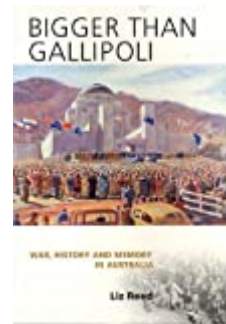


Liz Reed. *Bigger than Gallipoli: War, History and Memory in Australia.* Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2004. xv + 204 pp. \$38.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-920694-19-7.



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Managed Memories

On the eve of the celebration around the world of the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II, Liz Reed's book examines how Australia observed the fiftieth anniversary back in 1995. Though various institutions such as the Australian War Memorial marked the anniversary, the book concentrates on the Australian government's main program of commemoration, "Australia Remembers," which was run by the Department of Veterans' Affairs. The Labor Party Minister for Veterans' Affairs at the time, Con Sciacca (who at Australia's recent federal election actually lost his seat for the second time since 1995), is given consistently favorable treatment by Reed, and obviously charmed her with his sincerity.

"Australia Remembers" did include major commemorative events in state and national capitals, but its main focus was to provide support for local groups running local events; every parliamentary electorate received the same amount of money. Reed wisely does not attempt to chronicle all this activity, and her book is not primarily a history of "Australia Remembers." Rather, she attempts some analysis of meaning and purpose, focusing in particular on the way a program like "Australia Re-

members" is in the business of creating and massaging communal "memories," rather than (as it claims) simply recalling them.

In 432, Thucydides's Athenian envoys tried to ensure their Spartan audience was suitably impressed by Athens's power, "reminding the older men of what they already knew, and recounting to the younger things of which they were ignorant" (Thuc. 1.72.1). In 1995, the Australian War Memorial's commemorative exhibition promised, "If you were there, you'll remember. If you weren't, you can imagine." Reed is aware that the apparent neutrality of the "reminding" and the apparent autonomy of the "remembering" are illusory: during "Australia Remembers," she comments, "Australians were urged to remember the past, but in reality it often seemed that the past was being remembered for them....[A] new narrative of Australia's recent history and the identity of its people was being made" (pp. 62-63). Now, the thought that government-sponsored historical commemoration might be mainly about the creation of national myth is scarcely news, yet in Australia military commemoration has become something of a sacred cow; indeed, at times it seems

in danger of becoming a new civic religion. The country thinks it needs some sort of "identity" (Reed comments on this self-conscious need of "new" nations on p. 121), and the traditional story of European settlement/colonization/invasion is now too contested to serve as any basis for shared celebration. As a result, the ritual invocation of Gallipoli and Kokoda tends to pass without comment, all surviving soldiers from the World Wars are elevated to "heroes," and practically nobody stood on the sidelines in 1995 and criticized "Australia Remembers." (One or two people did raise the then unresolved case of East Timor, to suggest that Australia's willingness to fight for the cause of freedom was somewhat partial.) Reed fills the gap, applying an overdue critical eye to "Australia Remembers." If her tone tends to be carping rather than sardonic, that is a pity, but at least she is pointing out the emperor's lack of clothes.

There are many fine historians working in what might broadly be defined as the field of military historical commemoration in Australia, historians who know very well the realities of war and are deeply moved by its human tragedy. But there are also a public, a media, and a political class who simply want to use this history as a cleansing national myth, evoking childish simple "memories" of a golden past when we knew who the enemies were and all stood and suffered together as we fought. I fear that the historians, intent on telling stories which they rightly see as important, can be rather innocent in their bemused contemplation of the quite bad ways the stories they tell are twisted in other people's hands.

Reed points out some of the ways this happens. "Australia Remembers" did not try to stir up animosity towards the Japanese—rather the opposite, in fact—but ugly emotions were aroused over its choice of the term "VP Day" rather than "VJ Day"; the government was accused of pandering to the Japanese by using the more neutral term. (A year later, after a change of government, new Prime Minister John Howard refused to allow the dedication of a "Canberra-Nara Peace Park" in the national capital, given Japan's failure to issue adequate apologies for its wartime aggression.)

In other areas, "Australia Remembers" was rather more culpable. There was a deliberate effort to avoid highlighting what Con Sciacca called "the bad parts of what happened." Suggestions by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade Gareth Evans that Hiroshima and Nagasaki should be remembered appear to have been rejected. As Reed comments, "Australia seemed divorced

from the task of engaging with the moral concerns arising from the war" (p. 165). To a large extent, the program reduced the universal cataclysm of World War II to an event which only affected Australians (a photo of prisoners at Changi was carefully cropped for a poster to cut out any non-Europeans). Australians do, of course, know something of the war history of allies such as Britain, America, New Zealand, and (to a lesser extent) countries of Europe. But, despite Prime Minister Paul Keating's eagerness to reorient Australia towards Asia, "Australia Remembers" was never used as a platform to begin educating a largely ignorant public about East and South-East Asian experience of the war.

In other ways, the "Australia Remembers" distortion of history was more insidious. Overall, the program had less to do with history than with nostalgia: nostalgia for some imagined golden, sun-tanned past, which people could re-live by dressing up and listening to wartime music. This attempt to delve deep into "memory with the pain removed" (p. 99) led to bizarre passages, such as the attempt to identify a man who had been photographed dancing in the street on VP Day. As several rival claimants pop up, the reader is left wondering why on earth it matters. The Dancing Man is a memory, and, like all real memories, is shadowy and elusive. The attempt to turn him into some concrete, modern, 80-year-old reality would be farcical if it were not part of a more sinister agenda of attempting to fix the past so that it can never change again.

Reed's book captures much of this. She is quite good, for example, in deconstructing the "Australia Remembers" logo. Like many Australian good ideas, "Australia Remembers" was copied from the Canadians; but whereas the logo for "Canada Remembers" was brisk and business-like with a maple leaf, poppies, and text, Australia opted for more emotion, with a logo based around a photo of a soldier and his family reuniting at the end of the war. The logo by itself told the audience half of what they were supposed to think about the war. As with the Dancing Man, the real-life people behind the photo were located, and in this case interrogated as to whether the image was "genuine" or staged (in truth, careful selection is quite as effective as outright concoction).

Unfortunately, Reed's account is also vitiated by a relatively thin analysis of the issues regarding memory, remembrance, and propaganda, and above all by a heavy overdose of political correctness. She writes on every issue as though she has a checklist to mark off, and at the head of it is gender. Reed would, indeed, be well

served by a publisher who refused to allow her to use the word “gendered” at all. The minister responsible for World War II commemoration in New Zealand said the program would focus on the armed forces; thus, he “appeared to privilege the paradigm of warfare as the (gendered) site for the most important meanings of war and its remembrance” (p. 39). Well, yes. “The familiar trope of male warfare” is familiar because in fact men do most of the fighting in wars (p. 74). The persistent mutterings about gender in the end simply come across as whingeing.

This obtrusive focus on a single issue blinds Reed to insights which are very nearly in her grasp. Her “gendered” reading of the “Australia Remembers” logo seems to me to pay insufficient attention to the way the eye is drawn back, away from the returning soldier and onto the son watching his parents kiss, the younger generation whose consumption and digestion of this piece of history was to be the whole *raison d’être* for the program of commemoration (pp. 18-19). When she complains that, in attempting to recognize the importance of women’s home-front contribution, the “extension of a heroic status to women simply added another layer

through which their voices struggled to be heard,” she is really speaking for all those—female or male—whose experiences have been appropriated and transformed for the purposes of public story-making (p. 75).

A stark example of this is the little modern morality play (Reed describes an audience applauding “this poignant segment” of a Gala Concert in Melbourne, p. 92), in which a soldier’s story and that of his relationship with his loved ones is told through his and their letters; at the end, of course, it is imperative that the soldier must die, to provide the right dramatic close and to leave the audience struck with the sadness of war, but also with its beauty, that it produces such perfect rounded tales. Reed’s book is about a new generation making a plaything of history, as indeed every generation in the history of the world has done—but doing so with a rather distasteful air of moral virtue. There is a fair amount of value here, even if Reed’s reading of the issues can seem formulaic and lacking incision. Whatever the book’s faults, it reminds us of the need for historians to go on maximum alert whenever governments start commemorating the past.

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