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Abstract

A review of Richard Flanagan's novel, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. This paper looks at the background, the themes, the story, and the contribution of this novel to the conversations on the Burma Railway, war, legacy, and love. The usage of the novel form by Flanagan contributes greatly to the power of his novel which becomes a major analytical point of this paper.

Keywords

Second World War, Australia, Burma Railway, "The Narrow Road to the Deep North", Richard Flanagan

Disciplines

Asian History | History of the Pacific Islands | Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority | Military History

Comments

Written for HIST 228: Modern Australia

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The Narrow Road to the Deep North

By Richard Flanagan



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Professor Birkner

History 228: Modern Australia

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I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

¹ “The Narrow Road to the Deep North by Richard Flanagan Review – Beauty, Bathos and Brilliance in Equal Measure.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 22 Apr. 2015, www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/22/the-narrow-road-to-the-deep-north-review-richard-flanagan.

Language has guided humanity and enabled it to describe or inscribe the world. The written word, via the book, has acted as compilations of specific language, on relevant information or topics, which brings the reader to a deeper perspective. The novel has the power to blast the reader into a wholly foreign worldview. In this way, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, by Richard Flanagan presents the story of Australians and Japanese before, during, and after the Second World War and their struggle to cope with their experiences and memory. It is through the medium of the novel that Flanagan effectively illustrates the themes by interweaving the story and its themes together.

Richard Flanagan once noted, in a talk on this book to the Wheeler Centre in Melbourne, that a novel is not an argument for anything: a novel, like life, is inconsistent and does not have a fixed position finally.² He added that the composition of novels should be much closer in resemblance to music than narrative.³ Life often takes wild, confusing turns which are not explainable at first and force people to make difficult decisions. The storytelling of these chaotic aspects of life becomes more elegant, purposeful, and compelling when put into poetic form such as in this novel.

The background of the story for *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* was deeply personal to its author: his father was captured and placed into a similar POW camp to work on the Burma Railway construction during the Second World War. For Australia, “the most disturbing losses were prisoners of war: of the 22,000 captured by the Japanese, only 14,000 lived to return to Australia in 1945.”⁴ Soldiers not executed by the Japanese died of either malnutrition and disease, both of which were painfully described in the novel.⁵ The main character of the novel, Dorrigo Evans, was based partly on his father as well as on the famous Edward ‘Weary’ Dunlop. Both his father and Edward Dunlop were in the medical field so they understood, more than most, the physical suffering of POWs in these camps, which makes their experiences and viewpoint in this novel that more powerful.

² “Richard Flanagan: The Narrow Road to the Deep North,” WheelerCentre. *YouTube*, 9 Sept. 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAJ1v3YPhpU.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, 3rd ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 200.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 200.

Edward Dunlop was an army surgeon who, “showed extraordinary courage and ingenuity in defending his men in prisoner-of-war camps and improvising treatment for cholera, malaria, typhoid, and tropical ulcers.”⁶ In 1986, Dunlop’s war diaries were published which recorded the daily struggles with disease, cruelty, and hopelessness and would lead to him being viewed as a national hero.⁷ The introduction of his diaries into the literature on this topic was a harrowing and personal example of how people in the worst circumstances can rise above and help others. Edward Dunlop was a sporting champion, considered a “man’s man,” and an army surgeon so that meant he represented both the older military qualities of loyalty, endurance, egalitarianism, and valor as well as the newer qualities of healing compassion and forgiveness.⁸ The stories told in the novel come from the experiences of both men as well other stories that emanated from Australian soldier’s time in the camps. The way in which Flanagan weaves together these stories, characters, and themes makes the novel compelling and easy to understand. As Flanagan writes in the novel “A good book ... leaves you wanting to reread the book. A great book compels you to reread your own soul.”⁹ This book has a re-read value that most books do not and is a testament to its quality.

There are multiple characters and scenes that illustrate the Japanese brutality and soldier fatalism during the POW camps. The slave labour performed by the POWs to build the railway was incessant, sometimes day and night during a “speedo,” it blew away prior estimates for how long the project would take. The continuous beatings, wretched living conditions and food, and overall discomfort of the camps took a fatal toll on the minds of all men. It was the ones with mental fortitude, the ability to fortify their being with meaning, that led by example that would provide glimmers of valor amongst the suffering. For the ones that survived, finding meaning in their everyday grind and even the small tasks helped them cope. When people find their existence meaningless, their mental and

⁶ Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, 3rd ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.200.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. p. 201

⁹ Richard Flanagan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), p. 38.

physical health quickly comes after. Flanagan notes this by saying that “the path to survival was to never give up on the small things.”¹⁰ It is seen through the experiences of Dorrigo and of other men that the ones that find meaning in their work will have better chances of survival. After the war, some POWs would struggle to find meaning in their own lives, in some cases pursuing affairs or misbehaving in other ways.

The theme of mateship was also seen through the novel, especially in the POW camps between the Australian soldiers. As one another became weary during work, others would help with their load or make sure they were not slacking so they weren’t beaten. Even during the worst of times, Australians sought to stay connected with their mates. One extreme example of the mateship seen by Australian soldiers was when Dorrigo was forced to select 100 men to march to another camp which would bring certain death to many of the men from the arduous journey. Despite this reality, every single man shook Dorrigo’s hand and said thank you to him which shows that even during the worst of times, Australian “mateship” and decency was still alive.

The use of poetry and culture in the novel are seen in both the Australian and Japanese. Even the title of the book, “The Narrow Road to the Deep North,” comes from Basho, who was Japanese, and accounts his journey through Edo Japan. The beauty and depth of Japanese culture juxtaposes with the brutality of their actions in the POW camp. The commander of the POW camp, Nakamura, was a meth addict and who on countless occasions treated the Allied soldiers terribly, but also recited poetry. In a powerful scene, Nakamura talks to another Japanese about traditional Japanese literature and felt his spirits abruptly rising:

At the thought of their railway delivering victory in the invasion of India, at the whole world under one roof, with the beauty of Basho’s verse. And all these things, which had seemed so confused and lacking in substance when he had tried to explain them to the Australian colonel, now seemed so clear and obvious and connected, so kind and good when talking with such a kind, good man as Colonel Kota.¹¹

¹⁰ Flanagan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, p. 184.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 94.

Nakamura, through this conversation, felt a mutual and profound understanding: that the Japanese spirit was the railway and vice-versa. Now their “narrow road to the deep north” was “helping to take the beauty and wisdom of Basho to the larger world.”¹² The conditioning of the Japanese society, seen in this scene, gave the Japanese meaning to their life and work.

Flanagan shows that the morality of war was not clear-cut for each side. He does not attempt to privilege or moralize the allies. He provides nuance by adding perspectives that show the brutal actions of the Allies, which were often overshadowed by the wretched actions of the Japanese. In one particular passage, Dorrigo was questioned by a reporter on the use of the atomic bomb. This passage attempts to show that although the Japanese were seen as the inhumane enemy, the Allies made decisions that can also be viewed as inhumane, despite arguments that the atomic bomb saved lives. To expand on this point, in John Toland’s *The Rising Sun: the Decline and Fall of the Japanese Empire*, the author notes the equally as brutal side of the allies:

In his *Wartime Diaries*, Charles Lindbergh, who toured the Pacific, wrote: ‘Our men think nothing of shooting a Japanese prisoner or soldier attempting to surrender. They treat the Jap with less respect than they would give an animal, and these acts are condoned by almost everyone. We claim to be fighting for civilization, but the more I see of this war in the Pacific the less right I think we have to claim to be civilized. In fact, I am not sure that our record in this respect stands so much higher than the Japs’.¹³

The war of annihilation, which was seen in the Pacific, was spurred by the never surrender attitude of Japanese troops. This type of warfare scarred the psyche of all soldiers involved as you have to rationalize and suppress feelings of guilt that come from violence. Soldiers moving into normal life, in Allied and Axis countries, had to rationalize and justify their actions in war because if they did not, then they were stuck in a divided, corrosive mind. The novel takes the reader through this journey of finding meaning in one’s actions, in one’s life, and the war more broadly.

¹² Richard Flanagan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, p. 95.

¹³ John Toland, *The Rising Sun: the Decline and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1936-1945* Vol. 2 (New York: Random House, 1970) p. 841.

All the characters seen in the POW camps, Australian and Japanese alike, struggle to adapt to their newfound lives after the war. Each struggle is different: some suffering from guilt, some from grief, some from the inability to live normally, and others with their impending execution. The characters carry on with them the memories of their fallen comrades. In this specific sense, Darcy Gardiner always spoke of Nikitaris's fish shop back in Australia to his mates in the POW camps. After the war, Darcy's mates decide to go by the shop in honor of their fallen friend but are rash and throw rocks at the glass casing of fish as to them it symbolizes imprisonment from their natural environment. Later after feeling guilty, they go back to the shop and attempt to repay the shop owner. After telling him their story, of Darcy, of the POW camps, of their rash decision, the owner does not get angry and instead has them fed and given wine. The friends and the owner talk for hours and into the night, about everything, about life. It takes the valley of despair and suffering for such a night to feel so good and Flanagan notes this:

The simple chairs felt easy, and the place, too, felt right, and the people felt good, and for as long as that night lasted, thought Jimmy Bigelow, there was nowhere in the world he wished to be.¹⁴

The memory of their friend, and his fond memories of the Nikitaris's fish shop, play off each other to create a cycle of memory that brings meaning to their and Darcy's suffering. The time spent like this, just enjoying life, juxtaposes their experiences in POW camps and shows the challenge and allure of moving back to a peaceful normal life coming from such despair.

After the war, Dorrigo struggled to cope with the newfound spotlight and fame that seemed to be always increasing. He struggles to reconcile the lives lost in the camps with the fame he gains from his experience there. Dorrigo does not understand why they see him as virtuous and he despises virtue as such: "Virtue was vanity dressed up and waiting for applause."¹⁵ For Dorrigo, the war brought him struggles sure but it was his glorification after the war which he resented so much as he thought it

¹⁴ Richard Flanagan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, p. 253.

¹⁵ Richard Flanagan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, p. 53.

unfair to his fallen soldiers he led. The struggle to cope with this new found glory after believing that he had done nothing of glory was something hard to reconcile. It is in this struggle that even the most valorous of soldiers struggle as they do not think they are either worthy of the valor or that it is misplaced and should be put to their fallen comrades.

There is little mention of the other ethnic groups on the railroad, despite them making up a large portion of the workforce. Whether it was a literary decision to limit the scope or the fact that it simply never came up in the story naturally, the book would have benefited in its historical accuracy by mentioning it. Other literature on the Burma Railway have offered more facts about the railroad and who constructed it, but this does not mean that it is a better source, just serving a different function. This novel, like many other books, tells an unreal story in color. Based on true events, it will help the reader learn much more than telling the dry, actual story with all its facts and details. This novel teaches the reader by enveloping them within the story and experience.

During the end of his life, Dorrigo was driving through an intersection in Parramatta at three in the morning when a car full of drunken kids fleeing the cops in a stolen car blew through a red light and crashed into Dorrigo's car.¹⁶ Dorrigo had only days left to live and in that time "possessed of the most extraordinary dreams of his life."¹⁷ Flanagan decided that the reader should witness the culminating event in Dorrigo's emotional trauma during the last pages of the novel, through a flashback to his time in the POW camps, where he learns of the death of his one true love, Amy, among two other events that had already pushed him into a valley of despair. It is in this fragmented narrative development that Flanagan pieces together the story which makes the places, characters, and experiences so real and fulfilling. Flanagan creates a story that his reader cares about with themes and ideas that make them think critically about themselves and the world.

¹⁶ Richard Flanagan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, p. 325.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The “narrow road to the deep north” can be thought of as someone’s personal journey through life and memory to the ascendance of one’s inner being. It is sometimes that people don’t reach this inner peak until the end of their lives, with others finding meaning constantly. Viktor Frankl, in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, espoused this view that meaning in one’s life can vary from moment to moment.¹⁸ Frankl, who was held at multiple Nazi concentration camps, documented his experiences in *Man’s Search for Meaning* and outlined his strategy towards the burden of suffering that comes with life. The suffering felt at the time and in the past/future has tremendous effects on the individual and must be fixed through what he calls “logotherapy.”¹⁹ In Flanagan’s novel it is said that “A happy man has no past, an unhappy man has nothing else.”²⁰ This echoes a line from Viktor Frankl’s book: “But happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue. One must have a reason to ‘be happy.’ Once that reason is found, however, one becomes happy automatically.”²¹ Taking these two quotes, it seems that happiness is conditioned on a reason to be happy. The inability to reconcile one’s past makes it difficult to be happy and it takes coming to terms with the irreconcilable to feel meaning from life. This is the burden carried by former soldiers and many others: having to find meaning from what seems like meaningless suffering or random tragedy. The mental strength to contextualize the suffering is just as noble as combat.

Richard Flanagan, by writing *A Narrow Road to the Deep North* has added a new and useful book for understanding the Pacific theater, life in POW camps, suffering, guilt, memory, love, life after war, and much more. So many themes are neatly packed into the story and the characters that re-reading passages become more fulfilling each time. The feeling of the time and the place are so mightily conveyed that the reader becomes a part of the story, of the character’s lives, of the themes within. By using the novel form to tell this story of all sides of life, both war and peace, the reader

¹⁸ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: an Introduction to Logotherapy*. 4th ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 86

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 104

²⁰ Richard Flanagan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, p. 4

²¹ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: an Introduction to Logotherapy*. p. 138

gains something not attainable from traditional sources: it brings the reader directly into the experience rather than trying to describe it from without or from the future. The reader feels the emotions and thoughts felt by the characters which helps him or her understand and contextualize their struggle. These feelings, thoughts, and ephemeral things left behind in history must be documented and relearned for posterity. Richard Flanagan created a novel that does a service to his father and all Australian POWs by embedding the true events in a thematic narrative that encapsulates and remembers one's life story in a purposeful way. To quote a poem about remembering, such as this novel does innumerable times, written by Laurence Binyon and titled "For the Fallen":

“They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.”²²

²² Laurence Binyon, “For the Fallen by Laurence Binyon.” *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57322/for-the-fallen.

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