

Convicts, Coolies and Colonialism: reorienting the prisoner-of-war narrative

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Despite its remarkable scope, popularity and durability, the Australian prisoner-of-war narrative from the Pacific War, in both documentary and imaginative forms, has generated little critical attention.¹ Scholarly interest in it (as in prisoners-of-war more generally) is a relatively recent phenomenon, identifying it as a dissonant sub-genre of Australian war writing's dominant 'big-noting' Anzac tradition. Drawing on Carnochan's concept of 'the literature of confinement', this paper aims to enrich the dialogue about the Pacific War captivity narrative by reading it as 'prison' literature rather than as a branch of 'war' writing. It will also consider the significance of allusions to the Robinson Crusoe myth (a core trope of confinement literature), in the Australian convict and prisoner-of-war traditions. Due to constraints of space, the approach adopted is somewhat schematic and impressionistic and represents 'work in progress' rather than final thoughts.

Robin Gerster (1987) established the prevailing terms of reference of the Pacific War captivity narrative. For Gerster, because the prisoner-of-war narrative allegedly focuses on the captive's 'shame' at being denied his rightful place on the battlefield, writers of prisoner-of-war narrative face 'an acute problem of "public relations": how to make the non-combatant role attractive.² Their strategies for dealing with this problem include 'special pleading of passive suffering' (i.e. exploiting the horror and hardship of captivity) and seeking 'vicarious vengeance through mercilessly attacking [the] old enemy in print'. Such strategies, according to Gerster, render Australian Pacific War captivity narratives almost ubiquitously racist, appealing to a deep xenophobia in the national culture. Other commentators have followed Gerster's lead, treating the Pacific War POW genre's celebration of survival principally in relation to the Anzac legend which figures the Australian serviceman as 'resourceful in times of stress or hardship, adaptable, and possessing superior social organisation and capacity for comradeship or mateship' (Beaumont 481).

Acknowledging the importance of the theme of 'collective bonding' in the captivity narrative, Stephen Garton nevertheless registers the 'tensions' between 'the desire to mark out a specific Australian experience and the need to place it in a broader human story' (211) – tensions heightened by revisionist studies of the mateship ethos by Beaumont, Daws, Nelson and Hennings which suggest doubt 'whether there was anything distinctive about the Australian experience of internment' (216) and 'an awareness that there was no single prisoner-of-war experience' (217). Recognising the diversity of responses to and constructions of captivity, he discerns a positive and even transcendent impulse at work in some texts – notably the diaries and memoirs that flooded onto the market in the mid-1980s – and argues that xenophobia is 'not the whole story'. There is 'another type of story' at work that has affiliations with the narrative of 'personal growth' or *Bildungsroman* and embodies the drive to transcend the horrors of starvation, torture, slave labour and death and achieve a 'spirit of accommodation and tolerance' (217).

In their different ways, Gerster and Garton seek to find an appropriate critical lens through which to view the Australian prisoner-of-war narrative. Garton's sensitive appreciation of the genre's problematic status extends and counters Gerster's account, opening up new critical possibilities. Whether his suggestion that the *Bildungsroman* offers the most appropriate model for apprehending 'transcendence' of captivity is, however, debatable. Garton's allusion to the 'normalisation of captivity' (210) effected by personal accounts of the grim sufferings of internment offers greater opportunity for repositioning and thus revisioning prisoner-of-war literature. Ironically, Gerster's essay, with its focus on national characteristics, plots (and then abandons) the coordinates that permit this reorientation. Drawing on *Dead Men Rising*, Seaforth Mackenzie's novel set in an internment camp for Japanese prisoners-of-war, it notes that 'within the grounds of the camp, all men – guards and POWs alike – are prisoners' (226). By insisting on the military context, however, he misses Mackenzie's point that they are also equally prisoners *outside* the camp precincts. For Mackenzie, as for Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, the world – indeed the universe – is a vast internment camp, managed by an army of bureaucrats whose lives are as futile and circumscribed as the lives of the detainees they have in their charge. Fleeting moments of sensual ecstasy may briefly console but cannot ultimately liberate. There is no escape – except death. Based on its author's experiences as guard in the infamous Cowra camp where Japanese prisoners conducted a suicidal mass escape in 1944, the novel allegorises human life as a state of incarceration.³

These observations remind us that the 'prison' story belongs to a long international tradition which W.B. Carnochan, building on Foucault and Adorno in a wide-ranging and provocative essay, delineates as 'The Literature of Confinement' (*Oxford History of the Prison*, 381-406). This tradition which 'has no natural limit' (382), 'encompasses 'imaginary' prisons of the self and mind on the one hand and representations of the 'real' or 'actual' prison on the other (382) and is 'largely though not exclusively male' (384). Its relevance to the Australian captivity narrative is clear.⁵

Whether fictional or autobiographical, the literature of the prison concerns the interplay of constraint and freedom and therefore, analogously, also concerns its own creation. *Prison fictions are often told in the first person, and even when they are not, they imply the question, how does the mind break free?* Following Adorno, we could say that in a secular context freedom is always and only the figure: prison the essential ground ... *The overarching category is confinement; its subcategories are captivity of any sort and the particular experience of imprisonment. Confinement restricts the free movement of body or mind ... [and] comes in many forms – on islands, in madhouses, in abbeys and convents, in domestic households, in underground apartments in Harlem ... in claustral settings (like those in which Kafka and Beckett immure their characters) as well as in jails, penitentiaries and prisoner-of-war camps: in the human imagination, prison is where one finds it.* (381-2, my emphasis)

In the Australian context, a comprehensive study of the literature of confinement would encompass first and foremost Aboriginal writing and convict literature, as well as more recent prison literature. It would also include prisoner-of-war literature, the literature of the asylum, the orphanage and the school and other disciplinary institutions. Much of this literature, consists of first person 'testimony', both autobiographical and fictionalised, and 'concerns the workings of power and resistance to power' (382). It also raises the question of transcendence: 'how does the mind break free?' As Carnochan observes, prison stories 'commonly share a hope of transcendence, as represented by the overcoming of limitation or degradation, whether by the exercise of the mind or by interventions of providence' (382). His essay thus offers a model for a wide-ranging comparative literary study of the POW captivity narrative both within the national context and internationally.

Preliminary investigation reveals, for example, interesting parallels between prisoner-of-war narrative and the convict tradition, particularly in respect of the nature and significance of the representations of the captivity experiences that they reveal. To read POW literature alongside accounts of the convict system is to confront striking similarities not only between the constructions of suffering but also in the analyses of the significance of that suffering. If nineteenth-century critics of the convict system regarded it as a system of slavery, some twentieth-century Australian Marxist and left-leaning historians continue to do so, including Ken Dallas and Robert Hughes. In Hughes' view, for example, the British establishment feared and loathed the so-called 'criminal classes', identifying them as 'the enemy within' the emergent capitalist state and shipping them out to Australia as prisoners of the bourgeoisie in a vicious class war (27, 57, 282-7). From this same perspective, the Pacific War was an imperialist war for economic control of Asia. Initially victorious, the Japanese humiliated Allied prisoners as defeated representatives of the once dominant 'white' colonial empires in Asia and, in contravention of the Geneva Convention, converted them into a vast slave labour force in the Emperor's war machine.

Both convicts and prisoners of the Japanese saw themselves as slaves and viewed the crowded and unsanitary 'hell ships' bearing them to their places of toil as analogous to slave transports.⁶ For both groups, escape was virtually impossible. The

remote and inhospitable environments to which they were transported were versions of the 'natural penitentiary' Marcus Clarke saw in the topography of Van Diemen's Land.⁷ Athol Moffit, for example, jokes about the chance of allied prisoners successfully breaking out from Asian POW camps being equal to that of 'the convict Buckley who attempted to walk to China' (56).⁸ Both groups were guarded by the military and subjected to the forms of 'the punishment of spectacle' (public beatings and executions, floggings, torture) that Foucault associated with the pre-modern state.⁹ Both groups wore the scars of corporal punishment and suffered deficiency diseases (ulcers, sores, scurvy, beri-beri, blindness) attributable to inadequate rations.¹⁰ Both groups developed comparable strategies for coping with the horrors of their situation including black marketeering, secret codes, a sardonic, subversive humour, a vivid prison 'argot', supportive 'mateship' networks and a larrikin toughness.

Interestingly, prisoners-of-war under the Japanese sometimes saw themselves as the modern equivalents of nineteenth-century convicts.¹¹ Ray Parkin, for example, notes of 'Dunlop's thousand': 'we were shifted down to Makasura, just outside Batavia to await transportation [to Singapore] – even as our forebears awaited Botany Bay' (371). Referring to Gabbett, the cannibal in *His Natural Life*, he later observes that 'Gabot Cook, himself' ('a fictional Tasmanian convict turned cannibal') 'wouldn't be noticed' among the Australian POWs, newly arrived in Japan, their 'jungle beards' and long hair roughly barbered by order of their captors leaving 'patchy white skulls and tufted and plucked heads' (852). Malouf's ex-POW protagonist in *The Great World*, Vic Curran, 'has the look of a convict' (212) and, after his repatriation, develops a business empire based on shady financial deals. The best-loved and most frequently repeated tales of Australian POWs celebrated daring acts of theft in humorous euphemisms akin to the 'flash' language of the convicts. Goods (mostly foodstuffs) were not stolen but 'scrounged', 'liberated' and even 'promoted' for use by prisoners. Vivid POW idioms pepper the dialogue constituting Donald Stuart's *I Think I'll Live* (1981). POW narratives like Stuart's, penned from the viewpoint of the 'other ranks', are anti-authoritarian and deeply critical of the hierarchical nature of the military and the rituals its officers perpetuated (often to the point of absurdity) in the camps.¹² They particularly single out for attack the 'jap happy' officers ('white Nips') seen to be too cooperative with their captors and/or participating in racketeering (see especially Parkin 536, 558) and suggests that far from feeling 'shame' at their non-combatant status, many POWs were keen to dissociate themselves from the military ethos. This criticism is reminiscent of the reported and imagined contempt of the convicts for their guards and particularly for the overseers, floggers and informers co-opted from among their own numbers as reported in the journal of Francois-Maurice Lepailleur, a Quebecois political prisoner held during the 1840s in the Longbottom convict settlement at what is now Canada Bay in Sydney (45-6, 48). Further striking parallels between Lepailleur's journal and the diaries and journals of prisoners-of-war invite closer study.

Recidivist convicts were sent to sites of 'secondary punishment' including the dreaded Norfolk Island. Likewise, POWs whose acts of resistance brought them to the notice of the Japanese, were tried and punished along with political prisoners

and ordinary criminals. If they escaped execution they were incarcerated in local gaols, separate from and usually much harsher than the POW camps. Outram Road Prison in Singapore, for example, had the reputation of being the 'Ultima Thule' or 'Norfolk Island' for POWs. Once in such a gaol, prisoners-of-war of all nationalities developed a sense of comradeship and common identity with their fellow 'criminals', sharing as they did an experience of extreme brutalisation (see Hudson, Bell). Their dehumanising experiences call to mind the worst sufferings of convicts depicted by Tucker, Clarke and Warung. Boehm's comparison of the convict system with 20th century concentration camps (64) becomes the controlling image of the convict system as 'gulag' in Hughes' *The Fatal Shore*.

References, explicit and implied to *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) highlight other points of contact between Pacific War captivity narratives and the convict tradition. Crusoe, is one of the best known 'captive' heroes in literature, exemplifying either 'the natural self-reliance of mankind (as Rousseau believed) or (as contemporary readers are more likely to believe now) the colonizing mentality at work' (Carnochan, 384). For these reasons, Defoe's multivalent narrative which has been read as survival story, religious allegory and economic parable, is one of the key texts in the literature of confinement and has spawned an entire tradition (*Robinsonaden*) of desert-island-castaway stories. The Crusoe myth treats themes of solitude, survival, the relation of humankind to nature and [of Europeans] to non-European others (Spaas & Stimpson, viii). It has been consciously invoked in convict literature (most notably in chapter 26 of *His Natural Life*) and adopted by some writers of Pacific War POW narratives as an ironic paradigm of that particular captivity experience. If Crusoe's 'epic of the stiff upper lip' is not that of 'a collective lip' (Watt, 171) its evocation of the prison as a microcosm of quasi-capitalist production and exploitation has proven as relevant to constructions of the POW experience as the homosocial dynamics of its all-male environment.

Explicit allusions to the Crusoe myth (and its romantic-era descendant *The Swiss Family Robinson*) occur in numerous POW narratives including James Benson's *Prisoner's Base and Home Again: The Story of a Missionary Prisoner-of-War* (1957), Ray Parkin's *Trilogy* (*Out of the Smoke* [1960]; *Into the Smother* [1963] and *The Sword and the Blossom* [1968]) and Rowley Richards' *The Survival Factor* (1989). 'You'll never get off the island', the sardonic slogan of Australians in Changi (Nelson 27), also the title of Keith Wilson's 1989 memoir of captivity, implies that all the prisoners-of-war on Singapore are Crusoe figures.¹³ The resonant epigraph of Ooka Shohei's *Taken Captive: A Japanese POW's Story*, lifted from *Spiritual Reflections*, Defoe's second Crusoe sequel, illuminates the allegorical dimension of the literature of confinement: '[it is] reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another.'¹⁴

If Benson's narrative of internment takes its bearings from the idyllic colony of the *Swiss Family Robinson* (1812-27)¹⁵ Ray Parkin's wartime trilogy is haunted by the spectre of Defoe's shipwrecked mariner. A survivor of the sinking of the *Perth* in Sunda Strait, Parkin fictionalises his own experience in the first and third volumes in the character, John whose perspective is rendered objectively in third person narration. In the first volume, *Out of the Smoke* John struggles naked from the sea onto

Sangieng. He finds an old canvas boat cover and cuts himself rudimentary clothing. '[G]arbed in the newly fashioned coat and the tall Crusoe-like headpiece which made him look as if wildness were his natural state' (36) he sets out to explore the island and is welcomed by fellow survivors with 'Hi Robinson Crusoe' (44). Having established the Crusoe motif, Parkin continues to employ it to comment, in complex and often paradoxical or ironic ways, on John's journey into (and through) captivity. As well as situating John's experience within an ancient sea-faring romance tradition, it provides a touchstone for reflecting upon upon states of civilization and savagery. For Parkin, the romance of the *Robinsonaden* conceals acquisitiveness, materialism and an aggressive colonising impulse which needs to be resisted (85, 201, 233). Most importantly, it is an index of the autobiographical protagonist's spiritual development. John's abandonment of the Crusoe hat (and role) in the second volume (*Into the Smother*) signals his rejection of western society's rationalism, materialism and individualism. He develops a philosophy of intuition and acceptance, based on 'stomach wisdom', a 'feeling' for things which he believes is the basis of existence: 'this deep knowledge can outstrip egoistic intellect' (535). His journey leads him away from the Crusoe impulse to colonise and possess, towards an almost 'Zen' acceptance of pure 'being': 'to attempt more than to *be* is to propagate uselessness ... blessed are the meek. That is all you need to know' (807-8). Ultimately, in *The Sword and the Blossom* it leads John to empathy with the Japanese 'Other'. This is signalled in the text by the increased usage of Japanese terms and direct quotation of classic Japanese haiku: 'I've been Shintoed' (809), he says.

The significance of the Crusoe myth for POW captivity is implied rather than stated in *The Great World*. Malouf explores the meanings of the Australian experience of Changi and the Burma-Thai Railway on several levels: in the contexts of twentieth-century Australia and the political economy of mid-twentieth-century capitalism; as an episode in the long history of the rise and fall of empires; and as a meditation on the meanings of civilization and barbarism. 'Civilisation' consists in the 'world of commodities' (45) that can be used, sold, exchanged or discarded until 'nothing' remains. The 'absolute deprivation' of slavery on the railway confirms Digger's realisation (akin to Parkin's) that 'basically, when you get down to it, we've got nothing' (143). Alongside the Tamils who had formerly toiled for the British but now 'had changed masters, that's all. Another empire to build' (152), Digger and his mates face an uncomfortable truth. The Japanese have overturned the 'unquestionable superiority' of the white men who, in their turn, are 'coolies now'. It is this transformation (and the brutalisation accompanying it) that produces the 'shame' attributed by Gerster to the prisoner's non-combatant status.

The essential solitariness of Malouf's central characters, their struggle for survival in an all-male environment, their Crusoesque 'sexual apathy' (James Joyce's phrase) and particularly their efforts to reconstruct 'the world that has exploded around them' from the salvaged fragments (44) recall Defoe's myth.¹⁶ Changi, a place of rackets and deals, may be a microcosm of the wider world but the captivity experience also embraces altruism and self-sacrifice. Malouf allows Digger to perceive that the 'touch' of life in captivity, as outside the camp, is 'all selfishness and

savagery on one side' yet, at the same time 'the gentlest of healing' (194). Likewise, where Malouf perpetuates the theme of mateship, he also revises and qualifies it by presenting 'the Japanese and Korean guards on the Thailand-Burma railway as equal victims who, like the Australians, simply did what they had to survive' (Broinowski, 77). The authorially endorsed spiritual value of 'selfpossession', bequeathed to Digger by Mac, which emerges as 'the one true ground of manliness' (117, my emphasis) is reminiscent of Crusoe's self-sufficiency and represents but one of the many possible responses to captivity on a continuum from extreme resistance to quietist accommodation.

Notes

- ¹ See Laird's survey of the Australian prisoner-of-war narrative from World War 2 in the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* and Beaumont's in the *Oxford Companion to Australian Military History* for an overview of the genre.
- ² The extent to which captivity narratives by women have also been incorporated into the Anzac tradition remains a matter of debate among commentators (see Gerster, Beaumont, Laird and Garton). While the question of gender is a crucial one requiring the inclusion of female narratives in any comprehensive study of the Australian captivity narrative from the Pacific War, they will not be discussed in this paper.
- ³ Arguably all Mackenzie's novels envision a claustral universe and a carceral society: the school of *The Young Desire It*, the prisoner-of-war camp of *Dead Men Rising* and the claustrophobic urban-suburban domestic prisons (with their crimes and punishments) of *Chosen People* and *The Refuge*.
- ⁴ The debate in the *Slavic Review* (Fall/Winter 1987; Summer 1989) between Gruenwald, Oja and Hayden over Yugoslav 'prison and camp literature' is relevant to this problem of generic limits.
- ⁵ Other discussions of the 'prison' literature model relevant to the project of reorienting the Australian prisoner-of-war narrative include H. Bruce Franklin's classic study, *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (1978/1989) which begins with the slave narrative and traces the tradition through early convict literature and the work of Herman Melville up to the present day; and Ann Fabian's *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth Century America* (2000) which examines popular narratives concerning (and allegedly by) beggars, slaves, convicts, prisoners-of-war and farm wives and tramps.
- ⁶ The titles of several Pacific War POW narratives, not only by Australians, feature the term 'slaves' in their titles: Roy Whitecross's *Slaves of the Son of Heaven* (1951); W. Ken Hughes's *Slaves of the Samurai* (1946). The perception that they had been transformed into slaves or coolies pervades the narratives of prisoners of the Japanese. (The instances are too numerous to list but see, for example, Parkin 471, on 'our slave state'.) Likewise, convicts in Van Diemen's land and Norfolk Island often saw themselves as slaves (Lepailleur), and were represented as slaves by critics of the system (Hughes 282). Several of the early convict transports were owned and fitted out by slaving contractors, equipped with slave shackles designed for Africans making 'the infamous middle passage' (Hughes 145-6).
- ⁷ Captivity narratives of Australian and Allied prisoners of the Germans during World War 2 evince a 'Boys' own' flavour and feature 'escape' plots because escape was occasionally possible: once outside the wire, the fugitive could merge with the European population. An Allied escapee in Asia was glaringly conspicuous and easily recaptured.
- ⁸ Robert Hughes mentions Buckley's escape attempt and his recapture (453).
- ⁹ Because both states were emerging from feudalism into a modern capitalist economy the punishments practised in late eighteenth-early nineteenth-century Britain and 1930s Japan had not entirely lost their 'feudal' character.

- ¹⁰ François-Maurice Lepailleux's journal contains many references to the diseases (including what appears to have been vitamin deficiency blindness) that he and his fellow Quebecois political prisoners suffered as a result of inadequate food and shelter while held with ordinary convicts at Longbottom convict settlement during the 1840s in Sydney.
- ¹¹ Not only Australian prisoners of the Japanese thought of themselves in this way. German prisoners-of-war and civilian internees rounded up during World War 1 and shipped to Australia in 1915 in the SS *Empire* endured crowding and lack of sanitation reminiscent of convict-era barracks. They saw themselves suffering conditions 'worse than those provided by the British for Chinese coolies' and as a consequence took back to Germany a view of Australia as 'the convict state' and the Australian people as 'inherently inferior' in national character (Fischer).
- ¹² The 'bull' of saluting and drilling that the and the penalties (i.e. fourteen days' detention) they imposed for misdemeanours such as 'failing to appear on parade', 'disobeying a lawful command' and 'conduct to prejudice' (McLaggan 63). Contrasting an Australian POW mate with the 'Tiger', the Japanese commandant, Ray Parkin speculates on the differing ways 'stitch by commonplace stitch' men are 'woven' into a nationality: 'In Boof was the traditional resentment of authority, stemming, maybe, from the echoed stories of the harshly treated convicts; or of the colonists' suffering from official bungling ... or from the absence of class order' (*Into the Smother*, 722).
- ¹³ This slogan was the catch-cry of 'Happy' Harry Smith, the lugubrious Changi concert party comedian. As Hank Nelson notes, it invariably induced gales of disbelieving laughter from the Changi audience. Russell Braddon's *The Naked Island* (1952) also arguably implies a subliminal identification of Singapore with Crusoe's island. *Robinson Crusoe, USN: The Adventures of George R. Tweed on Jap-Held Guam* provides an interesting gloss on this theme.
- ¹⁴ Interestingly, the reformist Norfolk Island prison governor, Alexander Maconochie, recommended his charges read *Robinson Crusoe* to instill them with 'energy, hopefulness in difficulty, regard & affection for our brethren in savage life &c' (Hughes 506).
- ¹⁵ For Benson, an Anglican missionary, life at Gona in Papua before the Pacific War was 'a combination of Robinson Crusoe, the Swiss Family Robinson and Peter Pan' (31). His idyll, is destroyed when he is taken captive and removed to Kopoko (New Britain) and interned with Bishop Scharmac's Catholic community. The technological ingenuity and social harmony of the internees recreate the idyll in the midst of privation and hardship in a new camp at remote Ramale (173).
- ¹⁶ The effort to recreate the trappings of civilization which occupies Crusoe is also manifest in POW narratives. See *The Naked Island* (131-2; 225-32); Ray Parkin's *Trilogy* (124), and the numerous other accounts (i.e. in Weary Dunlop's diaries, in Hank Nelson's *POW: Australians Under Nippon*) of the ingenious improvising of western technology from primitive materials by prisoners-of-war.

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