

# BOOKS

## STILL LIVES: *A Memoir of Gaza*

Editor: Marilyn Garson

Published by: Mary Egan Publishing, Auckland, 2019, 267pp, \$35

Marilyn Garson is an intrepid traveller to war zones, an aid professional who assists local community organisations to create employment and entrepreneurship, coping with numerous problems. From 2011 until late 2015 she lived in Gaza doing that work in the face of the Israeli blockade and periods of intense bombardment from the IDF. This book is a memoir of that period, with immense and personal details of the events and agonies experienced by herself and her co-workers, together with their incredible resilience. It leaves this reader with no doubts about the shocking nature of Israeli government policies and actions towards the Palestinian people of Gaza.

On the day she was leaving Gaza, Garson told her co-workers that she was Jewish. She writes movingly about her family. With a mother and three sisters politically in totally different places from herself, of whom one sister is active in Zionist organisations, this was no easy coming-out. She believed it could have endangered her Gazan co-workers if they were knowingly working with a Jewish woman. She dedicates the book to her mother, who died in 2017, as well as to her co-workers — we get to know them well.

The book focuses on her four years in Gaza, but also encompasses more briefly her interesting personal biography from Canadian origins to New Zealand residence, via Afghanistan and Cambodia as well as Gaza. It also shows her increasing interest in her Jewish identity and her way of integrating this with her passion for justice and anti-Zionism — she is anything but anti-semitic and is brave in the face of mainstream Jewish opinion. She says that she arrived in Gaza as a secular professional and left, 'four years, two wars and one social enterprise later', as 'an activist and a more cognizant Jew'.

There are 1.7 million Gazans, who are, of course, separated from the Palestinians of the West Bank and East Jerusalem

by a large chunk of Israel, and going in and out of Gaza is largely regulated by Israel. Half of Gazans are children and teenagers, with schools teaching in two shifts.

A glance at a map shows just how small Gaza is — given that Israel, too, is small — but not by comparison. At 360 square kilometres, Gaza is a bit bigger than Wellington city, but still much smaller than the greater Wellington region.

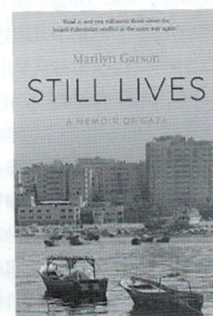
Extensive journals enabled Garson to produce detailed accounts of the day-to-day fears and privations experienced by all those she worked with, as well as the many Gazans who had family killed and houses destroyed in the two wars. There is a detailed day-to-day account of July and August 2014, when the Israelis bombarded Gaza daily. The two political movements, Hamas and Fatah, are discussed, but are not central. They have split the Palestinian territories between them, with Hamas largely in control of Gaza.

Contrasting with the misery of a war footing is the very positive side — the work of Garson's social enterprise GGateway created by her employer, the well-known non-governmental organisation Mercy Corps, along with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) as its first buyer. Her economic development team at Mercy Corps tried to improve prospects for many low paid and unemployed Gazans, with short vocational courses in construction, with startups and with upskilling IT graduates. Gazans have near universal rates of literacy and large numbers of university graduates and yet very high unemployment. Hence, they instituted post-graduate courses to bridge the gap to employment. IT exports are crucial to Gaza. The GGateway project would train and hire recent graduates to become employable. All this in the face of the blockade.

UNRWA, created in 1949, was a crucial agency in Gaza and jumped aboard the GGateway project, employing Garson as a consultant. So, in the 2014 Israeli onslaught on Gaza, she became involved in other aspects of their work, including their role in helping those displaced from their homes. UNRWA's schools, warehouses with emergency stocks, vehicles, communications and staff were set up to shelter 35,000 displaced civilians, but almost 300,000 sought shelter. Garson herself told the Israeli Army where each legally protected shelter was located, but seven were struck, nevertheless. UNRWA did amazing work, but President Trump is de-funding it.

The picture of her co-workers trying to do their work while coping with their families, the fear of being hit by Israeli bombs, the lack of electricity, transport and even food and water while sewage fails is moving and striking. The cold of winter makes all this worse. She makes deep and lasting relationships with these co-workers while declining invitations because of the risk to them if it came out that she was Jewish.

Back in New Zealand in late 2015, Garson joined a syna-



### Notes on reviewers

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gogue, and its choir, and studied for her Bat Mitzvah. This is a trend among adult women who rediscover their Judaism and were not able to undertake the ceremony at thirteen. But nothing improved in Gaza. 'Israel allied itself with the ultra-nationalist right and embraced Donald Trump. Mainstream, Zionist Jewish institutions acquiesced.' In 2018–19, while Garson studied and wrote, Israeli snipers continued to shoot protestors in their own Gazan land — by 30 April last year their forces had killed 202 Gazan Palestinians and wounded 31,249 (with just one Israeli death and six wounded). This during non-violent protests from Gazans close to the border fence.

Gazans stand up for justice and Marilyn Garson declares that she stands with them. She describes herself as 'wired to notice power and vulnerability'. She sure is. She lives by the quote from Beth Goldring, human rights activist and Buddhist teacher, with which she starts the book: 'Life is what you do, about what you notice.' Read this book, well written and poignant, and whatever your position on Middle East politics, you will have a much better picture of life in Gaza and the amazing resilience of the people, despite overwhelming pressures from the occupancy.

PRUE HYMAN

## THE ART OF WAR

Editor: Sun Tzu

Translated and introduced by: Peter Harris

Published by: Everyman's Library, London 2018, 312pp, US\$18.91.

*The Art of War* is probably the ancient Chinese text that is the most well-known to Western readers. It is standard reading for scholars of defence and strategy the world over. Many of the thirteen chapter titles — Starting a Battle; Planning an Attack; The Army on the Move; Forms of Terrain; and Using Spies — would not look out of place in a treatise on modern warfare today. Yet the book's reach has gone far beyond military scholars and entered the wider public consciousness. It is regularly referenced in Western media, from the Oscar-winning 1987 drama *Wall Street* to a 2020 episode of the teen soap opera *Riverdale*. The book has come to signify the combination of intelligence and the ruthless pursuit of one's opponents. It has been applied everywhere, as the *Economist* wrote in a 2011 article, 'from the boardroom to the bedroom'. Numerous editions have been released since the first English-language translations were published in the early 20th century. Amazon is currently selling books utilising *The Art of War* for groups as diverse as businesspeople, trial lawyers and writers of fiction. Sun Tzu's poetic maxims on terrain, deception, intelligence gathering and the qualities of leadership find applicability well beyond the context of China two and a half millennia ago.

Nevertheless, the modern Western reader is unlikely to know much of the context in which the book was written. This is where Peter Harris's 2018 translation provides a much richer guide for readers than many previous publications. The foreword by retired US Army General David Petraeus provides some insight into how the contemporary military leader applies Master Sun's teachings. He notes that Sun Tzu's argument that the best victory is one achieved with-

out fighting was most relevant during the nuclear standoff of the Cold War. Petraeus argues that the rise of asymmetric conflicts with non-state actors after 9/11 has made bloodless victory a more difficult goal. Sun Tzu places importance on speed in warfare and ensuring that violence is never prolonged. For Petraeus this is certainly true, but he notes that it gives little comfort to commanders facing multi-generational conflicts like that of Afghanistan.

Harris's introduction details the scholarship on Sun Tzu and *The Art of War*. Little is known of Sun Tzu's life, and his historicity has been questioned at times. An early Chinese history provides a highly fanciful account of Sun Tzu leading beautiful women of the court in military drills and then executing two of the king's favourites when the women failed to obey their orders. Such accounts have fuelled arguments that Sun Tzu did not exist. It is possible that Sun Tzu is an invention based on other more verifiable characters, such as the military adviser Wu Zixu and the later Sun Bin, who wrote a different book also titled *The Art of War*. While personal details on Sun Tzu are sketchy, the book's poetic and idiosyncratic text does suggest a single author. However, the overall lack of coherence in the writing suggests the book is either made up of a disparate collection of maxims and commentary, or a more orderly piece of writing that was broken up and re-edited at some point later.

Another challenge for scholars has been dating the work. During the middle of the first millennium BCE Chinese warfare shifted away from the small armies used during the Zhou dynasty to a period where several states competed using mass armies. This shift gave rise to a class of professional military advisers such as Sun Tzu. *The Art of War* appears to have been created after this transition had begun as much though not all of the new ways of war are mentioned. The lack of any reference to cavalry is strange as cavalry developed in China prior to the invention of the crossbow, which is mentioned by Sun Tzu. Scholars have given various dates for the work, with Harris suggesting the earliest point being between the 5th and 4th centuries BCE. The last possible date for the text, at least as we know it today, is 118 BCE as a copy has been discovered in a tomb dated to that year.

What really sets this edition apart is the inclusion of annotations from eleven traditional commentaries on *The Art of War*. These commentaries date from the 3rd to 13th centuries CE and therefore span a millennium of Chinese thought on Sun Tzu's work. Harris took these commentaries from an edition published in modern Chinese in 1962. The commentaries provide much greater insight into Chinese interpretations of the ancient work than would a standard translation of the text alone. Harris has provided short biographies of what is known of each commentator, as well as other guides, such as maps and timelines, to assist the Western reader. Of particular value is the editor's notes on each chapter, which help make sense of the more challenging parts of the book. Harris also uses these notes to provide examples from recent history to show how Sun Tzu's points have been applied in situations familiar to today's English-language readers.

As China continues to rise through the 21st century, it

