

**Roger Bourke, *Prisoners of the Japanese: Literary Imagination and the
Prisoner-of-War Experience*,
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The place within Australian national history of Australian prisoners of the Japanese during the Second World War has steadily risen during the past two decades. This can be testified by a perusal of the shelves of any Australian bookshop that will reveal a variety of titles by historians and ex-prisoners of war. Within popular Australian memory, the prisoner of war experience has come to represent concepts of mateship, courage and survival. Since the 1980s the place of the prisoner of war experience within the confines of the Anzac Legend has been the subject of great interest amongst academics such as Hank Nelson, Stephen Garton, Robin Gerster and Joan Beaumont, who have variously noted the tensions that exist within the writing of ex-POWs and within oral testimonies between their lived experiences and the Anzac ethos.

By contrast Roger Bourke's *Prisoners of the Japanese: Literary Imagination and the Prisoner-of-War Experience* focus is upon POW fiction and aims, according to the book's blurb, to similarly uncover 'the extent to which these fictions have influenced our beliefs'. At first this appears a compelling and welcoming contribution to the historiographical discussions on Allied prisoners of the Japanese. The main focus of Bourke's analysis are Nevil Shute's *A Town Like Alice*, James Clavell's *King Rat*, Pierre Boulle's novel and David Lean's film adaptation of *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, J.G. Ballard's and Steven Spielberg's film adaptation of *Empire of the Sun*, and David Malouf's *The Great World* amongst others. But unfortunately, the few fictionalised accounts of internment in Asia limit and fail to sustain Bourke's analysis.

Bourke's aim to cut through the nationalism that permeates wartime literature is applaudable but this decision perhaps ignores some pertinent questions. Namely, American and Dutch POW fiction is not covered and its general absence is not explained or justified. A chapter dedicated solely to Australian

POW fiction further compromises this aim. This is most clear within chapter four, which provides the most compelling discussion of Bourke's book but is needlessly limited through methodological choice. Whilst Bourke rightly notes that within British and Australian narratives, Americans are often described as racketeers, mafia-type capitalists, selfishly and unabashedly looking out for the survival of number one he fails to address whether American literature confirms such behaviour or how British and Australians are described in American accounts. Therefore, this once again emphasises why an inclusion of American works may have diversified this publication. Australian POW literature is written within a national framework. Australian prisoner of war memoirs, whilst emphasising and upholding the values inherent within the Anzac legend, also reveal that in order to survive selfishness could undermine the popular concept of mateship and coherent camp life. Whether this is a factor that compromises accurate representation and comparisons with how other nationalities represent the POW experiences and their characterisations of POWs of other nationalities is an area in need of further research.

At times, *Prisoners of the Japanese* proves a frustrating read. There is far too much explanatory narrative given to the process of writing and producing the few POW novels and films that form the subject of his analysis. Furthermore, the continual usage of large block quotations distract from Bourke's own discussion and viewpoint on the topic – making his line of argument rather disjointed at times. This is particularly infuriating within the Conclusion and perhaps emphasises the limitations of the topic. This leads to further frustration resulting from the lack of conviction in Bourke's argument as far too much space is filled by someone else's words. Such is the conclusion to the first chapter, in which Bourke discusses the construction of POWs as Crusoe-like figures (in which interestingly, he draws upon both fiction and memoir). Whilst the analogy is appealing it would have been far more fascinating if he had cited an author who actually made reference to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Similarly trying, is his unfair criticism and misrepresentation of Robin Gerster's discussion on attitudes to race by POW authors within Gerster's *Big-Noting: The Heroic Theme Within Australian War Writing*.

Furthermore, in a chapter discussing the mythology created by Pierre Boulle's novel, and David Lean's film, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, Bourke misappropriates the 'myth' in regards to the name of the river in which the POWs constructed the railway bridge. His assertion that Boulle's 'River Kwai' is actually a tautology – 'River River' – and the bridge actually cross the Kwai Yai (big Kwai) is in fact correct. Whilst Kwai is a little used colloquial Thai name for a river the actual 'myth' behind the name of the River Kwai is far more compelling than an assumed tautology, and is much more relevant to Bourke's discussion. When tourists began arriving at Kanchanaburi in Thailand to view the infamous bridge in the wake of the success of the film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, they may have been disappointed to find that prisoners of war had not built a railway bridge crossing the Kwai. The problem was that the actual bridge in fact crossed the Mae Khlong (แม่ คลอง). The River Kwai branched from the Mae Khlong and followed it alongside the railway toward the Burmese border. Therefore, to accommodate the tourists the authorities renamed the section of river in which the bridge was located upon the Mae Khlong the Kwai Yai and renamed the Kwai the Kwai Noi (little Kwai). However, geography lessons aside, the main criticism of this chapter is that it focuses too much on the production of the film and far too little upon the reactions of ex-POWs at the time of the film's release. Bourke insists *The Bridge on the River Kwai* angered and offended ex-POWs but does not expand upon this, apart from the commentary of British ex-POW and literary academic Ian Watt. A broader range of voices would have diversified this most interesting aspect of the discussion.

Perhaps the inclusion of all of POW literary genres – including the memoirs, published diaries, autobiographies – would have furthered Bourke's analysis. Throughout the book, there is a genuine willingness by Bourke to include references from First World War POW literature, POW literature from prisoners interned in Europe during the Second World War, memoirs by prisoners of the Japanese, and Holocaust testimony. In fact, one of the most quoted authors in the book is the Italian Jew Primo Levi and his experiences of Auschwitz, and he was neither a POW nor a writer of POW fiction.

There exists a strong and diverse historiography on the topic of prisoners of the Japanese, and a discussion and proper acknowledgement of this would have been appropriate. Developments in this area over the past two decades have observed how myths developed about internment by memoirs published in the post-war years, in which survival was based upon values inherent within Anzac, especially mateship. Literary critics and historians, such as Beaumont, Nelson, Gerster, Garton and Gavan Daws in the 1980s and 1990s revealed the diversity of POW narratives and experiences and revealed that camp dynamics and survival were far more complicated than an emphasis on national narratives. Absence of these compelling and important works within Bourke's *Prisoners of the Japanese*, issues that directly relate to the mythologizing of the prisoner of war experience, are unfortunate. The popularity and critical attention given to POW memoirs written by authors such Russell Braddon and Rohan Rivett (which have both sold over 1 million copies), and diversity added to this genre by authors such as Ray Parkin, make the memoirs and published diaries of POWs far more interesting and superior in capturing the experience of POWs in Asia during the Second World War than fictionalised accounts, some of which, as Bourke demonstrates, were written by authors who did not experience wartime internment or experience the events they fictionalised. The uneasy inclusions at times of POW memoirs in Bourke's discussion reflect the limited scope of a book-length discussion solely limited to fictionalised accounts of prisoners of the Japanese.

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