

TEXT review

‘Poppy-hunters, poppy-picking’*review by Clare Rhoden*

Robyn Rowland

This Intimate War: Gallipoli/Çanakkale 1915

with Turkish translations by Mehmet Ali Çelikel

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The 1914-1918 war – often symbolised by a poppy – has generated millions of creative responses across the decades, so that very few new works can make fresh inroads into its contested space. During the centenary of the Gallipoli landings, many creative minds have turned to the task of commemoration and mourning, and for those fascinated by the conflict, the pickings are rich. In *This Intimate War*, Robyn Rowland succeeds in bringing some new, personal, and arresting perspectives. This collection of poems offers a striking dual vision.

Creatively, the book is a triumph, and Five Islands Press is to be congratulated on the standard of its production. Like the recent centenary offering ‘Reflections on Gallipoli’ by the Australian Chamber Orchestra, *This Intimate War* offers us a hybrid, stereoscopic view of the conflict. The cover image, a reproduction of the painting ‘Mehmetçik ve Johnny Mehmetçik’ from the Canakkale series of modern Turkish artist, Fehmi Korkut Uluğ, intriguingly blends the shapes, emotions and motives of the two soldiers pictured, so that at first glance it is not clear which is the Turk and which the invader, or who is supporting whom. The decision to face each poem with its Turkish translation, while effectively halving the reading experience for those not competent

in both languages, is a sharp and provocative representation of the anomaly of the Gallipoli campaign itself: two armies, previously unknown to each other, facing off in a fight to the death.

Rowland is clearly intrigued by Gallipoli's associations to legendary Troy, as were many of the allied soldiers who fought there in 1915. In 'The Folly of Myth', she makes explicit connections:

They came with their own Trojan horse,
the refitted collier River Clyde,
mouths sliced out of her steel sides to disgorge men.
(26)

In this passage, the allied soldiers do not descend from the belly of the Trojan horse but are vomited onto the shore, much in the manner of the malformed offspring of the disgusting Error in Spenser's 'Faerie Queene'. Rowland deliberately makes repeated interchanges between the 'hero' (Trojan) allusions and the less heroic, 'invader' identity of the Allies. These fluctuating perspectives provide valuable reflections on the nature of war and warfare.

Perspective shifts invade these poems, challenging the reader with unexpected voices and sights, as the point of view, space and even the time frame oscillate throughout. In one line, we may be in the thought-stream of a young Turkish soldier, and in the next, we observe through the consciousness of a twenty-first century parent of sons. This device is used repeatedly in 'Ways of Seeing': in 'Section I, Sketches at Gallipoli', we first watch watercolour artist Major Leslie Hore, then are addressed by the poet, and then enter the consciousness of a Maori Anzac:

He'd wanted to paint...
you wonder at the ferocity...
'I am well,' wrote Huiru Rewha. (98)

While at first disconcerting, this technique underscores the multiplicity of viewpoints, the fragmentation of individual experience, and the pathetic confusion of war. Rowland captures each perspective for a fleeting moment, and then bends that moment into manifold refractions.

This split voice is not the only creative trope Rowland uses to raise our awareness about the insane absurdity of war. She also repeatedly pulls us up short, just as we begin to relax into the rhythm and texture of a poem, by inserting a harsh, immovable, stolid fact, often in the shape of a confronting number or statistic. For example, in 'The Folly of Myth', Rowland provides a lengthy and detailed exposition of the muddled bases on which the Gallipoli plan rested, demonstrating, as others have before her, the fundamental senselessness of the entire episode:

For eight months they fought on with no real gain.
Landed time and again into a blaze of scarlet loss, a

shredding wind
of bullets, the young of nations far away broke
themselves open
... So much they didn't know. (28)

Here the specificity of phrases such as

drowned by the weight of their own gear on the
shallows –
84 pounds full pack; 250 rounds of ammunition; 3
days' rations (26)

wrenches us from the emotive intensity that has been building throughout this three-part poem, and insists that we note the reality of the situation. The final lines, too, are prosaically direct:

You think of waste. And you know –
there never was a need for another Troy. (28)

If, indeed, there was ever need for an initial Troy.

Impressive as some of the longer pieces are – some, indeed, engage our attention with the holding power of a verse novel – Rowland is, I consider, much more successful when she turns her attention to the individual experience rather than the relation of the historical events. Some passages resonate with extraordinary clarity and economy, glowing from their longer settings like animated jewels. Such lines remain with us indelibly. For example, the last verse of 'Sky Fighting' could stand alone without reducing the impact of the entire poem:

they seem so free, up high in the blue open sky
able to fly away from the bloody un-limbed day
free to un-see, to un-hear, to un-know
the sharp business of metal resculpting flesh,
unaware,
those flying coffins have a flimsy lifetime in their
flight. (76)

Similarly, the entirety of the bereaved mother of 'Second skin' is eloquently captured in the spare opening lines:

Sticky veil, this grief,
second skin impervious to the touch. (94)

This Intimate War explores consciousness and context well beyond our typical Australian appropriation of Gallipoli to ourselves – that narrow understanding of ours that diminishes the entire Gallipoli peninsula to single, bloodied, narrow beach at Anzac Cove. Rowland presents us with a myriad of those involved. Here we have words from (and for) Allied troops of many backgrounds, from the Turks, from women on the production line at home, from widows, from bereaved mothers, from child soldiers and from those left to care for the disabled. Rowland is so comfortable with the Irish and their problematic, un-reconciled Great War experience that 'The

'Green Road' may be somewhat mysterious to many Australian readers. I hope they follow up their confusion with more reading about this defining war.

Rowland's treatment of the Great War is, of course, informed by much of the writing that has preceded it, and sometimes leans a little heavily on well-worn tropes. Yet unlike the protest poems of Wilfred Owen, Rowland's work captures more than fleeting, individual cries of hopelessness and despair. *This Intimate War* is a well-informed, twenty-first century interpretation which adds important perspectives to our consideration of this war in particular, and of war in general.

Clare Rhoden's book The Purpose of Futility: Writing WWI, Australian Style, was published by UWAP Scholarly in 2015. Her latest short fiction, 'Man/Machine/Dog' appeared in Overland 215 (Winter 2014). Clare completed a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne where she works as Teaching and Academic Resource Coordinator in the Department of Management and Marketing.

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