



Essential texts on the national fixation

MILITARY HISTORY

GALLIPOLI. THE BATTLEFIELD GUIDE. By Mat McLachlan. Hachette. 388pp. \$29.99.

THE GALLIPOLI LETTER. By Keith Murdoch. Allen & Unwin. 98pp. \$29.99
 Reviewer: **PETER STANLEY**

What is it about that stretch of rugged Turkish coastline that draws us back, again and again? Ninety-five years on, Gallipoli retains its fascination. Every year 50,000 or so Australians visit, many drawn by emotional desires transcending the actual events of 1915. Too many visitors are myth-seekers, wrapping themselves in the flag on Anzac Day and reinforcing a romantic, parochial nationalism at odds with the facts. They too often leave without understanding the historical reality of Gallipoli. They could do with reading this book.

The best way to encounter Gallipoli is as an independent traveller, by car or (best of all) by scooter. Joining an organised tour (Australian or Turkish) can be a lottery, unduly dependent on the guide's ability to convey knowledge and foster understanding without boring, lecturing or patronising – sometimes all three.

A self-guided tour allows visitors to find their own routes, travel at their own pace and form their own conclusions. But to do this confidently and successfully you need help: here it is.

Mat McLachlan, tour operator and sometime television presenter, has followed his successful 2007 *Walking with the Anzacs* guide to the Australian battlefields of the Western Front with an equally authoritative and practical guide to the battlefields of Gallipoli.

McLachlan's guide is certainly not the first or even the most authoritative guide to Gallipoli aimed at Australian visitors. The first and most detailed was Pam Cupper and Phil Taylor's, first published in 1989, and reissued as a second edition in 2000. It took in the Greek islands from which the invasion was launched and the sites around Istanbul, including the cemeteries in which dead Australian prisoners of war lie.

But now it has competition. Glenn Wahlert's *Exploring Gallipoli* and Garrie Hutchinson's *Gallipoli: The Pilgrimage Guide*, both recent and more colourful, are available too. Richard Reid's Department of Veterans' Affairs-funded website caters to tech-savvy back-packers.

McLachlan's guide is intended to be used on the spot. Utilitarian rather than glossy, in the style proved by *Walking with the Anzacs*, it suggests routes and stops by which the self-guided traveller will gain most from their time on the battlefield. Written in an easy style with just the right proportion of pointers, quotations and detail, it includes useful and clear maps.

The greatest virtue of McLachlan's guide is that it is even-handed, paying due attention to Australian, New Zealand, British and Turkish aspects of the campaign. It is less detailed than Cupper and Taylor, more detailed than Wahlert, less sentimental than Hutchinson and more readily portable than Reid. Every traveller planning to visit Gallipoli should carry a copy.

In the case of *The Gallipoli Letter*, publisher Allen & Unwin has pulled off the not inconsiderable coup of turning a 25-page typescript into a 98-page hard-backed book. Is this a canny exploitation of the marketing advantage of publishing anything with "Gallipoli" in the title (what's next – *The Gallipoli Cookbook? Gardening Gallipoli Style?*) or is it a useful addition to the bookshelf?

The answer is that *The Gallipoli Letter* puts into interested readers' hands one of the key sources of the Gallipoli campaign, a document raising still-important questions about the campaign's wisdom and Australia's part in it.

Journalist Keith Murdoch's "Gallipoli letter" – a denunciation of the folly of

continuing the Gallipoli campaign, written in September 1915 – has long been seen as marking the point at which disillusionment over the stalled campaign turned into active opposition.

Judge for yourself Murdoch's impassioned advocacy, repeating gossip and hearsay picked up through casual chats during his four-day flying visit. It is as shocking to read today as it was when Murdoch wrote to then prime minister Andrew Fisher. It fairly burns with indignation, famously asserting that "sedition is talked around every tin of bully beef on the peninsula".

The text of the letter – taken from the original in the collection of the National Library – is accompanied by a foreword by actor Jack Thompson and an introduction by historian Michael McKernan.

However we admire Thompson's gifts as an actor, especially in portraying Australian characters, his foreword must surely have been solicited simply to attract readers. The letter is patently not about what Murdoch has experienced "first hand" and Murdoch himself was not "one of the Anzacs".

The introduction by Michael McKernan, well known to *Canberra Times* readers, is another matter. The product of a historian who has steeped himself in the Great War for 40 years, including numerous visits to Gallipoli, it alone is worth the cover price. McKernan places this letter in its historical context carefully, clearly and memorably.

In 2010 Gallipoli has been well served by works that allow us to reconsider and reinterpret that campaign that will not leave us alone, and for reasons these two excellent books make clear.

Peter Stanley is the author of *A Stout Pair of Boots*, the first Australian guide to battlefield research.



A huge crowd at the Anzac Day 2005 memorial service at Lone Pine, Gallipoli.
Photo: Reuters

