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BOOK REVIEW



Torrens Island: the secret place

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A Future Unlived: A Forgotten Chapter in South Australia's History, by Michael Wohltmann, Adelaide, Digital Print Australia, 2016, 432 pp., \$50.00, ISBN 9780646958774, Publisher's website: www.digitalprintaustralia.com

In *A Future Unlived* retired history teacher Mike Wohltmann explores a largely neglected part of South Australia's history, the marginalisation and internment of 'enemy aliens' during the First World War and their fate immediately thereafter. South Australia had a substantial German population due to waves of successful migration beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. German-Australian communities were well-respected as industrious and law-abiding settlers but in a few short months after the outbreak of the war went from being perceived as ideal citizens to the 'enemy within'. The book begins with several short stories about Germans and Australian-born people with German ancestry living in South Australia and the hardships they endured due to the questioning of their loyalty to Australia during the war era. These anecdotes provide context for the subsequent chapters which describe how their marginalisation came about and the role of the Australian government and patriotic organisations in fuelling anti-German sentiment.

Previous offerings covering the history of Germans in Australia and the trials of 'enemy aliens' on the home front tend to focus on the overall Australian context with frequent references to internment camps in New South Wales and only short accounts of events in South Australia. One exception is the 2014 book *Interned: Torrens Island 1914–1915* by Martin, Monteath, and Paul; however, Wohltmann's publication is much more comprehensive.

A Future Unlived contributes to the existing scholarship by skilfully intertwining more detailed accounts of events on the South Australian home front than have ever been published previously, within the much larger context of national affairs. Of particular interest is a whole chapter devoted to Loxton, a small country town in rural South Australia which had a proportionally high number of men interned during the war and was a 'microcosm of Australian-German relations'.¹ Normally relegated to a few small sentences in other publications, if referred to at all, Wohltmann expands on this by detailing tensions in the town during the war, post-war Royal Commissions aimed at determining the loyalty of local Germans to the nation, and how this would impact upon Australia's returned soldiers, and describes the suspicions that plagued the German-Australian community for years after the war. Another unique aspect is his questioning of whether South Australia's Torrens Island internment camp commandant Captain George Hawkes was made a scapegoat for problems at the camp by having his commission cancelled. The suggestion that Hawkes was a scapegoat is a position likely to be contested by other historians who have considered him a brute due to

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¹Michael Wohltmann, *A Future Unlived: A Forgotten Chapter in South Australia's History* (Adelaide: Digital Print Australia, 2016), 352.

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atrocities committed at the camp but nevertheless a rigorous examination of the evidence in its contemporary context provides some support for this view.

Another strong contribution to the existing scholarship is a thorough explanation of how anti-German sentiment was fostered in the South Australian setting. There is a detailed breakdown of the various local organisations and individuals such as unions, benevolent institutions, and Freemasons who used their substantial influence to foster patriotism and to marginalise Germans in the general community and in politics. For instance, South Australia's first Victoria Cross recipient Arthur Blackburn is still honoured for his wartime bravery, yet this book highlights that he was also staunchly anti-alien which is a perspective that most other historians have failed to address. A section on anti-German propaganda follows, describing how patriotism was nurtured to increase support for the war effort and how this fervent promotion of the Allied cause further ostracised Germans in Australia.

A Future Unlived comes into its own with its assessment of 'Public memory and the history of forgetting'. The use of Brian Havel's theoretical framework detailing the characteristics of official public memory discusses why this part of South Australian history has been largely neglected in the past and how it continues to be suppressed by successive Australian governments who control national narratives about Australia's war-time involvement. In particular, Wohltmann highlights that discourses about Australian heroism and honour during the war lead to alternative views such as the treatment of 'enemy aliens' being silenced. In addition, narratives of the events of the First World War often focus on Gallipoli and the Western Front with other aspects overshadowed. With this in mind the presence of a chapter about German New Guinea which covers hostilities between Germany and Australia in the Pacific is a useful addition providing further context to the treatment of Germans on the home front. While there was a brief mention of the battle between the HMAS *Sydney* and the German SMS *Emden* in the Cocos, the inclusion of the activities of the German cruiser SMS *Wolf* around Australia would have strengthened the argument for an Australian fear of Germans in the region. Likewise, a more detailed discussion on the German spy network in Australia would have put the suspicion of German community members in Australia into further contemporary context.

Wohltmann also calls for 'historical justice' in the form of an official apology to the German-Australian community and a recognition of this part of Australia's dark history through the erection of permanent memorials at all internment camp sites in Australia. This may be an affront to traditionalists who reject acknowledgment of counter-narratives to Australia's glorious war history, but it is certainly worth considering.

Sound primary sources are used throughout, many of which are reproduced in the book. The fine print on some of the reproduced documents is difficult to read but most are of good quality, many in colour bringing the history of the time to life. Likewise black and white photographs illustrate conditions in the South Australian internment camp and on the First World War home front and of particular interest are those contained in the postscript, some of which were sourced from private collections and are therefore not available in the public archives. A website has been established along with the publication of the book to provide further resources for interested parties.² A couple of images appear to be incorrectly captioned; for example, a picture of internees working at a quarry is arguably not from Torrens Island. Although labelled this way in the National Library of Australia archives there is currently no other evidence to suggest that there was a quarry at Torrens Island during this time. Likewise, a sketch map is labelled as illustrating the first of two internment camp sites on the island; however, when assessing the cardinal

²A Future Unlived', accessed May 7, 2017, <http://torrensislandinternmentcamp.com.au/>

directions indicated on the map it is better aligned to the second site. However, these are minor observations and overall this is a well-researched and attractively presented publication which comprehensively explains the marginalisation of Germans in South Australia during the war era. Apart from its appeal as a general historical reading, it would be of interest to those studying enemy treatment during war-time, the use of propaganda by governments to sway public opinion, and people interested in the curtailment of civil liberties for refugees and other groups sometimes marginalised because of Australia's stance on international affairs. *A Future Unlived* is a welcome contribution to the history of South Australia and the nation's reaction to the 'enemy' on the Australian home front.