

# MEMORY IN A FRACTURED ISLAND: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LITERATURE OF THE ISLAND AT THE END OF THE EARTH

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The island of Tasmania is introduced. Almost literally ‘the island at the end of the earth’, its turbulent past and divisive politics (over radically opposed future ‘dreamings’) are outlined, and a landscape saturated in an inherent passion is described. The conflicted past manifests in a determination on the part of economic and social elites to blur history – to reduce the island’s past to a series of whitewashing clichés, and to engage in a systematic forgetting. The best-known literary engagement with Tasmania’s ambiguous past, its conflicted present, and the deep elementality of its natural world, is that of Richard Flanagan, 2015 winner of the Man Booker Prize for his novel, *The Narrow Road to the North*. Flanagan’s fiction is structured around an insistence that the past not be elided but be confronted; its darkneses and ambiguities looked full in the face. The paper discusses the central place within Tasmania’s literary corpus of Flanagan’s first book, *Death of a River Guide*, in which he resurrects suppressed narratives from the past, installing those narratives at the front of a reluctant community’s idea of itself. Flanagan notwithstanding, though, the real keepers of the island’s communal memory are its poets. Tasmania is really ‘an island of poets’, and some of that poetry is presented. It is noted that Tasmanian poetry is self-consciously an island poetry, engaging with the particularity of the island in which its authors ply their craft. It is a poetry of ground and heart, unambiguously Tasmanian, though structured around familiar island tropes – the sea, the littoral zone, a psychology of boundedness, but with an awareness that those island bounds frame a startling and unique past. Above all it safeguards the passage of the past through the fraught present and into the future, insisting that the present cannot be understood without an understanding of the shaping influence of the past. Memory is contested in Tasmania, then – and this is not only a matter of ‘whose memory’, but also one of the very relevance of remembering, period.

My island, Tasmania, sits like an inverted teardrop, below the easternmost coast of Australia. It is actually a large island as these things go, the 25<sup>th</sup> or 35<sup>th</sup> largest of the earth's millions of islands – or somewhere between – but with a psychology of smallness, situated, as it is, in juxtaposition with a huge island continent. I am accustomed to calling it 'the island at the end of the earth', for its first southerly landfall is the Antarctic ice, and its nearest westerly landfall is the coast of Argentina, two-thirds of the planet away. Neither west nor south coast is much peopled – the south coast not at all. The island has existed for a mere 20,000 years, when the retreating ice of the last ice age drowned the low-lying land bridge to what we now call 'the mainland'. It constitutes 26,000 square miles of topographical contrast. Mountain ranges, primeval forests and fauna-rich plains – but also comprehensively made-over human landscapes; extensive grazing tracts, picturesque colonial buildings of honey-deep sandstone, aging resource-processing industrial plant, crumbling ruins evoking the days when the island was a single, vast prison. And it is an island that has provided evolutionary nurturance for remarkable species assemblages.

*Australia* is, in the words of one of its favourite poets, a 'wide brown land'; a desert continent, dry, flat, spare, dessicated. Tasmania is a state of Australia, but is everything that the Australia of the imagination is not. None of the flat and dry desert iconography works in Tasmania. The rainforests are dark, dripping, overpoweringly green - and ancient, relic species of the Gondwana super continent, their closest botanical relatives to be found in distant Chile. The rainforests breathe their great age about you – the sense of deep, silent time is as overwhelming as the enveloping green, and a mix of melancholy and vague menace pervades all. And, baffling and complicating that passionate engagement, is a vague sadness that is experienced most potently deep within the rainforest.

The island that Europeans then knew as Van Diemen's Land became a European colony in 1803, when a sorry gaggle of convicted felons and their military guardians arrived and began the process of dispossession of the local peoples. The new settlement grew, but effectively remained one vast prison, and, like all prisons, an essentially totalitarian society. The first four decades were characterised by considerable lawlessness, as convict 'bolters' took to the bush to take their chances beyond the law. Some became figures of mythology, romantic 'wild colonial boys'; some became by-words for depravity and atrocity.

Transportation of British convicts to Van Diemen's Land ended in 1853, and a fierce backlash against history set in. In symbolic burial of the shameful past the island was renamed Tasmania, and the convict past was ignored – even denied. By 1880 it was possible to write boosterist accounts of Tasmania with minimal reference to its still-recent convict past – and the first post-convict generation pursued a priggish respectability with the sort of determination a subject people might evince in pursuit of liberation. It achieved a narrow-minded gentility that perseveres today. The 1860s to 1890s thus saw the appalling unremarked tragedy of aging ex-convict couples shunned, ostracised by the families they had nurtured, their very existence hidden by their children from their grandchildren.

Denied access to social approbation, the key to attaining respectability was to erase all traces connecting one to the past. 'Let the dead', it was often said, 'bury the dead', and elaborate fake genealogies were constructed to this end. Tasmania's collective shame in its convict origins has since been labelled 'the hated stain'.

What this amounts to is an expunging of memory. A supreme example came to hand in 1996 when an apparently angelic young man drove to the site of the key penal station, Port Arthur, by now a major tourist attraction, and went on a shooting spree, massacring 31 people in what was, at the time, the largest single-gunman massacre in peacetime history. In the outpouring of communal grief

that ensued, the dominant note struck was one of loss of innocence, perpetrated, moreover 'at such an idyllic spot'. That the central institution of a system as brutal as convictism could ever be described as 'innocent' and 'idyllic' beggars belief. It powerfully emblemises the strength of the island's communal forgetting.

The focus of this comprehensive act of denial was, of course the convict past, but it suited, too, the flaccid collective morality that also enabled European Tasmania to avoid engaging with the enormity of the obliteration and near genocide of a stable and functional resident Aboriginal society, and, in the first decades of the twentieth century, the deliberate extermination of the world's largest marsupial carnivore, the thylacine.

It is almost impossible to comprehend how such an enormous exercise in memory obliteration could possibly be achieved. It helps if the social focus is firmly on the future, this being seen to be full of material promise, while to its achievement the past is deemed irrelevant. Thus, from the first decades of the twentieth century the dominant Tasmanian dreaming has been one in which the island at the end of the earth would become a throbbing, roaring engine of heavy industry, an island of clamour and smokestacks, the Ruhr Valley of the southern seas. It was an hegemonic aspiration, but eventually realised only in part, and when the irresistible tides of globalisation arrived on the island, most Tasmanians were unprepared. The island's dreaming was shown to be folly, and this has compromised the strength of the narrative's hold on the hearts and minds of Tasmanians, though large numbers of Tasmanians adhere to it still.

It is against this backdrop that Tasmanian writers write. The island has descended into two rival dreamings. The dominant one is adhered to by the mainstream of politics, business, bureaucracy, and the displaced industrial labour that is the principle victim of the wrecking ball of globalisation. The oppositional dreaming insists on the relevance of memory, on the need to look a dire history square in the face and not flinch from its moral consequences. Those belonging to this oppositional dreaming are smaller in number, but dominant within the island's intellectual and creative elites.

Tasmania's writers are the prime insisters on the inevitability of memory; they are the constructors and deconstructors of island meanings old and new.

Foremost in this regard is Richard Flanagan, winner of the 2015 Man Booker award for his most recent novel, *The Narrow Road to the North*. His Booker prize winner is set mostly in occupied Thailand during World War II, and though this, too, is a Tasmanian story, more germane to my purpose is Flanagan's first novel, *Death of a River Guide*. This is the great book of the Tasmanian soul, a brash and passionate assertion of the extraordinary Tasmanian story – indeed, a project for its recovery, in all its intricate particulars. It is also a sorrowful and sorrowing book – it looks the darkness in the Tasmanian soul full in the face, and it does so with a great love for the land itself, and with a great human tenderness. The book tells the story of a river guide, a young man of mixed ethnicity, who shepherds parties of rafting tourists down the wild, rushing cauldron of a famed wilderness river, the Franklin. Struggling to make sense of his own sorry life, the guide is trapped in the river and is drowning. What he sees is not only a replay of his own life, but the life of the island. The stories the drowning river guide dreams are the stories we all grew up with, heard almost furtively, stories we believed to be of no account in the larger scheme of things, those exciting worlds far away on the other side of the planet. In our remote exile, we poor descendants of bog Irish peasants and the runts of the London slums, lived, we thought, lives of utter irrelevance.

When he published *Death of a River Guide* in the early 1990s, to critical silence but to an avid, word-of-mouth generated readership, Flanagan told us, as he told the rest of Australia, that the island at the end of the Earth was a repository of extraordinary stories, of doings dark and wondrous, of

passion and marvellous folly and heroic enterprise. Our stories, he said, are not boring and not such sources of shame and humiliation that they should be swept under memory's carpet. He turned a key and liberated our collective soul. Warts and all. In its wake a cultural confidence burgeoned. In all the arts there was a flowering, and central to this flowering was a loving but forensic engagement with Tasmania's ambiguous history and with its conflicted present. While the men of power, the repositories of the old dreaming, went on with their important business unperturbed, Tasmania's cultural practitioners, with writers in the van, went about the place-saving task of recovering memory.

In the huge shadow cast by Flanagan, writing flourished, and poetry in particular. I have called Tasmania 'an island of poets' so often that it has become a cliché. The island's poets so intensively engage with the natural world and are so determinedly set on recovering and interrogating its past, that Australian cultural discourse, looking in upon Tasmania, is frankly puzzled. That is not what contemporary Australian literature, determinedly urban and internationalist, is supposed to be about. I don't care. It is our journey – our process of discovery. And when you throw in poetic engagement with such island tropes as remoteness, the pervasiveness of the sea and the edge, the distilled experience that comes from living within bounds, all infused by an awareness that the island's bounds frame a startling and unique past, you get an equally unique poetics.

Not all our poets are aware of their participation in this project, and a small few simply aren't. Of those who can articulate such a memory-recovering project, a project to which the men of power are blithely oblivious – I suppose I am the most representative. In this capacity I write *of* Tasmania, *for* Tasmanians, and I trawl the past to bring it into the present. The tanka string on the accompanying sheet is an angry rant at the futility of merely bearing witness, of being denied access to channels of power. The other 2 poems come from a series of poet and painter collaborations based on a 2-day retreat at Moulting Lagoon, a game rich saline wetland, a place where, in season, Aboriginal tribal boundaries were crossed so all could partake of the lagoon's bounty. Of course, the descendants of the original island people have a heightened need to hold to memory, to unearth it and to nurture it. The poems vividly demonstrate the central place of memory in the contemporary meaning-constructions of descendants of the original peoples. One, that of Louise Oxley, is a European view, the other, by my good friend Greg Lehman, is that of an Aboriginal man, a polymath, not primarily a poet, though when he does turn his hand to poetry he does so to very good effect. The tribal chieftain who is the subject of this poem included Moulting Lagoon within his people's territory. With your indulgence I'd like to read this poem, and this, I think, would be a good note on which to finish.