

Vietnam Generation

Volume 3

Number 2 *Australia R&R: Representation and
Reinterpretations of Australia's War in Vietnam*

Article 2

1-1991

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Recommended Citation

Grey, Jeffrey and Doyle, Jeff (1991) "Introductory Comments," *Vietnam Generation*: Vol. 3 : No. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol3/iss2/2>

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Australia R&R: Introductory Comments

Jeff Doyle and Jeffrey Grey

“Australia R&R”—the title of this introductory essay should, for many in the United States, evoke recollections of pleasant times spent away from the war zone, times of rest and recuperation at one of several ports-of-call in the Asia Pacific region. Known to some servicemen, one of those ports-of-call may well have been Australia, chiefly in one or other of her major eastern cities—Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane—where, by all accounts, the R&R in whatever form it was taken was very fine indeed. “R&R”, whatever its strict definition—rest and recreation, rest and recuperation, recovery and recreation, or some other combination—is useful then as a title to a volume devoted to introducing the Australian experience of Vietnam to a wider American audience—the term is at once familiar as R&R and unfamiliar to most when it is re-located to Australia; as metaphor for the method of this volume it is doubly valuable since it suggests, severally, notions of recovery, recuperation, and revaluation which the analysis of Vietnam in the US, and now more recently Australia, has been undergoing for some time.

For that reason R&R is immediately useful for those American readers—“in country” veterans and others—who know something of Australia’s involvement in Vietnam; this volume will provide various kinds of recuperation of their memories of that involvement. For other American readers, who know less of allied participants in Vietnam, this volume it is hoped will provide an introduction—a means of recovering some of the representations of Australia’s roles as ally. For all readers, the volume is offered as a means of reinterpreting, and hence revaluing, the roles Australia played during and after the Vietnam War. From the perspective offered by 20-30 years distance, it is not the primary intent of these essays to make inferences about the way America revalues its roles, nor that of its allies, but to some extent the nature of the major power-minor power alliances played out in Vietnam and subsequently make some implications, if not stronger inferences, inevitable. Perhaps part of the “recovery” Australia, or at least numbers of Australians, need(s) to make from the Vietnam War is a stronger revaluing of the way they write, think and function in regard to the American alliance. This applies in all fields, social and intellectual, and not just in the more obvious military and political spheres. If Vietnam as event and/or cultural subject is the 1960s’ watershed (or even *the*

product of the crises of 1960s culture) it is often held to be, then Australia's part in the event of Vietnam may well come to have far more significance than its many commentators have recognised so far.

Useful too in the metaphoric halo of R&R is the sense conferred of a relocation of American experiences of Vietnam to another place—another location. To Americans in Vietnam it was “Nam”, “in-country”, and most tellingly “Indian country” (with all its interlayering of Puritan mythology)—all strange locales but, as it has been argued in many American critical accounts, all ultimately accommodated to an American vision of the nation's place within the world pattern of events. To most Australians Vietnam has yet to find such a happily resolved mythic location as “Indian country” allows; For Australia even within the face of conflating and comforting drives, Vietnam remains inertia-ridden as, and seems set to remain at least for the foreseeable future, a very different place—the “funny place” (often expressed in other and less polite terms)—a topography of the unfixed or a dis-location.

The essays in this volume offer then for the specialist and general reader alike, some Australian R&R—some recoveries, recuperations, revaluing and reinterpretations, and finally, an uncertain relocation of the Vietnam War. The essays present versions of the history of the Vietnam War as experienced by one of its principal allies: “versions of history” since one of the problems also inherent in recovery and recreation is the effect that time has on the memory of the past as it “actually happened”—those so-called events of history; “versions of history” too, since the writing of any kind of history, social, literary or military is no longer a simple matter (if it ever was) of collecting and reporting the concrete “actual” events, documents and figures; “versions of history” since Vietnam as American history is hardly a straightforward topic, as Australian history the complexity is increased with the necessity of writing and rewriting in the face of the massive US output of Vietnam as history, as film, as novel, and as myth.

And given that massive output, this introductory commentary takes, what may be the unusual step, as its starting point the volume's last two entries—the Chronology which speaks for itself attempting to locate Australian involvement in the wider context of the Asia Pacific region, and the Select Bibliography. Apart from its obvious function as a resource for future studies, on the one hand, a reading of the bibliography in conjunction with the preceding essays provides some insight into the range and depth (or lack) of study Vietnam has received at Australian hands. For example, for Australia, neither the MIA nor the racial issues have any significant impact, as they did and continue to do in the American revaluations of the war. It is hardly surprising that there are virtually no studies concerned with such matters. A number of other areas of major concern to Americans may similarly be revealed unexpectedly in absentia from Australian concerns. Part of this volume aims to “explain” those gaps; not so much fill them in, for they mark some

of the differences between the two country's experiences of Vietnam. On the other hand, even a brief reading of the bibliography will reveal areas where considerable discussion of the war was and is an active concern, sometimes in areas less central to the United States. Australia's continuing concern with its role, status and future alliances within the immediate southeast Asian region is one such area, and this explains why to Australian sensibilities the Vietnam War is intimately linked with the politics and history of the whole region—a region somewhat larger than American focus sometimes appears to understand. This regional emphasis is brought out in a number of the essays following, and it explains in part the breadth of reference to books and articles which to American eyes may not be at once directly relevant to the Vietnam War.

Moreover the Select Bibliography reveals in more than a quantitative way the presences and lacunae of Australian studies: first, it may be a surprise to some, especially those in some areas of the scholarly community, to see references to quite so many professional magazines, journals and to the kind of specialist publication devoted to technical data of a military kind, in a bibliography primarily biased to academic—that is literary and historical—studies. In part these special references are explained by the editorial desire to be as comprehensive as possible, and thereby to allow the widest possible access to a general readership. In part it is linked methodologically to the kinds of study which as yet remain mostly unwritten. It is more than anecdotally significant to note that the bibliography is larger than the editors expected it to be when its compilation was first begun. Vietnam had long been an area of scant attention; and moreover, the editors believed that even with the blooming of Australian writing on Vietnam, mostly in the 1980s, the quantitative product could not hope to match, even proportionately, the extent of the US output. There has been an explosion of literature devoted to Vietnam in the 1980s, but the bibliography's size is due also to the inclusion of those specialist publications. They require further comment.

Academic writing has habitually sectioned off certain areas as unworthy of more than scant perusal. Some technical and professional writings, while acknowledged in some military histories, have received little attention by other kinds of scholarly practice—notably in the social or literary-cultural histories. Many have noted how the helicopter dominates the iconography of Vietnam, even it must be said of the Australian imagery, where the helicopter played a slightly less central role; but while studies based in the humanities regularly note this, they have yet to investigate the material connections between the helicopter's tactical role and its representations—put simply, between the way the battlefield was changed by the machinery available, and the way this comes to materially effect the writing of the battlefield. More inferences such as these may be forthcoming; and, Australian rewriting of Vietnam offers a good area for such discussion because of the profound material,

indeed matériel, differences between Australian and American expectations of, and practices within, the theatres of the Vietnam War. Noting this is not to suggest that the following essays have on the whole achieved this nexus between technical matériel and a “material culture” reading, though both Terry Burstall’s and Jan Bassett’s essays lean in that direction. Rather the compilation of the bibliography and, it is suggested, its reading as an account of Australia’s Vietnam, highlights those areas which promise much for future rewriting.

The second way in which the Select Bibliography functions is to provide a context for the essays. While each essay in this volume is self contained, each essay also derives some of its meaning from the cumulative effect of the sequence and also from the effect of being read within and to some extent against the context provided by the bibliography. These essays present introductions to general readers, and at the same time re-write and re-value Australia’s Vietnam, as it stands so far, summarised in the bibliography and chronology which, perhaps contrarily, conclude the volume.

From another viewpoint, to begin appropriately for a re-valuing the volume begins with the official historian of the Vietnam War Peter Edwards’ “The Australian Government and Involvement in the Vietnam War”. a judicious gleaning of the major political and military events, discusses the parallels and differences of the pathways leading the Australians and the Americans to war in Vietnam. Shifting his focus from the world scale events of the war, to their social and political reflections within Australia, Edwards explicates: the Australian shift from United Kingdom to US alliance; the evolution of the concerns with Indonesia and Asian communism within Australian society; and the effects these events and concerns had on shaping the large and small scale political allegiances within Australia and the wider region. His essay clarifies the links between the large scale political manoeuvring within the southeast Asian-Pacific region with the specific national concerns of a small population uncertain of its role and future in that wider context.

Jeffrey Grey’s “Vietnam as History: the Australian Case” traverses much the same terrain adding extra documentation and variant readings to many of the same events and political couplings. A significant difference lies in Grey’s focus on the handling of the events as translation, that is, as they are written as history. At its most straightforward Grey’s essay provides a telling series of critiques of the several key texts of historical, political and social analysis of Australia’s Vietnam—that is, in part he critically reads substantial sections of the Select Bibliography. On the one hand, his essay provides entry to those texts suggesting as he assesses their strengths and weaknesses (Grey is forthright in apportioning the latter), their originating contexts, ideologies and methods. On the other hand, and more pertinently for this volume, Grey assesses the wider context of the writing of history, particularly military history,

in Australia. In doing this he places the events of Vietnam into a broader nexus of events, representations and ideologies which constitute a major aspect of Australian national identity—the network of military myth and cultural accretion known as the Anzac legend. Importantly Grey points to the way in which the Australian national identity has been, and it seems continues to be, partially moulded by the way the country accepts or rejects its military history. This he argues is dependent on the way its historians, specialist and popular alike, choose to write that history. By comparison with the pattern of writing about Vietnam in the United States, where Grey contends that the “historiographical battle lines . . . match those drawn politically during the war”, the Australian historiography is both more complex and less well advanced in practice. More complex, since there are more groups competing for the rights of controlling the publicly accepted representations of the war, and less well advanced in the depth of analysis obtained from that writing, as his critiques display. This lack of depth he sees as due less to the restricted access to data (a reference to the 30 year closure of official documents operating in Australia, which prevents all but selected personnel access to the governmental and institutional archives), than to the fundamental failure of much Australian historical writing to interrogate its own ideological biases.

As a first move in the kind of rewriting of Vietnam which Grey calls for, Terry Burstall’s “Policy Contradictions of the Australian Task Force, Vietnam, 1966” marks a strong re-assessment of the practices, at the material level, of the Australian Forces in 1966 in operations with its US allies in Phuoc Tuy province. His essay is a salutary reevaluation of the Anzac myth of the Australian as the “natural fighting man”, as he juxtaposes the pattern of Australian operational decisions against the expectations, disappointments and frustrations of the US commander, General Westmoreland. This assessment will be the more shocking to Australian sensibilities since not only does it weaken the image of Australian prowess, but it flies in the face of the popular image of American military incompetence in Vietnam, commonly held and voiced by Australian troops—who saw themselves as the professional and combat superiors of the indisciplined and careless American troops. Burstall adds more since he argues that the combat weakness of the Australians (to be sure a quantitative weakness, not a qualitative one) was structural, deriving from failures as much of military as political inexperience.

Where Burstall’s essay looks at the way that the revision of Anzac will reflect the material conditions of the field, Jane Ross’ “Veterans in Australia: the Search for Integration”, continues her substantial analyses of the reception of the returned servicemen. In a wide ranging and densely documented essay Ross details the competing images of the veteran (noted briefly in Grey’s essay as one of the problem areas), forwarded variously by the Vietnam Veterans’ Association of Australia,

the Returned Service's League, and several government departments, chiefly the repatriation system. Nor she notes has this struggle been confined to the relatively narrow concerns of the veteran communities and their "service" associations and agencies. Focussing on the popular media and the government systems, Ross demonstrates the way each in its way has from time to time deployed one or other image of the veteran as the "exclusive" image to achieve their political ends. She contends that the media in particular have treated the war and its veterans with "glib and often inaccurate analysis" using images based on the "sick" veteran borrowed unthinkingly from the US media, when other information contended that this applied only to a minority, albeit a politically vocal minority of veterans. Her essay delves into the political and moral implications of such competition, closing with a series of strongly worded questions about the cultural impact of these implications.

"Who Cares for the Caregiver?" by Jan Bassett advances another area all too often neglected in Australian writing on Vietnam, the participation of women, in this case nurses of the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps (RAANC). Bassett's essay is based on the results of a questionnaire surveying a large proportion of the nurses on active duty in Vietnam. Not the least interest in this analysis is the way that the nurses themselves have felt the neglect of their participation; it is clear that for some their responses to the questionnaire provided an outlet for previously withheld emotions; for others it was a means of making trenchant criticisms of both the necessarily expeditious treatment they were able to give to their patients (and, often implicitly, the nurses lament the attenuation of the treatment effected by early evacuation of the patient to Australia), and the, at times, traumatic effect the pattern of instant and short-cut treatment had upon the caregiver herself.

Care for victims in Bassett's essay is widened to include those too easily taken for granted in war. Together with Ross' case of the struggle for the veteran image, the two essays suggest some significant gaps within the study of Australia's Vietnam experiences—immediately obvious as victims are the wives and families of the veterans, be they combatants or caregivers. This has been the issue motivating some aspects of the veterans' community groups, and the government studies of the effects of Agent Orange are focussed on familial effects, particularly on offspring, and not exclusively upon the soldier. There are a number of filmic and fictional accounts, and it is certain that care for the families is built into the repatriation system and the practices of the veterans associations themselves, but there are not yet enough substantial studies of the effects of the psychological traumas of Vietnam upon the immediate relatives of Australian soldiers and nurses.

Other victims and apparent victims of Vietnam are the subject of James E. Coughlan's "International Factors Influencing Australian Governments' Responses To The Indochinese Refugee Problem", which charts, in a similar fashion to Edwards' essay, the political as well as

humanitarian evolution of the refugee problem and how Australia's response continues to reflect its sense of its role and future in the southeast Asian-Pacific region. As in Edwards' chronicle of the events leading up to and through Vietnam, Coughlan details the anticipations and reactions of the various Australian political parties as the world political spectrum engages with Indochinese refugees. His analysis of the policy formation of successive Australian governments explains the political intentions of Australia's desires to cement alliances within the larger national and multi-national groupings. At the same time he shows how Australia attempted to maintain in its immigrant populations, which included the refugees, an ethnic mix acceptable to the wider Australian electorate—an electorate at times more or less sympathetic to its newest, and sometimes it was felt forcibly introduced, citizens. The refugee problem, as well as the contentions surrounding the status of the veteran, are related in Australia to the level of economic tolerance the nation can "afford" to extend to such claimants upon its welfare system. And in the case of the refugees this climate is confused by the nation's desires to preserve if not enhance their standing within the southeast Asian-Pacific community. These desires are complicated by the need to fend off the longstanding damage to the national image of a racist Australia, remaining from its once touted White Australia Policy. As such the democratic self-presentation of the Anzac as the "natural fighting man" and egalitarian advocate of the "fair go" for all, Australians and would-be Australians alike, has been and is likely in the future to be sorely tested by the racist undertones of Australian national reactions to both former allies and enemies alike.

The last two essays in this volume turn from more directly "historic" events to their representations in the literary and some of the electronic media. Where the historical and political writing has focussed indirectly on the way Vietnam has highlighted the precarious or marginal "place" of Australia, Peter Pierce's "The Funny Place": Australian Literature and the War in Vietnam" engages with the dislocation of the national identity evident in the literary experience of Vietnam. The Australian soldier's term for Vietnam, "the funny place", becomes a revived metaphor for an Australian sense of the uncertainty of self and nation, characteristic of much Australian writing, as well as that of the soldier-writers' narratives of Vietnam. Considering aspects of the soldier as the "occidental tourist" of Asia, Pierce details the curious variations and surrogacies of the Australian literature of Vietnam and juxtaposes them with both the well known US fictions of the war and with earlier Australian narratives of warfare. Placement alongside the American fiction displays the difference in handling between Vietnam as "Indian country" and Vietnam as "funny place". For Australians the "funny place" eventually became the no-place, as the soldier failed to relocate his experience within the specific myths of Anzac. As Pierce writes there was no "clear cut ideological victory", nor a clear cut enemy to complement

either the national sense of military prowess (either the Vietcong were too good or not present as enemies), or at its most extreme the race-hatred characteristic of earlier anti-Asian feeling. The latter gives way to a vague but often strident anti-Americanism, vague because the target is so unfocussed, yet strident because it picks up threads of generalised anti-imperialist and post-colonialist feelings which had also been substantial underpinnings of the Anzac tradition. Much of the Australian literature of the Vietnam war is infused with a general spirit that the soldiers were fighting on the wrong side. Unfocussed too, since the feelings of contradiction are enhanced by a rampant distrust of the Asian "other".

Relocation takes also the form of writing not about the Vietnam War but the great occasions of Anzac legend. Pierce concentrates lastly on the evasion-relocation evident in the literature of the 1970s and 1980s which consciously or otherwise seemed to have re-written the foundation events of the Anzac legend in the First World War as if they were pre-visions of Vietnam. Far from providing a sturdy moral foundation from which the nation might progress, Australian Vietnam literature accommodates a parade of abiding national anxieties, enhancing the uncertainty entailed in the Vietnam war, not recuperating from it.

Television and cinema in Australia have developed relatively few "texts" in comparison with the massive output of the US media. There are a few distinctive Australian products however, providing islands within the ocean of American material which otherwise regularly gets broadcast on the Australian airwaves. Jeff Doyle's "Dismembering the Digger: Australian Popular Culture and the Vietnam War" assess three major examples, two from the television miniseries genre, *Vietnam* (1987) and *Sword of Honour* (1987), and one feature film, Tom Jeffrey's *The Odd Angry Shot* (1979). Accepting the notion that the products of popular culture, particularly television miniseries, tend on the whole to make comfortable, to ameliorate the events of history and the vagaries and inconsistencies of character by presenting the most average and acceptable (the most ideologically neutral) images or representations, Doyle argues that each of these three texts rehearse Australia's inability to find a satisfactory resolution to its response to the Vietnam War. In spite of their careful plotting, setting and handling of narrative closure, a measure of each text's desire to make their images conform, and hence comfortable, to a resolution, each of the texts dismembers or dislocates the events of Vietnam away from that resolution, into a televised version of Pierce's "funny place". Together these last two essays proffer a wide-angled re-assessment of the preceding essays' focus on their "versions of history"—on Vietnam as a series of events, with a series of competing explanations. In denying the possibility of any neat closure, the last two essays relocate the whole volume as a necessary reminder of the difficulties inherent in evaluating the effect of Vietnam within Australian culture.

Until recently, almost specifically the time of the Australian Welcome March in October 1987, Vietnam had been nearly forgotten in the widest popular areas of Australian society. The exigencies of the nation, as in many other western nations at the time, lay mostly in the problems of national economic management, operating on the margins of a volatile world economic system, intimately allied to the swings and sweeps of the balances of military power. In its place on what the west would take as the far rim of the Asia-Pacific region, Australia continued along a path of supporting those powers whose views most nearly reflected its own desired consensus of economic, political and cultural outlooks. Crudely put, in the period since the Second World War, allegiances switched from Eurocentric, and specifically British orientation, to an American dominated though significantly Asian-Pacific orientation. Such shifts—often rapid, sometimes expedient, sometimes principled—tested many of the established traditions of a fundamentally post-colonial but still European-leaning nation. Hardly in isolation, but almost certainly as one of the major events since Second World War, the Vietnam War marks the watershed of change, both chosen and enforced, within Australian society; it is arguably, and despite the earlier evasion of its effects, a watershed of change that impacts in a manner more profound and far reaching upon Australian society than the changes which the war has wrought in the United States. This small volume is in its way one aspect of that impact, traversing most of the terrain, and remaining as yet unresolved.