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Captives of War: British Prisoners of War in Europe in the Second World War by Clare Makepeace.

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In recent years, historians have become increasingly interested in the cultural history of captivity in World War II. A particular focus is prisoners' own interpretations of their experiences both during and after the war. Gender has emerged as a useful category of analysis in assessing the emotional impact of life behind barbed-wire.

With *Captives of War*, Clare Makepeace (Birkbeck, Univ. of London), a historian, writer, lecturer, and consultant in the cultural history of the two World Wars, has now made a valuable contribution to this still developing field of study. She has written previously on male heterosexuality and prostitution in the First World War,[1] and gender again features prominently in her present "consideration of how [Second World War] … prisoners of war made sense of their experiences *as men*" (7); in short, she is interested in "the emotions of POWs, rather than their material lives" (8). Hence, she investigates the psychological problems prisoners wrestled with during and after their imprisonment and the light shed by their writings "on what it meant to be a British man in the mid-twentieth century" (10). These topics of interest were partly inspired by memories of her grandfather, Signalman Andrew Makepeace, who was captured by German forces in France on 12 June 1940, and how he talked—or, rather, did not talk—about his experience.

Captives of War[2] is based on the evidence of twenty-six collections of letters and postcards, twenty-five logbooks, and forty diaries of various forms written by seventy-five POWs, including seamen, airmen, and soldiers of all ranks in all theaters of the war.[3] Memoirs and other postwar recollections are explicitly disregarded because they were "written from a vantage point of knowing how the experience unfolded and eventually ended" (22). Makepeace treats these sources, written by men captured in different theaters of war between May 1940 and June 1944,[4] as material objects, and images of them or their contents appear throughout her book. Her discerning, multilevel interpretations of these sources and the purposes they served is a great strength of her book. The author has also consulted primary sources in various archives, libraries, museums, and private collections in Great Britain and Switzerland.

The advantages of Makepeace's exclusion of post-captivity sources becomes apparent in chapter 1, "Capture." She shows that, contrary to current conventional wisdom, falling into enemy hands was not necessarily a transformative experience: her subjects "did not see their capture as a

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1. "Male Heterosexuality and Prostitution during the Great War: British Soldiers' Encounters with Maisons Tolérées," *Cultural and Social History* 9 (2012) 65–83.

2. Orig. diss. Birkbeck, Univ. of London (2013).

3. Claude Bloss's correspondence with his wife during his five years of captivity comprises 781 letters and postcards; many of the other sources are similarly extensive.

4. See appendix 2.

signal for the start of a wartime incarceration lasting an indefinite but lengthy duration, as numerous historians, sociologists and psychologists have suggested" (45). In fact, most expected to be quickly liberated or released and harbored overly optimistic expectations regarding the time it would take to defeat the Axis powers. Nor did they identify their surrender as shameful or dishonorable, though they often stressed that they bore no personal responsibility for their fate. Nonetheless, contemporary psychiatrists observed a subconscious awareness that falling into enemy hands carried a stigma.

Chapter 2, "Imprisoned Servicemen," examines how the prisoners made sense of their captivity experience. Many actually presented an "upbeat view of captivity" in their personal narratives and developed a "Kriegie[5] identity, against a perceived out-group of people who did not understand their life.… Acts of rebellion were key in giving meaning to their existence" (54, 56). Many men in the author's sample "asserted themselves as the equal or superior of their captors" instead of "rueing or bemoaning their … subservient position" (64). Their accounts of how they worked, exercised, studied, or entertained themselves served to "re-instate their masculinity" and show that they "still possessed the attributes frequently associated with men: being active, productive and resourceful" (73). Yet the prisoners' narratives also evince the "Kriegie lament" that those who had not shared their experience could never understand it and would see it as inferior. Metaphors of emasculation recur in their personal narratives "in relation to many aspects of POWs' confinement" (86).

Chapter 3, "Bonds between Men," clarifies how logbooks and letters fostered individual friendships as well as small-group solidarity among POWs. Diaries served as a "subversive space" (104) in which to air grievances over lack of food and news from home, as well as noisy and cramped quarters. The prisoners' relationships with each other were broadly shaped by "date of capture, rank and allocation of food" (105). Length of captivity and the shortage of food divided rather than unified them, but in their writings for a public audience the men stressed their friendships, camaraderie, military discipline, and sharing of food (114). Makepeace also highlights the important role female impersonators played in the all-male homosocial camp environment.[6] "POWs' admiration for men in drag could be used to exert their collective male superiority, but it also shows a blurring of the boundaries between heterosexual, homosocial and homoerotic relations" (127).

Chapter 4 concerns the "Ties with Home" that provided a rare element of continuity and stability in the prisoners' lives and helped them make sense of the captivity experience. The prisoners lived for their letters from home and often valued them higher than anything else, including food (135). Letters and photos were physical artifacts that "could overcome the spatial divide that lay between POWs and their loved ones [and] provide [them] with a tangible connection with home" (131–32). Fantasies provided another way to return home. Prisoners often encouraged their loved ones to think of them at pre-arranged times. Though they eagerly anticipated the day of their liberation, repatriation was also a cause of anxiety. Makepeace highlights how the prisoners' emotional dependence on their loved ones at home "could alter and upset these men's familial and gender roles … mak[ing] captivity harder to bear" (128).

Chapter 5, "Going 'Round the Bend,'" summarizes research on the link between imprisonment and mental health during and after the First World War and highlights the similarities with the

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5. "Short for Kriegsgefangener, meaning prisoner of war" (xiv).

6. See, too, her "'Pinky Smith Looks Gorgeous!' Female Impersonators and Male Bonding in Prisoner of War Camps for British Servicemen in Europe," in *Men, Masculinities and Male Culture in the Second World War*, ed. Linsey Robb and Juliette Pattinson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) 71–95.

situation in World War II. Many POWs experienced psychological problems in captivity which expressed themselves in various ways and were given a range of euphemistic terms. The prisoners acknowledged "that they and others were psychologically disturbed" and sometimes even embraced this fact "as one of the peculiar aspects of POW life." However, their psychological maladies "remained without recognition, without clear diagnosis or prognosis and without a specific name" (183).

In chapter 6, "Liberation," Makepeace briefly examines how shifts in style and form in the POWs' logbooks and diaries reflected the impending end of the war and their eventual liberation, as well as how and when the authors ended their accounts. This prepares the ground for her discussion of the resettlement of the repatriated prisoners.

Using medical papers and reports, Makepeace describes in chapter 7, "Resettling," the prisoners' efforts to come to terms with their captivity after returning home; she also indicates what was done to smooth their transition into civilian life, in the light of the problems liberated POWs had faced after the First World War. Those who accepted the help offered usually benefited, but the "ambiguity surround[ing] POWs' return home [was] reflected in the language of officials and psychiatrists, as well as in the attitudes of the ex-prisoners of war, and through their effacement of the very experience of captivity itself" (192).

The volume's conclusion rightly suggests that its main findings "might give historians pause to consider the experience of captivity in other wars and spheres of incarceration." Makepeace emphasizes the limited appeal of the "soldier hero" (224) ideal for the POWs, who were more attached to their civilian identity. She also astutely questions the often-voiced idea that falling into enemy hands triggered a "crisis of masculinity" or was "automatically emasculating" (225). While such feelings were experienced, this was mainly due to the POWs' perception that they had "let down loved ones in their familial domestic sphere." The prisoners were not "sealed off in some sort of barbed-wire vacuum" (226) but connected with their families back home in various ways. They experienced the temporal dimension of captivity in different forms than commonly assumed, and "escapism" rather than "escapes" (227) was crucial for coping with the often challenging conditions in the camps. Makepeace also notes that some prisoners made do by stealing from comrades or trading with the enemy; and, too, a "significant minority" (228) developed mental problems. Finally, the author identifies the way the POW experiences have been remembered after the war and the effect this process had on society, families, and veterans as a fruitful area for further research.

Captives of War is a stimulating and at times provocative book, even though Makepeace largely refrains from directly challenging other authors. As a result, her book's originality is not always immediately apparent. One wishes the more assertive tone of her persuasive conclusion were apparent throughout the book. Nevertheless, *Captives of War* is a meticulously researched, well structured monograph that deserves a wide readership, not least for the light it casts on important methodological problems.