
Perceiving 'the Other': Australian Literary Response to the Japanese Prisoners-of-War Breakout in Cowra

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1 Introduction

During World War II, over five thousand Japanese, captured in battles in Malaya, Indonesia and New Guinea as well as during the attack of the northern parts of Australia, together with Italians and Germans captured in the Near East and Europe became prisoners of war in Australia. Among these prisoners were those who were sent to the Prisoners-of-War (POW) camp in Cowra, New South Wales, a quiet town with a population of three thousand about 360 kilometres from Sydney. This situation gave some Australians their first opportunities for direct contact with the Japanese, something that seldom took place within Australia before the war.

Because of the lack of direct contact in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Australian images of the Japanese were often stereotypes such as exotic geishas from *cha-ya* or invaders from Asia who planned to take over the vast and thinly populated continent. Memoirs based on Australian experiences as Japanese prisoners of war in Malaya and on the Indonesian islands presented very different perspectives of the Japanese with them portrayed not simply as the enemy but also as human beings. The Japanese who, up until this time, had usually been described only 'en masse' in the imaginary invasion novels, started to have names, faces, and characters as the real enemy in Australian war writings. In POW memoirs, Japanese characters with more individual characteristics than the usual stereotypes — atrocious and incomprehensive captors — were depicted.

Now the situation was reversed and it was the Japanese who were held in captivity as prisoners of war. It was a new experience for Australians to have these Japanese captives — to face the Japanese as the enemy not on the battlefield but in their own territory where the power-relationship was quite distinct. During captivity, profound differences in the ways of thinking between Australians and the Japanese became clear, with the event of the Japanese mass breakout at Cowra marking the ultimate expression of these differences.

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Some Australian writers have regarded this 'incident', which took place at the POW Camp in Cowra, as the embodiment of the difference in ideas and behaviour between Australians and the Japanese. This event, however, was not fully understood for over twenty years after the war. It was not until journalist-authors like Hugh Clarke and Harry Gordon started their research and literally dug up the government archives and brought out the official documents, records and materials of the Cowra incident and reconstructed the story in the 1960s and 1970s, that the event was fully made public.

On the Japanese side, prisoners who survived the breakout and eventually returned Japan when the war was over had also kept silent. It was only in the 1970s that some of those ex-prisoners started to tell their stories and the Japanese version of the event slowly became known. In Japan, to reveal oneself as an ex-prisoner of war was still considered to be a great shame, which could affect one's family even many years after the war. Some ex-prisoners still refused to admit having been in Cowra, which hampered the whole process of revelation. Nevertheless interviews and memoirs were collected, which combined with information and evidence collected by the Australian side, led to publications about the event in the 1980s.

The Japanese breakout in Cowra POW camp occurred in the early morning of 5 August 1944, almost a year before the war ended. This camp, known as Number 12 Prisoner of War Group, was established about 3 kilometres northeast of the township of Cowra in 1941, and was guarded by the 22nd Australian Garrison Battalion. It consisted of four 17-acre compounds, from A to D, catering for a thousand prisoners in each, as well as the army compounds outside. In compounds A and C were Italian inmates; Japanese inmates were in Compound B and Japanese officers and Formosans and Koreans in Compound D. The number of the prisoners in Compound B exceeded a thousand in 1944. Because of security reasons, it had been decided to separate Non Commissioned Officers (NOC) from Other Ranks (OR) in Compound B, the latter to be sent to another POW camp in Hay. The Japanese camp leaders were notified of this decision beforehand on the morning of 4 August. These leaders held a secret meeting, and eventually with all the inmates of compound involved, they voted to rouse themselves to action—a breakout. It was a swift decision although there had long been rumours of such an event among both the Australians and the Japanese. At 1:50 a.m. the same night, with a signal made by a bugle, over nine hundred prisoners attacked the barbed wires in three places around the compound, with makeshift weapons such as table knives, bats and clubs. The huts were set on fire, while the invalids and some others remained inside and committed suicide. Most of the escapees used baseball gloves, blankets and toilet papers to get over the tripled barbed wire fences, however, many were just blocked and subsequently shot. Over three hundred of prisoners actually managed to escape. Among those, 25 men

died, mostly by taking their own lives. The rest were recaptured both by the Australian Military Forces and civilians and brought back to the camp. The total death toll of the prisoners in the breakout was 231,¹⁾ while 108 were wounded. Australian victims were four — three during the uprising and one during the search of the escapees.

2 *Dead Men Rising*

Because of censorship over the media at the time, and the subsequent classification of the records of the whole affair by the authorities, very few contemporary Australian authors wrote about the event. Kenneth “Seaforth” Mackenzie was one of the few authors who used the event as the setting of a novel and described it as one of the witnesses. The first impression one gets from his novel *Dead Men Rising* (1951) is the author’s ‘indifference’ to Australia-Japanese relationships or to the cross-cultural experiences between both groups. As has been pointed out,²⁾ his main interest lies not in the Japanese psychology of this extraordinary situation but in the protagonist’s love story and of the relationships formed within the boredom of garrison life. It was only later that non-fiction writers such as Harry Gordon and Hugh Clarke posed the first simple question : why did the Japanese do it?. The prisoners were well fed, clad and sheltered — their fish was imported from New Zealand and their copper pots were replaced by iron ones in order to cook rice better. They were given a certain degree of freedom, to the extent of growing their own vegetables and playing baseball or sumo wrestling.

Despite all this, the Japanese prisoners were desperate enough to revolt. In his novel, Mackenzie does not try to pursue the reasons behind their action, instead concluding that shame was so unbearable for those prisoners to remain as captives, that their only alternative was to escape. Because of the clear nature of the power-relationship between the Japanese and Australians in *Dead Men Rising*, the Japanese are rarely described as individuals. Instead, they are seen as the source of trouble or as an encumbrance. Only a few Japanese figures are actually individually described.

The title of the novel is taken from Michael Paul’s *The Anatomy of Failure*, which talks about prisoners who rose up, escaped, were eventually captured and killed. Mackenzie’s story seems to be about the garrison life itself in Cowra, which is called Shotley in the story, rather than the Japanese breakout and its consequences. His story seems to suggest that not only had the Japanese prisoners who lost face with the shame of being captives become like ‘dead men’, but also had the Australian garrison men become as if ‘dead’ in the camp. In the author’s note written in 1949, Mackenzie emphasises two things : the first was that “garrison men were human, intelligent, and on occasion brave.” The second was that the “greatest POW

mass-escape in Christian history” occurred in Australia in the first week of August 1944, almost a year to the day before the final defeat of Japanese Army in the Pacific. The main theme of the author seems to be the first, with the greatest breakout providing a climax in which the protagonist John Sargent becomes embroiled and killed.

Garrison life, the author’s seemingly main theme beside the love story of the protagonist, is often described in a harsh tone and with candid words. The camp troop was a patchwork of “ragtag and bobtail recruits from city and country”, of “aging solders, B2 men — younger fellows in spectacles or half-crippled, and permanently grumbling veterans of an earlier world war.” (p. 18) There was a prevailing friction among the ranks as well as within sections in the camp. Self-devoted officers and inquisitive sergeants make daily work difficult for their subordinates. There are many cases of absences from the camp without official leave, including that of the protagonist. Rumours about officers’ mistresses in nearby towns are whispered and one of the sergeants is believed to go out to see his at the Army’s expense. As Carr-Gregg points out, their garrison life “lacked not only the excitement generated by active combat duty but also the spirit of comradeship which tends to develop among soldiers who share danger and hardship”, an ethos close to the Australian legendary ‘mateship’.³⁾ In the battlefield, the existence of the Japanese as their enemy helps heighten their morale and confirms their comradeship, however, at the POW camp the subjugated Japanese are seen only as a burden and nuisance and do not arouse feelings of solidarity. Later writer Hugh Clarke also mentions the garrison men’s own deficiencies, their ‘unfitness’ for active service and “the secret contempt of civilians and scorn of younger combatant troops in training” in Cowra “because of the nature of their duties.” They were also “prisoners in a dull, mechanical round of garrison duty”, (*Escape to Death*, p. 33). Mackenzie’s protagonist sees that there is “no liberty... on either side of that barbed wire.” (*Dead Men Rising*, p. 36) Thus the negative mindset of the Australian side is revealed, including an ignorance and unpreparedness on the part of the authority for the eventual Japanese breakout.

Mackenzie, in his author’s note, asserts that this is a work of fiction and “not one character can in any way be taken to represent the likeness of any living man or woman.” However, he had written to George Ferguson, publishing director of Angus and Robertson, “that all the characters in the novel were real ‘people’ ”.⁴⁾ This might have been one of the reasons, besides the military secrecy over the breakout itself, why the book was not immediately published in Australia. While Mackenzie had won a fellowship by the Board of the Australian Commonwealth Literary Fund to complete this book, it was not published in Australia until 1969 although it was published both in the U.K. and in the U.S.A. in 1951. This English/American version

was not circulated in Australia.

The Japanese may be “incidental to the main business” (author’s words cited by Diana Davis in the Introduction to the Angus & Robertson 1975 Classics edition) and not the main purpose of this novel, but there are still details which only witnesses can reveal. In the story one and perhaps the only character that shows interest in the matters of the Japanese prisoners and talks on behalf of the Japanese is the sergeant-interpreter Orloff, who is probably based on a real figure, a Japanese-Russian interpreter called Negerevich. This Chinese-Russian interpreter who studied in Tokyo before the war bears the role of middleman between Australians and the Japanese. He speaks several languages, knows both Eastern and Western cultures, and can conveniently explain Japanese mentality and social background. For the Japanese prisoners, he is seen as a betrayer because of his position, and feels frustrated because he is the only one who can read the insulting gestures and scornful remarks made by the seemingly tame and quiet Japanese prisoners. He hates both the Japanese and Australians — the former for their contempt for the generosity and patience shown by their captors, and the latter for their ignorance and carelessness with regard to their captives.

In the novel, Orloff’s listener and friend, Sergeant-Major Poole, who is always surprised at whatever Orloff says about the Japanese and their ‘codes’ of fighting and dying, represents innocent Australians as a whole. Poole is the son of a grazier in his civilian life, and more inclined to listen to nature’s course of change rather than to hear about incomprehensible heathen mentality. These Japanese soldiers, “technically dead to their families and their War Office” because of their Military Codes, which forbade the status of ‘prisoner-hood’, and their behaviours and thoughts, were a source of puzzlement and mystery to Poole. Yet Poole becomes one of few Australians who begins to take Orloff’s warning seriously and “by his make-up and honest simplicity of mind” wills himself to believe it.

In the novel there is an episode where a Japanese lieutenant slaps a mean Australian major across the face and then demands that he be executed. Orloff explains to Poole that this is an act resulting from their ‘code’ of behaviour (p. 148) and that from a Japanese point of view it is the best way to die. Poole, with his Western view point, thinks that logically the Japanese lieutenant should be happy to be spared, but is corrected by Orloff who explains that the young and vain Japanese lieutenant seeks “dying in action” as a way of avoiding a dishonourable and miserable captivity. With Orloff’s ambiguous use of the word “ingenuity”, Poole gets the idea that the Japanese may be both “ingenious” and “ingenuous”. Thus through the vagueness of language Poole starts to see the necessity of recognising Eastern ‘illogic’ and not to try and interpret things through Western eyes, even if he finds it difficult to accept such a ‘difference.’ This episode concerning the Japanese

lieutenant reaches a climax in the court hearing when the Australians, except for Orloff, are astounded to realise that the silent lieutenant in fact understands English perfectly. (p. 192)

With his own “simple knowledge and code of living” Poole is unable to wholly believe in what Orloff says and to therefore bring action in response to his warnings. (p. 152) Poole eventually dismisses the urgency of Orloff’s warning as too pessimistic. Major Shawe of the Japanese compound, who holds an anti-White-Australia policy opinion and maintains ‘fair’ attitudes towards the Japanese prisoners, finds Orloff too defensive and “getting in his nerves”. Orloff’s repeated phrase “wait and see” does not meet with a positive reaction, and the prisoners’ outbreak is not prevented. Australians’ ignorance, indifference and negligence with respect to the Japanese are thus emphasised.

Mackenzie himself was one of the guards in the Italian compound and he provides some observations and personal stories of the Italian prisoners. He does not fully describe the Japanese prisoners nor how they were driven into the action of the mass-breakout. The protagonist, John Sargent, who works as a corporal clerk and whose job is to type official documents, shows very little interest in the prisoners throughout the story. One of the very few occasions when Sargent gives his impression of the Japanese prisoners is when he sees them doing Swedish drills and compares them to mass “automatons”, exactly the same word as is used later in Hal Porter’s short story written about the post-war Japanese.

Some of the characteristics in Mackenzie’s novel convey the atmosphere of the camp at the time of the outbreak. In his novel, the tranquillity and superficial peacefulness of the camp and its surroundings is described throughout the story. Under the blue sky, with abundant sunshine, or under the cool moonlight, the camp is presented in a pastoral context, without any of the violent or atrocious images of war and its combatants. However, it is because of this quietness and calmness that both captors and captives become nullified and like ‘dead’. Australian soldiers are tired of Army life, which lacks any “passion of action and movement, no swaggering thrills from foreign lands and foreign girls under other skies.” (p. 36) So when finally the mass escape happens, it also means the excitement of being finally able to “shoot into mortal flesh” for Australian soldiers. One Japanese writer makes the comment on the environmental cause of the breakout by saying that “the tranquillity of the place made the suicidal breakout possible”.⁵⁾ The outside tranquillity was believed to be a tremendous burden to the Japanese prisoners, who were ashamed of themselves for not fighting against the enemy in the harsh environment of the jungles. Instead they were protected and fed in the enemy’s land, which in turn drove them into the act.

reality the breakout was carried out under the bright moon, which, as later writers often point out, shows the Japanese aim was not a successful escape but rather as a suicidal act in order to “achieve an honourable death”. They had no intention of hiding or making a successful escape. In *Dead Men Rising*, Orloff warns that the Japanese breakout is close at hand because 1 : the moon will be full, and 2 : they are taking a bath all day. For most Australians only lunatics would carry out an escape at night with the full moon. According to Orloff, the Japanese are lunatics and they are cleansing themselves before the final act. Later writers of non-fiction, like Clarke and Gordon, and the Japanese memoirists, almost always mention this brightness of the moon.

3 Cowra Reconstructed in Non-Fiction

Mackenzie’s novel can be regarded as an immediate contemporary response to the Japanese breakout, although that was not necessarily the author’s aim. When the official records were finally made available after twenty years, later non-fiction writers using these records took a very different approach in reconstructing the event. In the 1960s and 1970s when Japan had already recovered from the aftermath of the war the relationship between Australia and Japan once again changed dramatically, this time to one which was diplomatic and economic. The idea and images of the Japanese held by Australians changed, too. Australian society had become more and more ethnically diverse. There was no longer the ‘implied’ power-relationship of the occupation force, of Australians as the conquerers and the Japanese as the conquered.

Hugh V. Clarke and Harry Gordon are among the main writers who wrote about the outbreak when the documents became available. Clarke himself was a prisoner of war of the Japanese in Malaya, Thailand and Japan and wrote about his experiences in other books. Gordon is a newspaperman whose senior colleague was unable to write about the breakout because of the censorship enforced by the government, when “censorship of war information was being tightened in Australia for political rather than security reasons.” (*Voyage from Shame*, p. 228) Both writers used official documents and conducted interviews with ex-prisoners in Cowra, and reconstructed the event both from Japanese and Australian perspectives for their first books. Both then revised their first books in 1994, commemorating fifty years since the breakout. Clarke’s first book, *Break-Out*, was the “first full inside story” of the event published in 1965, and was later revised and published as *Escape to Death : The Japanese Break-Out at Cowra, 1944* in 1994. Gordon’s *Die Like the Carp* was first published in 1978. He conducted many interviews and correspondence both in Australia and Japan, and tried not only to enumerate the facts he discovered but also to find out new and previously unpublished information. The discovery of the

court hearing of the first ringleader, Sergeant-Major Kanazawa, and exclusive interviews with him became central in his first book. In his next book *Voyage from Shame* he observes some changes in Kanazawa's state of mind as time passed — from sense of shame to regained pride. Gordon also reveals that one of the ringleaders who blew the bugle and signalled the breakout had assumed a false name. He is still buried in the Cowra Japanese cemetery under that name. Some of the facts Clarke and Gordon disclosed in their books became public for the first time in Japan through their Japanese translation.

As the titles of their books show, one of the major aims of both Gordon and Clarke is to reveal the nature of this event and the reason why they chose this suicidal act. The title of Gordon's first book, "die like the carp", is a phrase actually said by one of the hut-leaders to his members at the outbreak of the event. The carp, traditionally the Japanese symbol of bravery and excellent health with such strength as swimming up waterfalls, "knows how to die — it doesn't flinch when the time comes to plunge the knife into it." (*Die Like the Carp!* p. 16) Thus one of the leaders called Ogi, a story teller in the story reconstructed by Gordon, tells his men to show dignity in their death. Clarke's contradictory title, "escape to death," also reveals the nature of the act. It was to gain life-in-death for the Japanese prisoners because to go on living with dishonour and shame meant death-in-life to them. The later version of Gordon's book, *Voyage from Shame*, traces the mental change of the prisoners over the fifty years, and as mentioned earlier, he recorded the process of how they recovered their self-pride.

The first aim of the writers, or their strongest motive, seems to be concerned with revealing why the event happened. It was much easier for Australians to see it as a Japanese attempt for a successful escape and the eventual joining with the Japanese Army advancing southward. (*Escape to Death*, p. 81) But Clarke and Gordon did not try to solve the puzzle with Western logic, rather choosing to listen to the Japanese voices and let them tell their stories as a means to reconstructing the whole event. While Mackenzie had not been able to do this because of his limited opportunity to communicate with the Japanese as well as his own narrow viewpoint, later writers and novelists were able to take this approach through research and interviews.⁶⁾ Gordon and Clarke both start their books with the experiences of Japanese soldiers from the war theatres in New Guinea, how they fought and were captured, how they became prisoners and were sent to Cowra. Their attempt to trace and research the Japanese mentality, to recognise it, and to let it be come through in their stories revealed the unseen background, cultural and psychological factors which led to the event. This became the first attempt to understand the characteristics of the Japanese mind, which until this point had not been the focus of attention in Australian writing. This was also the period of time when journalist-authors like

Christopher Koch, Blanche d'Alpuget and other writers started to look at Asia, writing their half-non-fictitious novels based on their own experiences and by employing indigenous characters.

Through Gordon's and Clarke's observations, especially with Gordon's numerous and often painstaking interviews both with the Japanese and Australians in the event, the attempt to retell the whole affair from both sides was made. Some important points of the psychology of the Japanese prisoners were revealed, some of which until this point had been incomprehensible to most Australians. One such contradictory revelation is the fact that the Japanese prisoners were driven to the act under the pressure of being treated 'humanely.' As Gordon observes, the difference between the Allied POWs and the Japanese lies in their ignorance of the ways of how to behave as prisoners. Because of their 'Code', there should be no state of being prisoners for the Japanese, thus leaving no room for them to claim their right of survival. They even felt contempt for their captors for their kindness, regarding it as the sign of weakness. (*Die Like the Carp!*, p. 42) Naturally prisoners of war expected nothing but the most opposite attitudes from their own captors, as has been revealed in the memoirs of POWs of both sides. The episode of the young lieutenant who slapped an Australian officer in the face in Mackenzie's novel suggests that some Japanese wanted an easier and quicker solution to their dilemma using the enemy as a tool to achieve that end.

The Australian official records stress that the treatment of Japanese prisoners of war had been "humane and generous [and that] the conditions in the camp prior to the mutiny were exemplary and in full accordance with the provisions of the International Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (Geneva 1929) ... No complaints concerning their treatment had been made by or on behalf of the prisoners of war to the Camp Commandant immediately prior to the mutiny." (*Escape to Death*, p. 104, et al.) Almost all the memoirs of the Japanese ex-prisoners recall the fact that they were lucky in terms of their treatment.

The direct trigger for the breakout has been widely discussed in the works by Clarke and Gordon. The prisoners' frustration and despair generated from a sense of shame, hopelessness of being abandoned by their homeland, and fear of ostracism for their families in case their captivity was known had all combined to make for a difficult psychological environment. But to this point there were no elaborate plans to escape from the camp. It was a spontaneous, natural response of the prisoners to the decision by the Australian authority that NCOs and ORs were to be separated, which showed the similar suddenness of the Featherston mutiny by Japanese prisoners in New Zealand the year before. 'Mateship' was an important means of survival for Australian prisoners of the Japanese during their captivity. For the Japanese captives, under their "massive, collective sense of shame", (*Die Like the*

Carp!, p. 29) sharing their feelings with their 'mates' was just as important. Gordon cites the Russian interpreter's words and describes the relationship between the Japanese prisoners as "brotherly" — like the "Mafia" and comments, borrowing a Japanese ex-prisoner's words, that with "a greater degree of frankness by the camp authorities (and) a better knowledge of the Japanese mentality" the revolt needed never have occurred. (p. 87) Clarke calls it a "dreadful bond" which tied the Japanese prisoners — they "all shared the same cheerless conviction... they could not go back to Japan, and sooner or later, all must die in this foreign country." (*Escape to Death*, p. 49)

Furthermore, Clarke challenges the perfect collectivity of the prisoners. He emphasises that among the thousand and more Japanese from B Compound, 138 prisoners did not leave the camp nor take their own lives. (p. 71) These prisoners, although sharing the same fear and despair, were unable to simply obey the majority who rioted in order to carry out their mass suicide. Both in Gordon's and Clarke's stories, these Japanese prisoners, and in some cases the Korean prisoners, show their unwillingness to support the plan by secretly informing their captors about the possibility of a breakout; one of them even blackmailed himself to avoid participating. With such episodes collected from both the Australian and the Japanese sides, Clarke and Gordon have been able to reconstruct the event with a fuller and more accurate picture, with different perceptions and understandings based on different cultural interpretations about what was going on at the time.

4 Conclusion

The Cowra breakout gave Australian literature a theme, which has resulted in both fiction and non-fiction writings. It has also been used as an illustration to describe Japanese idiosyncrasies and enigmatic patterns of thought to Australians by such later novelists as Roger Pulvers, an American born Australian writer based in Japan who took up the Cowra event as the background of his novel set in the 1980s. It has also provided a subject for films and documentaries such as "The Cowra Break Out" by Chris Noonan and Phil Noyce (1986) and "Breakout" by Curtis Levy (1987).

Cowra today is still a quiet little town with a population of about nine thousand surrounded by grazing lands. Cowra became one of the first Australian towns to experience the cultural clash between Australians and Japanese. It was able to observe and recognise 'the other' through the Japanese breakout. Through this experience they have established a new relationship in the post-war years. War cemeteries for both the Japanese and the Australians have been built, connected to a Japanese Garden with a road lined with cherry trees. The city has also started an annual student exchange programme with Japanese schools. Once Cowra was the

symbol of 'differences' and 'irreconcilability'. Today it has become the centre for 'those who are different' to meet and tolerate each other.

The Japanese breakout in Cowra has given literature one of its most significant themes relating to the cross-cultural interaction between Australians and Japanese — between 'the others'. It reflects the changing attitudes of both Australians and the Japanese, of different cultures. It has given Australian writing a way to perceive 'the other.'

[Notes]

- 1) The toll of the dead numbers 234 in other sources, which include those who died after being recaptured.
- 2) Alison Broinowski, *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 70 or *The Oxford Literary Companion to Australian Literature*, 2nd ed., Melbourne: Oxford University Press, p. 224.
- 3) Charlotte Carr-Gregg, *Japanese Prisoners of War in Revolt: The Outbreaks at Featherston and Cowra during World War II*, St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978, p 60.
- 4) Ivid, p. 56.
- 5) Takashi Nagase, "Epilogue" from *Cowra Japanese Prisoners of War Camp*, Tokyo: Aoki-Shoten, 1990, p. 180.
- 6) Examples include a British author Ted Willis who wrote *The Naked Sun*, 1980, with both good and bad Japanese characters having their own voices.

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Acknowledgement :

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Mark Radford for his suggestion in polishing this paper.

This paper is part of the project supported by the Scientific Research Grant (Category C) of the Ministry of Education 2000-2001.