



WELL READ

REVIEWED BY RICK SULLIVAN

THE ILLUSION OF VICTORY
IAN BICKERTON, MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY PRESS,
\$36.99

AGAINST REMEMBRANCE
DAVID RIEFF, MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY PRESS, \$19.99

It's no coincidence these two books were released only weeks before Anzac Day. Both are relevant; both call for a reassessment of commonly accepted "truths". In *The Illusion of Victory* Ian Bickerton examines causes and aftermaths of wars from the past two centuries, focusing on victory and its unintended consequences for both the victors and the defeated. He argues that invariably the expected fruits of victory are exposed as illusions and that after one generation conventional military victories are shown to have been meaningless exercises in death and devastation, winners and losers indistinguishable.

World War II is a classic example. The UK and France were victors: Neither has recovered and reclaimed its former status or economic power. Germany and Japan were the losers. Within one generation, they became two of the most robust and powerful economies in the world, and were considered our good friends and allies.

Bickerton also points out that 21st century war has a new face, making the concept of victory even murkier. Asymmetrical wars, with large nations fighting small groups of fanatics with no fixed bases, create a need for new ways to define success. America's decision to declare a "War on Terrorism" sounded good until people began to ask, "How will we know when we've won?" A

war needs popular support, but it's hard to rally a nation behind an expensive, seemingly endless war with no visible returns. These new wars also have social, economic and political consequences out of proportion to their size, as seen in Afghanistan and Iraq.

It may never be possible to eliminate war. But Bickerton argues that we should look honestly at the results and futility of wars and work towards alternatives that don't require death and destruction or social and economic devastation.

Remembrance, as formalised in events such as Anzac Day and Remembrance Day, is an obligation and tribute to those who have made sacrifices and a tie that binds a people or nation together. But in *Against Remembrance* David Rieff reminds us that there is also a time to let go – to forget – because remembrance is a two-edged sword. When participants and those with direct memories of the events are gone, there can be a tipping point, when memory and its successor, history, turn into myth. Myth is defended more zealously than the truth, and is too often used to instil hatred, suspicion and a desire for revenge. People in that state are immune to logic and easily manipulated by leaders with their own agendas. The author has experienced this firsthand as a reporter in Bosnia, where he saw grudges half a millennium old turn to genocidal horror. His book is a cry from the heart for not just forgiving, but forgetting.

"Forgiving is not enough," he says. "It can never escape its own contingency. Without forgetting, we would be wounded monsters, unforgiving and unforgiven ... and, assuming we have been paying attention, inconsolable." ■