

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Robyn Rowland, *This Intimate War: Gallipoli/ Çanakkale 1915 – İçli Dışlı Bir Savaş: Gelibolu/ Çanakkale 1915* (Five Islands Press, 2015; Bilge Kültür Sanat, 2015)

‘... we have no boundaries anymore. / we are killing ourselves in this intimate war’  
(‘Close’ 40).

Not only do these lines echo the title of Robyn Rowland’s book of 19 poems centred on the Çanakkale and Gallipoli campaigns of World War I, but they also encapsulate the whole emotional, philosophical and aesthetic ethos of the collection. Rowland is an Australian poet who spends much time in her ancestral Ireland. She is well-travelled, and is nowadays a frequent visitor to Turkey. This cosmopolitan background, aligned, crucially, with the desire to convey truth through her poetry,<sup>1</sup> ensures that the poems in *This Intimate War* do not merely perpetuate the Anzac myth but represent the experiences and emotions of ordinary troopers on both sides of the trenches. In evoking the wholesale carnage that was Gallipoli, Rowland’s powerful language raises the reader’s consciousness of the affinity between the enemies: ‘... now i know him in the trenches best, / his ribs thin like mine, his bandaged foot, / that cough at night, the black sleepless shape of his death’ (‘Close’ 38). It establishes the meaninglessness of boundaries drawn along lines of nationality amid ‘bodies heaped so you couldn’t tell / what country they were from ...’ (‘Green Road’ 72). It highlights the redundancy of denominational differences, when ‘faith is everywhere like bloodied green grass’ (‘thank heavens’ 18) and where a misguided belief in authorities that ‘know the purpose’ (‘Luck’ 86) displaces the cry to an inscrutable deity: ‘sweet *jesus*, *allahu akbar*, *mary mother of god* / yes sir, sergeant, commander, captain, lieutenant’ (‘thank heavens’ 18).

Rowland depicts the war on the Gallipoli Peninsula as ‘intimate’, not simply through her dramatic portrayal of how combatants suffered, fought, killed and died in the closest physical proximity, but also by evoking the core values and essential humanity which united them: the longing for home and family (‘Close’ 38); the exchange of humour and gifts across the trenches (37-38); the terrible nightmares of young men who might equally well hail from Turkey’s Kızıl Adalar or Australia’s Bawley Point (‘Night ravings’ 34); the accord with music of Turkish Aykut or Scottish Neil, ‘pulverised’ alike into the silence of eternity (‘The Shattering’ 64-66); and the heart of the Turkish soldier who shouldered a wounded Anzac to his trench (‘Close’ 38). Thus, she invites reader to understand the truth inherent in the paradox: ‘i love him now, my enemy. i know him’ (‘Close’ 38).

Rowland accomplishes in poetry what has been achieved, recently, in other media:<sup>2</sup> That is, *This Intimate War* provides a transnational perspective on Gallipoli. Anzac, Irish, Turk: the nationality of the protagonist(s) in a given poem is much less important than the community of emotion and experience expressed. To reinforce this impression, Rowland frequently resorts to

<sup>1</sup> Robyn Rowland, ‘Life in the Raw with the Personal Muse,’ *Meanjin Quarterly*, 67. 4 (2008) 8, 14 January 2016 <http://robynrowland.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Life-in-the-Raw-with-the-Personal-Muse.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Hillman, ‘A transnational Gallipoli?’ *Australian Humanities Review*, 51 (2011) 25-42, 15 January 2016 <http://press.anu.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/gallipoli.pdf>.

symmetrical narration, presenting bilateral versions of similar experiences, as in 'The Dead' (78), in which first Imam then Priest struggle to reconcile faith with the 'brutal harvest' on the battlefield. Alternatively, the voice may be indeterminate, representative of all, as with the charging soldier in 'thank heavens' (18). The transnational perspective also allows Rowland to contribute to the process of redefining the Turks for the international community as honourable, aggrieved victims of predatory British imperialism at Gallipoli, partners in Anzac suffering: 'soldiers ill-resourced but clever, dedicated, / who would lie down and die to defend their homeland' ('The Folly of Myth: Prologue, 1915' 22). Appropriately, the front cover of *This Intimate War* is Turkish artist Fehmi Korkut Uluğ's painting of the aforementioned brave Turkish soldier supporting his wounded Anzac counterpart: *Johnny and Johnny Turc in Gallipoli 1915*.

The veracity and immediacy of the poems are enhanced by Rowland's recourse to the actual words, narratives and photographs of named individuals who experienced Gallipoli on either side; and by her use of factual detail, sometimes prosaic in form but never in impact. The importance which Rowland attaches to communicating a balanced account of Gallipoli is also apparent in the most unusual feature of the book: on each alternate page, juxtaposed with the original English, lies a fine Turkish translation by Mehmet Ali Çelikel. The accessibility of the collection to a wider readership is thereby ensured, while its message, that what is superficially different may be essentially the same, is reinforced.

Rowland does not confine herself to the male perspective on Gallipoli, but also presents the universal, agonising experience of women involved on both sides: nurses 'nursing – not for health' but to return their 'patched-up' loved ones to death ('Mopping up' 52); munitions workers on 'the production line of death' ('Production lines' 56); and the perspectives of wives and mothers. Some of Rowland's most powerful imagery resides here: 'Plum jam – his favourite – rests thickly in the spoon / she holds, has been holding now for two hours. / It slips along her hands, her veins, dripping' ('Second skin' 94). The image evokes mother love; memories; blood spilt; waste; suspension in grief, in time, in death. Rowland presents the female experience of war as different from that of '... Men full of strange energy / they call "war." They call "necessary"' ('when he was young, once' 92). Women are not soldiers, strapped 'into the resignation of obedience' ('Mopping up' 52). Through the female voices of Gallipoli, but from her own contemporary perspective, Rowland challenges the logic of war — all war — with a rhetorical question intended to resonate with today's reader: 'One day we will trade with them again, marry their sons / that are left, and will it somehow have been right?' ('Second skin' 96). In *This Intimate War*, the past reaches out to admonish the future.

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