

Book Reviews

In the Interest of National Security: Civilian Internment in Australian during World War II

Klaus Neumann

Canberra: National Archives of Australia, 2006, 124pp. AUD \$24.95

Given the current national obsession with security this is a timely and topical volume; it offers historical perspectives on a recurring theme in Australian history. For its author, Klaus Neumann, it is also a crucial theme, though in his view this is not reflected in historians' engagement with the sensitive topic of internment to date.

Published as it is by the National Archives, it is not surprising that the relevant collections of the National Archives various offices feature heavily. Indeed, the project stems in good part from Neumann's work as Frederick Watson Fellow at the National Archives in 2001, a stint which enabled him to view huge quantities of files, all of which are carefully listed in a most helpful index. Moreover Neumann has been able to access an impressive amount of published and unpublished materials held in other research repositories around the country.

The author's conundrum has been to convert an enormous volume of material into a single, modestly-proportioned volume (just 124 pages, including a sizeable section on sources and a bibliography). The solution is a good one. Over five main chapters he gives concise and accurate overviews of internment policy and practice, covering the period from arrest through internment, release and then an assessment of historical legacies. Beyond those overviews, however, he also delivers a series of case studies of particular internees who had a broad range of backgrounds and with differing experiences of internment. There is no suggestion that the ten case studies are representative of overall internment statistics, rather, their function is to demonstrate the gamut of internees in terms of such factors as national and religious background, political convictions, duration of internment and so on. Moreover, the approach enables Neumann to strike a balance between the sort of impersonal, "history from above" approach, which a reliance on government records alone might favour, and a focus on subjective, personal histories which offers insights into how internment impacted on the lives of internees and their families.

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It is no surprise that Germans and Italians feature heavily in this small sample, albeit in such a way as to destroy any notion that Australian authorities were dealing with homogeneous communities. The actual heterogeneity is perhaps best illustrated with reference to the case of the so-called “Dunera boys”. Like many of Australia’s World War II internees they came from elsewhere, in their case from England, and during their transport to Australia as well as the internment as “enemy aliens”, they were exposed not only to the company of Nazi sympathizers but also to the indifference of officialdom. A separate category of “enemy refugees” was not introduced until late 1942, by which time tensions between fascists and antifascists had manifested themselves in many ways. Most tragic was the fate of the Italian anarchist Francesco Fantin, one of Neumann’s case studies, who was murdered in the Loveday camp in 1942.

The case studies extend beyond the usual suspects. Neumann explores, for example, the internments of the Singapore-born Masuko Murakami, the Hungarian Emre Barcs and, oddest in some respects, Harley Matthews. The last was Australian-born, as were both his parents, and had acquired a considerable literary reputation prior to his internment. He had provoked authorities’ suspicions because of his association with the Australia First Movement. Released some six months after his internment, Matthews then faced a long struggle to clear his name.

Although internment rates were lower in the Second than the First World War, it is nonetheless clear that similar anxieties drove the process, and that many were interned for no compelling reason. Alas, unjustified internment is a phenomenon with a history beyond the Second World War. Neumann’s book, readily accessible and appropriately illustrated, shows that rich resources are available for a deeper and more critical assessment of the theme.

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