



Remembering Anzac Day

Karn Cleary © 21 April 2024

I titled today's service "Remembering Anzac Day", purposely. It disturbs me to see or hear references to "celebrating" Anzac Day, when I believe it should always be a day of mourning for all those who died so futilely at Gallipoli, and all the others whether they returned or not, who have gone off to war from New Zealand.

The 24th April, the day before Anzac Day is the anniversary of the death of my father, Bror Muller, who died in 1967. This talk is really about my father's experiences during the Second World War as an enemy alien and, in his words, 100% committed pacifist. I'll also talk about how those experiences affected his life after the war, and the impact on his family, or at least on me, growing up in the 1950s and 60s.

My father was born in Denmark on 14th August, 1908. His father Lieutenant JP Muller, had been an engineer in the Danish army, and his mother Maria was a nurse. When Bror was about two years old, his parents left Denmark to live in Switzerland, then to England. My father was brought up in England, and sent to boarding school in Gloucestershire. After he left school, in about 1925, he spent some time at a Danish Folk school, an agricultural college, and during a long summer vacation in the 1920s he toured Germany on a bicycle, learning the language as he went.

After graduating from college, Bror went to Canada where he spent a year working on a farm near Winnipeg. From Canada, he came to New Zealand in about 1930 and began his farming career on a small leasehold farm near Warkworth. During the

next ten years he moved twice, the last time to 300 hundred acres near Leigh, which was coastal and had a great view of the sea from Pakiri hill. By this time he had married Beryl, his first wife, and started a family. Although they had managed to get a mortgage for the farm from the Bank of New Zealand, this was the depression and money was scarce. It cost 5 pounds to be naturalised, that is, to get New Zealand citizenship, and Bror, who considered himself a citizen of the world, never had a spare five pounds, so when war was declared in 1939, he was still a Danish citizen, able to speak German and with a German last name.

He had also become known as a friend of the German naval commander Count Felix von Luckner, who was famous for having been captured during the First World, and escaping from imprisonment on Motutapu Island. In 1937-38, he returned to NZ as part of a round the world goodwill tour. On one occasion, he had stopped in Warkworth for tea at the local hotel. My father was giving a swimming lesson at the local primary school. Somehow the students heard that von Luckner was in town, left school and crowded round the hotel, hoping to get his autograph. Bror thought that the swimming lesson was far more important, so asked the Count for 40 signatures in an exercise book, and bribed his students to go back to school. The Count then asked Bror to organise a speaking engagement for him in Warkworth, so dad became known as his friend.

Germany invaded Denmark on 6 April, 1940. Denmark then became enemy territory. Already an alien, my father was required to register as an "enemy alien", and to report regularly to the police station in Warkworth. When the local patriotic league wrote asking for funds, Bror replied that being a pacifist he was unable to support their cause. Life became very difficult for my father and his family; however they continued to work and improve their farm. Bror was very interested in modern farming methods, and early in 1940 he constructed an electric fence, the

first in the district, using old marmite jars, made of white pottery, as insulators.

During 1939 and 1940, many people in New Zealand had become outspokenly anti-alien; in the Warkworth area people descended from the Puhoi settlers who had been there for generations, were discriminated against because of the Germanic names – even though most of the men had enlisted or were exempt as farmers from conscription. The worst moment for my father came on 19 June 1940, when the Niagara was sunk by a German mine just off Bream Head. The mines had been laid on 13th June by a German ship, and the Niagara was the first victim. The gossips of Warkworth immediately concluded that Bror had been communicating with German submarines through his electric fence, and the farm was raided by police, who found a pile of incriminating books from the Left Book Club.

My father was doomed by being on record as a pacifist and socialist, as well as an enemy alien. He was forced to leave the farm, ordered to live in Auckland, report regularly to the police and to work as directed. He was required to work in the naval dockyards at Devonport. Not surprisingly, although my father recounted this whole saga entertainingly, he was very bitter about the way he had been treated during the war. Our family never attended Anzac Day ceremonies, instead we marched on Hiroshima Day every year from 1961.

Anzac Day in the 50s and early 60s was a strange combination of holy day and mournful holiday. Ceremonies began with the Dawn Parades and continued through the day. Only returned service people were permitted to march, parades were addressed by mayors or members of Parliament, hymns were sung and prayers recited, there was an odd mixture of admiration for military might combined with hopes for peace in the future. Children were expected to attend a sort of mini parade at school before Anzac Day, and we were issued with little paper strips with

poppies printed on them, which we had to wear. I used to think that we were the only family not parading on Anzac Day, but I was wrong.

During the war, all men between the ages of 18 and 50 were subject to conscription into the armed forces. Many volunteered when war was declared, or as they turned 18. Women were never subject to conscription, but were manpowered to work in essential industries as the men left to serve; the only women who saw active overseas military service were volunteers, many as nurses but others in administrative jobs. Men in reserved occupations, who were needed to work on farms for example, could apply to be exempted, and many were rejected for active service because they were medically unfit. Others stayed in the Army but were never sent overseas.

For some of these men, Anzac Day was a source of embarrassment, as they couldn't parade or join the RSA, and so they too avoided the whole day. Many of the men who had served wanted only to forget the horrors they had been through, and chose not to participate in the ceremonies or the celebrations at the RSA clubs afterwards. (Pubs were closed.)

And then there were the pacifists. They were never given any favourable publicity, but there were many men who had spent the war in prison because they refused to fight. Although there was supposed to be exemption from service on grounds of religious conviction, many men who applied were not granted it. Those who objected because they were humanists or believed war was morally wrong, but did not belong to a Christian sect such as the Quakers or Jehovah's Witnesses had no chance of having their objections recognised. Some were offered the choice of joining the ambulance service or working in administrative capacities, but most were simply imprisoned in punitive conditions for the duration of the war. Some of these men were kept in prison for nearly a year after the end of the war. The RSA demanded that

they be kept in longer, not be allowed to work in the public service and suffer many other consequences, though fortunately the government did not impose these conditions.

For these men and their families, Anzac Day was a political statement in favour of war and militarism, and they were prevented by conscience from participating. It must have been very difficult for those who were Christians, whose churches supported the glorification of war and the sacrificial deaths of so many thousands of people.

There were outspoken Unitarian pacifists in New Zealand. In 1917, as Unitarian minister in Christchurch, the [Rev James Chapple](#) conducted services which became noisy political meetings and included topics such as, 'War enables profiteers to stand on velvet whilst the poor stand in queues'. Police took notes during a lecture tour of the West Coast that Chapple made in March 1918, and charged him with two counts of seditious utterance at Greymouth. The case was heard in the Christchurch Magistrate's Court on 10 and 17 May. Chapple was convicted on both counts and sentenced to 11 months' gaol. The magistrate described him as a dangerous man. Chapple alternated with William Jellie and others as a Unitarian minister in our church from 1939 to 1941, when he voluntarily withdrew, fearing that his public support for the advance of Soviet communism might create problems.

Another was Frederick Sinclair, who was born in Auckland and trained as a Unitarian minister at Manchester College in England. His ministry was mostly in Melbourne, and later Christchurch, and he was an uncompromising pacifist throughout the 1940s.

[Owen Hansen](#), who remained a member of the church until his death in 2009, spent 3½ years in detention camp and prison during World War II. The court would not accept his claim of a rational rather than specifically religious motivation for his

objection to any form of territorial or military service.

My father, being an enemy alien, was not subject to conscription, though he could have volunteered, but luckily was also not interned for his pacifist beliefs. Chapple's grandson, Maurice Gee, has written a novel, *Live Bodies*, about the experiences of two men imprisoned on Matiu Somes Island, as enemy aliens. One of the characters was based on Odo Strewe, a refugee from Nazi Germany, who was well known in Auckland after the war. Odo was an enemy alien, and despite being staunchly anti-Hitler, was incarcerated alongside self-proclaimed Nazis. His escape from the island was made in protest at being forced to associate with these men, many of whom were New Zealanders.

Anzac Day continued to be a national day of mourning, and also celebration, during the 1960s, but after the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament started in 1959, pacifists started to be more noticed. Hiroshima Day marches began in 1961, my memory is of being in a very small group marching up Queen Street watched by a much larger crowd, but my father went every year until he was too ill. With New Zealand's involvement in the Viet Nam war, the whole peace movement became stronger and more organised. We started to protest against the war on Anzac Day, although this caused outrage and claims that we were being disrespectful of the dead.

I started university in 1968, and remember going on anti-war marches and demonstrations, it seemed nearly every week. In the early 1970s, there were so many marching that the leaders would reach the Town Hall before the end of the demo had left Princes Street – we went down Anzac Avenue and all the way up Queen Street, usually 10 abreast, an estimated 30 thousand people towards the end of the war. Although there were many onlookers at these marches, being anti-war had become the norm at last. There were huge protests about the French nuclear

tests in the Pacific, and visits of American warships, until David Lange's government declared NZ nuclear free in 1985.

I still believe war is wrong and futile. As Unitarians, we are committed to working towards world peace. These days, Anzac Day has lost the aura of solemnity it used to have, perhaps because most of the service men have died or are too old to attend, and we're now able to go shopping in the afternoon. It seems to me that in the last ten years or so we have turned Anzac day into a weird combination of sentimental patriotism and excitement, where we claim to be mourning the dead but somehow have a nostalgia for war. We no longer protest in our thousands about the many unjust conflicts we are engaged in, especially in the Middle East and Afghanistan. I wish that Anzac Day could be a day we sincerely acknowledge those who died, and also honoured those who were brave enough to stand up for their convictions and were persecuted for promoting peace.

Another of Nancy Fox's poems, written in 1954, speaks to the division of those who fought and those who did not:

Main Body Reunion, Gallipoli veterans

*Having paid my toll to the heaviness and dread of war,
I took my daughters to see, under a bright sky,
their father's father and his peers pass by.
They marched with all the old confident swing, who wore
grey hairs with ease and the weight of years with pride...
meeting again who lived, grieving who died.
And, considering war to be madness and folly...
evil past words... I felt how bitter to be
there, of that age, yet not of that company.*

*[Landmarks poems 1937-1987, Puriri Press, Auckland
1989.]*