Australia’s unknown soldier: a powerful symbol of loss and faith


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The tomb of the unknown soldier in the Hall of Memory at the Australian War Memorial might seem to the casual visitor the timeless and natural symbolic centre of the memorial. But it was not always so: it was only in 1993 that the body of an unknown Australian soldier was repatriated and entombed here. That fact was highlighted by a 2013 controversy over inscribing Paul Keating’s striking eulogy in this sacred space.

So why did it take three-quarters of a century beyond the war for Australians to build a local replica of the powerful memorials inaugurated in London and Paris in November 1920? Those memorials at Westminster Abbey and the Arc de Triomphe spoke to a terrible reality of the first world war: so many of those who had been killed could not be identified, or even found.

These were the “missing”: in Australia’s case alone, of almost 60,000 deaths on the battlefields, 23,000 have no known grave. In the case of the British Empire, those bodies that were identified remained in more than 1000 cemeteries across the former battlefields.
The tomb of the unknown warrior, in Westminster Abbey, and the nearby cenotaph (literally “empty tomb” in Greek) in Whitehall offered mourners a place to acknowledge their loss and to perform the rituals of bereavement. The cenotaph was widely copied in Australia and across the British Empire; why not the tomb of the unknown?

In an era of expensive and time-consuming travel, Australians and New Zealanders in particular could hardly dream of visiting battlefield graves on the other side of the world. Throughout the inter-war period, relatives and returned soldiers consistently called for the return of a representative body to symbolise the absent dead. They called for the interment of an unknown Australian soldier.

Even as the coffin was being lowered into the grave in London, such calls had begun in Australia. In 1922 the matter came to a head. Some federal ministers hoped that a body might be interred on Canberra’s Capital Hill, while returned soldier groups variously favoured sites in Sydney and Melbourne.

Opposition to the proposal reflected Australians’ powerful affections for the British Empire. Opponents pointed to the lessened significance of the Unknown Warrior if the Australian plan went ahead. The “representative Warrior … in the centre of Empire”, one claimed, was:

… a unique testimonial that would not be improved by repetition in other countries.

Others worried that such a memorial would tend to re-awaken grief that had begun to settle.

Though the urge to inter an unknown soldier in Australia was defeated by such criticism at the time, the idea persisted, suggesting that war’s wounds had not entirely closed. In 1935, one Melbourne woman claimed that if an unknown soldier were returned it “may be my own son who is laid there”.

In the wake of the second world war, advocates were just as insistent that Australians deserved their own symbolic tomb, arguing it:

… would hold for us the same meaning as those in Westminster Abbey and the Arc de Triomphe.

Yet strong attachment to the Empire continued to complicate the venture. As late as 1970, a proposal from within the Returned Services League of Australia (RSL) stalled.

Finally, in 1991, the Australian War Memorial initiated a successful campaign to repatriate the remains of an unknown Australian soldier of the Great War. Referring to previous failures, deputy director Michael McKean suggested that unlike before, the memorial itself was now “very much in touch with Australia’s own history”.

The body was exhumed from a cemetery near Villers-Bretonneux, in France, and on November 11 1993 was interred at the Australian War Memorial.

Then-prime minister Paul Keating declared that the unknown soldier not only represented more than 100,000 “men and women who laid down their lives for Australia” in the wars of the 20th century, but that he embodied:

… a story of bravery and sacrifice and, with it, a deeper faith in ourselves and our democracy, and a deeper understanding of what it means to be Australian.

Prime Minister Paul Keating’s 1993 speech.

In 1993, entombing an unknown soldier from the battlefields of the Great War clearly meant something different to what the practice might have meant in the 1920s or 1930s. The survivors of the war were themselves almost all gone, as were those who mourned the dead of 1914-18.

Observer Ken Inglis described the funeral ceremony as “a kind of communal farewell to the Anzacs”. That farewell also marked a new beginning, as part of the reinvigoration and recasting of how Australians remember the Great War.

Certainly one element in the creation of the tomb was to assert a more independent national sentiment as Australia moved slowly beyond empire, a theme also reflected in the creation of tombs in Canada (2000) and New Zealand (2004).

Such tombs remain timeless because of their anonymity. Their meanings change as attitudes change and events in our own time affect our understanding of the past. Like the phrase “lest we forget”, the tomb of the unknown soldier defies precise definition. This is the point.

For grieving loved ones, a tomb could stand for the absent dead and attend to their need for a place of mourning. It also had the capacity to reflect whatever meanings one might ascribe to the war: crusade, triumph, futility or folly.

To the visitor, the unknown identity of the soldier might act as a homage or as a warning; perhaps both.

The urge to inscribe more precise meanings on the tomb is understandable, though it works against the potent symbolism of the nameless body. Here, as in our other ceremonies to mark the experience of war, silence speaks more powerfully than words cut in stone.

You can listen to Bart Ziino speak about the tomb of the unknown soldier below, in a podcast produced by La Trobe University.