

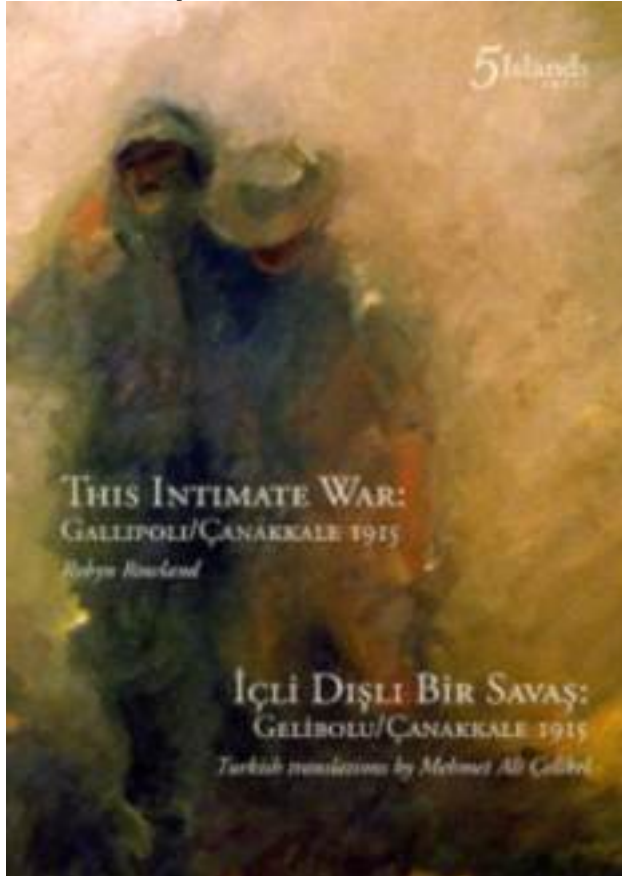
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The Vulnerability of Individuals in the Face of History: Lisa Gorton launches ‘This Intimate War: Gallipoli/Çanakkale 1915’ by Robyn Rowland

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This Intimate War: Gallipoli/Çanakkale 1915 by Robyn Rowland and translated by Dr
Mehmet Ali Çelikel, Five Islands Press, was launched at The Wheeler Centre
Melbourne by Dr Lisa Gorton on 2 March 2015



‘What is history?’ E. H. Carr asked in his 1961 lectures at the University of Cambridge. ‘What is an historical fact?’ By what process is ‘a mere fact about the past transformed into a fact of history’ – made to express, more than all the other multitudinous facts of

the same moment, the meaning of what happened? No poem can change the past. But a poem, if it is strong enough, can change the way in which we remember the past – our own, or our culture's. It can change the kinds of facts that we notice. And when it changes the kinds of facts that we notice in the past, it changes the present, too.

In *This Intimate War: Gallipoli/Çanakkale 1915* Robyn Rowland has entered the field of history. She has taken on the role of shaping how we perceive the past. I have read her collection many times now. It has come to live in my mind. Its many telling details, and its approach to history, have become intrinsic to my way of thinking about Gallipoli and Çanakkale. *This Intimate War* will work in this way on those who let it. This collection brings home the vulnerability of individuals in the face of history.

thank heavens

*faith is everywhere like bloodied green grass,
flying stone, screams of thousands in the din of dying,*

*sweet jesus, allahu akbar, mary mother of god,
yes sir, sergeant, commander, captain, lieutenant,*

*necessary as breath when the voice screams attack!
obey, obey, obey, smother that tremble,*

*fling your body over the trench-bank, charge!
feel your friend run beside you, grunt, drop,*

*run, keep running, forward, push those legs,
remember those childhood races, the prize,*

*bayonets are gleaming in the bright sun,
fields of starlight glinting before you so lovely,*

*waves of light moving towards each other,
the sound of cymbals? no, god NO!*

*the shock of his eyes up close,
stink on his breath – fear – and lunge in,*

*up under his chin to the spinal cord,
steel dulled, crimson as faith,*

*sweet jesus, allahu akbar, mary mother of god,
it wasn't needed for long.*

This, the first poem in the book, takes the reader immediately into the onslaught. Rowland is interested in history not as a narrative framed by retrospect, the perspective of safety, but as a present imperative force in the lives of individuals. The very inwardness of the poem's point of view gives the voice of the poem a frightening, shifting intimacy. 'Fling your body over the trench-bank'. Are we who speak the poem commanding someone? Are we hearing someone commanding us? Or is this someone speaking to himself, having internalised the voice of command? Who is vulnerable, who is safe? 'Up under his chin to the spinal chord'. Who has died? Has the poem stepped back, is it recording the death of its nameless protagonist; or has this protagonist, who might be us, killed someone else?

Such shifts of perspectives, worked into the details of this poem, are essential to how this collection represents war. How does the voice of command enter into the lives of individuals? Does the idea of victory in war depend on stepping back from the nameless dead? On the facing page, the poem is translated into Turkish. A killed soldier, and a killing soldier: this poem belongs to both sides of war. I have no skill to comment on the translations; but having the poems in both Turkish and English is central to the idea of this book. Turn the page and these languages touch each other as the dead of that war are joined in death.

In a later poem for child soldiers, 'Children of Gallipoli', Rowland writes:

*Every country had them. They left no wills,
no children to grandchildren, no mark on the earth
but some fading photo. If there is no stone for them
their brief breath vanishes into the vapour of history
unremembered. Just the image of a boy
dead in the trenches...*

The poems in *This Intimate War* draw on private testimonials. The collection quotes, for instance, the letter that a boy called Hasan Ethem wrote to his mother, a letter smuggled past the censors hidden in a sardine tin. The poems in *This Intimate War* work with individual names, with quotations and recollections. They remember particular single incidents: how ‘General Sir Bryan Mahon, a Galway man/ had a tantrum when he didn’t get promoted, resigned and/ headed off to an island, leaving his men under fire,/ and no-one game to pull us back without command...’; or how James Crozier, twenty-one year old Belfast boy, fell asleep in a farmhouse and was shot for desertion. The poems in *This Intimate War* consider the lives of women: mothers, nurses, lovers, munition workers: a photograph of seven women pouring explosives into shells; a recollection of England’s ‘Canary girls’: ‘their yellow skin shining/ brighter than flares, orange hair a badge of courage/ as TNT poisoning sank its toxic glow into their flesh...’

Rowland quotes Patrick Shaw-Stewart: ‘Think of fighting... on the plains of Troy itself!’ Not only in such references to Homer, but also in her sequence about war artists, ‘Ways of Seeing’, Rowland shows her reflective interest in the ethics and aesthetics of representing war. Of Major L.F. S. Hore she writes: ‘the smallness of his paper allowed such intimacies with landscape, such smallness of citizenry.’ Of Sidney Nolan she writes, ‘His landscapes have no aerial views. He sat among the ridges, bluffs and valleys’. Intimacy, citizenry, close and involved perspectives: these are values that Rowland’s collection embodies. The poems in *This Intimate War* consider war not from the perspective of victory but from the perspective of those caught up in war, who, whichever side they were on, lost.

– Lisa Gorton

Lisa Gorton writes poetry, essays and fiction. She is the poetry editor of *ABR*. Her latest collection poetry *Hotel Hyperion* was shortlisted for the Queensland Literary Awards and Western Australian Premier’s Prize for Poetry. Her awards include the Philip Hodgins Memorial Medal, Vincent Buckley Poetry Prize and Victorian Premier’s Prize for Poetry. Her novel *The Life of Houses* has just been published by Giramondo. *This Intimate War Gallipoli/Çanakkale 1915 – İçli Dışlı Bir Savaş: Gellbolu/Çanakkale 1915* is available from <http://fiveislandspress.com/catalogue/this-intimate-war>