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New poetry: Robyn Rowland, Lucy Dougan, Sarah Holland-Batt

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In a year that has seen an understandable overload of material, visual and literary, about the Gallipoli campaign it's important to point out that Robyn Rowland's *This Intimate War: Gallipoli/Canakkale 1915* (Five Islands Press, 119pp, \$25), is a unique contribution. Poetry collections about war by women are something of a rarity; to present each poem in English as well as in Turkish (translated by Mehmet Ali Celikel) makes this one stand out even more.

On top of that, the book is written from both sides, as it were. Victoria-based Rowland has a family connection in Turkey and has come to know the country well; she also viscerally detests war's waste of human lives particularly in the context of Gallipoli/Canakkale. These factors, and perhaps the fact that she is the mother of two sons, add considerable power to the poetry.

The book's 22 poems don't provide a comprehensive account of the campaign, but they do have enough scope, variety and intensity to suggest its essence. The "intimate" aspect of the attacks, counterattacks, communication between opposing trenches and the savagery of bayonet charges are all graphically evoked.

In many Australian accounts of Gallipoli, the Turkish defenders have been blurred. Rowland, with notable sympathy, brings them up close — nowhere more so than in the opening poem, *than heavens*, about one of many bayonet attacks. It ends with: "the shock of his eyes up close, / stink on his breath — fear — and lunge in, // up under his chin to the spinal chord / steel dulled, crimson as faith, // sweet jesus, allahu akbar, mary mother of god, / it wasn't needed for long."

To write as a noncombatant about killing and dying with such directness is always difficult but ultimately necessary. If euphemisms (such as "the fallen") are preferred then the horror of the business is muted, thus making it all the more likely to be repeated. Naturally, much of this has to be based on research.

Robert Graves once recommended, "Write first; research later", but Rowland has wisely ignored his injunction. Many of her facts (for example, excerpts from first-hand accounts) are wisely used — and interpolated as direct quotations without disrupting the surrounding rhythms. Only occasionally, as in her couplet "In March and April, Britain secretly carved up / the Ottoman Empire with France and Russia", does poetry give way to mere exposition.

The quality of the Turkish translations is beyond this reviewer's expertise but, given the thoroughness of Rowland's research, it seems likely it will do her work justice. Certainly, those reading this book will come away with a more vivid sense of the waste, and relative

pointlessness, of the Gallipoli campaign.

Lucy Dougan's third full-length collection, *The Guardians* (Giramondo, 76pp, \$24), is a very different sort of book. Perth-based Dougan's main virtues, at this stage of her career, are compression and a sense of poise. Her poems derive mainly from personal experience (of family, of friends, of life) in a low-key, personal tone that is, however, far from dull or unambitious. Her free verse rhythms are definite but seemingly effortless. It's a technique through which significant things (love, death, suffering) can be written about honestly while eschewing any self-conscious dramatisation. Many of the poems also have a narrative element that helps them stay in the mind long afterwards.

A fine example of this is seen in the opening poem, *The Mask*, where the protagonist (seemingly the poet herself as a young girl) is shown, from a room at the bottom of the house, a linen face mask made by her mother's mother. "There were eye-holes, and a mouth / and they took turns in it / running crazily about the garden." That night, after "relinquish[ing] it to the grass", the young girl wonders "if there were any more rooms / beneath the room under her bed. / How deep did they go down; / and if each of her mother's mothers / stretching right back / had left a fearful face there / for her to try on?"

The emphasis on family and women's traditions is a recurrent one. Dougan's poems reach forwards, sideways and backwards through the generations, quite often with unapologetic portrayals of "female" skills such as cooking and sewing. *The Ties My Sister Makes* is a fine example. "My sister's ties / will be dispatched about the world, / their underwater silvers and greens / flashing in the dark aquariums of shop windows." At the poem's end the narrator thinks, with not a little irony, of other women putting these ties away, "unaware of my sister's clever hands / and of her name / inside the label / beating out its syllables / silently next to their husband's hearts".

The coincidence of wry humour and real poignancy can also be seen in another "female/family" poem in the book's third section. In *Bump & Grind*, the poet addresses her daughter directly about "the on and off love affair / we've had with your dance school". The mother knows that "Much later you'll slash the tutu, / wear it over your jeans", but envisages herself anyway "harvest[ing] the rose buds / of which the sewing on / gave me so many small wounds, /and they'll get dusty in a red cup / on my desk /the year that you start bleeding / and I stop."

The blurb for this volume talks of Dougan's poems' "aspiration to quietness, to cumulative rather than immediate effects, and to sustaining a relatively natural and unobtrusive voice". The three poems excerpted above are surely convincing evidence of Dougan's success in these ambitions.

Australian poetry is an increasingly broad church and it is no slight to either book to say that Dougan's blurb would certainly not fit Sarah Holland-Batt's new book, *The Hazards* (UQP, 96pp, \$24.95). The Queensland poet's first book, *Aria* (2008), won three major prizes and showed her to be perhaps the most talented of a whole new crop of outstanding young female Australian poets. She is still only 33.

Aria was remarkable for its precocious accomplishment and for its sense of promise. Now, after considerable time spent overseas (particularly in the US) on a variety of scholarships, Holland-Batt has more than fulfilled those expectations. *The Hazards* is dense with the same metaphorical energy as her first book but that energy is now more dependably in the service of substantial moral and psychological insights.

The collection's four sections deal, in turn, with aspects of Australia, a variety of animals, Europe and America. Quite a number of poems, especially in Part III, are based on other works of art. Some critics over time have disdained ekphrasis as parasitic but several of Holland-Batt's poems in this mode, most notably *Primavera: The Graces*, *Against Ingres*, *Reclining Nude* and *Goya's Dog*, provide more than enough justification for the strategy.

The paintings involved are at once a take-off point for a lively work of comparable depth and a tribute to (though sometimes an interrogation of) the original.

A short excerpt from Holland-Batt's take on Botticelli's *Primavera* can suggest her skill: "It is spring. Death is in the trees, / in the petals shining underfoot like glass. / Let the dance quicken in the blood, / let it shake the speared buds down / like hail, let it follow the minds of men / and bring them to us, howling like dogs."

While such poems can work effectively as displacements for personal emotions, it's important to note Holland-Batt doesn't shy away from the "confessional" altogether. At various times, as in *Medusa* and *The Invention of Ether*, the influences of Plath and Lowell (respectively) are clear. Holland-Batt's approach to the autobiographical poem is often graphic but retains some important reticences.

Towards the end of the book, for example, there are several poems that appear to detail an intensely felt but ultimately unsatisfactory relationship the poet had with a very American American. It's unlikely their subject would be happy with these poems but, given what is revealed, they don't seem unfair.

Another, rather different side of Holland-Batt's descriptive power can be sampled in *The Atlantic*: "Old friend, you were right when you said / this can't go on. Still, I find your all-American jaw / in the dark and thumb its edge. It drags / against my palm like a panther's tongue ..." It may be a long way from *The Graces* but the same energy is there.

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Jamie Briggs confirms sending a photograph of a public servant to colleagues, but says he did not leak the image.