

Book Review: In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and its Ironies by David Rieff

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*Does remembering the past help us to learn from its lessons – or might it, in fact, be more moral to forget? In **In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memories and its Ironies**, David Rieff asks whether historical memory and the presumed duty to remember may, in some cases, exacerbate violence, prevent reconciliation or inhibit the pursuit of justice. This is a thought-provoking and at times provocative exploration of how we collectively engage with the past, writes Lauren Murray.*

***In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and its Ironies*. David Rieff. Yale University Press. 2016.**

Find this book: 

On 25 April every year, there is a national day of remembrance held in Australia and New Zealand that commemorates all those who have served and died in wars, conflicts and peacekeeping operations. First celebrated in 1916, Anzac Day originally observed the first anniversary of the Gallipoli campaign fought against the Ottoman Empire. It stands as an example of a project of historical remembrance – an active construction of what should be remembered and how.

Anzac Day demonstrates the belief that there is a form of duty inherent in the way in which a society deals with its past. Susan Sontag (the author's mother) has argued that: 'what is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds'. This morality of remembering has several facets: that the individuals in question gave their lives for ours and deserve to be remembered; that we learn from our past; and that our identity and the common bonds holding us together as a society depend upon a shared and renewed connection to our past. In this discourse, forgetting the past means that we are doomed to repeat it, in a paraphrase of George Santayana's famous saying.

It is this fundamental belief – that to remember is a moral act – that David Rieff explores in his most recent book, *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and its Ironies*. A renowned war correspondent and author, he has written on a vast array of topics including issues of immigration, humanitarian crises and other global struggles. Drawing on his vast knowledge of the defining conflicts of the modern era, including the Holocaust, the Irish Troubles, the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and the aftermath of apartheid in South Africa, he explores the uses and abuses of collective memory and questions whether remembrance really does protect the present from the mistakes of the past. Alternatively, as the irony referred to in the title suggests, it is possible for historical memory to exacerbate the tensions arising from former wrongs, which could lead to violent reprisals in the present day.

Rieff's discussion takes the form of an extended essay which centres on the role memory plays in how human beings understand and come to terms with their own mortality. All great civilisations must rise and fall, and we are rooted in the period in which we live. There are no guarantees that a defining moment of historical importance in our own lifetime will continue to be relevant, or remembered at all, in the future. The need to preserve the memories of the past reflects, in part, a human desire to live beyond our time. The desire for continuity is reflected in family memories – the way in which stories about previous generations are passed down – and, on a larger scale, in cultural memories that can be used to present the past in a specific, and often legitimising, way.

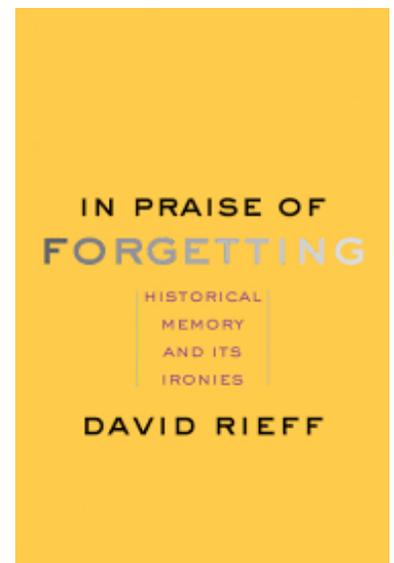




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In Praise of Forgetting begins with a discussion of the work of Maurice Halbwachs, an early twentieth-century pioneer of the theory that memory is a social construct. Although the act of remembering itself is a fundamentally personal phenomenon, Halbwachs developed the theory that shared consciousness of past events within a community plays an important role in creating identity, moulding future generations and expressing the way in which a nation identifies itself and understands its roots.

Yet the collective memories which shape cultures are not factual accounts of the past – they are distortions which reflect, in many ways, the concerns of the present. As Rieff argues, ‘the reality is that such efforts to mobilise and manipulate collective memory or manufacture it have been made by regimes and political parties of virtually every type’ (112). He goes on to point out that commemorative uses of the past flourished in Nazi Germany, Mussolini’s Italy, Russia under Stalin and Lenin and China under Mao. We can also add the example of Augustan Rome after the transition from republic to empire. In these cases, episodes from the past were used to solidify the notion of a common identity and shared future. All are extreme examples of the use of collective memory to reinforce the authority of the established power, but they exemplify the various ways in which historical remembrance can be constructed and manipulated.

Rieff’s central thesis draws upon all of these arguments to make a case for the value of forgetting in specific cases. It is inevitable that events will be lost in history at some point in the future, and that remembering the past provides no lesson on how to avoid repeating the same mistakes, as modern conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Northern Ireland (to name just a few of those referenced in the book) illustrate. If, then, the memory of past injustices can lead to violence and retribution for those in the present, then is it, in fact, morally right to remember? Rieff stresses that he is not advocating the concealment of historic crimes such as the Armenian genocide, the actions of British and French imperial forces throughout the colonial period or the fate of Muslims murdered at Srebrenica: forgetting is not the answer every time. Nonetheless, he argues that it is possible that ‘whereas forgetting does an injustice to the past, remembering does an injustice to the present’ (121). By focusing on remembrance rather than resolution or peace, there is a risk that the very act of remembering itself might prolong conflict.

What this essay articulates, then, is the very real danger that the memory of past atrocities can fuel violence in the

here and now. Rieff's work is a thought-provoking and often controversial exploration of what is gained and lost by remembering; yet, it is a work of moral philosophy that raises more questions than it answers. Collective memory is not always institutionally managed – the passing down of stories and shared experiences, for example, ensures that people remember events long after, even if inaccurately. It is a way of creating and reaffirming the common bonds which hold a society together, and of satisfying the basic human need for community. Nevertheless, Rieff does convincingly challenge [Paul Ricoeur](#)'s assertion that 'we must remember because remembering is a moral duty' (290). On the contrary, is it not perhaps more moral to forget?

Kazuo Ishiguro's most recent novel, *The Buried Giant* (2015), explores many of these questions and provides an interesting parallel to Rieff's discussion of the morality of remembrance. Axl and Beatrice, an elderly couple who have embarked on a journey across post-Roman Britain to find the son they barely remember, begin to realise that the land is trapped in a fog of forgetfulness. *The Buried Giant* is an exploration of a society that has forgotten its past – like *In Praise of Forgetting*, it asks if it is better to choose to forget the bad and remember the good. In the novel, as [Janna Thompson](#) argues: 'the answer is irrelevant. Remembering is our fate'.

After completing her PhD in Classics at the University of Edinburgh, **Lauren Murray** joined the Editorial and Production team at Orson & Co. Her doctoral thesis explored the social and political pressures affecting family relationships in the middle and late Roman Republic, with a focus on the socialising nature of collective memory. She has worked for the University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, Freight Books and as project editor and copywriter for Quarriers Charity.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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