

Tony Banham. *Reduced to a Symbolical Scale: The Evacuation of British Women and Children from Hong Kong to Australia in 1940.* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017. 324 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-988-8390-87-8.

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The war in Ukraine is a haunting reminder of how the violence of war upends and destroys the lives of civilians, including children, forcing millions to flee their homes and seek safety in neighboring countries. The displacement of civilians in wartime, including the scale of the logistical difficulties involved in the process and its effects on families, forms the focus of Tony Banham's *Reduced to a Symbolical Scale: The Evacuation of British Women and Children from Hong Kong to Australia in 1940*. Banham, the founder of the Hong Kong War Diary Project, has written extensively on the experiences of people living in Hong Kong during the Second World War in works like *Not the Slightest Chance: The Defence of Hong Kong, 1941* (2003), *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru: Britain's Forgotten Wartime Tragedy* (2006), and *We Shall Suffer There: Hong Kong's Defenders Imprisoned, 1942-1945* (2009). In *Reduced to a Symbolical Scale*, he turns his focus to different aspect of the Japanese invasion and occupation and explores the migration of British civilians to Australia. Throughout the book, Banham foregrounds the experiences of evacuated women and children and the civilians left behind in Hong Kong and explores the inherent flaws of the evacuation, which he describes as "doing generally the right thing,

incompletely, in an imperfect way, for the wrong reasons and at the wrong time" (p. 167).

The book is structured chronologically, with the first two chapters covering the planning and evacuation process. The British government issued the evacuation order in June 1940, a year and a half before the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong on December 8, 1941. Preemptive evacuations were not uncommon during the Second World War, but the Hong Kong evacuation was ordered when there was no firm evidence of an imminent Japanese invasion. Consequently, and perhaps not surprisingly, the evacuation order was met with resistance, with bitter debates ensuing about the necessity of the evacuation and many civilians evading the evacuation order.

In these initial chapters, it also becomes apparent why Banham describes the evacuation as not only taking place "at the wrong time" but also being undertaken "incompletely" and "in an imperfect way." The chapters detail the myriad challenges of orchestrating the evacuation and its poor coordination, especially with Australian authorities. As examined in the third chapter, the evacuation plan stood in conflict with Australia's racist immigration policies. Reflecting the White Australia policy, the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 effectively made it impossible for non-

European people to migrate to Australia, meaning the majority of Hong Kong's civilian population could not be evacuated to Australia. In the end, 3,500 British women and children were evacuated to Australia, a significant number but comprising barely a quarter of 1 percent of Hong Kong's overall population of 1.6 million at the time.

In chapters 4 and 5, Banham examines the experiences of the evacuees and those left behind in Hong Kong during the war, with the latter chapter focusing on the impact of the Japanese invasion of the colony. Banham describes the death and destruction brought by the invasion. For women and children relocated to Australia, the invasion ended any hopes that the evacuation would be short-lived, yet there was no systematic plan for the housing, finances, education, work, and medical care of evacuees, effectively leaving them to their own devices. The last chapter looks at the conclusion of the war and the impact of years of separation on families. The flawed nature of the evacuation scheme is also apparent in the postwar period, with no plans to return evacuees to Hong Kong. In the end, despite many evacuees' initial resentment at having to migrate to Australia, more than 50 percent of the evacuees would decide to make Australia their permanent home, with others returning to Hong Kong and the United Kingdom.

In the conclusion, Banham returns to the topic of "the wrong reasons" and the government's motives in ordering the evacuation, a point initially raised in the first chapter. The government stated that its goal was twofold: to ensure high morale and conserve food supplies. Yet as Banham notes, these justifications are specious. The resentment and debates following the evacuation order counterbalanced any potential improvement to morale. Similarly, the evacuation had little impact on food supplies, given the small segment of population evacuated and significant stockpiles of food in the colony. Banham argues that these rationales were meant to make the evacuation more palat-

able for the public. The government wanted to move as many civilians as possible to safety, but they could not outwardly admit that Hong Kong was far from impregnable in the face of an attack and would fall if the Japanese invaded. They were also anticipating criticism if they did nothing to evacuate civilians. In making this point, Banham draws an illustrative comparison to American civilians in the Philippines who brought a class action lawsuit against the US government in 2002 because it had "deliberately left them in harm's way" during the war (p. 165).

Reduced to a Symbolical Scale makes important contributions to studies of civilian evacuations and the Second World War. Banham's assiduous research on this topic is one of the great strengths of the book. He incorporates not only newspaper reports and government documents from archives in Hong Kong, Australia, and Britain but also copious interviews and correspondences with evacuees and their relatives. These accounts give the reader insights into the confusion caused by the evacuation, the challenges faced by women and children in settling in a foreign country, the uncertainty and devastation brought by the Japanese invasion, the anguish of family separation, and the sense of relief but also strangeness brought by family reunions after the war. While scholarship on civilian evacuations in World War II primarily centers around large-scale programs, like Operation Pied Piper in Britain, Banham's work draws attention to an often overlooked aspect of the war. By exploring the paradoxes replete within the program, Banham sheds light on the success and limits of the government's ability to shape civilian morale and how contests over race shaped evacuation schemes.

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