

**Roger Bourke.** *Prisoners of the Japanese: Literary imagination and the prisoner-of-war experience.* St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2006, 224pp. AU \$45

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Roger Bourke's *Prisoners of the Japanese* provides an analysis of literary and other narrative accounts of the prisoner-of-war experience, both generally and specifically the experience of being a POW of the Japanese. And while he takes into account the fact that there are a significant number of published (and republished) memoirs that have attracted popular and critical attention, Bourke's concern is with the paucity of fictional accounts and an associated lack of critical attention. In this regard, Bourke's book provides a significant addition to the consideration of the prisoner-of-war experience.

In a sense, as a starting point, Bourke makes note of Paul Fussell's characterisation of Second-World-War literature as a "laconic refusal to reach out for any myth" in a world "where traditional significance has long ago been given up for lost". Here, we might suggest that Fussell draws upon John Barth's essay on "The Literature of Exhaustion" (Atlantic, 1967) in which Barth ponders on how art can survive in the wake of the tumult and horrors of the early- and mid-twentieth century. In other words, in invoking Fussell, Bourke seeks to address a similar question to Barth: how can narrative represent the prisoner-of-war experience if the deployment of once powerful symbolisms and myths no longer seems capable of providing an insight and understanding of that experience, and no longer seem to be able to carry the weight of the experience?

Bourke challenges Fussell to assert that "*prisoner-fictions and prisoner-authors . . . never seem to abandon their quest to assign 'meaning' to their experience*". Further, he identifies at least two myths that underpin the fictions representing the experience under the Japanese. Bourke notes the persistence of the figure of the soldier-as-Christ and attendant Christian mythology and what he terms the "modern 'myth' of Robinson Crusoe".

Before discussing how fictions can be read in terms of these myths, it is important address a number of other issues. Bourke outlines three categories of fiction: the fictions of experience, those which draw on the experiences of the author (here Bourke cites the examples of James Clavell's *King Rat* and J. G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*); the researched fictions, which of course refers to those fictions based on the author's own investigations (Nevil Shute's *A Town Like Alice* and David Malouf's *The Great World*); and the imaginary,

those fictions that make only the slightest gesture toward historical circumstance, and in this case Bourke notes Pierre Boulle's *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (paradoxically the most popular and well-known prisoner-of-the-Japanese fictions).

Of course, these categories go to the issue of "authenticity" and go to explain the greater importance placed on prisoner-of-war memoirs, which perhaps satisfy a need to document event and circumstance, to provide a historical accuracy to the experience. In other words the desire for the historico-realistic account of the POW experience may still be more powerful than processes of fictional-mythic representation. This is not to say that there might not be a shift toward the fictional-mythic.

In addressing the Soldier-as-Christ figure, Bourke argues that in *A Town Like Alice* the key scene is the crucifixion of the prisoner Joe Harman. Such an image sets in train a powerful set of associations that raise the novel above its prosaic and somewhat formulaic construction. And, further, Bourke considers the way in which the scene is played out in both the novel and its later film adaptation, and the ways in which the cinematic visualisation and narrativisation builds on the literary. It is this difference between the literary and the cinematic that might demonstrate not the loss of traditional significance but its shift to a new medium.

Bourke underplays this point to a certain degree, even though he points out the fact that for most audiences, familiarity with a number of these texts is largely cinematic. Indeed this reviewer came to a number of these texts through their screen adaptations. In other words it could be argued, and Bourke adumbrates this, that if the literary is no longer served by traditional symbolism, the tradition of the visual (in this case the cinematic and the televisual) still is.

Nevertheless, Bourke persuasively argues for the continuing efficacy of Christian mythology and symbolism in prisoner-of-war narratives. The identification of Defoe's Robinson Crusoe as a figure that carries the significance of these narratives is more contentious. Bourke identifies two sources: Ian Watt's memoirs of his experiences as a POW under the Japanese; and Primo Levi's experience of Auschwitz. The difficulty, of course, is how to correlate the feeling of being isolated, abandoned and left to one's own resources amid an otherwise collective, if differentiable, experience. This is complicated further in two ways: first, it is unclear if Levi is invoking Robinson Crusoe as a general descriptor of his Auschwitz experience or whether it pertains to the period after the Germans had left; second, Levi

also invokes Hobbes, and one can see how the idea of a war of “all against all” might operate in a POW camp environment where individual survival is set against collective survival.

It is here that Bourke’s argument has the greatest potential and perhaps should have been developed earlier in the book. As it stands, it is the more interesting but less developed aspect of *Prisoners of the Japanese*. The interconnections of Crusoe’s view of the world and the Hobbesian view of nature/society remain subordinated to the Christological readings of the texts. In this sense Bourke’s work offers an opportunity to others to develop, extend and critique his reading of prisoner-of-war narratives, both fictional and non-fictional.

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