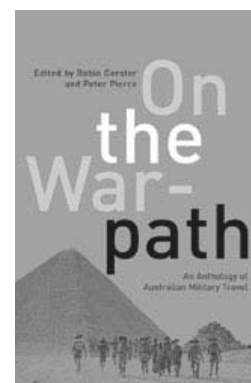


On the Warpath: An Anthology of Australian Military Travel

Robin Gerster & Peter Pierce (eds)

Reviewed by Dr Malcolm Kennedy



Robin Gerster is Associate Professor in the School of Literary, Visual and Performance Studies at Monash University in Melbourne. Peter Pierce is Professor of Australian Literature at James Cook University in Townsville. In this anthology Gerster and Pierce have pulled together a large and heterogeneous collection of writings from over fifty writers. These writers are a very diverse group many of whom, in real life, would have probably had nothing to say to, or do with, the others had they been put together in a small room.

Indeed, the inclusion of the notorious John Pilger and Wilfred Burchett appears to be a deliberate attempt to be provocative. This is especially so given that Pilger's piece is nothing more than a telling reflection of his profound ideological fixations and his early and continued ignorance. Burchett's cosy intimacy with yet another of the world's pantheon of murderous dictators is hardly excusable, even with his claim to have braved an 'unjustified imperialist' air attack. These two pieces, ironically, support the editors' ideas on war providing gratuitous opportunities for tourism.

The single most disappointing feature of the book is the brevity of each of the selections. The introductory paragraphs to each writer by the editors are generally useful in providing a context, although many are superficially, and some are profoundly, disingenuous. Most of the pieces selected have something of interest to say. But the focus on the theme of 'war and travel' leaves the reader repeatedly looking for something more of what the writer in question had to say about their experience of war, its personal impact and its longer-term consequences.

The sixteen-page introductory essay by the editors makes many fashionable, but questionable, assertions about the history and evolution of Australian society. It also makes selective use of snippets of writing to support the editors' views of the past and present nature of our society. Their academic concern for a 'quest for Australian identity' is misplaced. A more careful reading of their own text provides considerable evidence that most servicemen and women were both comfortable and clear about their national identity.

This confection is far more about the editors' notions of tourism than it is about the serious business of war. They note at one juncture: 'It is therefore not hard to be cynical about war tourism'. Given that they are preoccupied with

picking tourism bones out of writing that is actually about a much broader, deeper and more perilous experience, it is little wonder that they arrive at such a sterile deconstruction.

The fundamental premise put by Gerster and Pierce is that for most soldiers, and Australian ones in particular, going to war means travel and thereby: 'Soldiers on overseas campaigns are the ultimate package tourists'. This provides the reader with a clear insight into the disappointing intellectual tenor of this book. Unfortunately, the anthology does a disservice to the several dozen authors included who have written profound and enduring material on the vast complexity that is war.

A sample of the authors such as Gunning, Paterson, Tilton, Bean, Gullett, Monash, Manning, Slessor, White, Wake, McKay, Inglis, and Stanley have all given vastly more valuable accounts of the positive and negative consequences of war than they are permitted in the slices of their prose included in this volume.

The 'tourist soldier' argument is a pale and empty analysis of the experience of war. The theme can perhaps be made to fit, to a degree, some of the non-military camp followers, but it largely devalues what most of the authors selected for this anthology actually have to say.

It may be too obvious to point out, but for most Australian servicemen and women war has demanded that they fight for Australia's national interests in overseas conflicts. A minor aspect, of this otherwise dangerous activity, is the consequent travel to other countries and differing societies. The book places too much emphasis on this one aspect of a much more complex set of experiences. It very largely ignores the very considerable benefits to individuals and Australian society that have accrued from the observation of, and interaction with, people in societies different from our own.

The negative associations that this book subtly imputes to military service can be given a powerful corrective by a meditation on the actions of the very large number of military personnel who, deeply influenced by their overseas service, have spent much of their lives continuing to better relations between Australia and her neighbours. ♦

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