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Margaret Bevege. *Behind Barbed Wire: Internment in Australia during World War II.* St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993. xx + 314 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7022-2492-8.

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During the Second World War Australia returned to its traditional role of prison. Many thousands of prisoners of war were accommodated in camps around the country where they were joined by around 7,000 'aliens' who had been interned by other governments which considered the combination of a huge island, a small population and a complacent federal government ideal for the purpose. When the metropolitan power offered to pay for the maintenance of the prisoners, the historical consistency of the agreement was confirmed. More problematic was the government's decision to intern more than 7,000 of its own residents. These domestic internees were mainly people with some connection to one of more than thirty foreign countries, though they also included a small group of Anglo-Australian dissidents. The exercise was disruptive and very expensive. Not only did maintenance of Australian detainees cost in the region of 16,000 each week, the government was also faced with construction costs, the expenses of elaborate release tribunals, the loss of military personnel to the prison garrisons, the incarceration of a very significant workforce and a dramatic fall in sugar, tobacco, fruit and vegetable production. Further, the episode raised some very pertinent questions about the nature of Australian democracy, civil liberties and human rights.

Margaret Bevege addresses these questions in her book, Behind Barbed Wire, which uses all available archives (some are still not open) to ask why 'a country with a high regard for individual freedom nevertheless considered the detention of 7,000 local residents... necessary for, or useful to, its national survival'. (pxxi)

The conclusions Bevege reaches are kind to Australian governments. She recognises that internment was initiated by a very dubious system of information gathering which extended the powers of the poorly educated and politically naive local constabulary to assess reports supplied by cranky neighbours and business rivals. She is also aware that many arrests were made before a warrant was issued, that the internees were imprisoned without trial and that the release tribunals placed onus of proof of 'innocence' on the accused. Nevertheless she concludes that the internments were an inevitable government reaction to public panic and points out that at least Australians avoided the worst cruelties of camps in countries like Japan and England. If she is correct (and she probably is) the real question we need to ask about the internments is why were they inevitable? How could the Australian legislatures so quickly and easily discard any pretensions to liberalism? What elements within the Australian psyche led to mass hysteria about an alleged fifth column of German dairyfarmers, Italian canecutters and aged Japanese laundry workers? Why was there so little public objection to an abrogation of human rights in the name of a war allegedly waged to protect them?

In fact, as Kay Saunders points out in her new book, War on the Homefront, when the Australian government passed the National Security Bill, the main opposition to its acquisition of draconian powers came from the states, particularly Queensland. Further, this opposition was not about civil liberties, it concerned state rights, and was expressed in enhanced legislation to claw back the states' power to regulate and control private lives. The voices raised against internment belonged, on the whole, to the civil libertarians who joined the political debates of the 1930s and 1950s. It was desirable for the nation to have a conscience provided it could be expressed within the clearly defined parameters set by parliaments and debating societies. Dissent must never 'frighten the horses'. On the streets conformity was crucial. Public acceptance of this conformity may well explain the other aspects of the problem. It was easy to believe the myth of the fifth column because those accused of belonging to it were different.

When nationalised, or even native born citizens of

Italian or German origins were arrested, it only confirmed what most people already understood. The term 'Australian' did not imply nationality but race. The internment of Japanese families whose residency preceded the 1901 Act and the decision to deny them access to the appeals tribunals were both logical in these terms. When Jewish and other anti-fascist refugees were locked up, their continued suffering caused little surprise.

Margaret Bevege's book is a very useful contribution to the Australian history library. It has the strengths and weaknesses of its origins as a thesis. On the one hand the research is meticulous and the work will no doubt inform all future debate on the issue. On the other, the shear wealth of the material sometimes obscures the direction of the argument. It must be said that she has not been well served by her publisher. The mass of material consigned to end notes frustrates the reader and the quality of the paper suggests that the book's undoubted reference value will be lost well before its contents are superseded. Buy it anyway - it would be a shame to miss the debate on Bevege's conclusion that Arthur Calwell's experiences with migrant internees motivated his post-war immigration policy.

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