

Christina Twomey, *Australia's Forgotten Prisoners: Civilians Interned by the Japanese in World War Two* (New York: CUP, 2007)

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Over the course of the Second World War, the Japanese captured some 1,500 Australian civilians and interned them, along with other allied nationals, in a network of camps that stretched from north China and Japan proper to present-day Papua New Guinea and Sumatra. In *Australia's Forgotten Prisoners*, Christina Twomey seeks to recover the “lost stories” of these internees, to bear witness to their experiences, and to explain how they came to be marginalised from Australian public commemorations of the war (p. 18). | 456

Rather than employing categories of region, camp, or gender, Twomey approaches internment through the lens of nationality. In doing so, she is able to draw a narrative arc that stretches from the (non)evacuation of internees from the path of Japan's advance in the lead-up and early phases of the war right through to the internees' struggle for compensation and commemoration in the post-war era. *Forgotten Prisoners* thus creates a fuller picture of civilian internment, including how internees came to be trapped in the war zone; how they coped with life in the camps; how they struggled to rebuild their lives amidst the shattered colonialism of post-war East Asia; and how their treatment by Australian government differed from that of the oft-lionised POWs.

Twomey makes thorough use of personal memoirs, diaries, and various Australian government records, especially grant files from the Civilian Internees Trust Fund, which handled applications for government relief from former internees. She also derives insight from interviews conducted with internees Nelma Davies and Ian Begley. Thanks to her careful investigation of available source material, Twomey's work provides an account of internees that has gender balance and includes a range of internee voices from several different sectors of colonial society. The third part of Twomey's work, divided into sections headed "Liberation," "Homecoming," "Legacy," and "Compensation" draws on post-war applications for grants lodged by internees and is particularly worthy of further research by historians interested in how allied governments regarded the repatriation of their civilians. |457

In contrast to the policies eventually adopted by Britain, Canada, and the US, the Australian Department of External Affairs insisted throughout the war that interned Australians were responsible for the costs of their repatriation and began pursuing payment from ex-internees as soon as they set foot on Australian soil. Records generated over the course of attempts to collect on internee debts, along with applications for grants and government relief provide a rare window into the difficulty with which former internees integrated into the post-war world. Far from marking the end of deprivation, the coming of peace meant a life of poverty for many grappling with the loss of a lifetime's worth of savings and assets, ruined health, and general economic hardship.

By bringing to light the files of Australia's Civilian Internees Trust Fund, Twomey pulls back the curtain on the shabby treatment internees received after a period of tremendous hardship. In many cases, internees returned to Australia virtually penniless and weakened by malnutrition. They were then marginalised by a government eager to recoup the costs of repatriation and largely unsympathetic to poverty, ill health and unemployment. But while approaching internment along strictly national lines has the benefit of focusing attention on this specific category of government-inflicted suffering, the costs of this approach reveal themselves in the broad brushstrokes with which the actual internment experience is described elsewhere in *Forgotten Prisoners*.

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For allied civilians interned by the Japanese, nationality or country of origin was neither central to their experience nor as easily defined as contemporary understandings might suggest. Indeed, many of those repatriated to Australia at the end of the war were initially categorised as British due to the close ties and overlapping senses of identity in a time when an exclusively Australian concept of nationality did not yet exist in law. Furthermore, as Twomey notes, the internees were drawn from "a colonial community that had conventions and practices foreign even to mainland Australians" (p. 45-46), with the result that investigating internment strictly along national lines proves less clear-cut than might initially be imagined.

While the internment camps may have reflected the colonial societies from which the internees themselves were culled, the reflection was a distorted one, as Twomey

rightly recognises (p. 59). This re-creation of colonial society, stripped of essential ingredients like servants and other colonial comforts and constrained by the addition of barbed wire and gun-toting guards, reflected a substantial re-arrangement of old patterns of rank and privilege. In such an environment, previous employment, nationality, education level and social status arguably became less significant in determining the experience of individuals in internment than was one's status as a parent, the presence of a spouse, the possession of skills easily transferrable to camp life, or, perhaps most importantly, the circumstances of the particular camp in which one was interned. Some camps were segregated, others were mixed-sex; some were heavily populated with missionaries, while others had a more secular atmosphere. In short, the societies that developed within each individual camp varied wildly and were ones in which national lines only occasionally dominated. |459

Similarly, camps varied markedly by virtue of geography and circumstance. Japan's network of camps reached from New Guinea to Mongolia and from Japan itself to Sumatra, with an accompanying range of development and climate. Internees at the Weihsien camp were housed in a former mission compound, complete with hospital and an elegant Edwardian church, far from the war in rural Shandong. In contrast, Twomey notes the experience of internees in Rabaul, who spent two years of their internment huddled in tunnels they had dug into the hillside for shelter from American bombing raids. So close to battle, these internees "ran the risk of surviving captivity

under the Japanese, only to be killed by the bombs of Allied planes” (p. 124). With the internment experience so contingent on region, locale or camp commandant, there could be no exclusively “Australian” experience of internment. Nationality alone, then, is an insufficient and at times misleading framework for analysing the phenomenon of internment.

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One must not understate the contribution of Twomey’s research. By elaborating the hardships faced by internees following their release, many of which were made harder by the capriciousness of Australian government policy, Twomey has cast light on a previously ignored chapter in the history of internment and provided inspiration for further research into the experience of other internees following the war. While *Australia’s Forgotten Prisoners* founders somewhat on the ambition to truly “bear witness to the war experiences of civilian internees” (p. 18) by inadvertently flattening the dramatic differences that existed from camp to camp, readers can still turn fruitfully to this work for insight into the real hardships that repatriation represented for Australian internees and for further understandings of some of the camps referred to in the book.