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# Memory, Identity, and World II in Australia: Liz Reed's "Bigger Than Gallipoli"

## Abstract

This paper is structured as a review of Liz Reed's 2004 study *Bigger Than Gallipoli: War, History, and Memory in Australia*, an analysis of the Australian government's public commemoration of the Second World War from 1994-95. Critiquing certain aspects of Reed's methodology, I bring in some of Jill Ker Conway's insights on Australian identity from her 1989 memoir *The Road from Coorain*, as well as other scholars of historical memory and political theory. While Reed makes some important insights on the merits and deficiencies of political nostalgia, I argue that her book represents a missed opportunity overall.

## Keywords

Australia, World War II, memory, commemoration, review

## Disciplines

History of the Pacific Islands | Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America | Military History

## Comments

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In her 2004 study *Bigger Than Gallipoli*, Liz Reed of Monash University examines historical memory in Australia through the lens of military commemoration.<sup>1</sup> Reed devotes her attention to *Australia Remembers 1945-1995*, a series of public commemorations and education initiatives marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Second World War, as well as the Australian Bicentenary in 1988 and the Centenary of Federation in 2001. In so doing, she opens up a conversation on the broader processes of statebuilding and the construction of national identity from the nineteenth century to the present. Though Reed mostly focuses on the 1990s, her analysis stands to be supplemented by Jill Ker Conway's own account of the Second World War in her 1989 memoir *The Road from Coorain*, which provides a useful civilian perspective and an example of how memory shapes history.<sup>2</sup> Using insights from Conway's experience alongside Reed's more systematic narrative, this paper will explore some of the ways in which ordinary Australians have conceived of themselves as a people and the ideological structures that have shaped their self-expression.

The title of Reed's study hints at her larger thesis. The heroic sacrifice of the ANZACs at Gallipoli and elsewhere in World War I retains a privileged position in the Australian memory. In spite of this, it was really during the Second World War that Australians witnessed the ravages of modern warfare approach the homefront, and established the geopolitical ties that would carry them through the twentieth century. Accordingly, Reed views public commemorations of World War II as an instructive framework for understanding the political uses of nostalgia and its role in formulating national identity. The first two chapters of her book detail the origins and rollout of *Australia Remembers 1945-1995* (hereafter *AR*). The brainchild of Prime Minister Paul Keating and Veterans' Affairs Minister Con Sciacca, *AR* was modeled after official programs undertaken

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<sup>1</sup> Liz Reed, *Bigger Than Gallipoli: War, History and Memory in Australia* (Crawley, Western Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Jill Ker Conway, *The Road from Coorain* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

in Canada as the fiftieth anniversary of the war's end neared. Keating's Labor cabinet was put off by what it regarded as the excessively state-centered commemorations developed in the United States and Great Britain, preferring *Canada Remembers'* "people-based" focus.<sup>3</sup> This emphasis on everyday citizens linked Australia with a fellow former Dominion of the British Empire, and was further reflected in *AR's* logo, ubiquitous from the program's launch in 1994: a photograph of soldier Ray Walsh embracing his wife and two children, taken upon his return home from the Eastern Front on July 28, 1945.<sup>4</sup> Reed notes that the logo also evinced the government's attempt at an inclusive commemoration, combining military service and the homefront experience in a single image. Such questions of who and how the program chose to remember (of which more anon) recur constantly throughout the book.

Once underway, Reed explains that *AR* largely consisted of monument restorations, media segments, and education initiatives for both children and adults throughout 1994 and 1995. While Keating initially faced some opposition from Liberals over the extent of government spending, the program was a bipartisan effort overall and saw high levels of public engagement.<sup>5</sup> After recounting these more mundane details of *AR's* development, the remainder of Reed's study is organized thematically. Her third chapter introduces some of the methodological tools she uses to examine the program's deeper meaning, many of which she borrows from memory studies. Citing Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*, Reed places *AR* alongside the Bicentenary of 1988 and weighs how commemorations make use of the past, often for particular political goals.<sup>6</sup> As mentioned above, she is especially concerned with how public memory has represented the experiences of marginalized groups, particularly those of women and Aborigines.

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<sup>3</sup> Reed, *Bigger Than Gallipoli*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Reed, *Bigger Than Gallipoli*, 18-20.

<sup>5</sup> Reed, *Bigger Than Gallipoli*, 35.

<sup>6</sup> Reed, *Bigger Than Gallipoli*, 68-71. See also *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, ed. Pierre Nora, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-1998).

Unfortunately, this is the weakest element of Reed's approach. Though she is correct to underline *AR*'s delicate position in recognizing Aboriginal participation in the war, especially after the series of Aboriginal protests opposing the Bicentenary, her analysis of gender sometimes seems misplaced. For instance, she makes the "gendered" depiction of warfare as a peculiarly masculine enterprise a common refrain.<sup>7</sup> The point would be well taken had *AR* neglected the sacrifices of women who joined the workforce or who grieved the loss of their husbands, sons, brothers, and fathers; yet these are angles that the program strove consciously to emphasize alongside the experience of battle. Similarly, Reed's fourth chapter could have benefited from greater terminological precision. Employing the concept of "didactic nostalgia," she considers the V-J Day festivities that capped off *AR*'s commemorative programs on August 15, 1995.<sup>8</sup> In addition to Melbourne and Brisbane's massive victory celebrations, the anniversary of Japanese surrender was also preceded by a series of media segments aimed at educating the public on the final months of the war. Reed chooses to treat these closing events under the category of "spectacle"—recalling, of course, Guy Debord's famed contribution to Marxist theory.<sup>9</sup> Reed, however, fails to cite Debord or even make clear why spectacle is a useful paradigm for understanding V-J Day any more than other aspects of *AR*'s program.

Reed's penultimate chapter is her most interesting. Expanding on her earlier invocation of Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, she situates *AR* within Australia's broader construction of a national identity. Reed identifies one of the central socio-political challenges of modernity: "Whereas 'older' nations with recorded national histories have denser mythologies, the so-called 'new' nations such as Australia seem to be driven to 'undertake the process of national formulation

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<sup>7</sup> Reed, *Bigger Than Gallipoli*, 29-30; 47-48; 59-62; 71-90.

<sup>8</sup> Reed, *Bigger Than Gallipoli*, 108.

<sup>9</sup> Reed, *Bigger Than Gallipoli*, 101. See also Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, n.trans. (Detroit: Black & Red, 1970).

explicitly, visibly, defensively, and are always caught in the act—embarrassed in the process of construction.”<sup>10</sup> In an effort as old as Plato’s noble lie, White Australians have struggled to articulate a sense of themselves against the backdrop of a supposedly inferior indigeneity that predated colonization by a healthy 60,000 years. It is here that Reed’s study can benefit from *The Road from Coorain*, for Conway provides a first-hand account of the world that *AR* sought to reconstruct through memory. Conway’s memoir fleshes out Australians’ self-conception as the crown jewel of the British Empire, describing the BBC announcers from London that located Japan in the Far East (even though it was Australia’s northern neighbor) and the crowds that stood proudly at attention to “God Save the King” before public functions.<sup>11</sup> She also gives vivid life to the fear of Japanese invasion in World War II, recalling her parents being “jolted out of complacency” by the fall of Singapore. They even went so far as to stockpile firearms on their Outback property and make a suicide pact in case they were overrun by the Imperial Army.<sup>12</sup>

These are some of the episodes invoked, if implicitly, in what Reed terms the “complex semiotics of ritualised memorialising.”<sup>13</sup> This phrase comes in during her discussion of the ANZAC legend, one of the Australian memories most pregnant with meaning. Part of *AR*’s funding was allocated towards veterans and their families who wished to travel to places such as England and New Guinea for anniversary commemorations. Reed calls these journeys abroad “pilgrimages” and the travelers “pilgrims.” Her choice of words is revelatory, for the liturgies of nationalism draw deeply from the well of Christian ceremony. The pilgrims who traveled to Gallipoli in 1995, for instance, began their ANZAC Day with the traditional dawn service at 5:30 a.m. Though their visit included a guided battlefield tour with Veterans’ Affairs Minister Con

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<sup>10</sup> Reed, *Bigger Than Gallipoli*, 121.

<sup>11</sup> Conway, *The Road from Coorain*, 13-15.

<sup>12</sup> Conway, *The Road from Coorain*, 67-69.

<sup>13</sup> Reed, *Bigger Than Gallipoli*, 133.

Sciacca, it was the service, complete with the “Last Post” played on a didgeridoo, that gave the day its meaning and connected the pilgrims with the servicemen they sought to remember.<sup>14</sup> The dawn service also bears unmistakable parallels with the Divine Office traditionally prayed by monks and clerics, setting apart the sunrise and select hours of the day for ritual worship. In this, Australia represents only a more recent case of the “migration of the holy”: in William T. Cavanaugh’s estimation, the transfer of local loyalties from the rites and institutions of traditional religion to those of the secular nation state, inevitable in the process of modern state building.<sup>15</sup>

Conway is helpful again for understanding these religious aspects of Australian identity. Her description of the New South Wales landscape in the opening of *The Road from Coorain* is replete with the grammar of Christianity. The horizon on the plains forms “a sharp black line so regular that it seems as though drawn by a creator interested more in geometry than the hills and valleys of the Old Testament”; she finds it difficult, moreover, “to imagine a kookaburra feeding St. Jerome or accompanying St. Francis. They belong to a physical and spiritual landscape which is outside the imagination of the Christian West.”<sup>16</sup> Insofar as European settlement attempted to bring Australia under the more familiar auspices of civilization, it also allowed for a national consciousness articulated in fundamental opposition to the land and its indigenous peoples, as hinted at above with respect to Aborigines in the Second World War. Such tensions lay at the heart of the projects sponsored by *AR*, and Reed’s study would have made for a more insightful analysis had it devoted greater attention to them, rather than the tendentious treatments of gender that recur so frequently throughout.

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<sup>14</sup> Reed, *Bigger Than Gallipoli*, 131-38.

<sup>15</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011). See also Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Conway, *The Road from Coorain*, 5-6.

Perhaps Reed's most apt citation is that from historian David Lowenthal, who contended that the past is a place "increasingly suffused by the present."<sup>17</sup> For better or for worse, one can readily detect the present in Reed's account of *AR*. Written as the Australian government prepared to send troops into Iraq in 2003 and published as the military situation worsened in the following year, *Bigger Than Gallipoli* can be seen as a warning against the manipulation of patriotism and nostalgia as much as a historical assessment of a particular commemoration program. In her final chapter, Reed also connects *AR*'s complicated inclusion of Aborigines with Prime Minister John Howard's refusal to issue a formal apology to the nation's indigenous peoples.<sup>18</sup> Such an apology and the withdrawal of Australian forces from Iraq would come just a few years later under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, making the book a well-timed mediation on both the limitations and the possibilities of state action.

Yet *Bigger Than Gallipoli* is a missed opportunity in several respects. For all the instances in which Reed invokes the "gendered" nature of *AR*'s remembrance, she could have focused on some of the issues addressed in this paper—which may be more latent, but are crucial nonetheless for understanding Australia as an "imagined community."<sup>19</sup> As Conway's memoir demonstrates, White Australians in generations past put in great effort to conceive of themselves as subjects of the British Empire and heirs of civilization at the antipodes. Reed correctly emphasizes the deficiencies of these efforts and their manifestations in *AR*'s commemoration of World War II, but she neglects some of their deeper sources and implications. As we near the eightieth anniversary of war's end, we should hope for a study of historical memory in Australia that takes a sufficiently broad account of its origins and meanings.

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<sup>17</sup> Reed, *Bigger Than Gallipoli*, 56. See also David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Reed, *Bigger Than Gallipoli*, 176.

<sup>19</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso Books, 2011).



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