of the possibilities of history as a discipline, as well as the usefulness of a cross-cultural approach to the analysis of settler colonialism. Greg Dening, to return to his prologue, makes clear the unworkability of any concept of ‘zero point’ as the point of first cultural encounter between indigenous populations and invading colonisers. The contributors to the book show some of the ways that the idea of ‘foundation’ can be explored without resorting to such a concept.

ANN STANDISH
University of Melbourne

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With The Labour of Loss, Joy Damousi has made a very significant contribution to the growing study of mourning in wartime and postwar communities. Conscious of her position in the historical debate, Damousi diverges from works that examine responses to wartime grief through their public artefacts, and seeks to more fully understand individual grief and its gendered dimensions in two world wars. ‘In the transformation of a private individual memory to a public, collective one,’ she notes, ‘it is the specificity of individual grief which is lost’ (p. 128). Damousi shows how the bereaved tried to recapture the memory of their grief in public. It is an achievement of particular note that such a range of private records have been consulted in this book, which breaks new and important ground in the study of war, grief and memory.

The key theme of The Labour of Loss is the marginalisation of particular groups from public commemoration in Australia, and their subsequent attempts to assert a privileged place in Australian war memory. Loss bound people together during the war, but, as Damousi points out, ‘this was a fragile unity, for after the war, these groups tussled for the privileged status of primary bearer of memory and sacrifice’ (p. 25). Damousi deals with these groups in turn. Fathers of the dead, she suggests, could claim a legitimacy in commemoration by engaging with the masculine foundations of Anzac. However the notion of the ‘sacrificial mother’, which had so much currency during the war, was relegated to the periphery of public memory by the 1930s. War widows, while enduring the very real pain of losing husbands, were transformed into public reminders of their husbands’ sacrifice. Together with bereaved mothers, war widows found their specific loss and pain subsumed within the increasingly marginal and generic category of ‘woman’. This marginalisation, Damousi notes, was the result of these women ‘no longer [being] defined by their “sacrifice”’ (p. 36). Damousi deals also with the loss felt
by limbless soldiers, who attempted to sustain their identity through the myths engendered by the war. From all these groups Damousi draws the understanding that mourning is not passive, but can be ‘an active, dynamic and creative process’ (p. 2). She traces the politicising of the grief of individuals through associations that struggled to have their particular loss recognised via protest, petition and public meetings, as postwar Australia came more and more to understand sacrifice only in terms of the ‘glorious dead’ themselves.

Through the motif of absence, Damousi brings the reader to a closer understanding of the nature of Australian wartime bereavement across the two world wars. Absence became a way of life on the Australian home front in both wars, and an experience through which women could form a collective identity. The discussion of the particular relevance of absence to Australia is a strength of the book, as Damousi shows how the ‘experience of an earlier conflict did not make grief any easier to cope with, or to understand’ (pp. 105-6). In the Second World War, the lack of information on how soldiers died, particularly in Prisoner of War camps and bomber command, provided a continuity of experience between the bereaved of the wars, but more importantly drew the bereaved of particular groups together. The Australian context is crucial in the politicising of grief, as distance from the battle front and gravesites encouraged a heightened sense of loss and absence and of exclusiveness in the experiences of the bereaved. This feature in particular makes The Labour of Loss an important and highly relevant contribution to a series that also includes Jay Winter’s Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning (1995).

There are insistent reminders in The Labour of Loss that white Australia’s commemoration of ‘sacrifice’ – and its sense of national community – is premised on suppression and denial of the dispossession and sacrifice of Aboriginal people. Damousi incisively comments that the ‘memory of sacrifice of the soldiers could be upheld only by repressing the memory of earlier black wars of the nineteenth century’ (p. 56). Of course Damousi does not equate women and Aborigines in their loss and marginalisation, but her rendering of the two as struggling victims against a dominant Anzac mythology is both intensely relevant and provocative. It is this struggle of private memory against the sanitising effects of public memory that Damousi reveals so well and compassionately, and which makes The Labour of Loss such a substantial contribution to this emergent area of study.

BART ZIINO
University of Melbourne

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