



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

**First Know Your Enemy, by John
Moses & Peter Overlack: book
launch**

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and Culture*

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Several years ago, when I was a doctoral history student, and in the early stages of learning German, I happened to bump into John Moses in the National Library. ‘Here’s a great chance’, I thought to myself, ‘to glean from a master, some tips and tricks for speeding up language learning.’

I expected something like “Übung macht den Meister” (which translates roughly as “practice makes perfect”). His advice to me for learning German was, instead, surprising and simple: ‘Marry one’. Unfortunately for my language learning, however, I was already married, so I wasn’t in a position to take his advice—not legally, anyway! On that note, I’m sure that John’s sage decision to take his own advice (and marry Ingrid) has been a crucial ingredient of his success as a scholar, for more than half a century

More seriously, the value of John’s study both of German, and of key aspects of its history writing and historical self-understanding, has meant that he has been a major translator of German scholarship for the Australian context – for over fifty years. Nowhere has this been more influential than in Australian political, intellectual, and religious history; and, more specifically, in relation to the history of the Great War and its legacies.

Tonight’s book is yet another important contribution to that life’s work. It is my privilege, as a fellow historian, to offer some remarks on the book, and its place in a larger historical and national conversation.

Several Australian historians and thinkers have in recent decades questioned the notion that Gallipoli or the Great War represent the birth of the nation, as opposed to the Federation of Australia in 1901. They have proposed that different traditions of social and political innovation be given a higher place in the public memory, such as the secret ballot, women’s suffrage, the living wage or the Eight Hour Day.

Values such as mateship also appear to predate the Great War: in the camaraderie generated by the common hardships of convict life, or in the ‘levelling, egalitarian collectivism’ that was forged by the isolation and hardships of the Australian bush. Some historians have observed the marginalization of Australia’s women and indigenous peoples from the Anzac founding narrative, while noting little acknowledgment of frontier warfare with indigenous peoples in our commemoration of war.

These historians have also lamented a vacuous ‘sentimental nationalism’, in addition to what they describe as the ‘militarisation of Australian history’, which has been further propagated by lavish government funding of Anzac-related school curricula and resources that sing in a conservative key. Our poets have also put this plea, none more succinctly than the late Les Murray:

The Day of our peace will need a native

herb that out-savours rosemary.

Not all have agreed, however, with such positions. The late Ken Inglis, for example, contested the ‘top down’ explanation of the resurgence of Anzac commemoration, noting significant popular, grassroots

interest, while others have contested the way in which schoolteachers and students have been presented as passive recipients.¹ John Moses is another historian who has noted the profound extent to which Anzac commemoration emerged in the context of Christian leadership and liturgy. This is seen clearly in the legacy of Canon Garland, but also among a majority Christian population at the grassroots.

Alongside these debates, a vigorous contest about the meaning and origins of the Great War continues unabated—with polarizing interpretations. On one side is insistence on German culpability and the Allies' justified and noble purpose in going to war with Germany: a view defended most eloquently in Australian scholarship by John Moses (and now, it should be added, by Peter Overlack, in the book we're launching tonight).

On the other side of the debate, historians have insisted on 'collective responsibility' against a background of ethnic and nationalistic ferment in Europe, perhaps most prominently defended by another Australian historian of Germany, Christopher Clark, now based at the University of Cambridge (and who was, incidentally, a historian I met and learned from when I was studying there). 'The outbreak of war,' writes Clark, 'is not an Agatha Christie drama at the end of which we will discover the culprit standing over a corpse in the conservatory with a smoking pistol.' Instead, Clark sees smoking pistols in many hands.

I've labelled Clark's interpretation of the outbreak of the war as the 'sleepwalkers' thesis, because of the title of Clark's book, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe went to War in 1914*, published in 2012. It presents all European powers as sleepwalkers blundering unknowingly towards a tragic, unimaginably costly war.

The book we are launching tonight offers a very different interpretation. John Moses and Peter Overlack note that Clark's popular interpretation—and a long line of others like it—has been criticised for selectively ignoring key primary sources in relation to German war aims and German culpability. Clark's interpretation also keeps the focus firmly on how the war broke out, avoiding the 'deeper and essential question' of why it broke out.

It's that deeper question of 'why' the war broke out that is the focus of the book we are launching tonight. It is a question that is no less controversial today than in the 1960s—the decade when a young John Moses entered this important, and deeply contested, historical conversation. But the conversation is more than an academic one; it's also an important and ongoing national conversation—for a post-war Germany and Europe, as well as for Australia. This is especially the case when some Australian historians still insist that the Great War was not our war; that it was essentially futile; and that Australians should not have been there in the first place. Such historians tend to downplay or forget, however, the fact that Australians actually were a crucial component of the British Empire at that time; they also neglect the cultural, intellectual and political substructures of foreign policy.

The burden of *First Know Your Enemy* is to illuminate those substructures as a means of comprehending German war aims, and, consequently, Australian and Allied war aims. One of the achievements of this book is its skill in drawing our attention to key factors and forces in German political and intellectual culture, in the lead-up to the Great War.

A key idea, in particular, was that of Historismus, or historicism. This was a 'peculiar nineteenth-century German way of understanding the character of nations', and Germany's apparently unique role and destiny in world history. Crucial to this was an ideology of the uniqueness (or *Besonderheit*) of the German spirit. Here John helpfully traces the genealogy—reaching back to von Herder, Hegel, and von Ranke—of German understandings of Kultur, Volksgeist, Bismarckian Realpolitik, militarism, and imperialism. John's seven

¹ This also from Cochrane, the past is not sacred.

chapters (the book is ten chapters in total) go on to show how such notions helped to create an educated elite that operated in a ‘parallel universe’ distinct from the West, and how the ‘self-isolation of this class stifled the growth of liberal, democratic values in Germany’ (p. 297). Only after the ‘liberation’ of Germany in 1945, by superior Allied forces, could liberal democratic values be rekindled. The authors conclude the book with the observation that Germany’s subsequent membership in the ‘West’, was the end result of a tragically costly learning process.

The second part of the book complements the first, presenting the pioneering research of Peter Overlack, a former student of John’s, on the operational plans of the German Navy in the Pacific. These chapters throw new light on the tangible strategic threat to Commonwealth security during the Great War. Knowledge of this episode is ‘essential for comprehending the acute danger in which the Antipodean Dominions found themselves in 1914’ (p. 297). In turn, it is essential for understanding why Australia subsequently went to war.

These findings offer a significant challenge to some of the interpretations we noted above, including the ‘sleepwalker’ or ‘not Australia’s war’ schools of historical thought. Historian Andrew Bonnell notes in the foreword of the book a ‘cognitive dissonance’ among some Australian historians who embrace these views.

He adds that such views are not helped by a tendency towards ‘self-referentiality’ in debates about Australian history. This has been in part because of the ability of many history students to get away without reading foreign languages, even at doctoral level. The result is ignorance of vast historiographies, such as those of German historians. There has also been an ignorance of the religious dimensions of both European and Australian history—what leading Australian historian, Alan Atkinson, has labelled a ‘secular nationalist’ bent.

Added to this is a shyness about intellectual history and what John has called a prevalence of ‘presentism’ in Australian historical writing. This ‘presentist’ attitude too hastily casts moral judgements on earlier periods, instead of first trying carefully to understand historical actors on their own terms—including, for example, Australians and their Allied counterparts who decided to take the nation to war in 1914. *First Know Your Enemy* offers a corrective to some of these tendencies among Australian historians, as well as model of the kind of robust and careful scholarship that takes intellectual and religious history seriously, and that avoids the insularity and self-referentiality of some ‘secular nationalist’ traditions of history writing.

Books such as the one we are launching tonight remind us that ideas have consequences. They are also important for helping us to understand—and critique—that intoxicating but volatile brew we call nationalism. It’s has been a galvanizing force—and an immensely destructive force—since the eighteenth century, but especially since the French Revolution.

We know from history—especially from that of the Great War—how different sides in war have tended to appropriate God, or transcendent claims, to justify their own nationalist causes. As the despairing rhyme of Great War poet, J.C. Squire, pointed out:

God heard the embattled nations sing and shout

“Gott strafe England” and “God save the King!”

God this, God that, and God the other thing –

“Good God!” said God, “I’ve got my work cut out!”

These debates among historians are not closed. And that is as it should be. Truth-telling, as far as humanly possible, is the vocation of the historian. And so, the evidence on both sides should be weighed up. ‘Contrasting views need to be aired if societies like Australia are to avoid the groupthink that blighted Germany and Japan in the 1930s, or Russia and China in the 1950s.’ Yet sometimes we might wonder whether some history of the war ‘is essentially about how we would prefer to remember the past, than a heartfelt desire to understand the past with all its complexities and conundrums.’²

The great value of John and Peter’s work, and especially this book we are gathering to launch tonight, is the way in which it seeks to engage in truth-telling—as far as the historian’s natural human and epistemological limits allow. *First Know Your Enemy* helps us to understand better the past—Germany’s past, which is intimately linked to our past—in all its ‘complexities and conundrums’.

I congratulate John and Peter on the depth and quality of their book. I’m sure you’ll agree that it’s also beautifully produced.

There are many ways understanding the German mind—apart from marrying one—and this book is invaluable in helping us to do that. It is my privilege to declare this important book launched.

² Tom Frame, *Anzac Then and Now*, pp. 253-4.