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Review Article

Prisoners of War in the Second World War

Arieh J. Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity: Britain and the United States and their POWs in Nazi Germany*, Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 2005; pp. x + 382; ISBN 0 8078 2940 4

S.P. Mackenzie, *The Colditz Myth: British and Commonwealth Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004; pp. xiv + 446; ISBN 0 19 926210 1

Michael R. Waters with Mark Long, William Dickens, Sam Sweitz, Anne Lee Presley, Ian Buvit, Michelle Raisor, Bryan Mason, Hilary Standish and Norbert Dannhaeuser, *Lone Star Stalag: German Prisoners of War at Camp Hearne*, College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2004; pp. xv + 268; ISBN 1 58544 318 2

In the second world war perhaps as many as 35 million men and women spent some time in enemy hands as prisoners of war. Many of these were seriously maltreated, and millions died in captivity. However, academic historians, enticed though they often are by catastrophe, have left this field largely to popular historians, memoirists and film and television producers. The marginalization of prisoners of war in warfare — their physical removal from the battlefield and their legal status as being *hors de combat*, or ‘out of the fight’ — has therefore been perpetuated in the academic history of the second world war.

This situation has begun to change in the last two decades, but prisoner-of-war history continues to be perceived as ‘a separate and discrete subject, studied by specialist historians devoted to uncovering the experiences of groups in particular theatres of war’ — to quote two of the leading British scholars in the field, Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich.¹ Academic writing has tended to focus on particular internment camps or specific national groups, while other prisoner-of-war issues have become sensationalized. Most famously, the forced repatriation of prisoners to the Soviet Union in 1945,² the neglect of German

1 Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich, ‘Prisoners of War in the Second World War: An Overview’, in Moore and Fedorowich (eds), *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II* (Oxford 1996), 2. For a more recent historiographical review of POW literature, but one which does not significantly amend Moore and Fedorowich’s conclusions, see Vasilis Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War and the German High Command: The British and American Experience* (Basingstoke 2003), 2–6.

2 The chief protagonist in this debate was Nikolai Tolstoy (*Victims of Yalta* [London 1977]; *Stalin’s Secret War* [London 1981]; *The Minister and the Massacres* [London 1986]), who ulti-

POWs by the United States forces in 1944–45³ and the Japanese use of prisoners as guinea pigs in the testing of biological weapons⁴ have become the subject of fierce debate in the academy, the media and, at times, the courts.

Despite these controversies, prisoner-of-war literature, as a genre, has tended to be methodologically and theoretically unadventurous. Perhaps this is attributable to the fact that captivity is commonly a male experience, and one that has been appropriated to enhance masculine national stereotypes that have proved resistant to revisionism. It is significant that some of the more theoretically informed literature about captivity has arisen from studies of *women* internees of the Japanese. Their experiences lend themselves more readily to the critiques of gender, race and post-colonialism that have informed the more innovative historiography of recent decades.⁵

Though none of the three books under review could be said to be theoretically adventurous, they are all valuable additions to the academic literature on prisoners of war in the second world war. Two of them focus on aspects of activity that have been relatively unexplored by academics: namely, diplomatic attempts to manage the treatment of Allied prisoners in German hands and the experiences of British Commonwealth prisoners in internment camps in Nazi Germany. The third covers a fairly well worked field, German prisoners held in the United States.

In *Confronting Captivity*, Arieh Kovachi, whose earlier publications have been in the field of second world war diplomacy and war crimes trials, explores how the British and American governments strove, through diplomatic efforts, to support their nationals in German hands, while also placating anxious relatives at home. Kovachi also examines how London and Washington struggled to reconcile the need to protect their personnel in German hands with the military imperative of achieving victory, a conundrum that became increasingly intractable as the Allies advanced into Germany in the last year of the war. Prisoner-of-war policy at the government level has not been well covered to

mately suffered punitive damages in a libel action launched by one of the British officers whom Tolstoy alleged to have committed war crimes – Lord Aldington.

3 James Bacque, *Other Losses: An Investigation into the Mass Deaths of German Prisoners of War at the Hands of the French and Americans after World War II* (Toronto 1989). For the counter-argument, see Günter Bischof and Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower and the German POWs: Facts against Falsehood* (Baton Rouge, LA 1992).

4 Peter Williams and David Wallace, *Unit 731: The Japanese Army's Secret of Secrets* (London 1989); Sheldon H. Harris, *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare, 1932–1945, and the American Cover-up* (London 1994).

5 See, for example, Christina Twomey, 'Problems in Paradise: Gender, Race and Historical "Truth" in Paradise Road', *Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies* 10(1) (2006), 30–52; 'Australian Nurse POWs: Gender, War and Captivity', *Australian Historical Studies* 36(124) (2004), 255–74; 'Retaining Integrity? Sex, Race and Gender in Narratives of Western Women detained by the Japanese in World War II', in Bob Moore and Barbara Hatley-Broad (eds), *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace* (Oxford 2005), 175–84; Theresa Kaminski, *Prisoners in Paradise: American Women in Wartime South Pacific* (Lawrence, KA 2000); Frances B. Cogan, *Captured: The Japanese Internment of American Civilians in the Philippines 1941–45* (Athens, GA 2000).

date; Kovachi's research therefore provides a useful complement to Vasilis Vourkoutiotis's (2003) *Prisoners of War and the German High Command*.⁶

Confronting Captivity is divided into four parts, each focused on a major issue. Part I describes the conditions experienced by British and American prisoners in Germany and the efforts of the British government, particularly, to manage critical public opinion at home. Kovachi's account does not aspire to be comprehensive. He limits his study to those camps with the largest number of British and US prisoners, on the assumption that these encompassed the experience of captivity. One of the heartening findings of his research is the degree to which it shows that, even as the European powers descended into barbarism and the dehumanizing of their enemy, there was still some capacity to observe international humanitarian law and to tolerate open, public debate about the treatment of the victims of war. In Britain, whose nationals were generally interned for longer periods than American personnel given the comparatively late entry of the USA into the European war, there was regular criticism, in Parliament and press, of the support provided to prisoners of war. POW families (a group often overlooked in the literature, despite the recent interest in the wider historiography of war on grief and loss)⁷ were critical of the performance of the British Red Cross Society in delivering parcels to prisoners in Germany.

Public concern was also manifest during the notorious episode in which the German and British governments engaged in a tit-for-tat manacling of prisoners in the aftermath of the Dieppe raid of August 1942. This episode has been well covered already by the Canadian authority in the field, Jonathan F. Vance,⁸ and by David Rolf.⁹ Kovachi's account lacks the critical punch of Rolf, in particular. However, his description of the mental health problems encountered by prisoners of war, humanized as it is by personal letters and memoirs, highlights a more neglected aspect of captivity. It is often assumed that Allied prisoners of war, benefiting as they did from Germany's observance of the 1929 Geneva Convention in Western Europe, endured little suffering in captivity. Kovachi's account of the psychoses that arise from long periods of internment modifies that view.

In Part II Kovachi shifts to the protracted negotiations between the enemy governments over exchanges of severely wounded and sick POWs. In the event, four exchanges took place during the war, involving more than 10,000 British Commonwealth and US prisoners. The seemingly endless negotiations preced-

6 *Prisoners of War and the German High Command: The British and American Experience* (Basingstoke 2003).

7 Exceptions include Margaret Neeson, *A Very Long War: The Families who Waited* (Melbourne 2000), a poignant account of the families of Australian personnel lost in the islands of New Guinea during the second world war; and Sarah Fishman, 'Waiting for the Captive Sons of France: Prisoner of War Wives, 1904–1945', in Margaret Randolph Higgonet et al., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven, CT 1987).

8 'Men in Manacles: The Shackling of Prisoners of War, 1942–1943', *Journal of Military History* 59 (1995), 483–504.

9 "'Blind Bureaucracy': The British Government and POWs in German Captivity, 1939–45", in Moore and Fedorowich (eds), *Prisoners of War and their Captors*, 56–9.

ing these exchanges, tedious reading though they make, illustrate how the international arrangements then in place — the use of the Protecting Power and the International Committee of the Red Cross — allowed enemy governments to communicate, even as they were engaged in mass slaughter of each other's populations. The prisoner exchanges affirm that, as ever, international humanitarian law is more likely to be effective when it is anchored in reciprocity and self-interest. With the health of its own prisoners at stake, the Nazi government never broke off negotiations, revealing that it retained the capacity to follow an overtly pragmatic course of action when its interests were at stake.

In Part III, Kovachi turns to the final year of the war, when the Germans forced prisoners whose camps lay in the path of the advancing Red Army to march westwards. The Nazis seemed anxious that the prisoners might stage uprisings or engage in sabotage as the German defeat loomed; the Allied governments, in turn, feared that their nationals might be the target of reprisals for the devastating bombing of German cities. The story of the forced marches, and the privations these prisoners endured in the bitter winter conditions, is comparatively well known. But Kovachi explores the debates within the British and US governments as to how, if at all, they could intervene to protect their nationals at this precarious time of the war. In the end, given their lack of credible options, they took a calculated risk that the Germans would not retaliate against prisoners of war as the Allied advance into Germany continued. The winning of the war was the highest priority and this decision was legitimated on the reasonable grounds that a speedy Allied victory would ultimately prove the best means of helping Allied prisoners in Nazi hands.

Finally, Kovachi turns to another of the enduring debates about prisoners of war in Europe: the forced repatriation of Soviet, and former Soviet, nationals who fell into Allied hands at the end of the war. As mentioned, few topics have generated such passion and public controversy as this. Kovachi provides only muted judgments on the subject — a detachment traditional in empirical diplomatic history but one that is unnerving in a discussion of a topic so politically and morally offensive as this. This section of the book exemplifies Kovachi's style: deeply anchored in archival sources to the point of letting them lead his argument.

S.P. Mackenzie has provided a more engaging account of British Commonwealth prisoners in German hands. As his title *The Colditz Myth* suggests, this book takes, as its organizing theme, Colditz (Oflag IVC), the high security camp in Saxony that became in the postwar years synonymous with an intensely rigorous institution and the mythology of escape. In an excellent opening chapter Mackenzie details the way in which Colditz was mythologized through personal memoirs, film and television, thus helping to establish 'an enduring set of popular assumptions [about captivity] in which life behind the wire was interpreted, both figuratively and sometimes literally, in sporting terms . . . Escape was the name of the game with the team from Oflag IVC topping the league tables in terms of home runs' (1). In 1952 an ex-Colditz prisoner, Pat Reid — in an early manifestation of that now familiar cultural phenomenon,

the trauma victim turned public celebrity — published *The Colditz Story*. He capitalized on this book's popular success with a sequel, *The Latter Days*, published in 1953. *The Colditz Story* was soon made into a film, while Colditz itself became, in 1972–74, the subject of the most successful television drama series ever broadcast by the BBC. These cultural productions, together with a number of earlier publications such as *The Wooden Horse*¹⁰ and *The Great Escape*,¹¹ established a lasting stereotype of the British prisoner in German hands as an ingenious, brave and skilful officer, fixated with taunting the enemy ('goon baiting') and escaping.

However, Mackenzie's purpose is not only to analyse captivity in Colditz but also to ascertain how representative Colditz was of the wider prisoner-of-war experience in Germany. Using an impressively wide range of official, media and private sources, he explores this subject thematically and chronologically: moving from capture and interrogation through transit and processing to internment, liberation and repatriation. All aspects of camp life — leadership and discipline, German command, work practices, social and intellectual life, sexuality (a topic often ignored), political disputes between prisoners, collaboration with the enemy, reprisal and rewards — are examined with an authority that should make this book definitive, at least so far as British Commonwealth prisoners in Germany are concerned.¹²

Much of Mackenzie's analysis confirms what we already know about captivity in Germany, and, for that matter, captivity more generally. For example, conditions in the camps depended to a considerable degree on the personal characteristics of the camp commander. Stealing and criminal activity between prisoners did occur, national mythology to the contrary notwithstanding, and a key differentiating factor between individual experiences of captivity was rank, since that determined whether a prisoner had to perform manual work or not. Officers are known to have survived captivity over the centuries at a higher rate than other ranks: initially, because of their élite social status and their potential use for ransom; more recently, because of their exclusion from mandatory work under the 1929 Geneva Convention.¹³ The fact that officers' health was thus protected from the worst effects of the privations of captivity suggests that class might be a useful tool through which to analyse the prisoner-of-war experience.

Mackenzie validates the accepted view that the Germans observed international law in their treatment of British Commonwealth prisoners interned in Western Europe. There were of course exceptions to this (one of the most notable being the manacled episode already referred to), but these breaches tended not to be life-threatening. For instance, the 1929 Geneva Convention

10 Eric Williams, *The Wooden Horse* (London 1949).

11 Paul Brickhill, *The Great Escape* (London 1951).

12 David Rolf's *Prisoners of the Reich* (London 1988) is written more from the perspective of the prisoners and has a more limited source base.

13 Joan Beaumont, 'Rank, Privilege and Prisoners of War', *War & Society* 1 (1983), 67–94.

required that, as far as possible, prisoners of different nationalities should be housed separately from each other, but across Germany there was mingling of national groups, who, of necessity, were either housed together in the larger camps or held in adjacent compounds. Colditz, particularly, was multinational, holding significant numbers of British Commonwealth, Polish, French, Dutch and Belgian prisoners, as well as a handful of American officers.

Mixing with other nationalities was not, of itself, a problem. British Commonwealth prisoners, for example, generally cohabited comfortably, though Mackenzie found some evidence of racial stereotyping of the non-white nationalities and suspicion of the Afrikaners. Between the British and other groups there could be a cultural divide, as in the case of the French prisoners — of whom there were over a million — with whom there was mutual recrimination about the Allied defeat, the sinking of the French fleet and the French armistice with Germany in 1940. Soviet prisoners, on the other hand, to whom British prisoners had considerable exposure, often became the object of sympathy. As *Untermenschen* in Nazi ideology, they received none of the benefits of the Geneva Convention and suffered starvation, exposure, disease and appalling rates of mortality. Western prisoners, housed in adjacent compounds, sometimes smuggled or threw food across the fences. At other times, however, the self-interest that is so much a feature of captivity emerged. Confronted with the threat of typhus spreading from an adjoining Soviet compound, the Senior British Officer at Oflag VIB Warburg insisted that the Russians be moved. Another British POW confessed, 'It was easier to pretend they were not there, much as one crosses the street to avoid a beggar' (270).

The question of internal management of internment camps is one that is often overlooked in prisoner-of-war literature, which focuses more naturally on the conflict between the captor and captive. Mackenzie's treatment of the leadership provided by British Commonwealth officers and NCOs within the camp is therefore welcome. He confirms that effective leadership was contingent on the circumstances and the individuals who performed the roles of Senior British Officer and the 'man of confidence'. Ultimately, efficiency rather than superiority of formal rank determined who remained in leadership positions. The coercive element that underpins discipline in the armed services was largely missing in the prison camp. Styles of leadership therefore ranged from the use of moral authority through reliance on voluntary compliance with commonly agreed rules of conduct to physical intimidation and the use of camp police. In extreme circumstances British leaders referred matters to the enemy camp commandant. Though such measures were inevitably controversial, there were camps where criminal activity, including racketeering and extortion, might have threatened the collective good if left unchecked.

In leadership Colditz was in a class of its own. Almost all of the inhabitants were sent there because they had made a nuisance of themselves in other camps, primarily through repeated escape attempts. Though drawn from many nationalities, they tended to be like-minded officers, bound together by a common refusal to accept passively their status as prisoners. They were insub-

ordinate, prided themselves on baiting the enemy and, one suspects, were not always the easiest of companions. One of the less admirable aspects of Colditz was the tension between officers and the other ranks assigned to be their orderlies. Douglas Bader, for example, the much celebrated legless air ace, in an act of supreme selfishness, refused to allow his batman to be repatriated in 1943 because he did not want to forfeit his lackey's (his term) services (146).

It comes as something of a surprise to discover that Colditz was not especially distinctive so far as the matter of escape was concerned. Mackenzie comprehensively refutes the popular view that escape dominated every waking hour of prisoners of war. Across Germany, most prisoners decided to sit out the war in their camps. There were a number of reasons for this. Initially it seemed that Germany would win the war. There was the personal danger inherent in trying to escape. The chances of success (at least so far as making a 'home run', all the way to the UK, were concerned) were slim, and there was always a fear that the Germans might inflict collective reprisals on those left behind. Because of these risks, at Thorn (Stalag XIXA) the SBOs themselves are thought to have betrayed two escape attempts to the camp commander.

It needs also to be remembered that it was only officers who, free from manual labour, had the time and energy to devote to preparing elaborate escape attempts. Presumably also they were more predisposed to internalize the norm of having a duty to escape, thus returning to their units and resuming a fighting role. Escape, then, was an élite and minority activity — and even then one resorted to only by those who temperamentally found the tedium of confinement intolerable.

The statistics Mackenzie provides (349–50) challenge the mythology of escape even in the case of Colditz. Of the fifteen British escapees attributed to Colditz, only six actually escaped from inside the castle itself, in three separate breaks. Five others either arranged transfers to or (in one case) took advantage of moves to less secure camps. The remaining four 'escapees' faked physical or mental illness that got them repatriated from Colditz. Mackenzie concludes that if escapes from satellite working camps are included, then the camp from which the largest number of escapes took place was Lamsdorf: over 50 prisoners from that camp made it back to Britain. If only breakouts are measured, then Thorn 'emerges as the clear winner' (350). 'It is time to stop assuming that Colditz was in a league of its own', Mackenzie concludes.

In reality, being a British Commonwealth prisoner in Nazi Germany was more of an endurance test than an adventure. The Colditz myth, with all its *Boys' Own* derring-do, is a very British tale, and one which, Mackenzie concludes, 'drastically oversimplifies and distorts the general experience in Germany and even that of prisoners held inside the *Schloss* itself' (2). This is a welcome piece of revisionist history but, as Mackenzie himself acknowledges, it is unlikely that it will do much to change British misconceptions about captivity, so deeply embedded are they in the popular culture.

With Michael Waters' *Lone Star Stalag* we turn to German prisoners interned in the United States. There are already a number of accounts of these

nearly 50,000 POWs,¹⁴ but this book claims originality firstly by being focused on Camp Hearne, Texas, one of the largest camps in the US, and secondly by combining a historical approach to the prisoner-of-war experience with an archaeological study of the camp's remains.

The dual purpose of the book is somewhat problematic. Though obviously the archaeological survey, and the workshopping of its results, would have been a rich learning experience for the students at Texas A&M University, a book (as opposed to an exhibition) is arguably not the most effective way to present the results. Neither the opening chapter, replete with diagrammatic representations of the architecture of the camp, nor the 78 pages of descriptions and photographs of various artefacts, fountains, statues and buildings significantly enhance our understanding of the prisoner experience.

The historical section of the book confirms the traditional view that prisoners in the United States were treated with remarkable generosity, well beyond the requirements of the Geneva Convention. This surprised the prisoners themselves. 'Why are they treating us so well?' one asked (19). Another described the US being 'a weird country, when you treat your prisoners better than your own [black] people' (57). The benevolent treatment of POWs also irritated the local population, who dubbed Camp Hearne the Fritz Ritz (25). US government policy towards enemy prisoners was motivated by a mix of pragmatism and idealism. Contented prisoners were likely to be easier to control. There might be reprisals against US personnel in German hands if German prisoners were maltreated; and the USA wanted to demonstrate that its way of life was superior.

Prisoners in Camp Hearne had an extraordinarily varied diet, which was often adapted to German taste. They were allowed to pursue a broad range of recreational pursuits, to practise their religion, to conduct educational programmes and to engage in arts and crafts. None of this was exceptional: US prisoners in German hands were conceded the same rights. However, prisoners in Camp Hearne were allowed to marry their fiancées by long distance and were sometimes transferred to another internment camp in the USA, if this meant they could be reunited with a relative.

Most remarkably, in an instance that suggests that their US captors verged on the naïve, German prisoners in Camp Hearne were allowed to manage the Postal Unit, through which all incoming mail was processed and dispatched to POWs throughout the USA. Waters reveals how the prisoners used this control to develop networks of intelligence and intimidation across the camp system. They could open mail, insert notes and maintain a clandestine correspondence with prisoners interned elsewhere. More seriously, because they had access to the files and whereabouts of all German prisoners in the USA, they were able

14 For example, Arnold Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (Lanham, MD 1996); Robert D. Billinger Jr, *Hitler's Soldiers in the Sunshine State: German POWs in Florida* (Gainesville, FL 2000); Jeffrey E. Geiger, *German Prisoners of War at Camp Cooke, California: Personal Accounts, 1944–1946* (Jefferson, NC 1996); Steve Hoza, *PW: First-Person Accounts of German Prisoners of War in America* (Phoenix, AZ 1995); Lowell A. May, *Camp Concordia: German POWs in the Midwest* (Manhattan, KS 1995).

to compile a master list of the location of nazi and anti-nazi prisoners and track their movements all over the country.

It has long been known that camp managers in the USA wrestled with the problem of potentially violent conflict between pro- and anti-nazi elements among the prisoners of war. The bizarre control of the Postal Unit at Camp Hearne was only one element in this struggle, through which the nazis strove to maintain ideological hegemony and heterosexual conformity. Following the Geneva Convention, the US command maintained the German military rank structure for purposes of internal administration of the POW camps. Through this means, at Camp Hearne, the nazi element, though apparently small, ultimately gained control in 1943. They constructed short-wave radios, dispersed news from Germany, published an underground paper and built a network of tunnels and underground rooms to hold meetings. One room even contained a large portrait of Hitler!

This situation culminated in the murder in December 1943 of a Corporal Hugo Krauss, a prisoner who, though he had been brought up in the USA and had returned to Germany in 1939 as a nazi supporter, had become suspected by the nazi element as disloyal. Krauss's murder, which Waters examines in exhaustive detail, was one of at least seven throughout the camp system in the USA — a statistic that highlights the fact that many prisoners felt in more danger from their fellow Germans than from their American captors.

Of the three books under review, *The Colditz Myth* provides the best signpost to future directions for prisoner-of-war research. It is the only one that engages with the question of memory, a subject that has greatly enriched the wider historiography of war in the last decade. Given that the details of what happened during captivity are now relatively well known — at least so far as Allied prisoners in Europe are concerned — it is time to explore further the place of prisoners of war in the construction of national identities. What is the agency of individuals, governments and the cultural media in this complex process of reinterpretation of the past and mobilizing it to legitimize the present? Why do some national cultures glorify captivity while others forget? Why have myths of captivity arisen from the second world war but not from the war of 1914 to 1918, or, it would seem, from any other major conflict?

In exploring such questions historians need to move beyond treating oral histories of captivity as empirical sources, as the authors under review largely do, and view them rather as elements of an ongoing dialogue between personal memory, popular cultural representation of war and national commemorative practice. Prisoners of war need also to be studied within a comparative perspective. As mentioned, much of POW history has been focused on particular national groups.¹⁵ But it is clear from the mythologizing of Colditz — and for

15 The conference 'The Home-Coming of Prisoners of War after World War II', held by the International Committee for the History of the Second World War in Hamburg in July 2002, which resulted in Bob Moore and Barbara Hatley-Broad's *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace* (Oxford 2005), is one of the few attempts to consider aspects of captivity (in this case, the home-coming of prisoners) within a multinational context.

that matter, of the Burma–Thailand railway — that cultural practices shape the memory of captivity at the national and popular level. Do they also affect how captivity was experienced and endured? Australians popularly believe that their nationals were better able to survive the privations of working on the Burma–Thailand railway than were the British because of the supposedly unique Australian capacity for mateship. Such an idea might seem fanciful: yet another manifestation of national mythology. But the question remains as to whether some national groups did have a greater resilience and ability to survive the stresses of being prisoners of war because of their distinctive social dynamics and cultural mores.

Comparative prisoner-of-war history exploring questions such as these will not be easy, given the inherent subjectivity of the issue. Trans-national history also requires multiple language skills and poses complex archival challenges. Colditz again perhaps provides a key to the future of prisoner-of-war history: to achieve a wider understanding of captivity, the community of prisoner-of-war historians will need, as one new arrival said of the population of Oflag IVC itself, to be ‘desperately international’ (Mackenzie, 265).

Joan Beaumont

is Dean of Arts and Alfred Deakin Professor at Deakin University, Victoria, Australia. Her publications include *Gull Force: Survival and Leadership in Captivity, 1941–1945*; *Australia’s War 1914–18* (ed.); *Australia’s War 1939–45* (ed.); volume 6 of the *Centenary of Australian Defence, Australian Defence: Sources and Statistics* and *Ministers, Mandarins and Diplomats: Australian Foreign Policy Making, 1941–1969*. She is currently writing a history of Australia in the first world war, and researching the memory of war, including prisoners of the Japanese in the Asia-Pacific.