

Robin Gerster, *Travels in Atomic Sunshine: Australia and the Occupation of Japan* (Scribe, 2008)

The Occupation of Japan in the wake of World War II's conclusion has been dominated, in terms of historiography, by Americans who focus on the U.S. and Japan without any reference to Australia. Robin Gerster's *Travels in Atomic Sunshine* is a significant contribution to criticising this neglect, found even in John Dower's landmark *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Aftermath of World War II* (1999). Gerster reclaims the legacy of the Australian troops who were part of BCOF (British Commonwealth Occupation Forces) and their role in the Occupation. He tells a story, with its negative and positive sides, that has been ignored not just by America and Japan but also by Australia, including the Australian War Memorial Museum in Canberra. On ANZAC Day, Australians remember Gallipoli, Kokoda, but not 'the Forgotten Force' (as he calls them) of postwar Occupation Japan. (275)

It is true that Australia had little input into Occupation policy, and none in terms of overall command and choice of troop location. However, Gerster points out several reasons why the Australian troop presence had a significant impact on Australia and Australian-Japanese relations. The 1940s was a decade of intense racism toward Asians in Australia, in part from the continuation of the official 'White Australia' policy under the Curtin and Chifley governments. The prejudice among ordinary Australians, however, underpinned this policy. A constant question raised by Gerster is how could a country with such a staunch anti-Japanese outlook possibly bring 'democracy' to postwar Japan and its people? Invariably it required going against the tide of military policy and Australian public attitudes, but also the prejudice and disrespect toward Japanese all too common among a majority of BCOF soldiers.

In example after example, Gerster shows how some exceptional soldiers of BCOF broke through the military's 'non-fraternisation' policy to come in contact with ordinary Japanese. Sometimes this occurred through friendships or contact with Japanese who worked for BCOF. But more frequently it involved young Australian men meeting young Japanese women through sexual liaisons that led some into serious relationships and forbidden marriage. 'Sleeping with the enemy' (a title of one of the chapters) became, in effect, an opening wedge to changing Australia's anti-Asian 'White Australia' framework.

Australia's role in BCOF also can be viewed as the country's first major peace-keeping operation (virtually ignored by the War Memorial Museum). Australian troops were located in one of the most devastated areas of Japan: Hiroshima, totally destroyed by the atomic bomb, and Kure, location of Japan's largest naval base in the war, totally destroyed in the American strategic bombing campaign. Gerster documents extensively from memoirs and primary sources the raw conditions that Australian troops endured in these extremely impoverished locations, which contrasted with the far better situation of American troops in other locales, Tokyo in particular. The role of Australian troops and civilians, where it was positive, had a constructive impact mainly on the ground, through provision of schools, caring for orphaned children, and assisting with the rebuilding of infrastructure. All too

often, however, many Australian soldiers took undue advantage of local people, and particularly women, which created a scandal back in the home country.

It was the American command that directed policy changes under the Occupation, including devising a new Japanese constitution, purging the zaibatsu of top wartime owners, instituting voting rights for women, and permitting labour union organisation. The Australian command had no direction in any of these major reforms, which led many Australians to wonder 'why are we in Japan?' Gerster's answer is that the positive impact was as much on Australia and Australians, in large part through troop contact with ordinary Japanese, as it was on Japan. In contrast to Dower's history of the Occupation, taken entirely from the American perspective and focusing mainly on Japan's transition, Gerster's emphasis is on the Australians within Japan. Gerster's account highlights personal experiences far more than Dower's study. He also takes the reader along his own travels decades later that uncovered this personal side of this history.

Gerster takes a highly critical view of BCOF's Australian troops through much of the book, but we can view his sordid survey of troop life in Japan as a reflection of the serious faults of Australian military and government policy toward the Occupation, and of the parochial nature of Australian society at the time. The key rule for troops was 'non-fraternisation' – no contact with Japanese. Soldiers came unprepared culturally and were encouraged to maintain cultural and physical distance. Young men in a foreign country with little to prevent them from doing what they wanted, beyond standard duty, could hardly be expected to obey this absurd and prejudiced rule, one that did not exist for American military personnel in other places. Japan in particular, with its open attitude toward sexuality (traditionally, though with boundaries), and also the attitude of many Australians that 'the Japs have it coming to them' for their war crimes, created a powder keg when it came to sex. Rapes were common and prostitution a way of life. This contributed to the negative reputation that BCOF troops, considered by many the least disciplined of Allied occupation troops. Much of the violence was fueled by alcohol, but widespread involvement in the black market and theft generally was the background to this attitude as well.

Gerster is balanced in his narrative, however, and provides numerous examples of strong relationships that were the exception to the overall sexual opportunism of so many young men. One of the most disturbing sections is where he recounts the forced separation, government sanctioned and enforced by the military, of Australian soldiers and their new Japanese wives, with soldiers shipped back to Australia while placed in the brig. This policy was completely backed by Labor government immigration minister Calwell, who railed against mixing racial 'blood' and polluting Australia's white population with mixed Australian-Japanese children.

BCOF's presence in Hiroshima after the atomic bombing and with subsequent residual radiation gives Australian troop presence special meaning for the world today, which Gerster highlights in the book's conclusion. None of the troops had any idea that they were being exposed to residual radiation when they entered the city, and in some cases cleared debris, finding bones of the dead as they did so. American authorities knew of this danger but kept it secret for decades, suppressing medical data and blocking publication of Japanese scientists' findings until the end of the Occupation when Japan regained its sovereignty. Australian troops suffered from the

same diseases caused by residual radiation as Hiroshima residents who had not been in the city at the time of the bombing but entered afterwards. Even today the Australian government still refuses to recognise the suffering of these troops and provide them with extra medical assistance.

The irony of MacArthur's marginalising the Australian BCOF troops to the Hiroshima region is that their exposure to the aftermath of the atomic bombing makes these troops symbols of the dangers inherent in potential nuclear war in the present century. The story of BCOF newspaper journalist Istvan (Stephen) Kelen, an Australian originally from Hungary, is perhaps the most stunning example of this hidden legacy and also an example of how ordinary people from different cultures can overcome terrible injustices of the past. The first memorial for the atomic bomb victims was held in August 1946. It coincided with the O-Bon festival of the dead, which involved a dance in a circle to greet 'the dead whose souls had been liberated from their suffering in the Buddhist hell and elevated to a state of celestial bliss.' Kelen was the only foreigner in attendance that day and 'felt distinctly uncomfortable'. Gerster relates,

Then an amazing thing happened. The music and the movement suddenly stopped, and a man...called to the Australian: 'Come and dance with us honourable soldier'. Two grimy Hiroshima urchins, a boy and a girl, took him by the hands and led him into the circle. There on the bank of the Ota, Kelen writes, 'in front of the grotesque skeleton of a building, with the people of Hiroshima I too danced the Bon Odori.' As an epiphany of cultural reconciliation, this is hard to beat. (253)

Gerster's *Travels in Atomic Sunshine* is a scholarly, superbly documented study and a narrative written in a highly readable style. It incorporates provocative arguments and sophisticated insights without becoming 'academic'. It is a book that is bound to become a classic social history of a major era of the Australian-Japanese postwar encounter.

David Palmer