



## *Prisoners of the Sumatra Railway: Narratives of History and Memory*

by Lizzie Oliver.

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Much has been written in recent years about the Allied prisoners of war (POWs) who labored in Japanese military camps along the Burma-Siam “Death Railway” during the Second World War. Far less has been written about the so-called “other” railway, built by Japanese captives across the island of Sumatra, today part of the Indonesian archipelago (8). For decades after the war, it was commonly assumed there had been only one “death railway”; some survivors of the Sumatra railway even suffered the indignity and frustration of being “corrected” about their place of incarceration: “no mate, you were in Burma” (xiii). The lion’s share of scholarly attention concerned *the* “death railway,” which spanned Burma and Siam, and the Changi POW camp in Singapore. Building upon and moving past these studies, historian Lizzie Oliver<sup>1</sup> has now provided a much needed account of a largely forgotten aspect of the Far Eastern prisoner of war (FEPOW) experience.

As the war in the Far East progressed, increasing demands were placed on Japan’s economy. Rich in reserves of coal and oil, the island of Sumatra was identified as a possible source of some of the valuable resources Japan required for its war effort. Oliver explains that a large forced-labor railway construction project was implemented to move coal from the northern parts of Sumatra to its western ports at Padang, to be shipped to Singapore and on to Japan. The Sumatra Railway was thus meant to provide an accessible route via which troops and supplies could be moved across the island, avoiding waters heavily patrolled by the Allies. Japanese engineers began work on the Sumatra railway in December 1942, and local Javanese laborers (“romushas”) started excavation works for the line’s foundations in March 1943. The first contingent of Allied POWs arrived on the island in May 1944. In all, 4,968 Dutch, British, Australian, New Zealand, American, and Norwegian POWs labored on the Sumatra Railway, which stretched for more than 200 km between Pakanbaroe and Moeara and ran through jungles, swamps, and marshes. The railway was completed on 15 August 1945—the very day that Japan surrendered to the Allies. Six hundred and thirty-seven of the Allied POWs perished, mostly of malnutrition or tropical diseases, and a further two thousand were lost aboard transport ships sunk by Allied submarines (2).

*Prisoners of the Sumatra Railway* examines the POWs personal narratives as preserved in diaries and memoirs written during their captivity, postwar interviews conducted by the Imperial War Museum, and statements by medical officers and interpreters. Oliver observes that

it is not possible to learn about the Sumatra Railway, and the forced marches and shipwrecks that happened on the way there, without encountering the determination and courage of individual men who ensured that their stories were preserved after they returned home. It is their diaries,

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memoirs and oral history recordings that form the basis of the information that is now available about this part of the Second World War. By using excerpts from these it has been possible to create a narrative of their labour, the terrain through which the railway was built and the different camps that POWs inhabited. (xiv–xv)

Oliver adopts an innovative approach, synthesizing literary critical theories of life-writing, memory, and war representation with due attention to linguistic issues. She positions POW narratives as both practical and affective documents. Language in the polyglot camps on the island was, she argues, an instrument of both subjugation and resistance, as words from various tongues were co-opted into the prisoners' everyday dialect. Astutely applying Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of discourse,<sup>2</sup> Oliver discloses

the ways in which the social context of words are embedded silently into the linguistic choices made by POWs.... [They] developed their own "anti-language" slightly differently, since these men did not create a "new" vocabulary, although it was new to many of them. Instead they adopted phrases and words from the different languages they heard in use around them. In doing so, POWs made powerful statements of resistance by embedding within each word the "contextual overtones" of their captivity: for example, by creating a domesticity that was expressed through the Malay language, POWs developed roles for themselves (gardening, cooking, teaching) that were external to those created through Japanese command. (5, 76–77)

The author also describes the experiences of indigenous laborers. Though precise numbers and source materials for the many pressganged Tamils, Malays, and Koreans are notoriously hard to ascertain, given the preoccupation of Western scholars with *Allied* POWs, she does provide a refreshing discussion of the romushas the Japanese forcibly recruited to build roads and railways on Sumatra. The ca. 100,000 romushas toiled in conditions even more brutal and filthy than those endured by Allied POWs (26–29). Although they generally occupied separate camps, they sometimes worked side by side in the jungle. Their story is part of the wider narrative of Far Eastern captivity.

The book contains an introduction, five chapters, and an afterword. Moving from linguistic and literary discussions of the written remembrance of the Sumatra Railway in chapters 1–3, Oliver turns in chapter 4 to an examination of the POW body through medical reports and artwork in order to convey the discomforts and agonies of incarceration. The visceral experience of captivity was writ deeply upon the bodies of POWs. Movingly, many survivors of the Sumatra railway could not bear the sight of the degradation that captivity had etched on their flesh (99). The author discusses as well the survivors' postwar medical care in Britain, as they strove to become reconciled to the bitter legacies of captivity. Many were "haunted" to the end of their lives by the specter of maltreatment, starvation, and the ravages of tropical diseases (100–104).

A particular strength of the book is its transition from analysis in the early chapters of the POWs' wartime experiences and "immediate" personal narratives to an investigation of the bodily and medical experiences that bridged the postwar era to, in the fifth and final chapter, the effects of POW suffering upon later generations. That is, the book traces the chronological journey from the prisoners' own ordeals to those shared by their families. The author provides a salutary reminder that trauma may be passed down through generations, for instance, in the form of the "FEPOW" figure that emerged in postwar decades and the "Postmemorial Archive" created by re-

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2. See "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U Texas Pr, 1981) 259–422.

cent generations (125). This archive comprises reports, documents, and testimonies gathered by the children and grandchildren of FEPOWs.

The fact that later generations bear with them the trauma of those who came before provides the scaffolding of Oliver's study.<sup>3</sup> She herself explains that her interest in the subject stemmed from a desire to piece together the story of her grandfather, Stanley Russell: "It was a wish to learn about the story that he and his campmates [on Sumatra] told. I wanted to know how things happened and how, ultimately, they did that very telling" (xiv). Her personal tribute to her grandfather and all those who suffered with him illustrates how narratives of the Sumatra Railway may open wider perspectives on war and the transmission of its memory.

*Prisoners of the Sumatra Railway* amplifies the voices of POWs from a forgotten corner of the Pacific War and traces their stories of suffering and survival through the latter half of the twentieth century. By her meticulous research and dexterous analysis of how POWs shared, preserved, and made sense of their experiences, Lizzie Oliver has made a most valuable contribution to the literature of Far Eastern captivity during the Second World War.

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3. See, further, Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 2012), cited by Oliver and included in her book's bibliography.