

## ***Mapping a Memoir within Australian Landscapes: Shirley Walker***

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Shirley Walker (1927), retired Senior Lecturer in English from the University of New England at Armidale, where she taught Australian Literature, decided to try her own hand at writing a memoir. The result is *Roundabout at Bangalow: An Intimate Chronicle* (2001), which is her account of growing up in the Northern Rivers area of New South Wales in Australia. The author has also published numerous critical articles on Australian Literature, commenting thoroughly on the work of Mary Gilmore (1865-1962), Judith Wright (1915-2000) and Dorothy Hewett (1923-2002). Walker has also published *The Ghost at the Wedding* (2009) based on the life of Walker's mother in law, a woman whose life was largely shaped by war, and who, in 1918 near the end of WW1, married a returned soldier. This biography, which was awarded the Asher Literary Prize (2009) and the Nita B Kibble Award (2010), Australia's premier award for women's writing, has been described as a major work of Australian literature and a major contribution to Australian history. The present article focuses on *Roundabout at Bangalow: An Intimate Chronicle*, where Walker narrates the complicated and, sometimes, blurred resonances of her "half-a-lifetime" memoir. This work exemplifies how Walker is deeply concerned with the unreliability of memory and the way it can exaggerate grievances or distort past perceptions, unloosing itself from historical and geographical truth and adopting first and foremost a primal function in the formation of identities.

Walker initiates her memoir in The Channon, a small rain-forest village, and from there she takes us, in chronological order, to Wallangarra, on the Queensland border, Byron Bay (NSW), South Grafton (NSW), Armidale (NSW), Rita Island (North QLD), back to South Grafton and Byron Bay and closes her life journey in Bangalow (NSW). When Walker begins her story in The Channon she is seven years old, but her voice and experiences are of a woman in her seventies who feels the need to go back to her roots to understand the youthful "I" she once inhabited. The novel ends in 1997 at a roundabout at Bangalow on her way to Byron Bay but this time she is in her seventies and her companions are her grand-daughter and, in the car ahead of her, her son and her other grand-daughter. Walker herself wonders if this encounter at the roundabout is a mere coincidence or a demonstration of 'the mysterious and invisible lines of memory and desire' (p. 228) which intersects at that precise moment and space in her life. Thus, *Roundabout at Bangalow* is all about crossroads which interconnect through memory and which Walker analyzes in order to decipher them.

The titles of the chapters Walker uses to divide the different stages of her life, which she also tells the reader in chronological order, are important in order to understand that the inner life embedded in *Roundabout at Bangalow* is at once a “variety of qualities, continuity of progress, and unity of direction” (Bergson 2007, p. 10, the emphasis is mine). The first chapter is entitled “The Clover Chain” followed by “I always was lucky”; luck which is also shown in the first chapter, thus, the Clover is metaphorically indicating us the luck Walker is accompanied by along her life. The third chapter is “Maps of Memory” which describes how memory follows a path which is interrupted at certain points by impulses which show the different lived experiences. This chapter is followed by “Night Thoughts” since it is at night when the unconscious “I” wanders around unloosing itself from the socially constructed being. “The Flame” is the following chapter, which could be compared to the *Bliss* that non-western metaphysics insists upon, that is, a way to leave our bodies behind in order for us to reconcile with our real “I”. Then Walker entitles the following chapter “An Island too Far” to then go back to the “Peninsula” and to then end up with “The Roundabout at Bangalow”. These three last titles describe how Walker’s “I” feels the need to move away from home, from what is known to her, and then, once she is ready, to go back to her hometown and end the memoir at a roundabout. This ending highlights the incompleteness of her being since the longer she lives, the longer her “I” will be altered. As there will always be new experiences to live, looking back at her “I” she will always see a different one depending on the experiences she has had until that moment.

The idea of her being always in process is also mentioned by Walker when describing her Granny’s garden that the author recalls as a projection of her extravagant nature. The garden is a “profusion of climbing roses, Wisteria, Plumbago, May Bushes, Lasiandra, Honeysuckle” (p. 26) and Jasmine. The Jasmine is an example of the being in process we are referring to as it originates from Arabia and Spain, is grown in the South of France, common in old gardens in the colonial cities of the far North Coast of New South Wales and haunts the Australian night with its fragrance (p. 26). The garden is then an emblem of continuity as it carries the genes of the old garden favorites down through time. Walker tells us how her Granny’s household does not only exist in that present moment but is a continuum with the past. That is, past and present meet, in this particular point, at a roundabout of memory.

Walker metaphorically joins the garden and memory along the whole novel and we find the first example at the beginning of the memoir:

I am seven. I live in a valley in the rainforest. [...] Beneath the tangle of giant softwoods, cedar, rosewood and teak, [...] is a warm maze of fern and lawyer vine. The smell of cut timber permeates the air as the massive trees are felled with the logs hauled to the mill. (p. 3)

Sixty years later, placing herself in that same place, Walker describes this space as her home, “the place of birth, of birth into consciousness” (p. 3) and realizes the difficulties in recalling the dawn of consciousness. She returned to that place as she feels the need to distil the beauty and the bitterness of the place and, thus, of her consciousness. Walker sees the difficulty in reconstructing the past in a present so different and questions the authenticity of memories, deciding then to concentrate on facts. Moving, within her “I”, from the periphery to the center she wanders around issues that she

learnt, later on, through experience; an example is her own birth which, as she discovered in her adulthood, was a dramatic occasion (p. 8).

Within this wandering, Walker tells us about her mother Eileen Alannah and her father Joseph; how they met, how they had to marry, as if her mother were Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The Scarlett Letter*, since she became pregnant and how they lived. Through them we are told of the Great War, of the Great Depression, the Second World War, the society of the time, the education system, the Aborigines, and so on. Walker's aim is to clear the ghosts of old memories and make way for new representations and new suggestive images. One example is her mother's continuous breakdowns which seem incomprehensible to Walker who later on discovers that they were due to child abuse:

I visit her one day about a year before she dies. I'm bored, the day is hot and I'm trying not to look at my watch. She's shuffling through old photos. I pick up a portrait of her grandparents, her mother's parents. Her grandfather, that Soldier of the Empire, veteran of the Crimea, the Indian Mutiny and the Maori Wars, is standing straight, a gold Albert chain looped across his chest. His long-suffering wife is seated, composed, her face as yet untouched by cancer. I comment that he seems to have been a fine upstanding man. *He was nothing of the sort*, she says, and tells me matter-of-factly how, when she was four, and a number of times after that, he looked carefully around to make sure no adult was watching, took her by the hand and led her away... (p. 219)

In the same way we learn about her mother, we also learn about the different historical events that Australia went through. Walker describes how reminders of the Great War are everywhere, from the captured German guns in the park in Lismore to the roll of honor in the local hall of her school, not to forget King George V's head and the coat of arms, crossed flags and pictures of the great generals of the war, all arranged on the schoolroom wall (p. 18). The Great War and Gallipoli become a tragic myth which haunts the consciousness of children, particularly Walker's. This tragic myth is entrenched years later with her in laws since her father in law's brothers lose their lives in the Great War and her father-in-law's face becomes disfigured by a burst of shrapnel in his face at the Somme (p. 164)<sup>2</sup>.

Also through Walker's intimate memoir we get to know about the Depression that affected Australia following the Wall Street Crash which signaled the beginning of a severe depression for the whole industrialized world. Her maternal grandparents came to stay with them since her grandfather, who had been a blacksmith at Goolmangar and Bangalow, had to, in his fifties, break stones on the road for the relief, "the equivalent of work-for-dole today" (p. 23). Later on, in the autumn of 1936, Walker's family moves to Wallangarra in an old motor lorry with all their possessions. As a child, Walker is wild with excitement not realizing that her life is about to change completely as they are "flotsam on the dark tide of the Depression, as helpless as all the other human debris of the thirties" (p. 67). From 1936 and until the war breaks out in 1939 the family becomes nomadic, settling wherever her father's job took them; a job which is unsettled due to the Depression. Her father is at one stage, when the Depression is biting hard and work is closing down, on six pounds a week and made part time:

On this they have no chance of paying the rent, let alone feeding their families. Meals of rabbit, stewed pigeons or wild duck becomes more regular. Sometimes there is casual work, when a wheat train pulls into the New South Wales platform and the heavy bags have to be transshipped. One evening at dusk, crossing the railway platform, I catch sight of my father bent over like a hunchback, lumping heavy bags of wheat from one side of the platform to the other. He has been doing this all day, and on many other days. I avert my eyes, but this brief glimpse stays in my mind forever. Hard toil, hard yakka is to be his lot for life, and if you add to this an unquiet home, you can see what his life was like. He actually dies of hard work of an enlarged heart, six weeks before he is eligible for the pension. (p. 72-73)

Once the war starts there is more than enough overtime, saving many people from the Depression (p. 90). Walker describes the effects of the Second World War all through the novel, starting on page thirteen and giving the last reference on page 154. During the war Walker is in her adolescence and copes with a dangerous world. She is usually “self-absorbed, drifting, dreaming, reading and escaping into unreal worlds” (p. 99). The war discussions she hears at home, but which she does not dare to join, are always from the point of view of the working man. The author is saturated with the newsreels and their versions of events, with world figures such as the Prince of Wales, Mrs. Simpson, Hitler, Mussolini, Haile Selassie, Neville Chamberlain and General MacArthur. She witnesses Chamberlain “looking like a scrawny old rabbit” promising peace and giving in to Hitler for which the Australians were disgusted (p. 100). Australia is automatically at war because the Mother Country is and at first Hitler and Mussolini are to Walker figures of fun and subjects of songs of ridicule. Battles are broadcast as if they were a cricket match but when Japan bombs Pearl Harbour everything changes:

Slit trenches are dug in the school grounds and we have air-raid practice. We dive chattering and laughing into the rough trenches, skinning our knees. We knit scarves and socks, hundreds of them, as if this war is, as it was last time, in the frozen trenches of northern France. We practice with gas masks. We learn morse code and flag drill. Each child has a flag and we practise semaphore, as if our faltering dots and dashes, fluttering from hilltop to hilltop, will save us from the enemy, who are shown daily in cartoons as degenerates, bow-legged and short-sighted and obviously no match for *white* men. (p. 101)

The author recalls that after the fall of Singapore, an impregnable fortress for Australia, Australians were terrified, and it is because of the war, the Battle of Britain (p. 102), that Australians gained a new purpose, a cause. The photographer's shop window in Prince Street does not show any more pictures of wedding-cake brides but smiling faces in uniform, either of the AIF or the RAAF. Glamorous pictures are sent home of the crew who bombed the Rhine, Berlin, Stuttgart, Dresden, Bremen, and so on. Defeat will be tasted in Greece and Crete and Winston Churchill will be blamed “as the architect of yet one more Australian disaster, and Australians will curse him as their fathers did at Gallipoli” (p. 102). Prime Minister Curtin insisted that the Sixth division return to defend Australia against all Churchill's arguments for them to stay in the Middle East. The Sixth Division is at sea without escort, the Eighth is lost in Singapore and the Ninth is left behind to face Rommel at the Battle of El Alamein (105). Meanwhile, inland,

planes fill the skies and crash around. Boyfriends, husbands and fathers come back home on leave from New Guinea and the Pacific Island and their children do not recognize them because of the war as some have been in the war far too long and others, if came back at all, were totally changed by it. The peace will be very difficult because society has been irretrievably altered (p. 108). It is when the atomic bombs are dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that the war comes to an end and Australian minds turn immediately to the post-war world:

We are selfish and see things only in relation to ourselves. We imagine that with victory and peace all problems will disappear. The men will all come home; we will no longer go to dances where the only partners are seventeen-year-old beardless boys or ancient dodderers; we will meet all those soldiers and airmen we have been sending *love and kisses to, we will find romance*. (p. 141)

Before coming to terms with the post-war world society we need to follow Walker's description of Australian society in general. The author gives a broad picture of Australian society at the time, when street names such as Prince Street, Victorian Street or Queen Street "tell their own story of colonial reverence for the British establishment" (p. 88). The map of the world at Walker's first school shows patches of deep pink which belong to the British Empire "on which the sun never sets" (p. 17). Every year Empire Day and the old Queen's birthday are celebrated with speeches, sports and lollies. Imported comics tell of, for Walker and her sister, "mad foreign rituals such as Pancake Day, Bank Holidays and trips to Brighton" (p. 20). Both are interested in royalty and the *School Magazine* fosters articles of the royal family, thus, these sixth generation Australians are attached to the British Kings, Queens and Princesses. As an example, Walker found herself profoundly affected when the *Northern Star* announced that King George V was dying (p. 22). This means that the education Walker received was Anglocentric and its aim was "to impress on the colonials as much as possible of the customs and values of the motherland" (p. 91). Even when she was trained to become a teacher, she had to work on her accent, and had to eradicate the supposed Australian failings "slovenly vowels and nasal diction" (p. 139); ideals which persisted until the early seventies.

Having this picture in mind we perceive how society was constructed by the British Empire and the USA, projecting Western movies which came out of Hollywood and where people learnt every detail of the stars and their lives in an environment quite different from the Australian landscapes (p. 68). Through her memory we see how, in the first village they lived in, the values embedded by them were those of Anglicanism, patriotism and mateship, the last two excluding foreigners and blacks. Walker highlights the way that the Aborigines were rarely seen as they were isolated on islands in the Richmond and Clarence Rivers and at other missions. Hindus grew and sold vegetables in the area and the Italian families with banana plantations were up in the hills (p. 13). These two nationalities rarely mixed. It is after the war when society turns into a volatile mixture of Chinese, Italians and Spanish. Italians are not considered "to be white although a clear distinction is drawn between northern Italians, closer to the European races, and the southerners, closer to the Africans" (p. 169). With the post war boom Spanish families also migrate to Australia, most of them refugees from Franco.

With *Roundabout at Bangalow*, Walker denounces discrimination and claims a space for minorities; that is Aborigines, migrants and women. The first time the author talks about an Aborigine is to recall the story of Richard Graig, the first white man who happened to be an escaped convict and who lived for years with the Aborigines and was eventually pardoned on account of his discovery of the Big River, the Clarence (p. 86). Later on Walker wonders why the Aborigines are invisible, out of sight and “out of mind” (p. 95). It is at Grafton, and still a child, when she comes across a shocking sight. She sees her father’s former workmate on leave from the AIF who celebrates being at home by bashing every Aborigine in town. She will preserve this image in her mind, which becomes one of the experiences which will be awakened by intuition at college, where she realizes that there is no study of Aboriginal life and culture:

Memories of the Aboriginal massacres on the Tablelands have been repressed, to be revealed later in R. B. Walker’s *Old New England* and Judith Wright’s moving poem “Nigger’s Leap, New England”. Both deal with an Aboriginal tribe driven like cattle over a precipice in the New England Ranges, simply because they are a nuisance to some of the squatters. This is the dark side of the pioneering heritage of New England, but we don’t acknowledge it at this time. (p. 133)

At one point in her memoir Walker reflects on the fact that she could have lived a good life as a contented farmer’s wife, making jams and preserving fruit. But she is aware of herself as a “parody of a fifties wife and mother” (p. 206) which prompts her to leave this role aside and become a teacher while starting her studies at the University of New England. Her choice for her PhD is an Australian topic which at that time was considered “wantonly self-destructive” (p. 222). Once she finishes her PhD she obtains a lectureship in Australian literature and, by then, Australian literature had begun to flourish in Europe as well as in Australia (p. 222). With this work Walker revisits an Australian landscape which dissolves itself in diverse roundabouts that we readers take in order to understand Australia in the twentieth century.

Walker is able to provide in this work open questions which she sometimes answers ironically. She tells us about herself, a subject in process who, thanks to literature, has cleared the grounds for solutions aimed at reconciliation. It was Henri Bergson who in 1913 argued in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* that “if there is anything eternal, then it is the living eternal, the eternity of change” (Bergson 2007, p. xxvi). In *Roundabout at Bangalow: An Intimate Chronicle* we face a continuity of changes modified by the impulses which Walker somehow recalls and which memory alters. This is what Bergson calls the “reality” or the “real”, which he defines as essential becoming, mobility, variability, movement, in short, processes over being (2007, p. xxix). Walker draws herself from the periphery towards the centre; she is searching, in the depth of her being, for that which is most uniform, most constant and most enduring, and she finds, as a result, an altogether different thing (Bergson 2007, p. 7). Walker is making an effort to bend thought backwards towards its object, which is her inner I, deconstructing the “I” she has lived with in order to understand herself. She tells us about memories and by doing so she modifies them as she is seeing them from an “I” who has experienced different things during the course of her life. As Andreas Huyssen highlights, “memory always walks hand in hand with oblivion. Oblivion is always the memory’s shadow” (as cited in Jarque, 2011, p. 18).

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<sup>1</sup> Proyecto I+D FFI2010-17296, La ciudad fluida: representaciones literarias de la ciudad transnacional.

<sup>2</sup> For a full account see *The Ghost at the Wedding* (2009) where readers also come around roundabouts although this time Walker goes back further in time taking us into the nineteenth century when Jessie, Walker's mother in law, was born. With this work Walker does not rely on her own memory but establishes the literal truth of events through letters, diaries, service records and family documents. The author has to imagine the inner life of each character, especially that of Jessie.