



PRIME MINISTER

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Ladies and gentlemen

Thank you very much for inviting me here today, to say a few words about this fascinating and unique book.

Last year, of course, it was the fiftieth anniversary of many of the battles fought in defence of Australia, and it was my privilege on several occasions to pay tribute to those Australian servicemen and women to whom we owe so much.

I visited some of the battlegrounds - most notably, I suppose, Kokoda: and I have not had a more moving experience in all of my public life.

For a nation which has been so involved in wars this century, we have also been a long way removed from war: and I think that may be why these places - like Kokoda, or the war cemeteries at Boma outside Port Moresby, or at Lae - have such a disturbing effect when we first encounter them.

My generation was profoundly lucky: we all knew, I think, that our parents and our grandparents generations had gone through experiences of a kind that we were never likely to confront.

For instance, I knew about Singapore, and about Borneo - about Sandakan - because my father's brother had been there, and died there. But I was not taught about it at school, and there was very little to read about it.

We knew the wars through legend and ritual.

And we knew World War I better than we knew World War II.

But we really didn't know what it had been like.

And, in any case, the generations who fought in the two World Wars tended to keep their memories to themselves. We grew up aware of the wars but remarkably innocent of the experience of war.

And that, I think, is why we are shocked when we see the gravestones which remind us of how many died, and their ages, and what they must have gone through, and the people they left behind.

This is the 75th anniversary of the end of World War I. Later this year I hope there may be an opportunity to visit those battlefields in Northern France where so many Australians lost their lives. I sincerely hope it is possible to go, because these places are truly sacred to Australia.

But the battlefields of the Asian and Pacific war are also sacred. In the next few years I hope the battlefields of New Guinea, Borneo, Singapore and Malaya - and Burma and Thailand - will become as important to our historical understanding as the battlefields of the Middle East and Europe were to earlier generations of Australians.

Everyone should know about these battles.

Above all, they should know about the subject of this book - the prisoners of war who worked on the Burma-Thailand Railway.

No Australian soldiers suffered more than these. Few had more reason to feel betrayed or neglected - before, during and after their capture. None had to call on such reserves of faith and spirit as they did: faith in themselves; faith in each other; faith - I like to think - in Australia, what they had created there and what they hoped to create.

Whatever they may have thought, in historical terms they were doing more than just surviving.

As Gavan McCormack and Hank Nelson point out - these were the first Australians to go en masse into South East Asia. They saw it and dealt with its peoples as no other Australians ever had.

They also saw the British empire as few Australians had ever seen it - and it led a lot of them to conclude that we Australians had evolved into a different race. It raised their sense of an independent identity.

So, it may be that in time the 8th Division will be seen as something more than soldiers or prisoners of war - but as the first pioneers of Australia in Asia. The frontiersmen.

Somehow I think it would be the highest tribute we could pay them - both those who died and those who managed to survive.

Such a tribute would depend on our succeeding in Asia, of course. It will mean that we will have to succeed economically - as an entirely independent nation, aware of necessity and confident of both our identity and our capabilities.

And that will depend on our developing greater mutual understanding between the countries of Asia and ourselves, greater mutual respect.

The men and women discussed in this book very often did just that - they developed a deep respect for the Chinese and the Malays, the people of Borneo and Ambon and Sumatra who very often risked their lives to help them.

They found in all sorts of circumstances that they shared common human ground with people they had, for cultural and historical reasons, been inclined to patronise or despise.

There's surely a lesson in it - we can come to terms with the countries of Asia and in doing so, far from sacrificing our identity or our principles, strengthen them.

There's surely also a lesson in the accounts this book contains: that so much of the unconscionable treatment of prisoners came from what the Japanese had been taught.

My old friend, Tom Uren, might say it is lesson in the nature of fascism - and he's right. But it's also a lesson in ignorance, and parochialism. It's a lesson in culture and education.

That is why we should teach the story of the war.

Because the men and women who fought in those battles and suffered and died in those camps should be remembered and honoured. And because there is great deal for us to learn, both about ourselves and about Asia, in reading about these experiences.

Which gets me back to the most important question to confront us every Anzac Day: we are left to wonder what they died for.

We say they died for Australia: the question is, what sort of Australia? What sort of Australia is it incumbent on us to create?

Tom Uren and Weary Dunlop would have very different political views on this I'm sure.

Yet they would agree on some basic things: they would agree that Australia will succeed best if it incorporates into its daily life and the conduct of its affairs the principles of fellowship and cooperation and care for

each other. Mateship is as good a word as any other to describe it.

It has been around for a long time, that word - and those principles. But I'm inclined to think that it is only in the last decade or so that we have begun to realise just what a powerful force they can be in the economic life of a country and in seeing a country through great changes and hard times.

Mateship was never tested so much as on the Burma Railway and, for all the tragedy, nowhere was the triumph of mateship so emphatic. Mateship and the human spirit.

If we imbue all our endeavours in the next decade with those principles I am sure we will succeed - and if we succeed, we will have paid the prisoners on the Burma Thailand Railway the greatest possible tribute.

We will have created a prosperous Australian democracy, built on those values and one in which they are secure.

Hank Nelson and Gavan McCormack have done us all a great service with this book. So have all the other contributors - Australian, Japanese and Korean.

I congratulate them all and with great pleasure declare *The Burma-Thailand Railway* - the book - officially launched.