There was no yellow brick road to 'Constantinople' that would open up for the invading force, once the Dardanelles were sighted.)

Just go to see Peter Jackson's Gallipoli diorama, at the Dominion Museum Building, Pukeahu National War Memorial Park, Wellington. The roll of honour for New Zealand soldiers slain on 8 August dwarf's those for all other days of the campaign.

I think we have become afraid to engage meaningfully with our history, with the symbols that relate to different phases of our history, and with other contradictions about who we are that will shape our future whether or not we address them, just as they have shaped our past. We bury our past, just as we buried our soldiers.

Lest we forget. We have forgotten.

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