RECOGNISING COMPETING NARRATIVES

Contested Land, Contested Memory
Israel's Jews and Arabs and the Ghosts of Catastrophe
Jo Roberts
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Reviewed by Diane Lukeman

Jo Roberts is a British-born and educated lawyer and anthropologist who has lived in Canada for some years. Now a freelance writer, for five years she was managing editor of the *Catholic Worker*, and has reported for Embassy Canada's foreign policy weekly on Israel and the West Bank. She volunteered as a Human Rights Observer in the West Bank with a small secular NGO – International Women's Peace Service. Her experience during that time led her to write this book.

"My focus is on Israel's engagement with the Palestinian Nakba of 1948: how contested histories of the past press through the lives of Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel today and, ultimately, how they affect the possibility of peace between Israel and the Palestinian people."

Roberts has produced a well-researched book with material from a wide range of published sources together with the results of interviews with Israeli Jews and Arabs, including historians, writers and those who lived through the years prior to, during, and after the establishment of the State of Israel. The style of writing is succinct and comprehensive and the chapter titles give fair indication of the contents of the book: 1948; Catastrophe and Memory; The "New Israelis"; Reshaping the Landscape; Ghosts of the Holocaust; "All this is part of the Nakba"; Ghosts of the Nakba; Histories Flowing Together. There is one appendix – a copy of the Balfour Declaration – and extensive notes and glossary.

The author considers the foundations of antisemitism from the beginnings of Christianity through two millennia in Europe, early Zionism, the push towards the founding of the State of Israel in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the outcome of this for Jews in Arab countries and their arrival in Israel and the later waves of immigration. She has a clear understanding of these events and their impact on both Jews and Arabs living in Israel at that time. The book succeeds in presenting a balanced picture – each side is described empathetically from the point of view of those who were affected by the war in 1948.

The discussion of the development of nationality and the role of memories, and how narratives are transmitted from generation to generation is clearly informed by Roberts's background in anthropology. She explains that each nation/community develops cohesion through these narratives – and not all the narratives are based on the evidence now available. Through the generations, aspects of the narratives can strengthen and become enmeshed with political agendas. Those who lived through those times were often silent about what happened and now they are no longer there for the debate.

One of the most significant narratives in this book is that Arabs fled their land when the War of Independence broke out and that they were directed by their leaders to do so. There is much more evidence of their eviction and forcible transfer from their homes for those who survived the military attacks.

As part of the Zionist ideology, the return to the land was paramount – agricultural work was seen as vital, and a different way was brought in – communal farming in the collective settlements of the kibbutz and the moshav.

"Neither an Arab or a Jewish farmer from the 1930s would find their land recognizable now. The whole system of land use, and the landscape that it formed, has gone. Patterns of cultivation used for centuries by Arab fellahin were thrown over in 1948 for the modern European agricultural practices embraced by the Yishuv."

The author considers the extensive tree-planting in Israel significant in the narratives: the removal of olive trees, although these are indigenous to the land, and the planting of European species such as the pine, seemed to be an attempt to remove signs of the Arab presence in the land. Tree-planting appears to have been used often to cover up the remains of destroyed Arab villages.

Towards the end of the last chapter, Roberts writes: "As I travelled through Israel, talking to people about this book, I would ask if they had hope for the future. After a while, I stopped asking as the responses were so grim."

In 2009 the Education Ministry banned the use of the word 'Nakba' in the one textbook for Palestinian students in which the word appeared, in a description of how the War of Independence would be described by the Arabs. A spokesperson for the Ministry said, "It is inconceivable that in the State of Israel we would talk about the establishment of the state as a catastrophe." This denial is likely to be similarly inconceivable to those who were displaced permanently by this event.

Together with the stories of irreconcileable views, there is material from some of those interviewed talking more positively about the need to merge the narratives, to allow the Nakba to be part of the history of the founding of the State, about initiatives where the Israeli Arabs and Jews do work together. It remains, however, that:

"Jewish Israelis and Palestinians both remember the land as their own but their memories, individual and collective, are utterly different. Two competing narratives of historical suffering frame the conflict between them, two peoples whose dreams of nationhood are bound to the same territory."

A short review such as this cannot do justice to a book which narrates in rich detail the history of the Jews in Europe leading to the founding of the State of Israel and its impact on the local population of Palestine. The discussion of identity, statehood and the role of narrative gives a context for the sources of the conflicts and their continuation. You may not agree with all that is written in this book. Some of the material will bring great sadness, hopelessness and helplessness. This does not stop me from recommending strongly that you read it.