

**Intersecting Imperialisms: the Rise and Fall of Empires in  
Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North***

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## **Abstract**

Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013), which features the Thai-Burma 'Death Railway' in World War Two, depicts a complex web of imperial regimes that converge and clash in the mid-twentieth century. The protagonist is an Australian soldier effectively fighting for his country's former colonizer, Britain, which is losing its empire to Japan. I build on Laura Doyle's concept of "inter-imperiality" to explore how the novel illuminates the historical process of imperial factors intersecting at multiple levels, from the geopolitical and economic to the personal and cultural. The novel demonstrates how inter-imperial identities challenge simple binary models of imperialism, and how so-called national literatures are produced in a world context. This is evident in Flanagan's intertextual homage to classical Japanese author Matsuo Bashō. The novel also highlights how world literature discourse ought to take into account temporal and ethicopolitical factors (Pheng Cheah), suggesting an overlap with postcolonial studies.

## **Key Words**

Richard Flanagan, world literature, imperialism, empire, postcolonialism, intertextuality

Australian author Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013), for which he won the Man Booker Prize in 2014, portrays a complex web of imperial regimes that converge and clash during World War Two in the Asia-Pacific, involving both rising and declining powers. The protagonist, the Australian soldier-surgeon Alwyn "Dorrigo" Evans, fights in a series of foreign battles effectively on behalf of his country's former colonizer, Britain, which is rapidly losing its territories to an expansionist, military Japan. Britain's misfortune is symbolized in Dorrigo's fate when he is taken prisoner by the Japanese and forced to work on the infamous Thai-Burma 'Death Railway,' a delusional engineering enterprise born of nationalist ideology that ultimately results in mass fatalities and failure. In this essay I build on Laura Doyle's concept of "inter-imperiality" to explore how the novel illuminates the historical process of imperial factors intersecting at multiple levels, from the geopolitical and economic to the personal and cultural. Such an approach challenges simple binary models of imperialism – of colonizer and colonized – as well as the notion of so-called national literatures being produced within a local context. In contrast, I argue the inter-imperial identities in Dorrigo and other characters in the novel reveal the intricacies inherent in intersecting imperialisms, and that national literatures are produced in a world context due to the criss-crossing of cultural and political influences. The latter point is especially evident in Flanagan's intertextual homage to the classical Japanese author Matsuo Bashō. In addition, I contend that by employing an intersecting imperialisms approach for literary analysis it becomes apparent that world literature discourse ought to take into account temporal and ethicopolitical factors, which in turn suggests a complementary overlap with postcolonial studies. In this respect I draw on Pheng Cheah's work.

The growth of world history as a sub-discipline has contributed to interdisciplinary scholarship investigating various geopolitical and cultural links across the *longue durée*, relationships that previously remained hidden or were wilfully ignored. The outcome is a long-overdue move away from a Eurocentric or Anglo-American bias across the humanities – including literary criticism – to a transnational mindset, reflecting not only the globalised nature of today's world but also, arguably, that which has existed for millennia. As a consequence, Europe is no longer perceived as the centre of either 'civilization' or modernity. As the historian Peter Frankopan says in his recent book that repositions the importance of central Asia in world history: "History was twisted and manipulated to create an insistent narrative where the rise of the west was not only natural and inevitable, but a continuation of what had gone before" (Frankopan xviii-xix). Frankopan's *The Silk Roads* is indicative of the dismantling of the arbitrary lines that previously separated East and West, an ideological fiction perpetuated by European orientalism, as well as renewed attempts to unveil the multi-faceted links between them. Flanagan's novel follows in this enlightened transnational approach.

The Australian author's initial training as an historian clearly influenced his tendency to write predominantly historical fiction. Five of his seven novels published to date have mined Australia's history over the past two centuries, in particular the mixed legacies of British colonialism and the colonizer's savage treatment of the country's first inhabitants. Three of his novels – *Death of a River Guide* (1994), *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001) and *Wanting* (2008) – focus on the barbaric and militaristic penal colony established in his home state of Tasmania. *Narrow Road*, however, diverges from this leitmotif of antipodean British colonialism and returns to a broader historical purview that he first applied in *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*

(1997), which depicts traumatized European refugees who fled to Tasmania after the collapse of their homelands in World War Two to work on remote hydroelectric construction projects. Similarly, *Narrow Road* examines transnational historical forces and their effects upon individual lives, although this time beyond the British-European-Australian nexus, and takes into account Southeast and East Asia, regions much closer geographically to the author's home.

Part of the uniqueness and fascination with Flanagan's fiction is his distinctive historical perspective that is shaped by not only being from the southern hemisphere, but also from a formerly colonized nation that itself has acted as a colonizer. In other words, Flanagan is attuned to the nuances and ambiguities of imperialism, a theme that permeates much of his work, in ways that writers from northern hemisphere countries with historical legacies as imperialist powers are often not. In this sense Flanagan exhibits an "inter-imperial consciousness" (Doyle 182) that is also evident in Dorrigo and other characters in *Narrow Road* who are compelled to confront the conflicting forces of imperality in their own lives.

Laura Doyle coins the term "inter-imperiality" to denote "a political and historical set of conditions created by the violent histories of plural interacting empires and by interacting persons moving between and against empires." Regarding the latter point, inter-imperiality is "a structure of relations" involving people around the world who seek out solidarity and shape cross-border interactions through travel and technology (Doyle 160, 182). In other words, the concept highlights the phenomenon of individuals from all walks of life interacting with others within an over-arching geopolitical context of concurrent and typically competing empires. The kinds of people who interact within empires include diplomats, merchants, entrepreneurs, intellectuals, revolutionaries, refugees and – critically for

*Narrow Road* – soldiers. These people, and others, “continually circle back to shape relations among multiple imperial states” (Doyle 182). That is, the complex interactions among individuals influence the attitudes of, and behaviours between, their respective imperial states. The idea of inter-imperial discourse in itself is not new. For example, Elleke Boehmer in 2002 coined the term “cross-border interdiscursivity” to denote transnational political and cultural exchanges between anti-colonial spaces in her examination of empire at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Boehmer 8). But what Doyle emphasises is a broad set of cross-border discourses – not just anti-imperial ones – that continually circulate, as well as acknowledging imperialism as a global phenomenon that is not just confined to European imperialism (Doyle 162).

Imperialism typically involves cultural coercion – for example, by controlling education and language – with the rationale to control the minds of the colonized. This is borne out in Edward Said’s definition of imperialism as “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory.” By contrast, colonialism is “almost always a consequence of imperialism” and constitutes “the implanting of settlements on distant territory.” But as Said points out, while direct colonialism has largely ended historically, imperialism persists and “lingers” in cultural, political, social and economic spheres, largely because it is supported by ideological formations (Said 8). This last point is reinforced by Robert Young, who defines imperialism as “an empire that was bureaucratically controlled by a government from the centre, and which was developed for ideological as well as financial reasons” (Young 16). Young’s explanation teases out the distinction that empire is the outcome of imperialism as an ideology and practice. Curiously, Doyle does not define ‘imperialism’ in her essay on inter-imperiality, but instead defines

'empire,' which she seems to use as a proxy for the manifestation of imperialism. Empire, she says, is "an expansionist state" that through political or violent coercion controls a foreign territory and in turn is able to negotiate with other powerful states (Doyle 162). Doyle here emphasises force rather than mind control. Sociologist Krishan Kumar highlights the interconnection between the terms empire, imperialism and colonialism, arguing that the trio "make up a family of concepts with varied but overlapping uses." Kumar adds: "Empire is rule over a multitude of peoples. Imperialism and colonialism are the attitudes and practices that relate to empire" (Kumar 19). Put another way, while empire is the geopolitical outcome, imperialism and colonialism are the tools that enable empires to come into being.

### **1. Dorrigo's Odyssey: A Life Within Imperialisms**

Flanagan highlights the ideological justifications and commercial imperatives of imperialism in *Narrow Road*, which at its heart is a critique of tyranny in general and of empire in particular. The novel is set amid both rising and declining powers. On the upward momentum are Japan through its pan-Asian conquests, and the emergence of the Cold War superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. On the downward slide are Britain's colonization of South Asia, Southeast Asia and Australia, and the Netherlands' colonization of Indonesia. The novel is set at an epochal moment in history when the European empires that had dominated the world for centuries were rapidly dissolving, thereby debunking the myth of European invincibility.

Flanagan sets the imperial framework of the novel early on, with Dorrigo writing in a foreword to a book of war illustrations by a deceased fellow soldier: "The story behind this book begins on 15 February 1942, when one empire ends with the

fall of Singapore and another arises.” The date, of course, refers to the Japanese occupation of the British Empire’s supposedly impenetrable fortress at Singapore, which had been a key strategic post. Yet Dorrigo’s foreword also emphasizes the apex of imperial Japan’s might. By 1943 Japan was “overstretched, under-resourced ... [and] losing,” and as a result decided to build the Thai-Burma railway to supply its troops fighting in Burma with the dual aim of cutting off the Allies’ supply line to Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist army in China and invading India (Flanagan *Narrow* 24). Due to a lack of money and machinery, Japan forced POWs and other enslaved labourers to build the railway by hand.

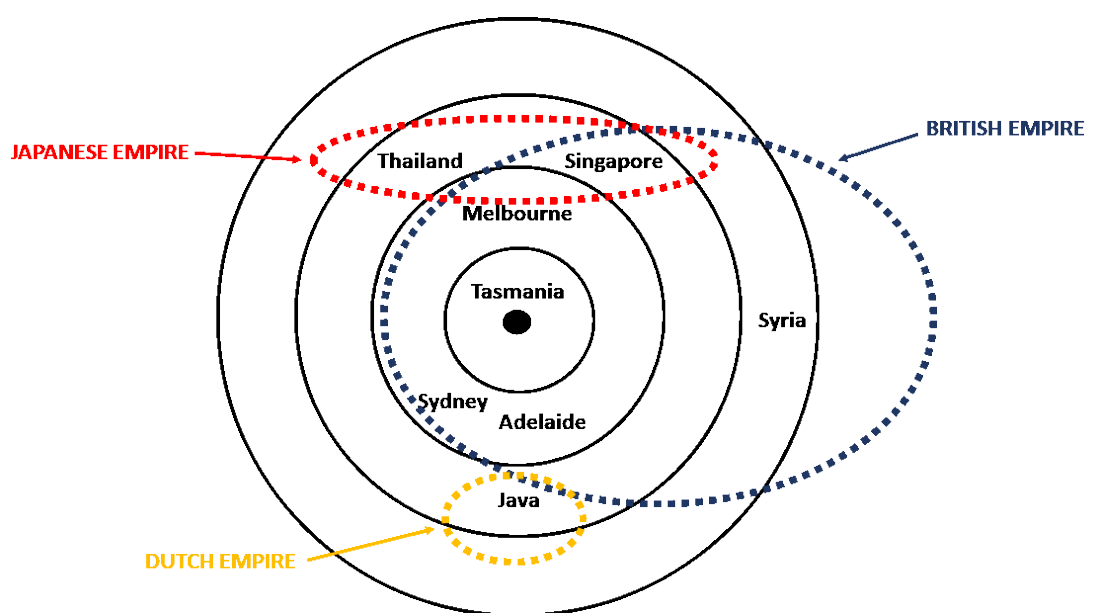
Dorrigo’s life is shaped and largely determined by historical forces that overshadow the period in which he lives. His geographical journeys occur within the context of rising and declining imperial powers that intersect one another, such that the fortunes of any one imperial regime cannot be understood in isolation from proximate imperial regimes. It is useful to apply Franco Moretti’s methodology of mapping a text in order to deconstruct the novel in relation to Dorrigo’s journeys and their inter-connectedness to various imperial powers. While Moretti’s concept of “distant reading” has come under critical scrutiny, my purpose here is not to critique his theory but rather to utilise part of it in a specific context. Textual cartography magnifies large units within a text so that we can discern relationships between these units. Literary maps, says Moretti, “are a good way to prepare a text for analysis ... [Y]ou *reduce* the text to a few elements, and *abstract* them from the narrative flow, and construct a new, *artificial* object” in order to make visible qualities “which were not visible at the lower level” (Moretti 53, original emphasis).

As Figure 1 illustrates, Dorrigo’s odyssey (a pun on the character’s obsession with Alfred Tennyson’s poem ‘Ulysses’) begins at his birthplace of Tasmania, the



island state south of the Australian mainland that is also Flanagan’s home, and which is positioned in the centre of the spatial map. Dorrigo’s journey proceeds outwards spatially to: Melbourne, where he studies medicine; Adelaide, where he trains as a soldier and meets his lover (his aunt by marriage); and Sydney, where he lives after the war. The Australian, or domestic, geographies lie within the inner circles of the map. Dorrigo’s personal odyssey during the war moves beyond Australia to as far as Syria, where Dorrigo and other Australians fight the Vichy French, and which represents the outer boundary of his travels, or the outer circle of the map. However, it is the third or second-most outer circle of the map that contains the locations of his experience as a POW in Southeast Asia, namely his capture in Java, his incarceration in Singapore and his enslavement in Thailand (Flanagan *Narrow* 42). What is notable about Dorrigo’s post-war life is that he retreats to the inner circles – his Australian homeland – and does not venture overseas again.

**Fig. 1 Dorrigo & Intersecting Empires**



Overlaying his geographical destinations are the three empires that overshadow his journeys and, as a result, determine the direction of his own life: the British, which had formerly ruled Australia, Singapore and Syria (briefly in World War Two); the Dutch, which had colonized Java; and the Japanese, which invaded Singapore and Thailand, and at one stage threatened Australia by bombing the country's northernmost capital city, Darwin. The purpose of this map is to highlight how Dorrigo's life is largely defined not by his own individual choices or actions, but by the vagaries of rising (Japan) and declining (Britain and the Netherlands) empires and by historical forces. Moreover, the map highlights how the ebb and flow of such imperial powers is an overlapping phenomenon, with various regions being subject to oppositional empires at simultaneous or adjacent moments in time. In keeping with Moretti's methodology, these concentric circles map Flanagan's novel in order to discern overall connections, and are deliberately spatial maps, not geographical ones. Consequently, they focus on the *relations* between Dorrigo's odyssey and the empires that had jurisdiction over his movements, rather than just tracking his journeys.

Dorrigo's involvement in World War Two is essentially due to Australia's historical, political and cultural ties with the United Kingdom as a former British colony. The divergence between the imperial romanticism among Australia's political class, as represented by Robert Menzies, the Prime Minister who led Australia into the war, and the ambiguity felt by many Australian soldiers who were compelled to fight in regions that really had little or nothing to do with their home country, is highlighted in different ways in the novel. For example, Dorrigo recalls his older brother Tom returning from "the Great War in France" and burning a picture of the Kaiser on a bonfire. Because this was an era when "people were ashamed of crying"

and “feared the weakness it bespoke,” Tom says nothing of World War One, the gas or fighting in the trenches (Flanagan *Narrow* 2). Tom’s wartime experience was the result of Australia still being a willingly subordinate, colonial outpost of the British Empire, despite technically gaining independence as a nation-state through Federation in 1901. When Dorrigo becomes a soldier three decades later, the Australian political obligation to defend Britain remains, but for ideological rather than pragmatic reasons. As Flanagan writes in an essay: “We forget that all those other wars in which the majority died were not because we were threatened, but because we were involved with empires elsewhere threatening others. We forget that all those Australians who died ... did not die for our country but for other countries” (Flanagan *What Do You Do* 213). In *Narrow Road*, this sentiment is borne out by Dorrigo’s contempt for Colonel Roxreth, “an Australian who strove to be mistaken as English.” Roxreth, who is initially superior to Dorrigo at the POW camp, instructs his subordinate to believe in “British stoicism” and the British Empire, which Roxreth maintains is not divided into “arbitrary nationalities” but consists of “one people.” The colonel’s forelock tugging to the near-defunct British Empire makes Dorrigo bristle. As a fictional inversion of empire, Roxreth dies of dysentery and Dorrigo assumes command of the Australian POWs (Flanagan *Narrow* 45, 47, 48). Australia’s military commitment to defending the British Empire in both world wars was significant, sending about 415,000 troops out of a total of 2.5 million British colonial soldiers in the first conflict, and almost one million men out of a total of close to six million colonials in the second conflict (Kumar 359, 375, 376).

Yet the novel transcends a cliched British-Australian, colonizer-colonized binary by portraying Dorrigo’s life within the matrix of several different imperial powers, as well as complicating his own personal position as a white Australian

complicit, albeit unwittingly, with his own nation's colonization of Indigenous Australians. In order to unpack the text's imperial tapestry it is useful to apply a contrapuntal reading, along the lines advocated by Edward Said. His methodology reads "the cultural archive" to reveal the often hidden or unacknowledged realities of colonialism lurking within and supporting the metropolitan centre of the British Empire (Said 59). Similarly, we can undertake a contrapuntal reading of the intersecting imperialisms in *Narrow Road* to understand the relationships between these empires and how they shape the history of both nation-states and individuals. In Flanagan's novel, the ascendant imperialism of the Japanese should be read in light of the demise of British imperialism in particular, and of European imperialism in general, as well as the emergent imperialisms of the United States and Soviet Union. Put another way, no single imperialist regime can be analysed in isolation from other imperialist regimes of that era – we need to read them contrapuntally.

Flanagan has written about how the genesis of his novel lay in coming to terms with the experiences of his own father, the late Archie Flanagan, as an Australian POW on the Thai-Burma railway. The character of Dorrigo, however, is not a fictionalized version of the author's father, to whom the novel is dedicated (Flanagan "Freeing"). Flanagan's novel symbolizes Australia's belated acknowledgement of the sufferings of the country's POWs in the Asia-Pacific and a national reconciliation with its troubled mid-twentieth-century history. The Japanese captured about 21,000 Australians, more than one-third of whom died in captivity. The death rate on the Thai-Burma railway, however, was higher, closer to forty per cent. This compares to only three per cent of men interned by the European Axis powers (Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy) dying in captivity. Moreover, the Australian POWs who died in Japanese captivity represented one-quarter of the total

number of Australians killed in World War Two (Beaumont 185, 188), which highlights how central the Asia-Pacific theatre of war was to Australia in the global conflict. Flanagan's novel depicts the extremity of the POWs' condition: they dressed in little more than a "cock rag" and "slouch hat" (Flanagan, *Narrow Road* 207); had virtually no food other than rice and almost no medicines; died of diseases such as cholera; and were forced to build the railway with hand tools and no machinery (Flanagan *Narrow* 96).

Flanagan employs his historian's skills to outline the scale and futility of what the Japanese Imperial Army believed it could achieve. The Japanese laid out surveyor's pegs over 415 kilometres from Bangkok to Burma (23). Even though the English and Americans before the war had declared that the railway was impossible to build due to the mountainous terrain, the Japanese High Command "decreed that it be built in the shortest time possible" (95). Their original timetable was five years, but the High Command reduced it to eighteen months during the "speedo," or high-speed, campaign in 1943. At stake were Japan's imperialist ambitions and national pride. Major Tenji Nakamura, the head of Dorrigo's POW camp, realizes the irrationality of the ever-shortening timetable to complete the project. The railway, he concludes, is "an insane equation" (96). Nevertheless, the major instructs his subordinate engineer officer to "treat all men as machines in service of the Emperor" (98). Human life is sacrificed to ideology. Although the novel focuses on Australian POWs, the Thai-Burma railway was notorious for exploiting slave labour from numerous countries. About sixty-thousand Allied POWs – from Australia, Britain and the Netherlands – plus around a quarter of a million people from China, Java, Malaya, Thailand and Burma may have worked on the doomed engineering project, although the exact number is unknown (Flanagan *Narrow* 26).

The cause of the violence, however, ultimately rests with imperial ideology, one devised to support delusions of power and conquest. In the novel, Japanese imperial ideology is represented primarily by Colonel Shiro Kota, who describes the railway as “the great epoch-making construction of our century.” Kota proclaims that “we will build what the Europeans said it was not possible to build over many years. This railway is the moment when we and our outlook become the new drivers of world progress” (Flanagan *Narrow* 121). The colonel’s comment exemplifies a belief among Japanese imperialists that their people were a “superior race” to Europeans (Flanagan *Narrow* 129). Yet this attitude must be viewed within the context of a broader resistance in Asia at that time against European imperialist powers, which had colonized the region for centuries, and European racism towards Asian people. This anticolonial movement across Asia was long-standing, having gained momentum after the seismic geopolitical shifts resulting from World War One, and transnational, built on the idea of a just international society based on the principle of self-determination, as embodied by the League of Nations (Manela 23, 29). In addition, World War Two and the consequent collapse of the European imperial powers triggered a general historical process of decolonization around the globe. As Major Tenji Nakamura tells Dorrigo: “[W]e were liberating Asia from European colonisation” (Flanagan *Narrow* 120). The major’s comment reflects Japanese imperialism’s belief in a “divine mission” in its home region, based on the assumption of Japanese superiority in terms of race, culture and spirit. As Christopher Szpilman says: “There was an altruistic, idealistic side to Japan’s divine mission, namely, the goal of liberating Asia from the yoke of Western imperialism. Certainly some pan-Asianists genuinely believed in such liberation” (Szpilman 90). Nevertheless, it is important as part of the contrapuntal reading of the novel to keep in mind that Japan

entered World War Two after it joined the Axis Alliance with fascist Germany and Italy in the belief that Hitler's military successes in Europe and the subsequent demise of the European empires would enable Japan to gain control of European colonies in Southeast Asia (Mikiso Hane 159).

Japan's aggressive expansion in the first half of the twentieth century across East and Southeast Asia was intended to acquire foreign resources in order to compensate for a rapidly growing population and limited domestic natural resources for manufacturing and food production, and to create a large, economically self-sufficient area with a defensive perimeter (Parker 72, 87). Economic expansion depended largely on military expansion (Mikiso Hane 153). Japan's rulers during this period consisted of right-wing, militarist, ultra-nationalist elements who co-opted the public's respect for the Emperor as constitutional sovereign, although ironically he had limited political power. Colonel Kota represents the rigid imperialist ideology that underpinned Japan's expansion. The colonel's view, however, is contrasted with Major Nakamura's scepticism. Japanese soldiers were indoctrinated to believe they were imbued with a special "spiritual power" (Mikiso Hane 147) that distinguished them from soldiers of other countries. While Nakamura starts off believing that "the Japanese spirit," which embodies the Emperor's wishes, is what sets Japan apart as an indomitable force, he later begins to doubt what that spirit entails, if anything. "But what that *spirit* was, what it precisely meant, Nakamura would have had difficulty saying" (Flanagan *Narrow* 119, original emphasis). The major's disillusionment and growing inability to articulate nationalist sentiment may be read as a critique of any nationalist ideology or jingoism, not just imperial Japan's. This is especially relevant in the context of Benedict Anderson's theory that nations are essentially "imagined communities" that do not always command a symbiotic sense of identity from every

one of their resident citizens (Anderson 6). After all, Japan in the mid-twentieth century had only relatively recently emerged from a feudal past, becoming a unified nation-state and constitutional monarchy in 1868.

In the novel, the start and end points of imperialism are institutionalized violence. Dorrigo undergoes an epiphany concerning the ubiquity and inescapability of extreme, historical violence as he witnesses along with about three hundred other Australian POWs a mere handful of Japanese soldiers brutally bash one of their Australian colleagues, who dies shortly after. Dorrigo feels complicit in the violence, that he had “assented” and “somehow agreed with what was happening,” because neither he nor the other POWs did anything to stop it.

For an instant he thought he grasped the truth of a terrifying world in which one could not escape horror, in which violence was eternal, the great and only verity, greater than the civilisations it created, greater than any god man worshipped, for it was the only true god. It was as if man existed only to transmit violence to ensure its domain is eternal. For the world did not change, this violence had always existed and would never be eradicated ... all human history was a history of violence. (Flanagan, *Narrow Road* 307)

This fatalistic theme of the perennial presence of violence throughout human history permeates Flanagan’s fiction. The question of complicity, even by omission, or the failure to act to prevent violence is a concomitant issue. For example, in Flanagan’s picaresque novel *Gould’s Book of Fish*, which re-imagines the brutality of the British penal colony in Tasmania, or Van Diemen’s Land as it was known then, the eponymous anti-hero, the convicted forger William Gould, reflects on how individual people allow violent regimes to operate without impunity. The Tasmanian colony



was founded on the wholesale theft of land from local Indigenous people, the attempted genocide of those same people, and the slavery of British and Irish convicts for free labor. Gould laments: “We all make our accommodations with power, & the mass of us would sell our brother or sister for a bit of peace & quiet. We’ve been trained to live a life of moral cowardice while all the time comforting ourselves that we are nature’s rebels” (Flanagan *Gould’s* 400-1).

In *Narrow Road*, Japan’s imperial reach extends to Korea, which Japan declared as a colony in 1910. The Korean perspective is personified by Choi Sang-min, a ruthless guard for the Japanese army who is given the Japanese name Akira Sanya and is nicknamed the Goanna by the Australian POWs, who regard him as the worst of their captors. The Korean’s imposed names highlight his lack of a defined self-identity. Born into a peasant family, Choi Sang-min signs up for the Japanese army at fifteen to work as a guard in a POW camp “elsewhere in the empire,” while his thirteen-year-old sister becomes a “comfort woman” in the Japanese-occupied state of Manchukuo in China (Flanagan *Narrow* 361-2). Yet Choi Sang-min understands that as a Korean he can never rise above being a guard, “lower than the lowliest Japanese soldier,” a subordinate position that is reinforced by the beatings he receives during army training (Flanagan *Narrow* 335, 337). The legacies of Japan’s colonization of Korea are evident after the war when the Allies arrest Choi Sang-min as a war criminal.

An Australian military court sentences him to death for ordering the murder of an Australian private – an alleged crime that Colonel Kota, who was set free, falsely accuses him of. Choi Sang-min subsequently realizes that “the Allied victors often seemed to free officers who had links to the Japanese nobility and let others more lowly, like themselves [Koreans and Formosans], be the scapegoats whom they

hanged” (Flanagan *Narrow* 333). In other words, Choi Sang-min, as a Korean, is punished for a war crime orchestrated by his Japanese colonial masters. The irony is that he only fully understands the nature of his predicament on the eve of his execution. “I am not Korean, he thought to himself. I am not Japanese. I am a man of a colony” (Flanagan *Narrow* 361). Choi Sang-min’s identity, therefore, is as much inter-imperial as is Dorrigo’s, although for different empires and in different ways.

Another key inter-imperial consciousness in the novel is that of Frank “Darky” Gardiner, the Australian POW who is beaten to the point of death by the Japanese. Gardiner represents the British and subsequently white Australian colonization of Indigenous Australians, and the associated violence against the country’s first inhabitants, which is a constant topic throughout Flanagan’s fiction. Not long after the war ends Dorrigo learns that Gardiner was, in fact, his nephew, the illegitimate offspring of Dorrigo’s brother Tom and an Indigenous Australian woman (Flanagan *Narrow* 427). Dorrigo’s collusion in Gardiner’s death through omission may be read as white Australia’s complicity in the colonization of Indigenous Australians.

Dorrigo’s wartime life story, then, represents inter-imperiality as played out in Southeast and East Asia in the mid-twentieth century, as a rising Asian empire, Japan, took advantage of the colonial Southeast Asian territories of the European empires that were under military pressure from Nazi Germany. As an Australian, however, Dorrigo embodies an inter-imperial consciousness, fighting on behalf of a dying empire he does not believe in, and in territories away from his own home. The construction of the novel, therefore, is inherently transnational as much as it is transimperial. As such, *Narrow Road* cannot be said to be a work of ‘national’ literature, as in Australian literature, but instead is more accurately described as a work of world literature. My argument is that Flanagan’s novel enters world literature

on one level “by bringing the world directly into the text itself” (Damrosch *How to Read* 86) through Dorrigo travelling abroad into the domains of different empires.

This process of bringing historical empires into the text reinforces the text’s relationship with, and relevance to, the extra-textual world. I am building here on Eric Hayot’s related concepts of “worldedness,” or “the form of a relation the work establishes between the world inside the work and the world outside it” (Hayot 26), and “connectedness.” The inter-imperial world within the text is central to illustrating the effects concurrent empires have on people’s lives. Hayot maintains that the ‘world’ in world literature may be conceptualized in one respect as an “aesthetic world,” or a “*diegetic totality* constituted by the sum of all aspects of a single work or work-part, constellated into a structure or system that amounts to a whole” (original emphasis). On the other hand, aesthetic worlds are “always a relation to and theory of the lived world,” and as a result constitute both “social and conceptual constructs” (Hayot 44). When applying Hayot’s theory to *Narrow Road*, the aesthetic world consists of Dorrigo’s journeys from Australia through Syria, Java, Singapore and Thailand, which in turn create a diageitic totality that simulates the notion of a global aesthetic world. Furthermore, Hayot coins the term “connectedness” to describe the degree to which structures located at one level in the diageisis – such as protagonist, setting and so on – “relate to exteriors or interiors that swathe or puncture them,” or the relations between divisions with a system. His methodology is predicated on the assumption that the world is “an unbroken surface,” that the world is “infinitely connectable” (Hayot 74-75). Flanagan’s novel portrays the connectedness between an individual who lives in a country that geographically lies outside the main theatres of war, and the imperial powers that have caused the war. The novel injects an ethicopolitical element into the narrative in order to prompt readers to consider how

these inter-imperial relations may be influenced by individuals resisting such imperial powers.

## **2. Temporality and Ethics in World Literature**

The intersecting imperialisms underpinning *Narrow Road* enable an examination of the temporal and ethicopolitical dimensions of world literature. In this respect there is a crossover between world literature theory and postcolonial studies. I propose that these two sub-disciplines of literary criticism ought to be viewed as being complementary rather than oppositional, as is often claimed at an institutional level. Laura Doyle maintains that the notion of inter-imperiality broadens the scope of postcolonial studies by challenging the simple binary of colonizer-colonized and by adding complexity and depth to the multitudinous relationships between empires. Although I agree with this point, her additional claim that an inter-imperial approach “diverges significantly” from “so-called world literature” (Doyle 182) deserves to be contested. Doyle does not explicitly explain why she adds the derogatory adjective “so-called” to world literature as an academic discipline. However, she says an inter-imperial “analysis does not offer an account of what some have referred to as ‘world literature’. Rather, it highlights the world production of literature of any status, specifically its production within imperially shaped world-systems” (Doyle 188). Doyle appears to be making a distinction between literature being produced within transimperial contexts and ‘world literature.’ But as outlined above, a work of literature conceived within an inter-imperial context and which brings that inter-imperial world into the world of the text is, in fact, a work of world literature. World literature and inter-imperiality are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, as Flanagan’s novel demonstrates, they are both complementary and additive.

Doyle seems to perpetuate a demarcation between world literature and postcolonial discourse that is frequently cited in the academy, especially in the United Kingdom, where I work. Yet the methodologies of world literature and postcolonial studies may often be mutually beneficial, rather than incompatible or discrete. Rob Nixon, for instance, advocates that world literature studies ought to embrace the anti-imperial concerns that are foregrounded in materialist postcolonial studies. By doing so, Nixon believes world literature studies may capture some of the “radical energies” that postcolonial engagement encourages. Conversely, “we need scholarship and teaching that can address, in transnational terms, territories beyond postcolonialism’s conventional reach” (Nixon 37-8). Similarly, Karen Thornber argues in the inaugural issue of this journal that “scholarship on world literature has remained relatively silent on many matters of global significance,” citing, among other things, human rights abuses, trauma, slavery and global history – each of which is central to the narrative of *Narrow Road*. Thornber calls for world literature scholarship to “connect more meaningfully with life on the ground” in order to provide “insights into global problems and ideally working toward their amelioration” (Thornber 115-6). In a later issue, Mads Anders Baggesgaard continues this debate by arguing that the study of world literature should not only investigate how literature relates to “global problems,” but also how literature “relates to local problems brought on by imperial forces” (Baggesgaard 477). Baggesgaard’s essay on how the peripheral nature of Danish colonialism throws light on larger colonial systems is akin to Flanagan’s novel demonstrating how the peripheral nature of the colonization of Australia throws light on rival imperial systems in the mid-twentieth century. From the ‘opposite’ perspective, postcolonial scholar Sharae Deckard criticizes postcolonial studies as it has frequently been practised in the academy for “perpetually looking

back to Western European high imperialism,” and argues that the discipline should engage with “new imperial formations and geographies” in the twenty-first century, such as the rise of China, post-Soviet Russia and “the American imperium” (Deckard 239). In other words, Deckard advocates a world approach to postcolonial studies. In the remainder of this essay, I will develop further the above arguments that advocate the incorporation of a material perspective in world literature discourse by demonstrating how the intertextuality prominent in Flanagan’s novel provides a pre-eminent case study for such an approach. In particular, I will build on Pheng Cheah’s associated concepts of temporality and an ethicopolitical perspective being present in world literature.

Cheah argues that the ‘world’ in world literature is a “temporal category” because the world must first “be,” or exist, before it can “appear as an object” (Cheah 2). Pursuing this line of logic, Cheah proposes a “normative theory of world literature” based on the premise that the world is temporal, and that world literature has the “power or efficacy to change the world according to a normative ethicopolitical horizon” (Cheah 6). Cheah makes a connection between temporality and ethics by drawing on Goethe’s conception of world literature as an exchange of ideas between authors and intellectuals from different countries, cultures and languages. Through this process of continuous, dynamic exchange, world literature becomes temporal, and in turn enables the portrayal of different kinds of alternative possible worlds in order to improve the conditions and circumstances of the actual world – this gives rise to an ethicopolitical dimension. Furthermore, Cheah says temporality and spatiality co-exist with each other in relation to the world, this comment being part of his criticism that spatiality has become the dominant conception of the world in contemporary world literature theory. “Following Goethe, I

suggest that we should conceive of the world not only as a spatio-geographical entity but also as an ongoing dynamic process of becoming, something that possesses a historical-temporal dimension and hence is continually being made and remade” (Cheah 42). Cheah’s distinction of the ‘world’ in world literature incessantly being made and remade is important, because it emphasizes how new writers and new texts bring different perspectives, reinterpreting the world and offering alternative views of what the world ought to be. Literature can play an important role in ongoing attempts to remake the world by providing “imaginings and stories” that point to the opening of other worlds (Cheah 210).

Flanagan re-imagines the divided, bellicose actual world through the overt use of a non-Western text as the novel’s key intertext, seventeenth-century Japanese author Matsuo Bashō’s canonical *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1694). Flanagan’s homage to Bashō goes well beyond borrowing the title. Both books share the theme of the impermanence of power. Moreover, Flanagan loosely structures his *Narrow Road* as a homage to the *haibun* literary genre that Bashō is credited as inventing, a prose narrative interspersed with pithy *haiku* verses. Flanagan took twelve years to write his novel, and in early versions he had written it as “a story composed of linked *haiku*” and “in the form of a *haibun*” before deciding on the final, published version (Flanagan “Freeing My Father”). Although Flanagan’s work is indisputably a contemporary novel, its prose narrative is frequently intercut with *haiku* poems at poignant moments, such as when an ageing Dorrigo on his hospital deathbed after a car crash in Sydney recalls fragments of a *haiku*, in an effort to make sense of his life in his final hours. In addition, Bashō’s *Narrow Road* “has no absolute center, no single, overarching perspective. Instead, a focal point emerges, climaxes, and then is replaced by a new focal point” (Shirane 225). Similarly,

Flanagan's novel has no absolute centre, because its core story of Dorrigo's experiences as a Japanese POW for three-and-a-half years represents only a small portion of his long life. The war plot is framed between a love story of Dorrigo's doomed pre-war affair with his younger aunt by marriage, and his post-war years as a national hero, distinguished surgeon and serial philanderer, when he struggles to find meaning in life.

Another level of intertextuality in the two works is that they are both travel books, although in different respects. Bashō's is the more conventional travelogue in that it's an account of the Japanese writer's third major journey in Japan, which took two and a half years in the early 1690s at a time when few people travelled for pleasure. While Bashō's journey is voluntary and domestic, Dorrigo's is involuntary and international as a soldier and enslaved POW. However, their journeys are similar in that both the main characters, Bashō and Dorrigo, are on personal quests to divine meaning in life. Or, as it has been said of Bashō, to seek "a vision of eternity in the things that are, by their own very nature, destined to perish" (Yuasa 37).

To create a direct link between his novel and Bashō's book, Flanagan ironically imbues Colonel Shiro Kota with both a penchant for sadism and an aesthetic obsession with Bashō's writing. Kota regularly quotes *haiku* poems in between driving thousands of POWs to their deaths on the railway. Yet despite his passion for Bashō, the colonel fails to heed Bashō's theme of the ephemeral nature of power – or at least not until many years after the war. Kota's mummified corpse is discovered in his apartment, and beside it Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. Kota's copy is marked with a dry blade of grass at the opening page, and Flanagan in his novel quotes Bashō's first two sentences, reinforcing the



intertextuality of the two works: “Days and months are travellers of eternity ... So too the years that pass by” (Flanagan *Narrow* 378). Assuming Kota had actually finished reading the travelogue, he would have encountered the passage where Bashō ruminates on the ruined mansions of three generations of a warrior family, whose members and deeds have long since “passed into oblivion.” Bashō, overcome by sadness at the transience of glories of “ancient warriors,” observes: “When a country is defeated, there remain only mountains and rivers, and on a ruined castle in spring only grass thrives” (Bashō 118). Flanagan gives Bashō a distinctly anti-imperial turn by echoing this motif of grass outlasting earthly powers in his novel. After the Japanese surrender, the railway is abandoned by the Thais and dismantled by the English, and the dense tropical jungle vegetation swiftly takes over. “Of imperial dreams and dead men, all that remained was long grass” (Flanagan *Narrow* 316).

The effect of Flanagan’s technique in foregrounding a canonical Japanese text as the key intertext is to position his novel away from being perceived as a work of ‘Western’ literature, or more specifically Australian literature that is a derivative of the colonialist imposed English literature, to being a work of world literature. Furthermore, in Flanagan’s novel both ‘East’ and ‘West’ talk to one another in mutual discourse, in a seamless intertwining of Japanese and Western literary conventions. This is connected to the ethicopolitical imperative of the novel. Implicit in the text is the call for reconciliation between two previous bellicose nations, Japan and Australia, or, more broadly, between two rival empires, those of Japan and Britain. The book’s ethicopolitical concern is reinforced by the narrative sympathetically exploring in the final two sections (sections four and five) the post-war lives of the novel’s two most prominent Japanese military figures, Kota and Nakamura, as they adjust to the sudden demise of what they had previously believed to be their

indomitable imperial empire, and the occupation of their country by the United States military and its Allies. In short, the transcultural intertextuality of Flanagan's novel represents an attempt to avoid any semblance of Orientalism, European imperialism's ideological doctrine that imposes an arbitrary dichotomy between 'East' and 'West,' and instead present a vision of an alternative world in which 'East' and 'West' inter-mingle and inter-relate. Australians in the twenty-first century, after all, typically view themselves and their nation as being far more integrated with Asia than retaining ties with the former 'motherland' of Britain. Flanagan's novel embodies this attitude.

Yet the ethicopolitical aspect of Flanagan's novel that results from transcultural intertexts is not due solely to Bashō's book. Flanagan also employs a range of Western intertexts, both classical and modern, that further underscore the novel's themes of intersecting imperialisms and historical violence. Roland Barthes states that "[a]ny text is a new tissue of past citations." As a consequence, a text will incorporate a "volume of sociality" by which anterior and contemporary language enters the text (Barthes 39). Barthes, in turn, draws on Julia Kristeva, who argues that the intertextual nature of a text creates a dialogue whereby one can read the "other" intertexts within the text (Kristeva 39). In this sense one can 'read' the various world literary intertexts that are overtly positioned in *Narrow Road* in order to arrive at a more complex understanding of imperialism and empire, in such a way that Flanagan's novel subsequently transcends its immediate geographical and temporal references to participate in a broader discourse.

Dorrigo is an avid and life-long reader, but all the books he is described as reading are associated with empire. As a medical student Dorrigo reads Alfred Tennyson's poem 'Ulysses,' which is written from the perspective of the ancient

Greek king Odysseus, a leader in the Trojan War, who decides late in life to reject idleness and travel again. Dorrigo specifically reads Tennyson's lines:

The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep  
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,  
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world. (Flanagan *Narrow* 13)

By reproducing a three-line excerpt from Tennyson's blank verse poem, Flanagan creates the semblance of a *haiku*, given that these three lines could easily stand alone. Dorrigo reads these lines while he is with his lover and aunt, just prior to leaving for the war, so the scene could be interpreted as Dorrigo desiring "a newer world" to replace the conflict-ridden one he lives in. In this respect, the novel exhibits its ethicopolitical imperative of suggesting a better, alternative world to the actual world. On the other hand, the echoes of empire are unambiguous: the subject of king Odysseus; and the authorial connection with Tennyson, who was appointed poet laureate at the zenith of the British Empire in the mid-nineteenth century. Moreover, Flanagan sets up a sort of triangular intertextuality as the Tennyson lines mirror the final lines in Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* that comprise a *haiku*. Although Bashō has only just returned home to be reunited with old friends after his prolonged travels, he nevertheless confesses the urge to take off once more, which dovetails with the legend of Odysseus setting off from Ithaka again.

As firmly cemented clam-shells  
Fall apart in autumn,  
So I must take to the road again,  
Farewell, my friends. (Bashō 142)

In addition to Tennyson, Dorrigo reads other canonical writers of the Victorian era, or the age of empire: Anthony Trollope, Robert Browning, and the writer perhaps

most directly associated with the British Empire, Rudyard Kipling (Flanagan *Narrow* 19). It's a curious reading list for a character who is quintessentially Australian, in his disrespect for authority, his egalitarianism and his concern for his 'mates.' Yet the Victorian canon illustrates the colonial education that Dorrigo would have been raised on. English literature as a subject formed the foundation of literature at school and university in Australia at that time, a legacy of the British Empire's desire to control and shape the minds of its colonized peoples. However, the younger Dorrigo's reading also includes the early canonical Australian bush poet and short story writer Henry Lawson, who helped usher in a distinct Australian-ness to domestic literature, implying that Dorrigo's mind had not been completely colonized. Pointedly, the Kipling poem that Dorrigo quotes in his worst days as a POW is 'Recessional,' which was published during Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897. Although the poem may be read as a lament for the ephemeral nature of British imperial power, Dorrigo interprets the refrain in the last line of all stanzas but the final one – "Lest we forget – lest we forget!" – somewhat ironically, saying that the phrase is "not about remembering. It's about forgetting – how everything gets forgotten" (Flanagan *Narrow* 253). In a sense, this is the over-riding concern of *Narrow Road*, that the experience of World War Two POWs like Flanagan's father ought not to be forgotten, hence the composition and publication of the novel. Dorrigo also scours an Adelaide bookshop for classical Roman authors like Catullus, Lucretius and Ovid – who all lived during imperial Rome – and the prototype historian from ancient Greece, Herodotus (Flanagan *Narrow* 73). This classical intertextuality not only positions the novel's theme of rising and falling empires across millennia, but also situates Flanagan's book within a world literary dialogue

that extends back to antiquity, thereby avoiding the problem of periodization and a focus on the short-term in history.

In conclusion, Flanagan's *Narrow Road* is an important work of fiction in world literature for two key reasons. First, the novel portrays how empires and imperial powers intersect on a variety of complex levels, affecting both nation-states and the lives of individuals, influencing political, economic and cultural factors. This aspect of "inter-imperiality" demonstrates how inter-imperial identities challenge simple binary models of imperialism – of colonizer and colonized – and how literatures are produced not so much in a national context, but in a world context due to the criss-crossing of cultural and political influences. Second, Flanagan's novel exemplifies the temporal and ethico-political dimensions of world literature, as conceptualized by Pheng Cheah, especially through the author's use of a canonical classical Japanese text as the key intertext, thereby dissolving arbitrary Orientalist boundaries between 'East' and 'West.' In turn, Flanagan's book highlights how world literature discourse may benefit from the material and historical perspective of postcolonial studies.

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