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Robert O'Neill and the Australian Official War Histories: Policy and Diplomacy

Peter Edwards

Like the citizens of many nations around the world, Australians are marking the centenary of the Great War of 1914–1918. With rather less fanfare, Australians are also marking the centenary of the start of a tradition of official war histories, which have had a fundamental role in shaping the way that Australians have thought about the nation's involvement in war since 1914. Robert O'Neill's contribution to that tradition was a major turning point in the development of that tradition, in at least two important respects.

When war broke out in 1914, Australia was engaged in a general election, which brought the Australian Labor Party back to office. One of its first decisions was the appointment of an official war correspondent. The Labor Government referred this decision to the relevant union, the Australian Journalists' Association, who conducted a ballot. The outcome was a victory for the *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Charles Bean over Keith Murdoch (the father of Rupert) of the Melbourne *Herald* and the Sydney *Sun*. When the Minister for Defence, Senator George F. Pearce, met Bean on 20 September 1914, Pearce told Bean that he should not only file newspaper reports but

also, after the war, write a history of Australia's part, which would become 'a permanent record for libraries, schools, and the nation generally'.¹

This was the origin of the 12-volume *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–18*, of which Bean would be the general editor. He would also be the author of the six volumes that form the backbone of the series, dealing with the Australian Imperial Force on the Gallipoli peninsula and on the western front in France and Belgium. Those volumes were based on Bean's own notebooks, as well as the mountains of official records, such as the unit diaries. Bean was an extraordinarily dedicated and courageous reporter, who personally witnessed virtually every major battle in which the Australians were engaged, other than Fromelles.²

At this time, Australian history was practically unknown in Australian universities. For decades to come, it would be, at best, a small adjunct to British imperial history. Newspapers, by contrast, were thriving. Bean, born in Australia but educated at Clifton College and Oxford University, was an exemplar of an Anglo-Australian tradition of journalism that contributed serious commentary on national affairs. By 1914, Bean had published three books based on his own reporting.

The authors appointed to write the other volumes generally had similar backgrounds. As far as possible, Bean chose eyewitnesses rather than prominent participants, usually correspondents who had no interest in defending the reputations of senior officers but who knew at first hand what the men in the trenches (literally or metaphorically) had endured. Henry Gullett and F. M. Cutlack, who wrote the volumes on the Australian Imperial Force in Sinai, Palestine, and Syria, and

1 Connor, John (2011) *Anzac and Empire: George Foster Pearce and the Foundations of Australian Defence*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, p. 47.

2 Inglis, K. S. (1979) 'Bean, Charles Edwin (1879–1968)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 7, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press. Available at: adb.anu.edu.au/biography/bean-charles-edwin-5166/text8677. See also Coulthart, Ross (2014) *Charles Bean*, Sydney: HarperCollins.

the Australian Flying Corps respectively, had similar backgrounds to Bean, as did Thomas Heney, who was appointed to write the volume on the home front but died before he could complete it.³

The central theme of the 1914–1918 history, especially of Bean's massively detailed volumes, was the character of the men he observed under the stress of war. In Bean's view, the Australians, especially those from the bush, had developed the qualities they had inherited from their British forebears: the character of the young nation had undergone its greatest test and had passed with flying colours. Despite the vast scope of the conflict, in which hundreds of thousands of Australians served and more than 60,000 were to lose their lives, Bean's approach depended on close attention to the individuals engaged in battle. The descriptions in the narrative and the accompanying sketches were supported by footnotes on the individuals named, showing that this great citizens' army comprised 'a fair cross-section of our people ... [such that] the company commander was a young lawyer and his second in command and most trusted mate a young engine driver and so on'.⁴

It was not an approach that took much interest in, or had much room for, questions of strategy, or the involvement of Australians in high command, or civil–military relations. The author of the volume on the home front, Sir Ernest Scott, did include the exploits of Prime Minister W. M. Hughes in London and Paris, but more in the context of Australian domestic politics than of anything that might be called Australian strategic policy.⁵

3 See their respective entries in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*: Hill, A. J. (1983) 'Gullett, Sir Henry Somer (Harry) (1878–1940)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 9, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press. Available at: adb.anu.edu.au/biography/gullett-sir-henry-somer-harry-448/text11157; Sweeting, A. J. (1981) 'Cutlack, Frederic Morley (1886–1967)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 8, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press. Available at: adb.anu.edu.au/biography/cutlack-frederic-morley-5859/text9963; Stewart, Ken (1983) 'Heney, Thomas William (1862–1928)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 9, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press. Available at: adb.anu.edu.au/biography/heney-thomas-william-6635/text11429.

4 Quoted in Inglis, K. S. (1979) 'Bean, Charles Edwin (1879–1968)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 7, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press. Available at: adb.anu.edu.au/biography/bean-charles-edwin-5166/text8677.

5 Scott, Ernest (1936) *Australia during the War*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

Bean's volumes, with their covers (as an early reviewer pointed out) the colour of dried blood, achieved substantial sales. To have them on one's bookshelves was an act of personal commemoration which complemented the nation's great commemorative institution, the Australian War Memorial, in the creation of which Bean was the moving force.

In what they omitted almost as much as in what they recorded, Bean's volumes had a major influence on how Australians thought of themselves and their young nation, especially its role in war. They helped to confirm the notion that Australia's primary role in conflict was to provide expeditionary forces who would fight alongside, and in close coordination with, those of Britain and the other Dominions.

By the time Bean finished the last of his six volumes, the world was again at war. It was a mark of the respect that he and his history had engendered that in 1943 the War Cabinet decided, on the recommendation of the Australian War Memorial (and almost certainly at the instigation of Bean himself) to appoint an official historian of this second global war. The man appointed, Gavin Long, had a similar background to Bean, that of a well regarded journalist and correspondent. Long was also an eyewitness to several campaigns, although it was not possible for one man to cover as many of the Australian battlefields as Bean had.

Many of those appointed to write other volumes in what eventually became a 23-volume series also had a background in journalism. The author of the home front volumes, Paul Hasluck, had experience of high-level diplomacy, rare for an Australian of his time, as well as the academic credentials of a professor of history or political science, but much of his reputation in the 1940s was based on his important role as a journalist at the *West Australian*.⁶

Although Hasluck would later become Australia's foreign minister, there was little on Australia's international relations in his two volumes on *The Government and the People*, which were focused on Australia's domestic politics. Australia's relations with Britain and the United States received relatively little attention, and were discreetly handled. Substantial — and sometimes controversial — books on the

6 Bolton, Geoffrey (2014) *Paul Hasluck: A Life*, Perth: UWA Publishing.

high politics of war, including such matters as the relations of prime ministers Robert Menzies and John Curtin with Winston Churchill, or Curtin's relations with Douglas MacArthur, emerged much later, from a new generation of academic historians.⁷ Gavin Long himself wrote a book on Douglas MacArthur, in which he expressed opinions widely held by Australian servicemen, but which were probably considered inappropriate for an official history.⁸ It appears that, in the 1950s and 1960s, there was little appetite in official circles for a detailed account of the sometimes fraught relations between Australia and the countries that Menzies, in his peacetime term as prime minister from 1949 to 1966, liked to describe as Australia's 'great and powerful friends'.

It was perhaps symbolic that both Bean and Long died within months of each other in 1968. In the 1960s, Australian history, which had been steadily growing in Australian universities since the 1940s, was now flourishing and attracting popular attention outside the academy. The first volumes of Manning Clark's *A History of Australia*, published in 1962 and 1968, generated controversy, while Clark's teaching helped to inspire a new generation of Australian historians.⁹ The late 1960s were years of rebellion and dissent, as the postwar generation of baby boomers came to adulthood, with many attending the burgeoning universities. Having known only peace and prosperity, they would probably have been restive in any case, but the Vietnam War crystallised their discontent and focused them on questions of war and peace. Amid an atmosphere of widespread dissent and anti-war demonstrations, the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre was established at The Australian National University in 1966, the nation's first major think tank on strategic policies.

Also in Canberra, the Australian War Memorial was recovering from its post-1945 doldrums and undergoing a major revival in its role as not only a museum but also a research centre in Australian military history. In his last years, Gavin Long encouraged the memorial's collaboration with the new public and academic interest in Australian military history. Long was involved in the award of the memorial's

7 See Horner, David (1992) *High Command: Australia's Struggle for an Independent War Strategy, 1939–45*, Melbourne: Allen & Unwin, and a number of later works by Horner, David Day, Anne Henderson, and others.

8 Gavin Long, *MacArthur as Military Commander*, Batsford, London, 1969.

9 McKenna, Mark (2011) *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark*, Melbourne: Miegunyah Press.

first three research grants to 'a journalist, a soldier and schoolmaster turned academic, and a young scholar who would become a historian of distinction', an indication of the new breadth and diversity of background and interest in the field.¹⁰

This was the social, political and academic environment when Robert O'Neill was appointed in 1970 to write an official history of Australia's involvement in the Korean War. In the following year, he became head of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, the position he held until 1982. During those 12 years he would dedicate much of his research and writing time to the Korean War official history.

It is deceptively easy today to overlook the significance of O'Neill's appointment. For a start, it was by no means certain that the government of the day would undertake an official history of Australian involvement in the Korean War. By 1970, it was clear that Korea was the first of a series of post-1945 conflicts, which differed in many respects from the two world wars. Korea was certainly no minor affair, but it was on a markedly different scale from the two world wars. As in 1914–1918, the land war was much larger than those on the sea or in the air, but Australia's contribution was made not by a vast army of citizens who had been recruited 'for the duration', but by a relatively small, professional army, created only in 1948. Korea was the first of what historians would call Australia's 'wars of diplomacy',¹¹ in which the initial commitment and its subsequent higher direction would be interwoven with an increasingly assertive foreign policy, with alliance management and a sharp focus on the region to Australia's north the dominant elements.

To write the official history of Australia's involvement in this new type of war, the government chose a new type of historian. In his mid-30s when appointed, Robert O'Neill had not been there as a journalist or war correspondent: he was a schoolboy at the time of the Korean War. A graduate of the Royal Military College, Duntroon, who had served with distinction as a young officer in the Vietnam War,

10 Stanley, Peter (2003) 'Gavin Long and History at the Australian War Memorial', in Jeffrey Grey (ed.) *The Last Word?: Essays on Official History in the United States and the British Commonwealth*, Westport, Conn.: Praeger, pp. 113–14.

11 Grey, Jeffrey (2008) *A Military History of Australia*, third edition, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, p. 220, uses this term to describe the conflicts in Malaya, Borneo, and Vietnam, but it is arguably no less applicable to Korea.

O'Neill had credibility with the services, but his principal qualification was something unknown to earlier generations of Australians — a doctorate in history, which had led to scholarly publications. His Oxford PhD thesis, subsequently published as a book, had been on the relationship between the German Army and the Nazi Party.¹² In short, he had outstanding credentials in the academic study of the high politics and civil–military relations that lay behind a military commitment. O'Neill knew the importance of recording and analysing not only the experience of those who served, but also the high-level decision-making that led to service personnel being placed in harm's way.

During the decade and more that O'Neill spent researching and writing, he discovered so much important and interesting material at this level that he realised that there should be, not just a chapter or two, but an entire volume on the strategic and diplomatic aspects of the commitment. The War Memorial Council agreed. The projected single volume was divided into two, one on strategy and diplomacy, and the other on combat operations.

Today it is easy to overlook the innovative character of a major scholarly volume of Australian diplomatic and strategic history. Diplomatic history was a tender, young shoot in Australian universities, where any scholarly interest in the history of Australia's foreign policy was more likely to be found in political science departments than in history departments. The gibe that Australia had no foreign policy other than slavish subservience to its powerful allies was commonly heard. Few works on Australia's diplomatic history, based on substantial archival research, had been published. The first volumes of *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy* began to appear in the mid-1970s, the fruit of a program initiated by Paul Hasluck as Minister for External Affairs (as Foreign Affairs was then known) from 1964 to 1969. Hasluck's long parliamentary career delayed the publication of the second volume of his contribution to the official history of Australia in the 1939–1945 war, and he subsequently wrote several important books of memoirs. Even when serving in high office, he remained essentially a historian who believed strongly in the importance of the written record.

12 O'Neill, Robert (1969) *The German Army and the Nazi Party, 1933–39*, London: Cassell.

Strategic history was even more neglected. The decade in which O'Neill was carrying out his research, the 1970s, was also a time of unprecedented scholarly discussion of Australian strategic and defence policy. In both academic and policy-making circles, a strong view was emerging that the era of forward defence was over, and Australia had to look to a new strategic concept, which would become known as 'the self-reliant defence of Australia'. This concept and its implications lay at the heart of the first White Paper on Defence to be brought down by an Australian government, in 1976. Vigorous debate followed on the ramifications and implications of this doctrinal shift and the associated reorganisation of Australia's defence organisation, implemented amid considerable controversy following a major review in 1974.¹³

The Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, with O'Neill at its head, was central to much of this discussion. In 1976, the centre held a major conference on 'The Defence of Australia: Fundamental New Aspects', resulting in a publication under that title, edited by O'Neill, the following year.¹⁴ While the theme of this conference, as of so much discussion in the 1970s, was that Australian strategic and defence policies were moving into a new era, this environment clearly influenced O'Neill's research and analysis of the conflict of 1950–1953. If Australian strategic, defence, and foreign policies were about to move into a new era, it was essential that Australians should have a good understanding of the era that was passing. The forward defence era could be seen as ending with the fall of Saigon in 1975. Few events were more important in its initiation than the negotiation of the ANZUS Treaty and the commitment to the Korean War.

O'Neill's first volume of *Australia in the Korean War 1950–53* was therefore fundamental to a generation of scholarship on Australian strategic and diplomatic history.¹⁵ It remains an indispensable account of the negotiation of the ANZUS Treaty, a fundamental element of Australian policies for decades to come, but its historiographical importance did not end there. O'Neill's detailed analysis of Australia's

13 Edwards, Peter (2006) *Arthur Tange: Last of the Mandarins*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, chapters 10, 11, and 13.

14 O'Neill, R. J. (ed.) (1977) *The Defence of Australia: Fundamental New Aspects*, Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University.

15 O'Neill, Robert (1981) *Australia in the Korean War 1950–53*, Vol. I: Strategy and Diplomacy, Canberra: The Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service.

diplomatic dealings, especially with London and Washington, showed that Canberra did not simply knee-jerk in response to directives from its allies. There were difficult choices to be made. Winston Churchill's peacetime government in London, for example, strongly opposed the idea that Australia (or New Zealand) should sign a security treaty with the United States to which Britain was not a party. The commitment to the Korean War was deliberately handled in a manner designed to show Washington that Canberra made its own decisions on such matters, independently of London. In subsequent years, Australia had to decide where it stood on matters where the United Kingdom and the United States were at odds, such as General MacArthur's threats of using atomic weapons and his 'push to the Yalu'.

By his detailed treatment of such matters, O'Neill demonstrated that war histories, like wars themselves, are what would now be called a whole of government exercise. The service, the sacrifice, the experience of those wearing uniform is, of course, central to a war history; but so too are the decisions that send those service personnel into combat. The roles of the politicians, the diplomats, the civilian officials, and the senior military officers are all important parts of the story. The careful study of what they did, or failed to do, is essential not only to understand what actually happened, but also as the foundation for the study of current and future policy. O'Neill's record of the work of P. C. (later Sir Percy) Spender as Minister for External Affairs and of young diplomats such as James (later Sir James) Plimsoll in Korea, for example, is a major contribution to Australia's diplomatic history.

The second volume of O'Neill's Korean War history, entitled simply *Combat Operations*, also shows the influence of a different style of authorship.¹⁶ As in the two world wars, the land, sea, and air theatres are treated in three separate parts, as Australian units of the three services operated alongside the sister services of allied countries rather than as a joint force. But in each case O'Neill devotes considerable attention not only to the experiences of Australian units and individuals, but also to some of the wider military and diplomatic issues that affected the operational experience. The extent to which Australian servicemen were able to influence the allied coalition's tactical and operational

16 O'Neill, Robert (1985) *Australia in the Korean War 1950–53*, Vol. II: *Combat Operations*, Canberra: The Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service.

approaches was an enduring theme of O'Neill's history, as it had been of his own experience as the intelligence officer of a battalion serving in Vietnam.

The impact of O'Neill's Korean War history on the Australian tradition of official war histories can be seen in the fourth series to be commissioned. Originally designated to cover the Malayan Emergency of 1948–1960 and the Vietnam War (to which Australian forces were committed between 1962 and 1972), it was later extended to include the Indonesian Confrontation of 1963–1966. It was then designated the *Official History of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948–75*. These conflicts, like others of the post-1945 era, have been referred to both as 'wars of diplomacy' and 'wars of decolonisation'.¹⁷ The international context and Australia's management of both its major alliances and its relations with the new, post-colonial governments emerging in the region to Australia's immediate north were of obvious importance and interest.

O'Neill was a member of the selection panel which recommended the appointee for this history. In light of what has been recorded above, it is perhaps unsurprising that the selected historian, the present writer, had a background in diplomatic rather than operational history. I was the principal author of two volumes dealing with the political, strategic, and diplomatic aspects of the three conflicts, while other authors covered the operational and medical areas. The two strategic–diplomatic volumes, *Crises and Commitments*, and *A Nation at War*, were consciously written in the tradition of O'Neill's first Korean War volume.¹⁸

At the time of writing, a fifth series of Australian official war histories, *The Official History of Australian Peacekeeping, Humanitarian and Post-Cold War Operations*, is in the course of publication, with David Horner as the official historian and general editor. The government has also announced that a sixth series will be commissioned, to cover

17 See footnote 11 on wars of diplomacy in Anderson, Fay and Richard Trembath (2008) *Witnesses to War: The History of Australian Conflict Reporting*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing.

18 Edwards, Peter with Gregory Pemberton (1992), *Crises and Commitments: The Politics and Diplomacy of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948–1965*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial; Edwards, Peter (1997) *A Nation at War: Australian Politics, Society and Diplomacy During the Vietnam War 1965–1975*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial.

the commitments to East Timor, Iraq, and Afghanistan. It can be anticipated that diplomatic and strategic considerations will be amply covered in these works, perhaps more prominently in the sixth series, although they are likely to be integrated into the volumes dealing with operations rather than as stand-alone volumes on the model of the Korean War and Southeast Asian Conflicts series. No official war historian today or in the foreseeable future is likely to omit the strategic, diplomatic, and civil–military dimensions of a conflict, as had been the practice of O'Neill's predecessors, Charles Bean and Gavin Long, and their respective colleagues.

The appointment of Robert O'Neill as the official historian of Australia's involvement in the Korean War, and the way in which he carried out that task, marked a major turning point, not only in the tradition of Australian official war histories, but also in Australian strategic and diplomatic historiography. He was the first of the Australian official war historians to have academic qualifications of a high order, whereas his predecessors had typically been distinguished journalists and war correspondents. Secondly, he pioneered the coverage in official histories of the strategic and diplomatic policy-making that led Australian forces to be involved in conflicts, with the same precision and authority as had always been given to the experience of those forces. From the vantage point of the second decade of the twenty-first century, it would be easy to overlook the full significance of O'Neill's contribution to an important element in Australians' understanding of their nation's place in the world.

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