

Magna Carta and Memorialization: The Perils of Historical Anniversaries

Lindsay Diggelmann

2015 was a big year for anniversaries. We had, to name a few, Gallipoli, Waterloo and of course Magna Carta. October 2015 was also the 100th anniversary of the publication of *The Normans in European History*, based on a series of lectures given earlier in 1915 by the noted American medievalist Charles Homer Haskins, better known for his later works *Norman Institutions* and *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*. Haskins, a prodigy who had completed his Ph.D. and started teaching at Johns Hopkins by the age of 20, opened his 1915 work with a vignette recounting events that had taken place several years earlier:

In June 1911, at Rouen, Normandy celebrated the one-thousandth anniversary of its existence...The Norman capital received with equal cordiality the descendants of the conquerors and the conquered...Four Norwegian students accomplished the journey from their native fjords in an open Viking boat...A congress of Norman history listened for nearly a week in five simultaneous sections to communications on every phase of the Norman past...Banquet followed banquet and toast followed toast, till the

L. Diggelmann (✉)
University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand
e-mail: l.diggelmann@auckland.ac.nz

cider of Normandy paled before the champagne of France... In this transitory world the thousandth anniversary of anything is sufficiently rare to challenge attention, even in an age which is rapidly becoming hardened to celebrations. Of the events commemorated in 1915 the discovery of the Pacific is only four hundred years old, the signing of the Great Charter but seven hundred. (Haskins 1915, 1–3)

What does all this tell us, aside from the fact that, Wi-Fi and PowerPoint slides apart, academic conferences haven't changed much in the last hundred years? It shows that the desire to celebrate notable historical milestones was already much in vogue a hundred years ago. And yet, as Haskins surely knew, the supposed creation of the Duchy of Normandy as an independent political entity in the year 911 is little more than a convenient myth. The event being commemorated in 1911, the so-called Treaty of St-Clair-sur-Epte in which the Viking leader Rollo, ancestor of William the Conqueror and of King John, reached an agreement with the French monarch Charles the Simple, appears only in the notoriously unreliable *History of the Normans* by the monastic author Dudo of Saint-Quentin. Dudo, writing about a hundred years later, probably made the whole thing up as an origin myth for his Norman patrons. He includes the famous scene in which Rollo, told that he has to kiss the king's foot as a mark of feudal respect, refuses to do so. Instead he orders one of his men to perform the deed. The burly Scandinavian warrior takes the order literally, lifting King Charles's foot to his mouth and sending the poor monarch toppling onto his backside in a moment of laughter and humiliation clearly intended to signal the passing of the torch to a new generation (Dudo of Saint-Quentin; Christiansen 1998, 48–49).¹ The early Normans, barely removed from the state of nature, are seen as noble savages who already constitute an effectively independent power, potentially capable of “overthrowing” the French Crown.

In 1911, therefore, the eager Normans and their Scandinavian visitors were celebrating little more than a fantastical story of uncertain date. I was reminded of this spurious excuse for a millennium party when contemplating the outbreak of nostalgia for Magna Carta in which we all indulged during the anniversary year of 2015. I am not suggesting that the Great Charter was an historical illusion or that it did not come into being in 1215, but I was led to question the rationale for celebrating an event distant in time, space and cultural significance just because it happened to occur in a year separated from our present day by a large round

number. In particular I began to feel uneasy, as a matter of historical methodology, with the underlying assumption that there is some sort of important connection, some kinship, some sense of shared values between ourselves and our thirteenth-century forebears just because the gap in dates is divisible by one hundred. So the intention of this chapter is to explore those assumptions further and to question both the timing and the content of commemorative discussions concerning Magna Carta. None of this is to deny the document's legacy and its value as a statement of the rule of law, but many other people have addressed that factor recently so I intend to leave it alone.²

In New Zealand, as in other countries influenced by the British legal and historical tradition, the name "Magna Carta" remains powerful and the document's creation was commemorated with enthusiasm. The anniversary fell at a time when other events from New Zealand's past were also being recalled. In 2015, the 175th anniversaries of the Treaty of Waitangi and of the foundation of the city of Auckland received some attention, though the main focus was on the centenary of the ANZAC landings at Gallipoli. As I will demonstrate below, the distortions and misconceptions of the past that were evident in the Norman millennial celebrations of 1911 have been just as prominent in recent memorializing activities, both in New Zealand and elsewhere. What is apparent is that present-day priorities and values tend to overshadow an accurate rendition of the past. This presentism means that what we think of as our collective cultural memory of past events often reveals more about ourselves than it does about our predecessors.

MEMORY AND MEMORIALIZATION

My topic intersects with studies of historical memory and its formation, a subject which now has a long and distinguished history. In a useful recent survey of the historiography of memory in the medieval context, Megan Cassidy-Welch and Anne Lester highlighted the distinction between the study of memory as a cognitive tool, on the one hand, and on the other the study of remembrance "as a set of cultural forms that bring into collective consciousness things that have occurred in the past" (Cassidy-Welch and Lester 2014, 230).³ The two strands are most closely associated with the influential works of Mary Carruthers in the former case and Pierre Nora in the latter (Carruthers 2008; Nora and Kritzman 1996–1997).⁴ For my purposes, the principles and processes

that scholars identify as important for societies in shaping their views of their own pasts (in other words, the concept of remembrance) can also be applied to the ways in which scholars and commentators choose to memorialize certain events by marking their anniversaries. In a sense, anniversaries themselves act as *lieux de mémoire* (“sites of memory,” in Nora’s phrase) if by that we mean the sets of signs and symbols to which we attach meaning in the present based on our perception of their meaning in the past. The 800th anniversary of Magna Carta in 2015 (as opposed to the original document) was a site of memory for historians, legal and political scholars interested in affirming the value of the medieval text to the modern world. Thus perceptions of Magna Carta’s value as a foundational statement of rights and liberties were reinforced during the anniversary celebrations in ways that reveal more about modern priorities than about historical realities. In Nora’s own words:

Lieux de mémoire originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organise celebrations, pronounce eulogies... (Nora 1989, 12)

My intention here is to ask why it is that we foreground, privilege or in other ways place importance upon certain past events when they happened to occur an easily memorable number of years ago. We should guard against our tendency to attribute extra importance to particular historical events, to look for relevance or common cultural ground, simply because of a numerical coincidence. The logical sequence underlying this tendency is so deeply ingrained within us, so unspoken, that it normally passes without critical examination: *because* 2015 happened to be, by pure coincidence, 800 years since Magna Carta, *therefore* we felt some sort of obligation to commemorate the event. Further rumination upon the cultural imperatives of large round numbers was deemed unnecessary. This, it seems to me, is a flawed methodology. Would we be discussing Magna Carta at such length if it were not for the coincidence of its anniversary?

It is not my intention to belittle the events surrounding the anniversary or the efforts of the organizers of the various panels, conferences and edited collections which marked it. I am simply trying to encourage consideration and interrogation of the underlying reasons for the events. Study and celebrate Magna Carta, by all means, but do so for the right reasons. Don’t be too quick to reach for connections and conclusions

that may, at their core, be prompted by nothing more than a desire to justify the fact that we were marking a more-or-less random correspondence of two points in time. Perhaps I sound like I am launching some sort of manifesto for a change in historical thinking, wherein we put aside our devotion to round numbers and adhere to more rigorous and scholarly reasons for discussing past events. “Good luck with that,” I imagine you are thinking. And I do not expect to be successful, because the habit of marking anniversaries, birthdays and other events designated by the passing of time is so common to our human experience. But I believe two points are worth making: that it is important to reflect upon the historical practice of commemoration and that we should ensure our commemorations rise beyond the trite.

There is significant risk that commemoration may bring with it a greater-than-usual opportunity for selective interpretation and distortion of the historical record. Selection of evidence is something we all do all the time—it is the only way to put a structure on the gigantic amorphous blob of the past. But my concern is that the urgent desire to find meaning in the past and connection to ourselves is exacerbated at moments of memorialization designated by round numbers. To be blunt, it makes us even more likely than usual to pick and choose the bits which suit our worldview. We thus underplay and downgrade differences. People have always done this with the Charter, regardless of anniversaries. Think of Coke, think of Stubbs: both experts in hijacking Magna Carta and holding it to ransom, twisting its meaning into a shape that suited the political and scholarly priorities of their own circumstances. For the seventeenth-century legal scholar and parliamentarian Edward Coke, the Charter represented the central document of an otherwise nebulous English “ancient constitution,” a text he used to reinforce his opposition to the Stuart kings by “misconstruing its clauses anachronistically and uncritically” (Turner 2003, 148).⁵ For Bishop William Stubbs, Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford between 1866 and 1884 and author of the highly influential three-volume *Constitutional History of England*, the Charter was nothing less than the founding document of English liberties (Stubbs 1874–1878, 1: 532). Such a view represents an interpretive position “distorted by [the] unthinking acceptance of nineteenth-century preconceptions,” a position which framed English history as the story of progress toward the satisfying certainties of the Victorian age (Turner 2003, 199). It is clear, then, that anniversaries are not necessary to impose distorting views on the past: the risks are apparent at

any time. Yet they are heightened at those moments when coincidences of the calendar provoke misguided celebrations and potentially false connections between “now” and “then.”

COMMEMORATING MAGNA CARTA IN 2015

Modern commentary on the Charter self-evidently reflects contemporary social, political and legal views, a trend intensified by the occasion of the anniversary. In the volume accompanying the 2015 British Library exhibition—“the largest exhibition ever devoted to Magna Carta”—the curators make note of 2015 as the 800th anniversary but do not attempt to rationalize why this should be an appropriate moment for celebration. Their stated aim is “to examine the myths which have become integral to the modern meaning of Magna Carta, and to explore how this medieval document has come to be regarded as a symbol of freedoms and rights” (Breay and Harrison 2015, curators’ foreword). The mythmaking, as they note, has become just as important as the original document—an abject failure in achieving its aims in 1215. Therefore would it not be more appropriate to celebrate anniversaries of later moments when the Charter came to mean something powerful in a new context? If we were to follow the curators’ comments to their logical conclusion, we should actually commemorate the publication of Coke’s *Institutes of the Lawes of England* or Stubbs’ *Constitutional History* as formative of Magna Carta’s modern meanings.

In another volume emanating from the recent anniversary, scholars with an ecumenical frame of mind contributed to a collection entitled *Magna Carta, Religion and the Rule of Law*. The rationale is explicitly laid out: the book “invites all religions to ask what contribution they themselves should make to the rule of law in today’s secular, democratic politics” (Griffith-Jones and Hill 2015, title page). This is unquestionably a worthy aim; but does it have anything to do with Magna Carta? The connection seems rather tenuous, especially when one glances at chapter titles such as “The Still Small Voice of Magna Carta in Christian Law Today” (Doe 2015) or “Strasbourg’s Approach to Religion in the Pluralist Democracies of Europe” (Martínez-Torrón 2015). Runnymede feels a long way from here. I do not mean to denigrate the scholarship of this volume—I am simply asking why it is that a thought-provoking, politically and culturally relevant, and admirably irenic collection of essays needed the justification of Magna Carta’s anniversary to see the

light of day. The assumption is clear: since the Charter stands for human rights, civil liberties and other things in which we (the editors and authors) strongly believe, we will use it as a framing device for a book that speaks to our interests. But the original Charter stands for no such things and thus, I would argue, the whole volume, worthy as it may be, is based on a false premise.

The editors of a further 2015 collection of essays, *Magna Carta and its Modern Legacy*, are more explicit in their acknowledgement of the anniversary as a motivating factor (Hazell and Melton 2015). In an introductory chapter hiply entitled “Magna Carta ... Holy Grail?” (and with an appropriate nod to Jay Z) they make the case for the Charter as a point of inspiration for those interested in their own area of academic enquiry: the design of modern political constitutions.⁶ Setting themselves up, somewhat disingenuously, as proponents of a cautious view against the champions of traditionalism, James Melton and Robert Hazell openly explain the rationale for the timing of their publication:

Thus, the contribution of this volume is largely to point out that Magna Carta’s influence is not as clear and not always as positive as the traditional account of the Great Charter would lead us to believe. We are not the first to point this out, but in a year when the traditional account will be the focus, we feel that it is a point worth remembering. Does this mean we should not celebrate Magna Carta or its 800th birthday in 2015? Absolutely not! The Great Charter serves as an important symbol for the principles of constitutionalism and the rule of law, and at a minimum, it is worth celebrating to help reinforce those principles. (Melton and Hazell 2015, 19)

As heart-warming as it is for a sceptic such as myself to see the rationalization for the timing of a commemorative volume explicitly considered, it is still the case that the calendrical coincidence is used to link the medieval artefact to a consideration of modern political processes.⁷ Even the celebratory volume compiled by Nicholas Vincent, an eminent scholar of the Plantagenet period and a principal figure behind the 2015 commemorations in Britain, presents a balanced and sensible view of Magna Carta’s modest medieval achievements and its more potent modern legacy but does not offer a justification for the timing of the publication (Vincent 2015). So inherent is the view that the 800th anniversary is a significant moment in its own right that further justification is rarely

deemed necessary. This may be because such undertakings assume a life of their own once the realities of publishing deadlines take effect. The seeds of an initial idea germinated several years earlier shoot forth with a vigorous, self-sustaining momentum as the magic date looms on the horizon. Once the marking of a particular date is considered worthwhile, publications, conferences and exhibitions must be organized and brought to fruition in order to justify the time and effort expended on the whole business.

I do not mean to be entirely reductive: there is clear intellectual, scholarly and cultural value in the *act* of commemoration. But the *process* by which this commemoration unfolds risks becoming a self-sustaining feedback loop, in which the initial rationale is superseded by the pressures of completion before the inevitable calendar event. Those voices rationalizing the frenetic pace of activity can become shriller and the significance of the underlying event can be extolled even further in order to reassure all concerned that their efforts are valuable. Both Vincent and the Rt Hon Lord Dyson, Chairman of the Magna Carta Trust and author of the previously cited volume's foreword, refer to Lord Denning's effusive description of the Charter as "the greatest constitutional document of all times—the foundation of freedom of the individual against the arbitrary authority of the despot" (Vincent 2015, 9, 13).⁸ Vincent, cautious medieval scholar that he is, weighs up this viewpoint judiciously and recognizes its limitations as a piece of historical analysis. Lord Dyson, on the other hand, appears to accept it as a statement of fact, not opinion. It is surely no coincidence—though the point is not emphasized—that Lord Denning's judgement on the matter had been proclaimed exactly 50 years previously, in 1965: the 750th anniversary of the Great Charter's birth.

COMMEMORATING MAGNA CARTA IN 1915

Again and again, therefore, we see an assumption that anniversaries are moments when historical events deserve to be celebrated or commemorated, for no other reason than that a particular period of time has ticked by. A whole slew of justifications may be offered. Magna Carta should have been considered just as relevant (or irrelevant) in 2014 and 2016 as in 2015, but the fact of the anniversary prompted commentators to pontificate upon its meaning just as much as had been the case in 1965 or 1915. It is interesting to reflect upon one item arising from the

700th anniversary, a collection of essays delivered to the Royal Historical Society (Malden 1917). A distinguished list of early twentieth-century scholars of the Middle Ages, including J.H. Round, F.M. Powicke and Paul Vinogradoff, contributed to the volume. The preface was penned by the Rt Hon Viscount Bryce, who left readers in no doubt about his views on the Charter's importance:

Thus the Charter of 1215 was the starting-point of the constitutional history of the English race, the first link in a long chain of constitutional instruments which have moulded men's minds and held together free governments not only in England but wherever the English race has gone and the English tongue is spoken... [L]et us see what share may be assigned to it in the rendering of those services by which Britain has helped forward the cause of freedom and good government throughout the world. (Malden 1917, xiii, xvi)

One's eye falls immediately on the century-old certainties of gender, race and imperial positivism encapsulated in these statements. The touchstone phrase "freedom" meant something very different to the authors and editors of 1915 than it did to their successors in 2015. In 1915 "freedom" meant the ability of the British Empire to spread its values of civilization and constitutional monarchy around the globe, to the unacknowledged detriment of individuals elsewhere.⁹ In 2015 discussion of the "freedom" enshrined in Magna Carta has implied the opposite: the right of individuals to live unencumbered by the threat of state intrusions, be they political, legal, cultural or digital, into their personal affairs.

In America, too, hyperbole over Magna Carta was unrestrained by any concern for historical accuracy. Addressing the constitutional convention of the State of New York in the assembly chamber at Albany on 15 June 1915, the very day of the 700th anniversary, Nicholas Murray Butler proclaimed the document's timeless relevance:

The meeting [at Runnymede] ... was no ordinary gathering. Feelings, hopes, ambitions that had long been forming; tendencies of whose end and significance those who represented and voiced them were but dimly conscious; aspirations that lie deep in the heart of man from the beginning of time, but come to the surface only with the passing of long ages of years, were all struggling for expression. (Butler 1915, 4)

For Butler, an educator, man of letters and sometime president of Columbia University, Magna Carta was nothing less than the foundational document of human civilization itself:

There is then a most real and vital relationship between that striking, half barbaric scene at Runnymede, hundreds of years before the name of America was known, and this convention of revisers of the fundamental law, assembled in the Capitol of the State of New York ... Look back across the tumbling ocean and over the troubled and blood-stained centuries, and take courage from the steady, if slow, progress of liberty among men. Order had first to be established by whatever means were at hand; killing was once as natural as rising with the morning sun. When order was established, then opportunity was offered for men to exert their powers, to express themselves, to achieve, and to possess; and the history of western civilization is the story of what happened. (Butler 1915, 26)

Splendid stuff. What sounded stirring and inspiring a century ago now sounds hopelessly antiquated. It is worth reiterating that my point is not that there is no value in studying Magna Carta; it is simply to warn that anniversaries, in and of themselves, tend to provoke an outpouring of activity, scholarly or otherwise, that tells us more about the society doing the celebrating than about the event being recalled.

What, in fact, is Magna Carta all about? We look for those small aspects, buried deep in the text, that suggest connection, because we seek some meaning at the moment of chronological linkage. Otherwise, why bother celebrating? Yet it is entirely possible to interpret the document's values as elitist, sexist and racist. It deals mostly with "free men," not with the probable majority of English society who could have been classed unfree. Women, unsurprisingly in a medieval context, are depicted as second-class citizens whose voices count for less in a court of law than do men's. Jews were subject to restrictions on their activities because of their racial and religious identity.¹⁰ Of course it would be unfair and anachronistic to judge the Charter by modern standards of equality and liberalism, but such apparently illiberal features are nonetheless prominent. Choosing to ignore them, most observers focus instead on chapters 39 and 40 (or 29 in the later abbreviated versions) concerning the rule of law and due process, and largely put aside the rest.¹¹ It is with them that they feel a connection on the basis of much later legal developments. There is, surely, a risk that the choices of which parts of

the Charter to celebrate reflect an unexpressed teleology or a hazy presentist triumphalism: loath as they may have been to say it, commentators were using the occasion of the anniversary to celebrate a Magna Carta that looks like our world, one in which chapters 39 and 40 serve as a mirror to our own beliefs in the rule of law, liberal values, representative democracy and human rights. Perhaps we should not be too quick to condemn men like the Rt Hon Viscount Bryce, Nicholas Murray Butler or indeed Bishop Stubbs, before looking in that mirror with more self-awareness. In lionizing chapters 39 and 40, how convenient it is to forget all the feudal gobbledegook that makes up the other 99% of the document and tells a very different story.

NOVOCENTENARIES AND DEMISEMISEPTCENTENNIALS

I am not denying that anniversaries can be useful moments of reflection. 1986, 900 years since the great survey which gave rise to Domesday Book, prompted a burst of scholarship which shed new light upon that document and offered new interpretations.¹² As the popular historian and television presenter Michael Wood commented in his 1986 book on Domesday:

Anniversaries are often thought-provoking affairs, even at the level of birthdays, let alone novocentenaries. They make us, individually or collectively, look afresh at our changing relation to our past. The 900th anniversary of Domesday Book has certainly done that, from great national celebrations down to the activities of the smallest local schools, groups and societies. The reason is that Domesday Book is the nearest thing to a photograph of the ordinary people of this country we could hope for from so long ago; it is, as it were, the “family album” of the English people. (Wood 1986, 7)

We could all think of other examples of anniversaries boosting scholarly and educational activity. If approached in the right frame of mind, along the lines Wood suggests, they can promote valuable cultural and historical reflection although the risk of misinterpretation remains acute.

When it comes to Magna Carta, however, some of the recent outpouring of scholarship stretches too far in seeking meaningful connections between our own world and the thirteenth century, as if the fact of the anniversary necessitated a search for modern relevance: let

us say something, anything, to demonstrate its importance. I return to my model of flawed logic: *because* it happened exactly 800 years previously, *therefore* in 2015 we needed to fill endless volumes with learned commentary. I stand with Jonathan Sumption, both a noted medievalist and a distinguished British law lord who, in an address to the friends of the British Library, warned against over-interpretation of Magna Carta prompted by the fact of the anniversary. In a withering attack, Sumption condemned a lot of recent commentary on the Charter as “the distortion of history to serve an essentially modern political agenda,” “high-minded tosh,” and “the worst sort of ahistorical Whiggism” (Sumption 2015, 1, 4).¹³ He contended that Magna Carta remained important, but urged us to see that importance as lying not in the medieval document itself but in its contribution to the constitutional thinking of seventeenth-century England and eighteenth-century America. A review of the speech in *The Guardian* noted that his demolition of the accepted view was so complete that at the end no-one dared ask a question. “After an abashed pause,” *The Guardian*’s correspondent continues, “one man put his hand up and gingerly asked what Sumption, having rubbished the idea of Magna Carta as a document of proto-democracy, thought of the [host venue] British Library’s new exhibition lauding it as a document of proto-democracy?” (Steavenson 2015). In reply the eloquent speaker murmured something politely unintelligible.

The desire to commemorate events is not restricted just to anniversaries ending in hundreds. Decades are popular (think of the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, also in 2015) and quarter centuries seem to be in vogue too, nowhere more so than in New Zealand. During 2015 the *New Zealand Herald* tried to convince us that we should all be celebrating the 175th anniversary of Auckland’s existence which it insisted on calling, correctly but with extreme awkwardness, the demisemisepcentennial.¹⁴ The city’s major daily newspaper ran a series of articles on Auckland’s heritage and paid particular attention to events planned for Anniversary weekend, an annual public holiday. Under the inspiring banner headline “Auckland: It’s Our Demisemisepcentennial,” the *Herald* reported on the “immersive multi-media show” funded by the city’s Council, in which historical images were recalled and in some cases brought to life. According to the *Herald* report, “the producers hope that modern Aucklanders will revise their understanding of the city [and] learn how many of those early visions are not too much different

from today's hopes for the town." Organizer Mike Mizrahi further summed up the aims of the display:

This is history for the selfie generation, we want people to take photos of themselves here and now, with the photos of the past. We're making history here, then in 25 years, or 100 years, people will look back at this like we're looking at old celebrations. (Smith 2015)

The aims of the show were undoubtedly well intentioned but strongly suggest a form of public history intent upon pursuing a presentist agenda. In this case, self-consciously or not, the focus was on telling a current story which would shape past, present and future, rather than on assessing the past on its own terms.

NEW ZEALAND AND HISTORICAL COMMEMORATIONS

From a New Zealand perspective, the most notable anniversary falling in 2015 was the centenary of the ANZAC landings in April which, along with commemorations of other World War I events, has been the major focus of cultural memory and historical reflection in the 2014–2018 period. The growth of the ANZAC tradition with its role as New Zealand's (and Australia's) principal medium of war commemoration has been a venue for considerable historical enquiry.¹⁵ Despite (or perhaps because of) the even sharper focus prompted by the centenary, not all commentators have been enthusiastic about these developments. *New Zealand Herald* columnist Brian Rudman strongly objected, offering the view that:

this single-minded fixation on an imperial war fought 100 years ago on the other side of the globe is a travesty... Yet last year [i.e., 2014] the ministry identified just two "tier one" events of "nation-changing magnitude" to commemorate: the anniversary of the start of World War I and New Zealand's "occupation of Samoa". This year [2015] it was the 175th anniversary of the Treaty of Waitangi – I must have blinked and missed that commemoration – and the 100th anniversary of Gallipoli. (Rudman 2015)

What Rudman objected to was not the valuable emphasis on public education through memorial activities. Rather, he was concerned that the wrong sorts of events were being recalled and that modern,

government-led (and funded) commemorations were simply reinscribing colonial-era historical norms which urgently needed updating. A visit to the website of Manatū Taonga, the Ministry of Culture and Heritage, confirms a strategy of centralized planning for recent and upcoming anniversaries.¹⁶ Contemporary cultural sensitivities are fully in evidence, so perhaps Rudman is overstating his case. Yet it is hard to avoid the impression of New Zealanders being told by government officials what they can and should celebrate. One of the events falling in 2019 will be the 250th anniversary of Captain Cook's arrival in New Zealand. The *Northern Advocate* newspaper reports that an organizing committee, Te Au Marie or the 1769 Sestercentennial Charitable Trust, will arrange re-enactments of the voyage to and around New Zealand, using both Māori and European vessels, cartographic skills and navigation techniques in an admirably multi-cultural approach to the occasion (de Graaf 2015). I am not suggesting that any or all of these designated milestones are undeserving of celebration or commemoration, but I do wonder whether we need to be told what is an acceptable government-approved topic of commemoration just because of a calendrical coincidence.

While Rudman does not question the point of anniversary celebrations in general, his article does show clearly how the sorts of historical messages being propagated and considered valid depend very much on the choices of those arranging and paying for the party. His views are especially interesting in light of Charlotte Macdonald's recent discussion of the starkly different forms of cultural commemoration at work in New Zealand and how these have changed over a century. In 1914, as part of a phenomenon which Macdonald labels "colonial memory," the fiftieth anniversaries of several key encounters in the New Zealand Wars of the 1860s tended to emphasize reconciliation, nation building and mutual respect between Māori and Pākehā, though not without some Māori resistance to the culturally dominant European view (Macdonald 2015, 21–25). In 2014 commemorations of the centenary of the Great War vastly outweighed the impact of activities concerned with the 150th anniversary of the earlier conflicts. The latter were not insignificant but struggled to gain momentum in the obscuring shroud of 1914's long shadow. The 2014 commemorations of the New Zealand Wars, now "largely instigated and led by iwi," told "a very different story ... than that on show in 1914 ... enact[ing] a history of mana, defiance, strength and survival" (Macdonald 2015, 33). The colonial memory of 1914, which reinforced an idealized vision of the past in New Zealand's early

twentieth-century present, has given way to a memory in 2014 seeking to renegotiate former certainties concerning race relations and national origins (Macdonald 2015, 16). Once again the version of history on display at the moment of commemoration tells us just as much about the present as it does about the past.

To return to the 2015 demisemiseptcentenary of the city of Auckland (and of the Treaty of Waitangi). One might say that 175 is a roundish sort of number but the rationale for the celebrations felt somewhat thin. A song and dance was deemed appropriate only because of the arrival of a particular moment in time. The extent to which such celebrations have become more fashionable is indicated by the contrast with 1940. Despite that year being the 100th rather than 175th anniversary and therefore a more obvious date for commemoration, little effort was made to mark Auckland's birthday though much more was done in honour of the centenary of the Treaty. Wellington's *Evening Post* reported on the correspondence between Governor-General Lord Galway and King George VI. Lord Galway assured His Majesty that:

[c]entennial celebrations have served to strengthen the people of New Zealand in their resolve to uphold and defend to the utmost those precious ideals of freedom and justice which throughout the centuries have guided and inspired the British peoples. (*Evening Post* 1940b)

During the same week the *Post* reported on the unveiling of commemorative tablets at Waitangi, on the re-enactment of Captain Hobson's arrival and on the opening of a new wharērūnanga (meeting house)—several with photographic evidence (*Evening Post* 1940a; *Evening Post* 1940c). These were part of a co-ordinated series of celebrations which Penelope Edmonds has recently referred to as a “highly choreographed event,” deliberately designed as “a strong nation-building tool” (Edmonds 2016, 172). In an editorial of 6 February 1940, the very day of the centenary, the *New Zealand Herald* opined that:

[t]here has been much debate about the value of the Treaty of Waitangi as a legal instrument, about the observance of its terms by both races, about alleged violations, both early and late. Let that now be forgotten, since it is better to consider what has resulted from the most remarkable compact ever made between a civilised and a primitive people. (*New Zealand Herald* 1940a)

Here is Macdonald's "colonial memory" writ large. The fact that the editorial reflected the mainstream racial and historical views of the day hardly needs pointing out. Treaty celebrations put the Auckland birthday events to shame. To be fair there was a war on, and in September 1940 the metropolitan executive of the Auckland Provincial Centennial Council decided to postpone festivities "owing to the great difficulties, arising out of the war, in arranging celebrations worthy of the occasion," especially since insufficient performers, athletes and members of the armed services were available to take part (*New Zealand Herald* 1940b).

On the other hand, the 150th anniversary—or sesquicentenary—in 1990 provided the focus for much celebration of Auckland's past and present. This was also an occasion for further reflection on the Treaty, notably in a book of essays commissioned for the occasion which reflected the very different cultural environment from that prevailing in 1940. The spate of anniversaries falling in 1990 formed the self-conscious rationale for the appearance of the volume *Towards 1990*, as indicated in the foreword by Michael Bassett, himself an historian but also Minister of Internal Affairs at the time:

The most important of these events undoubtedly is the 150th anniversary of the Treaty of Waitangi; and commemoration of the signing of the treaty is the main reason why 1990 is such a special year for all New Zealanders. But by a fortunate coincidence 1990 is also the anniversary of a number of other significant events in New Zealand history...The 1990 Commission has drawn up a list of these events – seven in all – which it has invited the nation to remember...It is important for New Zealanders to consider these historical issues, for they are central to the way we see ourselves. (Bassett 1989)

As with the list prescribed by the Ministry of Culture and Heritage, referred to earlier, the idea of a government commission inviting people to remember certain events carries the risk of creating an official or sanctioned version of the past, using the occasion of an anniversary to impose an acceptable interpretation. Yet this is not to deny the value of Bassett's encouragement of New Zealanders to reconsider their own history. In the chapter on the Treaty, Judith Binney commented that the foundational document had been "neglected until relatively recently" (Binney 1989, 20). As Binney concluded, "[i]n re-establishing the Treaty made at Waitangi as the base of our society today, we are finally beginning

the long and necessary process of decolonizing ourselves from within” (Binney 1989, 29). This is not the place to revisit debate on the Treaty or to enter into discussion over the validity of its status as the “Māori Magna Carta.”¹⁷ My point is simply to acknowledge that, despite my general scepticism, anniversaries can contribute in a positive way to the process of re-evaluating past events and their modern significance. If unreflective presentism can be an impediment to accurate historical interpretation, its more enlightened cousin in the shape of thoughtful revisionism sometimes prompts urgent and necessary corrections to previously inadequate mainstream historiographical traditions.

In 2015 commemorations of the 175th anniversary of the Treaty, and of the city of Auckland, took their place alongside the more visible centenary of Gallipoli and numerous events marking the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta. At a series of public lectures hosted by the University of Auckland, several speakers used the occasion to examine the Charter’s continuing utility.¹⁸ For example, Michael White of the Human Rights Commission asked “whether, in an increasingly globalised world and economy, it is time to reconsider the application of the principles of the Magna Carta to contemporary immigration policy” (White 2016, 66). Martin Cocker, Executive Director of NetSafe, interrogated Sir Tim Berners-Lee’s call for “an online Magna Carta or an online bill of rights” (Cocker 2016, 58). Although these are interesting and provocative issues, they reinforce the ubiquity of the intellectual process I have identified: the search for connection and relevance between the present and a moment or event in the past, based in the first instance on the mere fact of the arrival of an anniversary.

All of this, based as it is on a strange but innately human attachment to round numbers, is part of a phenomenon I like to call roundophilia. As I am sure you can tell by now, when it comes to historical interpretation I myself am more of a *roundophobe*. In other words, I would prefer that we think twice before celebrating events for no other reason than a calendrical coincidence. Commemorate by all means, but do so for more valid purposes than numerical accident. The 2015 Magna Carta celebrations represent a noteworthy example of the sort of phenomenon I have been describing, encompassing considerations of modern political, legal and social arrangements that have only the most tenuous links to the events of June 1215 at Runnymede. Prompted by a round-numbered anniversary, commentators often privileged the familiar and the desirable at the expense of what was alien or harder to explain. So in closing,

and in a spirit of mathematical equity and fair play, please join with me in a belated commemoration of other notable events which fell in 2015, such as the 387th anniversary of the appearance of the first volume of Edward Coke's *Institutes of the Lawes of England*, or the sesquicentenary of Auckland losing its status as New Zealand's capital city. These ideas may sound preposterous but maybe no more preposterous than celebrating the existence of an ancient feudal document just because it happened to come into being exactly 800 years previously. Thus I return to my manifesto, but with little confidence that it will be enacted in a world besotted with the marking of historical anniversaries. Cast off the intellectual oppression of big round numbers! Roundophobes of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your unconscious enchainment to a dubious historical methodology.

NOTES

1. For commentary on the episode: (Kozioł 1992, 147–159).
2. For example: (Breay and Harrison 2015; Griffith-Jones and Hill 2015; Hazell and Melton 2015; Vincent 2015).
3. See also: (Cassidy-Welch and Lester 2015).
4. The former was originally published in 1990; the latter is an abridged and translated version of Nora's multi-volume *Lieux de mémoire* which appeared in French between 1984 and 1992.
5. On Coke's influence, see also Chris Jones and Stephen Winter's introduction to this volume.
6. For a consideration of the cultural frames of reference implicit in Jay Z's adoption of the phrase "Magna Carta ... Holy Grail" as his album title, see Anna Milne-Tavendale's chapter in this volume.
7. I feel obliged to observe that Hazell and Melton's edition betrays their modern concerns and interest in constitutions by allowing the cover to bear an entirely anachronistic image of King John signing the document with a quill pen ... more John Hancock than John of the Plantagenets.
8. The same citation is given in the book's final chapter: (Goldstone 2015, 171).
9. The classic critical analysis of this view of British history as a march of progress toward the triumph of empire is: (Butterfield 1931). See also "The English Whigs," chapter 7 in (Bentley 1999).
10. Magna Carta, 1215 chapters 39, 54 and 10–11. Numerous translations are available online. See, for example, the British Library website: <https://www.bl.uk/magna-carta/articles/magna-carta-english-translation>.
11. On the famous chapters: (Arlidge and Judge 2014, 51–66).

12. Among the most important of the many publications on the topic originating at the time is (Holt 1986). See also: (Roffe 2007). Roffe's opening chapter, "Domesday Past and Present," includes a historiographical survey of dominant interpretations of Domesday since the late nineteenth century, including those prompted by the 1986 anniversary.
13. For further discussion of Sumption's argument, see David Williams' and Chris Jones's chapters in this volume.
14. Mathematically, the phrase implies "half of half of seven, multiplied by 100," thus 175.
15. See, among others: (Worthy 2002; Robinson 2010).
16. See <http://www.mch.govt.nz/nz-identity-heritage/commemorations-and-anniversaries> for the policy and <http://www.mch.govt.nz/commemorations-2014-2020> for the list of events.
17. See the chapters by David Williams, Laura Kamau and Te Maire Tau and Madi Williams in this volume.
18. Videos and transcripts of the lectures are available at <https://magnacartanz.wordpress.com/>.

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