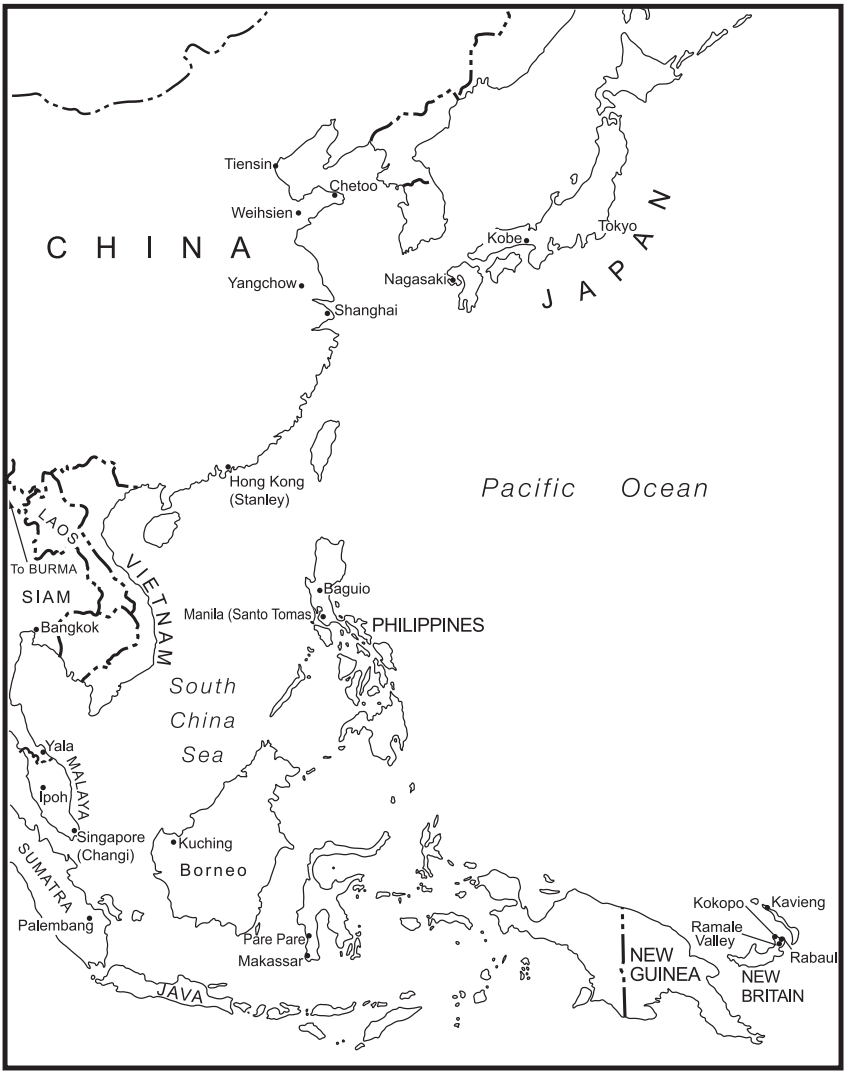
INTRODUCTION

Words about war might, in the end, tell us more than graphic images of it. In the last book she published before her death, Susan Sontag speculated about images of suffering in Western culture. *Regarding the Pain of Others* considers art, but photographic images of other people's suffering, particularly in war, are its focus. Sontag suggests that we have a 'camera-mediated knowledge of war'.[1] If there is no visual aid, no well-known photograph to accompany a particular war crime or atrocity, it has tended to be forgotten outside the circle of the people immediately affected and their descendants. Iconic images mark memory in ways that words do not, even if it is narrative that ultimately provides a more profound form of understanding.

Photographs of the emaciated and semi-naked bodies of POWs have become emblematic images of the experience of Allied soldiers captured by the Japanese in World War II. In Australia, the Burma–Thailand railway has become its defining story. The hold that the POW story has on popular memories of Australia's participation in the Pacific war, if we follow Sontag's logic, stems as much from the shocking nature of its images, from rib-cages and loincloths, as it does from the testimony of survivors. There are no equally famous images of Australian *civilians* – approximately 1500 men, women and children – who were also taken prisoner and interned by the Japanese during the war. This is one reason that their stories have been almost forgotten.[2]

How can a group's history be 'almost' forgotten? It can be almost forgotten or, more precisely, remembered only in particular ways, if there are influential forms of fiction dealing with the issue but no iconic



Asia, 1939–45, showing the location of significant places mentioned in this book.

photographs, no coherent public narrative and no prominent memorial. Australian cultural memory of life for civilians interned by the Japanese has resided largely in the realm of fictional re-enactment – films, television mini-series and plays – and not in the arena of national commemoration. Films about internment camp life have appeared in a steady stream since the end of the war. *Three Came Home* (1950), based on American woman Agnes Keith's memoir of her experiences on Borneo, was the earliest; the most recent is Bruce Beresford's 1997 film *Paradise Road*. The most familiar to Australian audiences is probably *A Town Like Alice*, based on Nevil Shute's 1950 novel and the subject of a 1956 film and a television mini-series in 1981. Except for *A Town Like Alice*, where an Australian POW is one of the main characters, Australians are usually incidental or minor characters in these productions. Nevertheless, such fictions remain the most influential source of information in Australia about the experiences of civilians interned by the Japanese in World War II. Recent generations of schoolchildren in New South Wales have learnt about internment by studying John Misto's play, *The Shoe-Horn Sonata*. Film-makers and playwrights like Misto have been most interested in the fate of interned women and children, and even the Australian War Memorial's display cabinets on civilian internment reflect this focus, despite the fact that more than two-thirds of Australian civilian internees were adult men. Notwithstanding the War Memorial's relatively recent and welcome acknowledgement of civilian internment in World War II, public awareness remains piecemeal and sketchy.

'Australian nationals abroad', which is how the Department of External Affairs referred to them in the 1940s, had formed part of the broader colonial and imperial presence in Asia in the period before World War II. They had never imagined a future in which some of the world's major colonial powers would be defeated by Japan, nor could they foresee that war in the Pacific would mean years of living in internment camps under the control of Japanese, Korean, Formosan, Sikh or Indonesian guards. On the eve of the conflict, large portions of the Asia–Pacific region were controlled by Western powers. Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore and north Borneo were British territories; the Philippines was a US possession and the archipelago that formed the Netherlands East Indies was, as its name suggests, a Dutch colony. China was not itself a colony, although parts of it had been occupied by the Japanese, an Asian power with its own colonial ambitions, since the 1930s. Shanghai was a treaty port which had been divided into a French

Concession and an International Settlement, governed by a municipal council elected by foreign residents.

Immediately before the outbreak of war with Japan in December 1941, the majority of Australian civilians living in the Asia–Pacific region were located in the Australian external territory of New Guinea, in Singapore and Malaya, and in China. There were smaller concentrations of Australians in Hong Kong, the Philippines, the Netherlands East Indies and Siam (later known as Thailand). Most of the expatriates had not lived in Australia for many years, and had created a relatively prosperous and comfortable life for themselves in their adopted homes. Many had taken advantage of the increasing mobility that was to become such a defining feature of the twentieth-century world. Some achieved a standard of living beyond their wildest dreams. One young man, who had grown up in an orphanage as a ward of the state in Western Australia and had supported himself by working as a station hand since his early teens, arrived in China in the early 1920s on the advice of members of a freighter crew who suggested he might find a good living there. By the 1930s Roy Fernandez was a senior member of the Shanghai Municipal Police, lived in an apartment with servants, and took his wife and two children on holidays to the United States, England and South America.[3] Westerners who lived as part of expatriate communities in Asia enjoyed the benefits of a high standard of living, even as their home countries smarted from the effects of the Great Depression. Large trading, agricultural and commercial enterprises profited from cheap local labour; so too did members of the white community, who routinely employed cooks, housekeepers and nannies for their children. Even single foreign residents, free from the demands of running a family and large household, employed local domestic servants.

Career and conversion were the two major motives that lured Australians further north. Membership of the British imperial family provided opportunities for Australians so inclined to work in colonial health, education and welfare organisations. The tin, tea and rubber industries also attracted Australian men to the region. Most were based in Malaya, but a proportion were stationed in Siam, the Netherlands East Indies and the Philippines. There were well-rewarded careers on offer as a mine or plantation manager, or as an accountant, mining engineer or dredge-master in such enterprises. Others – men and women both – arrived as representatives of large commercial, insurance or trading firms, such as Jardine's, Burns Philp and Cable & Wireless Ltd, and worked in an administrative capacity for them or sought to

establish their own businesses and livelihoods. Doctors, teachers and nurses were drawn to places like Singapore and Malaya in the hope of a successful and perhaps more lucrative career than was on offer in Australia.

Less motivated by commerce, and more by the prospect of converting indigenous peoples to Christianity, Australian missionaries had a long-standing presence in the region. Many of the countries invaded and occupied by the Japanese did not have strong Christian traditions and had been field targets for missionary societies since the great evangelical revivals of the nineteenth century. Japan itself was home to missionary societies and orders of missionary nuns. China was another scene of intensive Christian missionary activity in the period leading up to World War II. Australian missionary couples and their families, as well as single men and women, worked for various organisations including the China Inland Mission, the Church Missionary Society, the Methodist Mission Society and the Salvation Army. Many of these missionaries had lived in China for much of their adult lives, had reared their children there, and returned to Australia only on furlough every four or five years. Descendants of the original Salvation Army missionaries, who had travelled to China in the 1920s, refer to themselves to this day as part of 'The China Family'.[4]

In most parts of the region, Australians were a national minority in expatriate communities dominated by the British, Americans or Dutch, depending on the location. The situation was different in New Guinea. Formally from 1921, Australia had administered, on behalf of the League of Nations, most of the Pacific island territories that had been controlled by Germany before World War I, although the Australian military had in fact been in control since 1914.[5] This 'mandated territory' included the north-eastern part of the main island of New Guinea and the islands of New Britain and New Ireland; Ocean Island (Banaba, now part of Kiribati), administered on behalf of the United Kingdom as a British colony of the British Western Pacific Territories; and Nauru, by the joint mandate of Australia, New Zealand and the UK. Rabaul, a northern coastal township on the island of New Britain, was the administrative capital of the Australian external territory and home to a colonial community dominated by Australians. Most of the men worked in concerns linked to the trade in copra and gold, but at least 100 men and women were officers of the New Guinea Public Service. Colonial public service ran the gamut of occupations, from sawmilling, mechanical work and health care to more eminent

appointments in the judiciary. There was also a significant missionary population in New Guinea. Hundreds of predominantly European missionaries worked there, a legacy of the time when the islands had come within the German sphere of influence. Missionary nuns, such as the Australian sisters of the order of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, who lived as part of an international convent community of nuns at Vunapope, near Rabaul, were a visible and prominent presence in the islands. They were known as the 'white sisters' for the colour of their habits more than their skin; the Germans were the 'blue sisters'. There was also a group of Australian Methodist missionary men on the island of New Britain and four Methodist mission nurses. In the Pacific, missionaries were an influential presence, particularly given the isolated nature of many communities and relatively weak and under-financed colonial governments.[6]

Growing tension with the Japanese brought a host of new arrivals to New Guinea and elsewhere in the early 1940s. A number of journalists and war correspondents were present in the region by late 1941, reporting back to Australia on developments. One was the well-known Jack 'Jet' Percival. Once described as a 'buccaneering type' by his newspaper colleagues, Jack Percival was the *Sydney Morning Herald*'s representative in the Philippines. In the 1930s Percival had accompanied Charles Kingsford-Smith on his trans-Tasman flights, and became a noted aviation correspondent but by 1941 he and his wife, Joyce, were living in Manila and expecting their first child.[7] Recent arrivals like Percival felt no particular loyalty to the region and made desperate efforts to escape after war had been declared. Percival and his wife did not succeed but many women and children had already taken heed of evacuation orders and left before the Japanese occupied their homes. Those who stayed included some women who did not wish to leave their husbands and medical professionals who were required to remain behind. Long-standing residents with careers and commercial interests to defend, men and women both, were not interested in leaving; neither were missionaries, most of whom considered that abandoning their posts in the hour of need would destroy any credibility they had gained with the people whom they hoped to convert. Very few imagined that Japan would declare war on the United Kingdom and the United States and that, at least initially, it would defeat them both.[8] In a matter of months, between December 1941 and March 1942, the Japanese controlled all the Dutch, American and British territories in the south-west Pacific area, giving the lie to centuries of Western imperialism and domination

based on doctrines of racial superiority. Expatriate communities in the colonies were as surprised as the imperial powers upon whom they had depended for their defence. They were also terrified.

Events had moved with frightening speed. Hong Kong had fallen in December 1941, Singapore surrendered the following February and the Netherlands East Indies fell to the Japanese in March 1942. What type of masters would the Japanese prove to be for the now-vanquished colonials? Many whites imagined the terror of rape, pillage and massacre. There were grounds for fearing the behaviour of victorious Japanese troops, as events at Nanking had attested so clearly in the 1930s, but in those early days of defeat every stereotype of Asian barbarity that the West had manufactured tormented defeated colonials as much as any hard evidence of brutality. As we will see, in the mess and violence of invasion such horrors did sometimes occur, but most foreign nationals were subject, at least in the first instance, to the more mundane treatment considered appropriate for 'enemy aliens' in a time of war. They were identified, separated from the rest of the population, and detained in prison-like facilities.

The Dutch in the Netherlands East Indies were the most numerous of approximately 130 000 Allied civilians interned by the Japanese in hundreds of camps that dotted the map between Shanghai and Rabaul.[9] The Allied powers, whose treatment of their own enemy aliens is certainly not an unblemished or uncontroversial record, at least followed international protocols and informed the International Red Cross of the whereabouts of interned persons.[10] The Japanese in most cases did not, and almost no information was available about civilian internees, as they became known, for the duration of the war.

Photojournalists recorded the liberation and homecoming of civilian internees in 1945. We now know that photographs at once reproduce and interpret reality. If any image were to sum up the sense of isolation and difference that many former internees felt in the immediate post-war years, the image reproduced in Figure 1 of Frank Merritt might be it. Frank Merritt was among the first group of internees liberated in February 1945, when the Philippines was reclaimed from Japanese occupation by forces led by General Douglas MacArthur. The following month, Merritt was photographed at Sydney's Central Station. Contrast Merritt's expression with that of the woman beside him, who positively beams. This is a man who appears sad, resigned and perhaps, given the trace of a forced smile, relieved. His cardigan is shabby and ill-fitting

Figure 1: *Frank Merritt, a Gallipoli veteran who was detained at Santo Tomas internment camp in the Philippines with his wife and their daughter. This photograph was taken on Merritt's homecoming to Australia in March 1945. Within months, he would criticise the Australian government for the mean treatment of its citizens who had 'suffered horribly'.*

Figure 2: *Jean Merritt, photographed in Sydney on her return from Santo Tomas internment camp. She was eighteen years old. After the breakdown of her parents' marriage in the early post-war years, she went to live in Canada with her father.*

compared to the schoolboy's tie and woollen jacket, and the fur collars that adorn the women's coats.

Frank Merritt's daughter, Jean, was also photographed that day. She carried a blanket tied with string and a small hessian bag, belongings crucial in an internment camp but out of place in metropolitan Sydney. The wrists that emerge from her cardigan are thin and the vertical stripes of her cotton pants draw the eye to her wisp-thin waist. Although she was eighteen, Jean appears to be a much younger girl.

The photographs are of homecoming, and they express displacement, but they do not tell of its context. For that we require words, and we need to turn to the archival record. After knowing so little for so long, the Australian government now watched and counted this first group of liberated internees very carefully. Frank, Mary and Jean Merritt had sailed from Manila to Townsville in northern Queensland, where they disembarked and transferred to a train bound for Sydney. During the journey south, officers from the US and Australian armies walked through the train and demanded that Frank Merritt and his fellow passengers sign a promissory note guaranteeing repayment of their repatriation costs.[11]

It was a homecoming in stark contrast to Frank Merritt's experience of returning from World War I. A member of the Light Horse Regiment who had exaggerated his mere seventeen years of age to nineteen in order to enlist, Merritt, a country boy from Gippsland in southern Victoria, had been wounded in the stomach at Gallipoli. After the war Frank had married and spent much of his adult life in the Philippines, enjoying a successful career and the comforts of an expatriate lifestyle in a house complete with servants.[12] His experience of war a second time around, by then a man in his forties who did not enlist in the military, was very different. This time, the battlefield came to him. In January 1942, the victorious Japanese forces who had occupied Manila commandeered Santo Tomas University and transformed it into an internment camp for the thousands of Allied nationals living in the area. The Merritt family spent more than three years detained at Santo Tomas, as civilian internees of the Japanese.

As Frank Merritt and members of his family would learn, there was a world of difference between returning to Australia as a war veteran, and repatriation as a liberated civilian internee. Frank Merritt was a man in a position to make a meaningful contrast between the civilian and military experiences of war. Mary Merritt was not, but she always resented – perhaps even more than her husband – the distinction that

the Australian government drew between service personnel and citizens affected by war who had no actual service to the nation. In 1945, she informed the Australian Minister for Information that despite her civilian status, General MacArthur had 'regarded us as soldiers in the front line and commended us for maintaining faith and refusing to cooperate with the enemy'.[13] But civilian internees were not soldiers and it was a distinction the Australian government was keen to maintain. Returning POWs, for instance, would never be asked to pay for their journey home.

Dorothy Jenner looked a little happier than Frank Merritt when she was photographed on her journey back to Australia from internment in Hong Kong. She and five other Australian women and their children appear on the deck of their repatriation ship, wearing printed cotton dresses, smiling and waving for the camera. The original caption in the *Argus* newspaper noted that Dorothy Jenner was better known in Australia as 'Andrea', a columnist for Sydney's *Sun* newspaper. In her luggage, Jenner had extensive notes that she had made during her time in Hong Kong's Stanley internment camp, written on any available scraps of paper she could find. Words, stories and wry observations of human nature were Jenner's stock in trade, and a practice she maintained throughout her captivity.

A worldly, twice-divorced and childless woman who had just turned fifty, Jenner arrived in Singapore in late 1941 to work as a war correspondent for her newspaper. Initially thrilled at the prospect of joining the action, it was an attitude Jenner later considered naive, reflecting that she went off to war as if it were a trip to Manly on the ferry.[14] By December 1941 she had made her way to Hong Kong, and witnessed the siege and eventual surrender of the colony to the Japanese on Christmas Day. Uninterested in battlefield tactics or stories that would bolster a preconceived image of military valour, Jenner instead documented the shock of defeat for Hong Kong's colonial population. Two weeks before surrender, the impending sense of doom felt by those caught on the island was reflected in their ever-increasing consumption of alcohol. Jenner also thought terrified civilians, herself included, found release in sex. She described the atmosphere as an 'orgy of "forgetfulness"', in which lust and fear circulated throughout the colony.[15] When the rumour of surrender had been confirmed, Jenner confessed to her diary that the words 'tore with jagged edges at my brain'.[16]