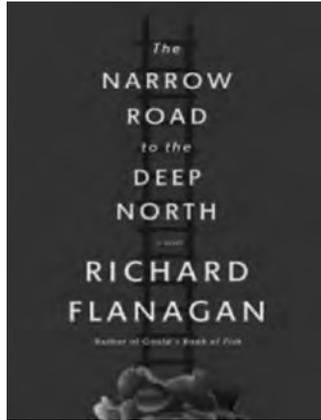


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Imperial Legacy

The Narrow Road to the Deep North by Richard Flanagan,
Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2014.



When we apply the term epic to a work there are certain expectations we have about the nature of its narrative; traditionally, the setting for its actors—the gods, heroes and humans—is historical and often mythic: Homer, Dante, Milton, Joyce, and Ezra Pound carved out their poetic masterpieces using history, legend and myth. For the novelists in the realist tradition, and especially for those whose subject is war, things are different. Myth and legend are more often than not replaced by a specific human interaction known as love or, to be literary about it, a love story. It is a long and venerable tradition that includes *Dr. Zhivago*, *Farewell to Arms*, *The English Patient*, *The Reader*, *Atonement* and now comes the accomplished Australian novelist, Richard Flanagan, with his Second World War novel (based partially at least on his father's experience) about the building of the Burma-Thai railway, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. Flanagan's novel won this year's Booker prize, the first Australian to do so, and it may or may not have been this success that brought on the wrath of Michael Hofmann, the accomplished German-born poet and translator and regular reviewer for the *London Review of Books*. Hofmann's main objection to the novel stems from its style, construction and, so it seems to me, its love story. To be legal about

it, he has grounds for criticism on all three accounts; however, that is not the whole story, nor, I think, the most important one.

I often visit a good friend of mine who was forced into early retirement by a severe heart attack; he is, among other things, an expert on the history of warfare from a mostly Marxist perspective. I mentioned that I had just finished Flanagan's novel and I asked him if he had heard about the eight American airmen who had been used in dissections experiments while they were still alive, at Kyushu University medical school. He slowly looked up from his coffee and said he had not. I continued to speak about the story saying how like many of the Nazi war criminals these "doctors" were tried but then soon released by General McArthur. We spoke about Korea, the Cold War, the Russians and Chinese, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the incendiary bombing of Tokyo. Finally, as I was about to leave, I said that I thought Flanagan's great contribution in the novel was the recording of stories like these for the contemporary world if not for posterity. My friend reflected for a moment and said, "It is true, the scale of horror is not its full measure."

The story of the railway and the river Kwai entered the public domain in 1957 with David Lean's film, I have written elsewhere about the personal impact of this film— my first experience of cinema as a boy¹. But despite my continued (if considerably diminished) affection for *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, there is no question that the Hollywood treatment was sanitized beyond recognition, especially for those veteran POWs who had endured and survived the camps². The film was made politically correct no doubt as an attempt to show the Japanese that they were now on the side of the West in the Cold War World, surrounded as they were by China, North Korea, Russia and Vietnam. Not to forget, of course, all those American bases³ with their money, marines, prostitutes and military immunity from rape culture and rape cases. Shohei Imamura's 1961 film *Pigs and Battleships* (Buta to gunkan) portrays this world. The film is little known inside or outside of Japan.

Flanagan's great contribution in this work then is the recovery of the lost and forgotten lives not only of the Australian and other POWs but of the Korean guards, the comfort women,

the Romusha⁴, (a Japanese word for laborer) and, later, the women and children of these “survivors”. There are many powerful and terrifying scenes in this novel but the best of them stand up as narrative in the wake of Primo Levi’s *The Reawakening*, or Masuji Ibuse’s *Black Rain*. There is plenty of melodrama as Michael Hofmann points out but there are many more scenes where the emotion is earned and hard earned and the writing is spare and direct and the language deliberately chosen. When the POWs returned:

They died off quickly, strangely, in car smashes and suicides and creeping diseases. Too many of their children seemed born with problems and trouble, handicapped or backward or plain odd. Too many of their marriages faltered or staggered, and if they lasted it was sometimes more due to the codes and customs of the day than to their own capacity to make right all that was wrong; and what was wrong was too large for some of them. They went bush by themselves; they stayed in town with others and drank too much. . . They drank and they drank, and they couldn’t get drunk no matter how much they drank. 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’s what Chum Fahey said when they met up at the Hope and Anchor.

Several times throughout the novel Dorrigo Evans the protagonist/hero refers to being part of a Pharonic slave system with the Japanese Emperor as the Sun King. There is an echo of Samuel Johnson’s contempt for the pyramids in his *History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissina*: “Do we talk of that? Do we? No, we talk of the magnificence and majesty of the Egyptians. Of the Romans. Of Saint Petersburg, and nothing of the bones of the hundred thousand slaves that it is built on. Maybe that’s how they’ll remember the Japs.”

The double edge sword of racism cuts both ways and there are many Conradian moments on this river, the shade of Kurtz is never far away:

And all the time he was talking, Colonel Kota went on clenching and unclenching his hand, raising and lowering it when clenched, as though he were readying his sword for another beheading.

It's not just about the railway, Colonel Kota said, though the railway must be built. Or even the war, through the war must be won.

It's about the Europeans learning that they are not the superior race, Nakamura said.

And us learning that we are, Colonel Kota said.

Then there is the doctor's encounter with the Tamil which leads to a meditation on death and dying, suffering and Christ:

Three months before, walking to a downriver camp to get drugs, he had come upon a Tamil *romusha* in a ragged red sarong sitting next to a creek, waiting to die. The old man was uninterested in what help Dorrigo Evans could offer. He waited for death as a traveller for a bus. Walking back along the same path a month ago he came upon the old man for a second time, now a skeleton picked clean by beast and insect. He took the red sarong from the skeleton, washed it, tore it in half and tied the better piece around his neck. When death comes for him he hopes to meet it similarly to the Tamil *romusha*, though he doubts he will. He does not accept the authorities of life, and nor will he, he thinks, of death. . . He hopes Christ is right. But he does not agree. He does not. He is a doctor. Suffering is suffering. Suffering is not virtue, nor does it make virtue, nor does of it virtue necessarily flow.

Flanagan's description of the ruthless Korean prison guard who is waiting to be hanged by the Allies, while his Japanese commanders are set free, has a similar sweep and poignancy:

His father, a peasant, had wanted him to have an education, but times had been hard and after three years at elementary school learning some Japanese myths and history, he left work for a Korean family as a servant. They gave him his board, two yen a month and regular beatings. He was eight years old. At twelve he went to work of a Japanese family, who gave him board, six yen

a month and an occasional thrashing. At the age of fifteen he heard the Japanese were hiring guards to work in prisoner-of-war camps elsewhere in the empire. The pay was fifty yen a month. His thirteen-year-old sister had signed up with the Japanese to go to Manchukuo to work as a comfort woman for similar pay. She told him she would be helping soldiers in hospitals and, like him, was very excited. As she could neither read nor write, he had never heard from her again and now that he knew what comfort women did, he tried not to think about her, and when he did, he hoped for her sake that she was.

I have deliberately avoided the “love story” aspect of the novel and will only remark that it has a *Zhivago* like quality to it, i.e. adultery, separation, loss and tragic non-reunion. There is melodrama and some over the top prose, but it does not distract from the war story or, it can be argued, add to it very much either. Sheldon Currie, the author of *Margaret’s Museum*, once advised a friend not to write the war novel he was planning because eighty percent of novel readers are women and women do not read war novels so no publisher would consider it. On reflection, without making Flanagan out to be writing to a publisher’s formula, there is something in what my friend Sheldon is saying. Having got this out of the way, I would like to look at one more scene and one final description, both of which deal with this male world and both of which show Flanagan at his best. The first concerns some of the Australian POWs who are now demobbed and back home in OZ. One of their mates who died in the camp continuously spoke about a Greek fish and chip shop he used to frequent before the war. After his imprisonment he became obsessed with the memory of fish being kept in the tank alive before they are eaten. His fellow POWs were always telling him to shut up about it, but now that he did not survive and they were in his home town, they decided to look up the shop late at night and free his fish. Much alcohol of course had been consumed. After smashing the window and releasing the fish in the harbour they sober up and the next day seek out the old Greek owner, Mr. Nikitaris, to ask forgiveness and to pay for the window and the fish:

We’ve come to say sorry, said Jimmy Bigelow.

We had a mate, began Sheephead Morton. And this time

the old Greek said nothing. He was so stooped it was hard to see his eyes, which roamed the black and white tiled floor as Sheephead Morton told him their tale.

When it was done, Jimmy Bigelow said that they wished to pay old man Nikitaris for the broken window, for the fish and any other damage.

The old Greek was a time in replying. His eyes looked up and around, and as his head roamed, taking in each man in turn, it nodded slightly.

He was your clobber?

Like all immigrants, he seemed to have an unerring instinct for the oldest, truest words in his new language. The way he said the word, it felt free of the treacherous weight of *mate*.

He was, said Sheephead Morton. *Our* clobber. . .

Three daughters, he replied. Good girls. Good families. And the boy. Good—

And the old Greek stammered for a moment, something unintelligible, and his face seemed to wobble off its awkward axis. He brought a hand of knobby fingers up to his face, like old pruned apricot branches in an autumn gale. As if trying to prop his face back into a picture of certainty.

He was killed in New Guinea in 1943, he said. Bougainville.

The shop slowly emptied, the staff cleaned up, locked up and left, and outside the street died away to the very occasional car slashing a puddle. Inside, they just kept talking to the old Greek about many things until it was so late that not a pub was left open. But they didn't care. They sat on. They talked about fishing, food, winds and stonework; about growing tomatoes, keeping poultry and roasting lamb, catching crayfish and scallops; telling tales, jokes; the meaning of their stories nothing, the drift of them everything; the brittle and beautiful dream itself.

Out of context it skirts the edge of the sentimental and the borders of cliché, but located deep in the narrative it is a powerful affirmation of survival and of lives lived amid suffering and torture. Before this encounter we have been reading for several chapters

and dozens of pages a record of the horror of daily life “on the line” and the writing reminds us, as it should, of Pimo Levi and Solzhenitsyn; it reminds us too, especially the final paragraph, of the lost generation of Hemingway and his Nick Adams stories and of the spare prose of Bernhard Schlink’s novel of post-war German guilt, *The Reader*.

It is true that there are times that Flanagan does not exactly know what to do with his protagonist/hero; that is, how heroic or indeed anti-heroic he should make him. The ambiguity is not necessarily a bad thing. We don’t feel that the narrator/author lets us down with this character, compromises his ethics, so to speak. There is no moral ambiguity even on a small scale as, for example, there so clearly is when F. Scott Fitzgerald has his narrator shake hands with Tom Buchanan at the end of *The Great Gatsby*. Flanagan’s portrayal in the opening sections of the novel of Dorrigo Evans as an old man, as a reluctant war hero/surgeon, and an equally reluctant old man as womanizer and adulterer, is some of the most assured writing in the book:

He was not unaware of his critics. Mostly he found himself in agreement with them. His fame seemed to him a failure of perception on the part of others. He had avoided what he regarded as some obvious errors of life, such as politics and golf. But his attempt to develop a new surgical technique for dealing with the removal of colonic cancers had been unsuccessful, and, worse, may have indirectly led to the deaths of several patients. He had overheard Maison calling him a butcher. Perhaps, looking back, he had been reckless. But had he succeeded he knew he would have been praised for his daring and vision. His relentless womanizing and the deceit that necessarily went with it were private scandals and publicly ignored. He still could shock even himself—the ease, the alacrity with which he could lie and manipulate and deceive—and his own estimate of himself was, he felt, realistically low. It was not his only vanity but it was among his more foolish.

In the end, Dorrigo Evans is Flanagan’s most complex character and his tragic and pathetic position arises directly out of the POW

world and it is formed by contrast and comparison with the good and evil he encountered there.

Richard Flanagan's book is important for reasons other than fiction or art or Booker prizes. When Michael Hofmann wrote a scathing review earlier this year of Martin Amis' latest novel, *The Zone of Interest* I was in complete sympathy with his stance⁵. I took no joy in the review as I had bought the novel and was trying to read it. Amis is the greatest stylist in English of his generation, so it is sad to see him write to formula and publisher or agents suggested subject, especially when the subject is the Holocaust. We can dismiss a poorly written and conceived book about the Holocaust because we know the story of the Nazis is out there—in film, in theatre, in novels, in television, on the web, and even children's stories. And this is how it should be. It is not that the Japanese have been forgiven for their Fascism—we can't forgive it—but rather that the majority of the peoples their Empire occupied, tortured, and killed have not yet had their say, their voices remain, like those in Derek Mahon's poem⁶, forgotten in the dark where

They are begging us, you see, in their wordless way,
To do something, to speak on their behalf
Or at least not to close the door again.
Lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii!
“Save us, save us”, they seem to say,
“Let the god not abandon us
Who have come so far in darkness and in pain.
We too had our lives to live.

¹ “Shaping Identities in the Dark,” *The Nashwaak Review*, vol. 32/33, Number 1, Summer Fall 2014, pp.188-204.

² One of the better known survivors was the literary historian and critic Ian Watt. I remember studying Watt's seminal work *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (which also came out in 1957) as an undergraduate at St. F.X. Watt had been taken prisoner by the Japanese and remained at the Changi Prison until 1945, working on the construction of the railway with thousands of other prisoners. He criticized both Pierre Boulle's book and Lean's film for the cavalier way they treated the historical details of their imprisonment. More than 12,000 prisoners and over 80 thousand civil-

ians died during the building of the railroad, most of them from disease, but many from beating and from being literally worked to death. Watt himself was critically ill from malnutrition for several years after his release. “There was a period,” he told the *San Francisco Examiner* in a 1979 interview “when I expected to die.”

³In 1972 the Americans gave back the military bases on Okinawa, but things have changed since the rise of China and a renewed interest on the Japanese Right in a stronger expression of militarism. The people of Okinawa are paying the price as a newly released documentary illustrates. *We Shall Overcome* (Ikusaba nu todomi) 戦場ぬ止み Director: Chie Mikami 2015/130 mins./ English Sub./ DVD or Blu-ray/NTSC/All Regions “Seventy-four percent of all U.S. military bases in Japan are crowded onto the islands of Okinawa. In December 2014, Takeshi Onaga was elected governor of Okinawa, uniting both conservative and liberal forces in an “all-island struggle” and promising to oppose plans to construct a new military base in Henoko through land reclamation. Fumiko, an eighty-five-year-old survivor of the 1945 Battle of Okinawa, joins the protest movement and uses her own body to block construction trucks. Observing the bounty of Okinawa’s traditional lifestyle and culture, the film pays attention to the songs and laughter that politics cannot silence. The sincerity of the people’s demands for an end to *ikusa* (war) resonates strongly.” <http://www.zakkafilms.com/directors/chie-mikami/>

⁴ It is estimated that 10 million Romusha worked for the Japanese in Java and that 4 million of these died, 2.4 million from famine. Whole families were included, men, women and children. The same was true on the Kwai where the forced laborers were Thai, Burmese, Malaysian, Tamils and Indonesians among others.

⁵ “Splashing through the Puddles,” Michael Hofmann reviews *The Zone of Interest* by Martin Amis Cape, 310 pp, August 2014, *LRB* Vol. 36 No. 20 · 23 October 2014 pages 3-5

⁶ “A Disused Shed In Co. Wexford” by Derek Mahon, <http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poem/item/9297>