

## Ordinary monsters

Wednesday, April 27, 2005

Moira Rayner

Compassion is a civilising virtue. Increasingly, on Anzac Day we highlight the compassion of Simpson and his donkey at Gallipoli, rather than the heroism of soldiers such as Jacka V.C. who single- and bare-handedly slaughtered six Turks. Gentle, dead heroes make war seem acceptable in retrospect. Yet no battle is fought compassionately; no survivor returns unharmed, and every honest soldier tells us plainly that battle is horror, fear and waste. A Turkish sniper killed Simpson on the same day that Jacka earned his bloody medal.

Compassion complicates decision-making. In *The Downfall*, the recent, controversial German movie of Hitler's last days, he discloses to his bunker companions, as thousands above him are dying in a last, useless defence of a Berlin that he had ordered destroyed, that he had ruthlessly excised all compassion from his soul in order to achieve his great purpose for the German people, who must now die. Elaborate courtesy to women, affectionate encounters with soon-to-be-dead child soldiers, this is what makes a monster: who decorated Magda Goebbels, 'bravest of all German mothers', who would poison her six children to 'save' them from a world without National Socialism; who tested his cyanide capsule on Blondi, the dog he sentimentally regarded as smarter than most men; and who consumed, at the last, a vegetarian, teetotal meal, then shot himself on a subterranean sofa. An ordinary monster.

What makes this a controversial movie is his ordinariness. Anyone without empathy, with power and personality and without constraints may be a monster too.

A few years ago the former Czech President, and poet, Vaclav Havel told the United States Congress that we labour under a '[D]estructive and vain belief that man is the pinnacle of creation, and not just a part of it, and that, therefore, everything is permitted. We are incapable of understanding that the only genuine backbone of our actions - if they are to be moral - is responsibility - responsibility to something higher than my family, my country, my success. Responsibility to the order of being, where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where, and only where, they will be properly judged.'



*The Downfall*, the movie.  
Photograph: Constatin Film

The thousands of Australians who attended Dawn Services this week were genuinely moved, but I heard

many young men and women, and children too, carried away by a sentimental, patriotic event. Anzac Day commemorates the waste of war and the miracle of survival. Compassion for those who died or were wounded and those who returned is right and proper, but sentimentality and spectacle is not.

Compassion means that any human being, whatever their age or situation, is entitled to be treated decently and with respect. But war does not permit this.

In times of peace compassion must be constantly refreshed. It is easy to lose it because of national or political exigencies or sense of endangerment. We have agreed on rules about how wars may be waged, prisoners treated and civilians must be protected, yet the greatest world power would have us accept that such rules do not apply to the men and boys in Guantanamo Bay, its off-shore detention centre. It has even denied to untried 'terrorists' the US Constitution's guarantees of due process and fair treatment.

It is compassion that underpins the ancient law of the sea, too, which required a captain to rescue people on a swamped boat and take them to safe harbour, in 2001, though they were illegally bound for Australia.

It was lack of compassion that enforced the Tampa's stand-off from the beautiful but wild and distant rocky outcrop of Christmas Island, where he meant to land them, and which decided the Australian government hastily to excise the Island from 'Australia' for immigration purposes.

And it is our lack of legal recognition of the great human rights protections of compassion that make me now ask, just why it is that our government is building a \$336 million, 800-bed immigration detention facility on this place?

Christmas Island's Shire President Gordon Thompson believes that the federal government plans to turn the island into Australia's Guantanamo Bay. That's what its officials and advisers told him. Deep in the Indian Ocean, a Christmas Island detention camp would be secure from unwelcome attentions: state child protection officials, meddling professionals and advocates, and journalists too, who have told us about the suffering of children, the punishment practices and health facilities in immigration detention. From Christmas Island, no asylum seeker can apply for a visa or claim refugee status because it is not 'Australia' and the writs don't run. Thompson believes our government means to detain all future boat people there, wherever they originally landed, in or out of the 'immigration zone'. Parliamentary Secretary Chris Pyne would neither admit nor deny such policy intentions on Anzac Day, but on 26 April the Immigration Minister made the expected denial – no doubt, as rock-solid a policy commitment as the government's pre-election promise to maintain the health safety net.

Unpopular outsiders particularly need our compassion and the people need to be constantly reminded of the need to care. It does not take much for quite ordinary fears and thoughtless insults to evolve into dehumanising insensitivity. It was only 11 years ago, in Rwanda, where neighbour turned on neighbour and created one of the greatest, fastest genocides of the 20th century, though Sudan might exceed this in the 21st.

*Harper's Magazine* recently published some of the interviews with 10 Hutu men jailed for killing Tutsis – 50,000 out of the 59,000 in their district died in two months – conducted by a French journalist, Jean Hatzfeld. They did not hate them. Killing was just less tedious work than farming, with better benefits (the loot and the land). Their machete technique improved with practice. They chopped to pop music. And one said:

'Outside the marshes, our lives seemed quite ordinary. We sang on the paths, we downed some beer... We chatted about our good fortune, we soaped off our bloodstains in the basin, and our noses enjoyed the aromas of full cooking pots. We were hot at night atop our wives, and we scolded our rowdy children. Although no longer willing to feel pity, we were still greedy for good feelings.'

Compassion: without it, such ordinary monsters we may be.

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## **About the author**

**Moira Rayner** is special counsel to the Council for Equal Opportunity in Employment Limited, a lawyer and a writer.

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## **Published Comments**

What's your opinion? Tell us what you think by adding a comment to offer feedback on this story.

*It seems a great part of the Howard government's modus operandi to keep unpleasant truths out of the public domain. A single detention centre on Christmas Island fits this bill perfectly – a virtual detention centre to which all people seeking refuge can be rendered.*

*As corrupt as the Bush Administration is, at least Guantanamo Bay and the practice of rendition is*

*limited to alleged terrorists. In a class all of its own, our government prejudices asylum-seeking men, women and children as enemies of the state. Ordinary monsters indeed – but is anyone noticing?*

David Cumming

Wednesday, April 27, 2005

*The German example is apposite. We have to ask ourselves how could a culture that produced Goethe and Bach, produce Auschwitz and Dachau? In the 1930s, the German middle-class morally collapsed. They were by no means a special case, although some of us like to think so.*

John Hooker

Wednesday, April 27, 2005

*Dear Moira,*

*you have touched upon a delicate subject. Just how far beneath the surface of our human 'sophistication' is the primitive and savage?*

*I was struck by a story from America, that Christian land of 'freedom and democracy' (which drops cluster bombs and depleted uranium on innocent civilians of oil-rich countries). It seems one woman murdered another and cut the still living baby from her womb and took it back to her home town and claimed it was her own.*

*I guess the Christmas Island issue, no matter how lamentable, is small in comparison with what could be done by our right wing Government given the dark, cruel forces which bubble and convulse within us all.*

Dennis Smith

Wednesday, April 27, 2005

*Thank you for your fine Anzac Day leader and Moira Rayner's comments on Anzac Day, which both articulate what I felt but could not quite put into words.*

*I used to look forward to the Dawn Service in Canberra, as a proper occasion to mourn the dead killed in our necessary wars. But I feel now that our society is perverting Anzac Day. Every year it is becoming more like a festival of militarism, and further and further away from its original purpose. Now, it is about war as entertainment.*

*As to the Christmas Island Detention Centre : it seems our government national security agencies*

*no longer (at least for the moment) instigate death by drowning of asylum-seekers as a deterrent against unauthorised entry, as I believe was done in the case of SIEV X in 2001. The deterrent now is to be based on the threat of permanent incarceration on Christmas Island, for those who cannot be returned to any other country. A living death in detention on a remote inaccessible island nominally part of Australia, rather than death by drowning. I suppose it is better ? But it is still wrong and shameful.*

*I note this is bipartisan policy shared by Coalition and ALP. Our political mainstream seems to have lost all sense of perspective or decency in this area of policy.*

*Our nation is going to have to come up with better solutions if we are not to be a pariah among nations.*

*Robben Island, in apartheid-era South Africa ... Christmas Island, Australia ... is there really any moral difference ?*

tony kevin

Wednesday, April 27, 2005

*On 'Behind Closed Doors' SBS Insight programme, broadcast 27th April, Christopher Pyne stated it was a 'purpose built facility' (like Baxter is) for unauthorized boat arrivals.*

*The significance is that the Christmas Island Detention Facility will be 'for certain types of people', ensuring a racial separation, which is not implemented at present.*

Ranjan Abayasekara

Friday, April 29, 2005