

*The Ashgate Research Companion to Memory Studies*. Edited by Siobhan Kattago. Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2015. Pp. GBP£90 cloth.

*This book provides an original and reflexive approach towards key thinkers in memory studies. By asking its authors to reflect upon their academic companions on their journey into memory studies, it not only writes about memory, but also creates memory; a volume that is both science and art at once.*

Since the 1970s-1980s, when the memory boom reached academia, scholars from various disciplines have explored the concept of 'memory', from both individual and collective perspectives. Their rich academic endeavours try to grasp the various faces of memory and remembering. Since the 2000s, several handbooks have been written to get back to the core question: what do we understand by individual and collective remembering?

*The Ashgate Research Companion to Memory Studies* is a huge contribution to this academic debate on memory. The book consists of four parts: 1) Memory, history and time, 2) Social, psychological and cultural frameworks of memory, 3) Acts and places of memory, 4) Politics of memory, forgetting and democracy. The book thus opens up a platform for, and a lively dialogue between, a wide variety of scholars, from historians and philosophers to sociologists and political scientists, of younger and older generations. In addition, the authors also come from different national backgrounds, from the US and Italy, to Estonia and Israel.

What sets this book apart from previous edited volumes on 'memory' is that it takes a very original and creative point of departure. All the authors were asked to go back to their early encounters with memory studies, to the source of their fascination for memory as a research subject. Who have been their companions on their academic journey? Which academics have inspired them? And what have they contributed to their thinking about memory? The chapters thus not only discuss the thoughts of important memory scholars, but also reflect upon the larger social and historical context of the memory boom.

The book discusses important memory scholars such as Nora (1931), Koselleck (1923-2006), Halbwachs (1877-1945), Bakhtin (1895-1975), Warburg (1866-1929) and Jan & Aleida Assmann (1938 & 1947) from a new angle. Every author discusses the work of these formative thinkers from their personal perspective, and how they have been influenced by them. The question answered in the chapters is thus not 'what have these thinkers argued?' (a common question) but 'what have they meant to the next generation of thinkers?'. Besides the fact that the latter question pays attention to the *interpretation* of formative ideas on memory, it also leaves room for scholars less known in the field to enter the stage. See, for example, the chapter by Estonian historian Marek Tamm who introduces the semiotician Yuri Lotman into the field. As *The Collective Memory Reader* notes, the Tartu School of semiotics has, so far, not been widely integrated into the discussion on memory, despite their important work on this topic.<sup>1</sup> The current approach allows for little discussed, and thus new, theories to appear on stage.

In addition to theory, this book also reflects upon the social and historical context of the memory boom, by asking those who are involved in memory studies how they became engaged with the topic. Several authors mention the fall of the Berlin wall as a 'critical event' in their academic lives. It evoked questions about the representation of the past, nature of remembering and about memory politics. Several authors also reflect upon the art works – such as films, novels and theatre plays – that inspired them, see for instance the chapter by Mieke Bal.

Although the book has a very original point of departure, asking its authors to write as if they were an *ego-histoire*, it could have gained more – in both originality and our understanding of doing science – if authors had not only reflected upon their academic companions but also on how their personal lives have led up to their academic career paths. For instance, which experiences, stories or life choices of themselves or others have triggered them?

After all, if we have a brief look at the personal lives of the key thinkers mentioned above, we see that all of them lived in a very turbulent age. Reading about their personal lives raises questions about what brought them to the field of studying memory; certainly not only their academic or artistic companions. For instance, Pierre Nora (1931) is a Jewish historian, who taught at a lyceum in Algeria from 1958-1960. Reinhart Koselleck (1923-2006) served as a German soldier in WWII, and was taken to Kazakhstan by the Soviet army as a prisoner of war. He finished his thesis in 1954, after his return on medical conditions. He believed that because he was a citizen of a nation who had been defeated in WWII, he was able to understand history in a more self-reflexive way (than those historians from victorious nations.<sup>2</sup> Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) died in Buchenwald. He was arrested by the Gestapo because he protested against the arrest of his Jewish father-in-law. His first essay on collective memory appeared in 1925, right after WWI, when he worked at the War Ministry. Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) wrote several important essays while being exiled by Stalin to Kazakhstan. He faced many problems while trying to publish his work in the 1940s-1960s because of the strict censorship in the Soviet Union. Aby Warburg (1866-1929) was born in a Jewish banker's family, whose ancestors had migrated from Italy to Germany. He opposed the social pressure of his relatives to live a conservative Jewish life and take over the family business. He suffered from mental illness.

We can only guess which aspects of their personal lives – which stories, friends and events – have made them into the key thinkers they are today. How interesting would it have been for science if these scholars would have reflected on their academic endeavours in light of their life experiences?

Siobhan Kattago states that "each chapter entails a degree of self-reflectivity traditionally bracketed out of scholarly research" (3). In anthropological research, this self-reflexivity is normal and goes much further than the reflexivity pursuits of this edited volume. This volume could have gained by such an approach as well. The chapters still remain rather theoretical and distant from the authors' personal lives, although Burch is a positive

exception in that he provides an *intimate* insight in his understanding of the relation between the past and the present. He dares to be open and vulnerable, and by doing so, familiarises the reader with the emotional side of remembering, an aspect often neglected. If all authors had been encouraged to reflect not only on their academic companions but also on their intimate companions and personal lives, then this book would have contributed even more to our understanding of the social and historical context of a scientific discipline and to the original approach of key concepts within this volume.

Besides that, we should not forget that the interest we have now in the era in which previous big thinkers were raised will be passed on to the next generation. They will be willing to read what and who were the sources of inspiration – both academic and personal – to the memory scholars who contributed a chapter to *The Ashgate Research Companion to Memory Studies*.

INGE MELCHIOR

*VU University Amsterdam*

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<sup>1</sup> Olick, J. K., Vinitzky-Seroussi, V., Levy, D, Eds. *The Collective Memory Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. p.28.

<sup>2</sup> Koselleck, Reinhart. *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing history, spacing concepts*. Stanford University Press, 2002. p.76.