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*The Narrow Road to the Deep North* and the De-sacralisation of the Nation

**Abstract I:** *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, romanzo di Richard Flanagan, costituisce un nuovo contributo nel catalogo della letteratura australiana sull'esperienza di guerra. I riconoscimenti e gli elogi che il romanzo ha ricevuto sin dalla sua pubblicazione nel 2013 riflettono l'apprezzamento diffuso per la sua capacità di *re-immaginare* l'Australia in un terreno già saturo. Il romanzo di Flanagan può essere letto come una critica all'ascesa del nazionalismo militante, che emerse sull'onda del sostegno dato dall'Australia alla 'guerra al terrore' di Bush, e una critica all'idea che l'arrivo per mare di rifugiati richieda un intervento militare e una risposta militante. Questo saggio suggerisce che la sostituzione dell'eroismo sul campo con il calvario dei prigionieri di guerra nella giungla thailandese rappresenta un modo di re-immaginare, se non di sfidare apertamente, lontano dal motivo della battaglia epica, l'idea diffusa che le storie di battesimo del fuoco siano le uniche vere storie nazionali.

**Abstract II:** Richard Flanagan's novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* represents yet another addition to the catalogue of Australian war experience literature. The awards and accompanying praise the novel has earned since its release in 2013 reflect a widespread appreciation of its ability to *reimagine* Australia in a saturated terrain. Flanagan's novel can be read as a critique of the rise of militant nationalism emerging in the wake of Australia's backing of Bush's 'war on terror' and the idea that the arrival of boat refugees requires a military and militant response. This article discusses how the novel's shift from battle heroics to the ordeal of POWs in the Thai jungle represents a reimagining – away from the preoccupation with epic battles – but not necessarily a challenge to the overriding emphasis on baptism of fire narratives as the only truly national narratives.

Writings about war is not exactly a rarity in Australia. Walking through an Australian bookshop will take you past shelves of books dealing with the First and Second World Wars, and to a much lesser extent the many other theatres of wars in which Australian troops have fought, from Sudan over the Boer War to Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, it is not unfair to suggest there is an obsession in Australia about war that manifests itself in the military paraphernalia of war – including books – and culminating in the annual parades on Anzac Day<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> For a critical assessment of the resurgent interest in 'the Anzac legend' see Lake & Reynolds (2010).

Apart from the apparently endless supply of books about particular campaigns and the literature with a fixation about equipment, vehicles, ships and planes, there are the (auto) biographical accounts of war veterans. Beyond this, Australian literature dealing with war experience or the war as a backdrop to other Australian experiences lives a largely separate and far more withdrawn life. Richard Flanagan's novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is yet another addition to the catalogue of war experience literature. The novel's anti-war sentiment is far from unique in Australian literature. Its novelty lies in its graphic account of the dehumanising experience of Australian POWs dying in droves while constructing the railway track for the Japanese war machine eager to move troops from Thailand through Burma to pave the way for the invasion of India.

The many books, including literature, on war suggest the attention granted to Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, is not because it deals with the experience of war and its consequences on the home front and in the military afterlife, but because of the way it does. The awards and accompanying praise the novel has earned since its release in 2013 reflect an appreciation of its ability to imagine Australia differently, to *reimagine* Australia in a terrain already covered by numerous other accounts. Reimagining Australia in Flanagan's novel is then less an exercise in, to invoke Richard White's classic text (1981), inventing or reinventing Australia, but more relevantly discussed as a critique of the nation's prevalent form of narrating its past through 'the war effort'. Reinvention, by contrast, questions the war experience as the defining moment for the nation. It rejects the exclusivist nation narration (Bhabha 1990) of baptism of fire, and through this raises a critique of whiteness, of Anglo-centred accounts displacing other nation narratives through the indisputable supreme sacrifice of laying down lives for white dominion Australia. Alternative nation narratives include the white invasion of the country itself in 1788, the mid-nineteenth century gold rush (Jensen 2014), political nationhood (and the birth of a white Australia policy and denial of Aboriginal citizenship), the post-1945 massive migration influx and its eventual transformation of a white Australia into a multicultural Australia. In a more contemporary vein one could add the arrival of neoliberal Australia with an increasing disparity of income, increasing poverty pockets accompanied by a dehumanising refugee policy (Hage 2003) and how this has already led to a less inclusive conceptualisation of what constitutes the nation.

Flanagan's novel does contain traces of some of the alternative national narratives listed above. The contemporary spread of poverty pockets in Australia is matched by the novel's references to the depression in the 1930s and 1980s leading to people dying "of starvation on the streets of Hobart" (Flanagan 2013: 5). Black-white history and the racism embedded in it remains peripheral only manifesting itself in the presumably part-Aboriginal character, Gardiner. Racism in the novel is primarily directed at the Japanese and people in the Middle East. There are occasional gestures towards multicultural Australia, for example the Greek fish-and-chips shop owner who lost his son in New Guinea. But they remain mere traces as the novel's main concern as nation narration rests solidly with the impact of war on prevalent notions of Australian identity, not least the construction of a national identity through a post-war representation based on tropes of male heroics in theatres of war. The

choice of the terrible ordeal of POWs over the customary war legends in the Second World War, the Rats at Tobruk and the Kokoda Track, raises the question whether POWs can be hero material, but the few battle scenes in the Middle East expands the scope of the question whether there are any heroes in war<sup>2</sup>. Flanagan laconically narrates how the POWs suffering fails to qualify as subject material of heroism in the national reconstruction after the war:

When they were demobbed the army quacks told them and their families not to talk about it, that talk was no good. It was hardly a hero's tale in the first place. It wasn't Kokoda or a Lancaster over the Ruhr Valley. It wasn't the *Tirpitz* or Colditz or Tobruk. What was it, then? It was being the slave of the yellow man. That is what Chum Fahey said when they met up at the Hope and Anchor (Flanagan 2013: 341).

### The Battle Over Australianness

The novel depicts an old antagonism between a British-derived conceptualisation of Australia complete with its inherent notion of cultural-racial superiority and a belief in the benefits of keeping social hierarchies intact, pitted against a larrikin, anti-authoritarian, anti-hierarchical definition of Australian identity characterised by social mobility against the odds set by those seeking to preserve privilege as hereditary (Jensen 2005). Flanagan's dismissal of the first understanding of Australian identity is palpable:

Colonel Rexroth, a study in irreconcilable contrasts: a highwayman's head on a butcher's body, a pukka accent and all that went with it in the son of a failed Ballarat draper, an Australian who strove to be mistaken as English ... Colonel Rexroth ... said he believed all their national British strengths would be enough, that their British esprit de corps would hold and their British blood would bring them through it together ... [Rexroth] thanked the entertainers, then spoke of how the division of the British Empire into arbitrary nationalities was a fiction. From Oxford to Oodnadatta they were one people (Flanagan 2013: 45-48).

Rexroth is not only 'a study in irreconcilable contrasts', a man of an outdated First World War vision of Britain as an imperial bulwark defending its overseas territories. Flanagan's choice of narrating the war experience as an integral part of a broader twentieth-century Australian history rather than writing a novel exclusively about war means the war experience is both a chronology of unfolding historical events and a history retrospectively viewed. The latter works to historically distance the way the war was understood at the time. Through this Rexroth along with Rooster MacNeice (shooting a parachuting enemy pilot in mid-air to the disgust of his mates, being responsible for the Japanese thrashing of Darky Gardiner leading to Gardiner's death, bragging about his war heroics after the war) become characters whose main function is to depict an unappealing narrative of Australia which has also become historically redundant. Given the dismissive attitude towards those protecting either their British-derived notion of an Australian national identity, the other

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<sup>2</sup> Garton addresses the distinction between First World War heroics and Second World War ambiguity and relates it directly to the POW experience (1998: 88).

characters espousing values of an egalitarian Australian identity tested by the horrors of war and life as POW camp inmates are granted a much larger albeit also ambiguous space.

Three key episodes give some indication of what Flanagan identifies as the antidote of the imperial propaganda that characterises the Anglo-Australian definition of nationhood – and which continues to haunt Australian discussions of nationhood, not least in connection with Anzac Day. The first passage presents a condensed narrative of their descent into hell in the POW camp depicting classic Australian virtues of fatalistic stoicism, resilience and humour<sup>3</sup> pitted against the futility of these defences when confronted with the crushing dehumanising experience:

They tried to hold together with their Australian dryness and their Australian curses, their Australian memories and their Australian mateship. But suddenly *Australia* meant little against the lice and hunger and beri-beri, against thieving and beatings and yet ever more slave labour. *Australia* was shrinking and shriveling, a grain was so much bigger now than a continent, and the only things that grew daily larger were the men's battered, drooping slouch hats, which now loomed like sombreros over their emaciated faces and their empty dark eyes, eyes that seemed to be little more than black-shadowed sockets waiting for worms (Flanagan 2013: 52).

Starvation and other forms of privation make resistance pointless yet the stubborn rituals of attempting a dignified life under impossible circumstances lend the account a blend of stark realism, surrealism and empathy. These strands come together in moments of acute crisis; the random and pointless thrashing of Gardiner; the men limping and crawling along The Line (their name for the railway track) where those who manage to get there are too weak to do anything; picking out the ablest men to walk to Burma even if they all know most of them will die as a consequence. Acts of solidarity are inconsistent, at times paradoxical, but also considered necessary to ensure their survival as a group:

He had to help Tiny. No one asked why he did; everyone knew. He was a mate. Darcy Gardiner loathed Tiny, thought him a fool and would do everything to keep him alive. Because courage, survival, love – all these things didn't live in one man. They lived in them all or they died and every man with them; they had come to believe that to abandon one man was to abandon themselves (Flanagan 2013: 195).

The collectivity of the men stands in contrast to their commander, Dorrigo Evans, whose weight of responsibility places him in a separate space. Standing up to and constantly negotiating with the Japanese commander, Nakamura, whose blind loyalty to military rank forces him to respect Evans, cannot be shared between Evans and his men. This sets Evans apart, a situation enhanced by Flanagan's choice to make him the protagonist. The men's inner feelings, the glimpses of their lives before and after the war – very often detailing their future deaths – are generic representations of soldiers' lives, whereas in Evans the

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<sup>3</sup> A similar depiction can be found in Bowden (1998).

struggle for survival and their meaningless lives in the camp, is mirrored by his struggle to make sense of life in Australia – before as well as after military service. If Evans represents the hollowness of man, they represent the pointlessness of life in nihilistic times:

Dorrigo Evans is not typical of Australia and nor are they, volunteers from the fringes, slums and shadowlands of their vast country: drovers, trappers, wharfies, roo shooters, desk jockeys, dingo trappers and shearers. They are bank clerks and teachers, counter johnnies, piners and short-price runners, susso survivors, chancers, larrikins, jobs, tray men, crims, boofheads and tough bastards blasted out of a depression that had them growing up in shanties and shacks without electricity, with their old men dead or crippled or maddened by the Great War and their old women making do on aspro and hope, on soldier settlements, in sustenance camps, slums and shanty towns, in a nineteenth-century world that had staggered into the mid-twentieth century (Flanagan 2013: 213).

There is a striking contrast in the image of a cross-cultural section of Australian male volunteers set against the opening statement 'Evans is not typical of Australia and nor are they'. Because the catalogue of them means that they are in fact 'typical'. It operates as an ironic exposure of an Australia where the poor and middle classes enlist in the army, while the upper middle class and elite stay out. Yet it is those who stay out who take it upon themselves to define what Australia is and how Australian identity is given shape through what they claim is war experience as *meaningful* – proven through excellence in the battlefields. POW experience does not qualify, it is an embarrassment to the idea of the soldier fed by the glorification of the First World War experience. What constructs the war experience is the propaganda of the war machinery and the subsequent post-war reconstruction based on narrations of uniquely Australian fighting skills – not futile endurance in a labour death-camp in the Thai jungle.

*The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is marked by a number of deeply distressing features. Most poignant amongst these is the theme of pointless suffering and death. While the novel is a war novel, the violence it depicts is not the 'spectacular' brutality of epic battle scenes. The prevalent form of violence is the suffering, punishment and slow death that saturates the novel and which is reproduced as an after-effect of the war experience. Protracted scenes, such as the punishment of Gardiner, the simultaneous terrible operation on an already partly amputated leg, and the later dissection of the live American prisoner by the Japanese in Japan, are merely some of the more graphic examples of a prominent feature of the book. Flanagan here seems bent on de-romanticising the post-war reconstruction of war heroics, which began on a national level in 1930s Australia with the erection of war monuments and the 'consecration' of the disastrous Gallipoli landing as *the* Australian war experience<sup>4</sup>. Ironically, the Gallipoli was also primarily about endurance, as soldiers on both

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<sup>4</sup> Inglis (2008 [1998]) has written a detailed account of the history of war memorials in Australia. While their construction in many parts of Australia began soon after, and in some cases even during, the war these were locally based efforts to honour the local soldiers. The monuments in the capital cities were national and erected in the 1930s. For a more nuanced discussion of the social lives of war memorials in Australia see Taylor (2005).



sides were trapped in trenches with little hope of military success. Clearly, Flanagan's novel is also written with a view to the contemporary post-Keating militant nationalism continuing to feed and feed on the national commemoration of earlier military campaigns.

Flanagan's ghastly realism can also be explained with reference to a desire to tell it as it was – to raise the lid of a tabooed history about the suffering of Australian captured soldiers at the hands of the Japanese, adding weight to a counter-narrative of the Second World War as an alternative to the monolithic tales of First World War heroics. But also as a long overdue replacement of the distant war in Europe fought on behalf of the empire by an obedient white settler society, with the Second World War as the war which finally confronted Australia with its geopolitical reality. Yet, the gory scenes are so numerous and protracted that more must be at stake here for Flanagan. He shows how atrocities, deliberately inflicted suffering and death during the war permeates the society for decades to come, since clearly all the surviving POWs and the Japanese camp runners are marked by the war for life. It mars their lives; they die prematurely, they commit suicide. Even the next generation's lives are marked by it (Flanagan 2013: 340). This theme is also mirrored in the life shattering experience of taking another man's life (Kato's predilection for beheading prisoners after his initiation in Manchukuo). But even this fundamental disrespect for life can be taken to another more sinister level. The connection between the live heart still beating outside the American captive soldier's body and the tremors associated with earthquakes foreshadows the atomic bombs dropped over Nagasaki and Hiroshima. It becomes evidence of an escalating violent madness suggesting violence once released has a built-in propensity for spiralling out of control. It points ahead to the nuclear arsenal of the Cold War, but also to how violence escalates in any theatre of war. In a more contemporary frame relevant reference points are the almost incomprehensible levels of violence and atrocities committed in the Middle East and Afghanistan by militants, by the Afghan, Syrian and Iraqi governments, by the Israeli government and by Western military forces – whether committed by boots on the ground or drones.

### **The POW Camp as Displaced War**

The novel's war period setting in a POW camp in Thailand obliterates the European theatres of war from the novel. In the broader frame of national historiography the novel's setting marks an altered perspective away from the customary preference for narrating the Second World War mainly through the battles in Europe (and North Africa) between Allied powers and Nazi Germany. Part of the traditional focus also on Australia's participation in the European theatres of war is due to the legacy of the First World War working as an assertion of Australia's belonging to the circle of Western nations<sup>5</sup>. Shifting the focus from the First World War to the Second World War inevitably entails a change from an exclusive focus on Europe to a combined focus on Europe (where the Middle Eastern and North African theatres

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<sup>5</sup> My point here is not to ignore the battle over the significance of Australian First World War participation, between seeing Australians as loyal supporters of the British Empire and Australians as fighting on their own behalf under an alienating empire. Rather it is how these seemingly antagonist narratives are united through the paradoxical mutually exclusive commemorations of Gallipoli and Anzac Day.

of war were seen as part of the European war) and the Asia-Pacific region. The Australian participation in the Second World War is inextricably linked to the Japanese bombardment of Darwin and the sinking of a Japanese submarine in Sydney Harbour. Events irretrievably placing Australia in a fight for survival on its own doorstep (with many of its troops overseas), and through this a belated and reluctant acknowledgement of Australia's position on the outskirts of Asia.

*The Narrow Road to the Deep North* reinforces this geopolitical shift through its attention to the 'Japanese holocaust' in Manchukuo, which, as the novel reveals, did not meet the condemnation and trials caused by the holocaust in Europe. Hence the novel's triple displacement from the First World War to the Second, from Europe to Asia, and from combat to POWs leads to a radical new narration of war as nation narration. Flanagan leaves it to the Japanese POW guard, Tomokawa, to observe the obvious Western hypocrisy and racism in the distinction between war crimes: "At the beginning I was terrified they'd pick me up as a war criminal. And I used to think: What a joke! Because they only cared about what we did to the Allied prisoners ... And when I think about all that we did with the chinks in Manchukuo ..." (Flanagan 2013: 406). The anti-Chinese Japanese racist acts are graphically narrated and the post-war Japanese burial of its genocidal war record is unequivocal. Yet, as the novel makes it clear it is the American occupational forces which ensure the 'rehabilitation' of the Japanese war criminals after the war (some high ranking Nazi war criminals also escaped justice through their Allied protection – see Goda 2009). The Second World War as the just war against unmitigated evil perpetrated by totalitarian empires is not questioned, but certainly compromised by political game play surrounding the establishing of the Cold War order following hot on the heels of the Second World War. There are a number of ironies suggesting Flanagan aims to question the idea of 'valiant' warfare, which haunts the propaganda during the war and the nation rebuilding after the war. The Korean POW camp guard, Choi Sang-min, is hanged on evidence provided by the Manchukuo war criminal, Kota, who lands himself a prestigious job with Japan Blood Bank after the war. Choi Sang-min is portrayed as a plain war criminal but also as a colonial subject of the Japanese occupation tried for crimes committed by an army that considers him racially inferior. The Senegalese black troops dying for Vichy France in the Middle East represents another more peripheral example of confused loyalties. The part of the novel dealing with the war finishes with the confinement of the Japanese troops in Changi prison in Singapore, where the POW experience began for the Australian troops at the opening of the war in this part of Asia.

Read from the perspective of the emotionally crippled male suffering from PTSD the novel can be seen as a belated articulation of the terrible – literally unspeakable – ordeal of the Japanese POW camps. But violence also ties the novel together outside the POW camp setting, from the early episodes in the Middle Eastern theatres of war to the later depiction of a post-apocalyptic Japan, strikingly reminiscent of Akira Kurosawa's post-apocalyptic Japan film, *Dreams*<sup>6</sup>. In post-war Japan, the slow but inevitable grinding towards death of the POWs has been replaced by instantaneous death by explosives and casual murders by

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<sup>6</sup> The segment 'Tunnel' is a nightmarish return to the aftermath of the Second World War where a Japanese commander is haunted by the ghosts of the soldiers he led to their deaths.

people who have lost all confidence in society's ability to regenerate itself. The string of deaths continue throughout the novel, not only as casualties of war, but of sickness, of accidents, freaky and planned. Almost all characters are killed off one by one and even a few extremely peripheral characters' deaths are described. The centrality of the theme of death and dying is clearly related to the novel's many references to the Japanese death poems and to the shadow of death hovering not only above the POWs death camp but also over those left behind in peaceful Australia. Death, it seems, is almost contagious.

### Intertextualities

There are a number of intertextual reference points for *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. They are mine rather than Flanagan's but they represent parts of the catalogue of canonical Australian art works (novels and paintings) that speak to the themes represented in the novel. Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* is one obvious reference point: the quintessential Australian as convict, thief, the one who looks after his mates, displays fearless egalitarianism, and the rejection of those who believe in British inherited values. All of these are located in Gardiner, also known as the Black Prince, because of his uncanny ability to survive through surgically executed acts of stealing from the Japanese. Rooster who thinks Gardiner has stolen a duck egg from him, who later indirectly causes Gardiner's death, is shown up for his inability to read what solidarity-based mateship is about. Albert Tucker's apocalyptic paintings inspired by his visit to Hiroshima in 1947 represent an interesting comparison showing how the shadow of death hovering during the war lingers on after the war. Arthur Boyd's *The Mourners* and *Melbourne Burning* (1945) were a response to the revelation of atrocities in Europe and Asia (Heathcote n.d.).

Two watershed publications from the 1960s bring us to *The Narrow Road to the Deep North's* central preoccupation – war and how it relates to subsequent national identity formation in Australia. The first text is Alan Seymour's play, *The One Day of the Year*, considered so controversial it was taken off the Adelaide Festival program in 1960<sup>7</sup>. Also, in this play the character who only speaks at the end of the play, is the only character with actual war experience from Gallipoli. Other characters hotly debating the meaning of Anzac Day were either not involved in the war, or they were involved in the wrong war (the Second World War), which at the time was considered secondary to the untouchable sacrifice of the First World War. When the only 'real' war hero finally speaks he recounts the horror of what it was like, not the Anzac Day trumpeted narrative of heroic military prowess, and celebration of white Australian maleness. Also, in Seymour's play the nationalistic rhetoric surrounding April 25 is an outlet for the returned soldiers' frustrations over the sad post-war lives as unrecognised labourers. The class society which is partially abandoned through the egalitarian myth of mateship in war is left unchallenged and merely picked up again at the end of the war. Flanagan clearly reiterates this position in his representation of working-class Tasmanian POWs.

The second text Flanagan's novel invites comparison with is George Johnston's 1964

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion on the controversy and the life of Seymour's play see Anne Pender's essay 'The One Day of the Year' (2014).



novel, *My Brother Jack*, where the crippled and psychologically damaged returned soldiers after the First World War form the childhood backdrop for the protagonist and his brother's lives. The novel portrays the brother, Jack, initially as the classic Australian war hero material, only to account how he actually fails to join the overseas campaign during the Second World War, whereas the non-fighting non-heroic protagonist puts his life at risk covering the war in New Guinea. The novel suggests the national male heroics and the singular focus on Gallipoli and the First World War is out of touch with the reality of the Second World War and its Asian-Pacific theatre with a war on Australia's doorstep. Australia's inability to come to terms with its post-war reality that requires other forms of nation narration better in touch with the lives lived by Australians is what propels the protagonist into a self-imposed exile<sup>8</sup>. Both *The One Day of the Year* and *By Brother Jack* also represent a stepping away from Australian blood sacrifice for an imperial British whiteness towards a 1960s informed perspective overtly preoccupied with its own contemporaneity; youth rebellion, class rebellion and women's liberation – and anti-war sentiment in the wake of conscription for the Vietnam War.

If *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* represents a critical revisiting of the question of war as nation narration it also enters the critical space opened by Seymour, Johnston and a range of subsequent books and films. Albert B. Facey's autobiography *A Fortunate Life* and Peter Weir's film, *Gallipoli*, represent important early 1980s revisions of the early glorification of blood sacrifice beginning with Bean's legendary accounts from the First World War – later consecrated through the erection of endless war monuments and their hybrid mausoleum temple forms in Sydney and Melbourne and other capital cities. What is often forgotten is how such monuments are not coterminous with the sacrifice but erected typically later as parts of the reconstruction of national narratives. The whiteness of these monuments is easily associated with the idea of reinvoking Roman and Greek classical antiquity as a way of reasserting white Australian sovereignty over relatively recently illicitly occupied land. In this way the memorials contribute to the 'endowment' of the white Australian occupation as both timeless and indisputable through the voluntary blood sacrifice of its citizens.

### ***The Narrow Road to the Deep North* and its Contemporary Ghosts**

Flanagan's novel is written at a time when this critique has long been established – even if far from broadly endorsed. Indeed as Lake and Reynolds (2010) argue contemporary Australia is going through a resurgent interest and renewed consecration of the Anzac legend. The novel can be read as a critique of the renewed bellicose nationalism beginning with John Howard's anti-invasion rhetoric (as a way of evading the responsibility for refugees in spite of Australia's international commitment) combined with his role in pushing Australia into a range of quagmire conflicts in the Middle East and Central Asia. The bellicose nationalism has since partly been picked up by subsequent governments from Rudd, over Gillard, then vigorously reinforced by Abbott. Nothing suggests it is about to be finished. If both current

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<sup>8</sup> In an article commemorating the 50th anniversary of the publication of *My Brother Jack* (2014) Nadia Wheatley (2014), discusses the novel's ambivalent attitude to the Anzac legend and its conformist burden on national identity formation.

major party leaders appear preoccupied with other matters than promoting further futile military adventures, their complete lack of interests in alleviating the situation of refugees remains intact, from mandatory detention to refusal to process asylum seekers arriving by boat<sup>9</sup>.

*The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is both about being at war and its long-term and long-distance consequences. One can imagine Medicins Sans Frontiers hospitals in Syria and elsewhere operating under similar conditions to those Dorrigo has to perform under, when he is operating on an already amputated leg of an Australian POW. Through Flanagan's laconic depiction of a desperate lack of supplies, lack of facilities, and constant pressure, he helps the reader understand through its uncompromised attention to gory details, what ordeal the POWs were passing through – but it also finds contemporary repercussions in the war zones, refugees are desperately trying to escape from. The parallel invited through the depiction of an 'Australian ordeal' does exactly what governments fear most – it makes us see refugees as humans not as abstract numbers whose quantity 'we' need to be protected from, producing fear that makes 'us' demand the prevention of their arrival. It would be an outrageous claim to insist Flanagan's novel is written in response to this, but it is part of the contemporaneity to which the novel speaks. And the novel offers a space for the reader to comprehend the monstrosity caused by war, then and now.

Historically, the novel is both a revisiting of the Second World War and the narrations and mythologising surrounding the war. Although April 25 remains solidly associated with the First World War, it has altered its significance away from an exclusivist pride in Anglo-Australian nationhood assertion to a more inclusive but obviously still war focused event celebrating Australian citizenship as an identity based on unconditional loyalty to the nation. Here, inclusivity is clearly not on the rise. The question is, how the shift from a focus on the First World War to the Second as the nation-shaping event for post-war Australia which already Prime Minister Keating called for in the 1990s has remapped war as a quintessentially Australian experience. The several wars Australia has participated in since the early 2000s have demonstrably not demanded the same level of involvement nor the same number of casualties. The Second World War has emerged as the last war involving mass mobilisation in Australia and the last clearly defined just war.

### Conclusion

Since the 1960s and 1970s Aboriginal and multicultural Australia have been chipping away at the monolithic Anglo-Australian constructions of Australia as a British or British-Irish derived society. Anglo-Australians who remain the most privileged group in Australia have sought not so much to fight back as to solidify their hold on Australian identity as predominantly white, Anglo-Australian and male dominated. The legacy of war, the idea that white Anglo-Australians (we grew here) fought for the land, while others (you flew here) came as a result of the valiant struggles first in Gallipoli and the Western front. Tobruk, the

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<sup>9</sup> While these observations are mine, they are not dissimilar from the critique Flanagan has raised as a public intellectual, for example in his columns written for *The Guardian* (<http://www.theguardian.com/profile/richardflanagan>).

Middle East and the Kokoda Track represent the last post of identitarian whiteness. *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* occupies an ambivalent space in the dispute over suitable material for nation narration. It clearly opens up a new front in terms of the very different narrative it presents in terms of what constitutes war experience, what constitutes heroism and what constitutes Australian maleness. The silence it replaces with a nation narrative is not necessarily the result of stoicism but of deep psychological wounds too painful to lay open. Yet there is not only silence but also *silencing* which is the result of nationalistic manipulation shaming the POWs into silence. Flanagan adds further weight both to the need to shift the historiographic discourse on national experience away from the First World War to the Second World War and through this from Europe to Australia's own geopolitical neighbourhood. He draws attention to how racism raises its ugly head in the commemoration of war, both in relation to the two important Australian sites, the death railway and the Kokoda Track. Visits are geared to the commemoration of the dead POWs and Australian and American soldiers, the innumerate Asians dying remain anonymous and of little interest to these exercises in dark tourism. Hence the visits reproduce the racial hierarchy of the war through the commemorative act. Flanagan's novel also implicitly raises the point about the Eurocentricity inherent, also in Australia, in the emphasis on the European holocaust and the lack of attention granted to the Manchukuo genocide.

When Flanagan through his acceptance of the Prime Minister's Award ended up on stage with Tony Abbott, champion of militant nationalism, it was not only a baffling moment. It was also a confirmation of the unresolved question whether the novel, while opening up critical spaces considered too sacred to the nation to be open for questioning, ends up involuntarily reinforcing war experience in its new, broader, and far more reflexive form as the quintessential, national experience. And in doing so, it lends its weight to the continued marginalisation of less national, because less spectacular, less specific event focused, but nonetheless immensely nation-shaping experiences of Australian history – from Aboriginal-non-Aboriginal contact history, over multicultural history, and less male-centred forms of nation narration, to mining and environmentally based / ecologically inspired accounts of Australian history – and Australian contemporaneity. The novel through its concluding episode with the Tasmanian bushfires of 1967 suggests the birth-by-fire narrative is not necessarily about one particular form of manmade war, but can in fact take many different forms.

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