This is the author's radio script of this article.

Geoffrey McGeachin has written three contemporary novels featuring special agent Alby Murdoch, but his new novel The Diggers Rest Hotel introduces a new detective, DC Charlie Berlin, and takes us back to the period immediately after the second world war, when men were trying to adjust to civilian life and women were trying to cope with men trying to adjust to civilian life.

Berlin was a fighter pilot, shot down on his last mission and held in an eastern European POW camp till the end of the war. He’s survived, but he’s witnessed horrors, one atrocity in particular that continues to haunt him. He’s not popular with his superiors, so they send him north from Melbourne headquarters to try and solve a series of armed robberies: a motorcycle gang has been knocking off the payrolls at the railway stations in northern Victoria. He knows it’s going to be a difficult case to solve and that he’s being made a scapegoat.

Once in Wodonga, where he doesn’t know a soul, he soon finds some allies. There’s the young constable who’s been assigned to drive for him – and keep an eye on him, as he readily admits. There’s the beautiful but aggressively flirtatious Rebecca Green, reporter and photographer. And there’s Sergeant Pete Whitmore from the army base at Bandiana, a regular at the Diggers Rest Hotel, where Berlin is staying. Of course there are antagonists as well: the local police Sergeant Corrigan, his twin brother Vern who runs the Hotel, and Captain Bellamy, head of a local militia intent on defending the country against the red menace.

The Diggers Rest Hotel takes a little while to get going. It all feels slightly mechanical while McGeachin sets up the backstory. There are flashbacks to Berlin’s war experience, and even to his childhood, to explain why he became a cop and why he is so troubled: Rebecca’s of the opinion that ‘he was damaged and he was trouble and nothing would ever be easy with a man like that’, though it doesn’t seem to put her off: we’re told early on that his broken nose gave him ‘a brooding appearance that women seemed to find attractive.’ In turn, he finds that ‘almost everything about this woman made him uncomfortable. And, strangely, that was
something he liked.’ There’s a rather wooden melodramatic quality about a lot of this character development.

Another problem is the plethora of period detail. Some of this is relevant to the plot: for example, the abundance of army surplus gear available in the community makes it difficult to trace the motorcycles used in the robberies. At other times it’s just scene-setting. Walking down Wodonga’s High Street, Berlin ‘passed a grocery store with brightly painted tin signs for Kinkara Tea, Lifebuoy and Sunlight soaps, Bovril and Keen’s Mustard nailed neatly to the outside. Hardware stores had brooms and shovels and stacks of feed out on the pavement, and the cake-shop windows displayed iced finger buns, lamingtons and neenish tarts.’ This is fine up to a point, but McGeachin too often takes us past that point. The dialogue could be more economical too: sometimes the conversations go on just a little too long.

But despite a few imperfections, *The Diggers Rest Hotel* is a good read – rather grimmer than the Alby Murdoch novels, but it gives a picture of a difficult time in Australian society when the war was won and the cost of the victory was being assessed. The plot is satisfyingly intricate without being confusing. And I think, after this first outing, it will be well worth pursuing Charlie Berlin as he develops through the inevitable sequels.