

THE DUNERA AFFAIR: A SCANDAL FOR WHOM?

Paul R. Bartrop

Read before the AJHS — Victoria on 17 September 1990

The year 1990 sees the fiftieth anniversary of the departure from England and arrival in Australia of the infamous transport ship *Dunera*. One of the recurrent themes of authors who have examined the history of the *Dunera* is that the whole affair was a scandal of which both the British and Australian governments should be forever ashamed and apologetic. The purpose of this paper is to question this prevailing 'wisdom', and to consider whether the word 'scandal' is in fact appropriate to describe the voyage or its aftermath.

There is little doubt that in the summer of 1940 Britain was fighting for its life. The so-called 'Phoney War' ended on 10 May with the German invasion of the Low Countries. Britain would soon stand alone awaiting a German invasion; its resources were then stretched beyond capacity as Italy entered the war in June and threatened the British Mediterranean lifeline. New considerations of security now confronted the British. Immediately after the outbreak of hostilities the British Home Secretary, Sir John Anderson, had made a declaration that the government would draw a clear distinction between enemy aliens and refugees from Germany and Austria, and aliens tribunals had been set up throughout the country to classify the refugees into the following categories:

- A — persons to be immediately interned as not being absolutely reliable;
- B — persons left at liberty, but subject to certain of the restrictions applicable to enemy aliens under the Aliens Order of 1920;
- C — persons who should be free from all restrictions under the Aliens Order, except those applying to friendly aliens.

Both the B and C categories were classified as refugees from Nazi oppression, and generally considered by the British people sympathetically. As a result of investigations undertaken by the aliens tribunals, 568 refugees were placed in category A and interned; about 6,800 were classified as B, whilst the vast majority, numbering nearly 65,000, were classified as C.

With the invasion of the Low Countries a panic emerged in Britain which saw all enemy aliens, whether refugees or not, as potential fifth columnists who may be spies ready to spring into action once the Germans invaded. On 12 May Sir John Anderson issued an order which would 'temporarily' intern all male Germans and Austrians over sixteen and under sixty (excluding the invalid and infirm) throughout the coastal regions of England and Scotland. All other male aliens in the same age group, regardless of their nationality, were also to be subjected to restrictions: daily report to the nearest police station; prohibition from using any motor vehicle (except public transport) or bicycle; and a curfew between 8 pm and 6 am. At the end of May a second order provided that all B category persons of enemy nationality, male and female, anywhere in the country, should be immediately interned. Then in the last week of June, as the panic measures intensified with the collapse of France, an order was issued for the general internment of *all* adult males of enemy nationality between the ages of sixteen and sixty, throughout the country. The great majority of these were men who had been placed in the C category, and included

many engaged in work of national importance as scientists and educators, as well as many students from schools, colleges and universities.

Accompanying the panic measures to intern all enemy aliens were calls to deport as many as possible from Britain to places where they could do the least damage to the war effort. On 3 June new Prime Minister Winston Churchill wanted to know why arrangements could not be made to deport twenty thousand internees to Newfoundland or St. Helena, and on 7 June the Dominions Secretary asked the Canadian High Commissioner in London, Vincent Massey, whether Canada could take some of the internees off Britain's hands. Canada agreed that it could. Subsequently, ships taking internees across the Atlantic departed Britain on 24 June (*Duchess of York*, 2,602 internees), 30 June (*Arandora Star*, 1,213 internees), 3 July (*Ettrick*, 3,062 internees), and 7 July (*Sobieski*, 1,828 internees).¹

One of the transports, the *Arandora Star*, never reached its destination: it was torpedoed by a U-Boat a few hours out of Liverpool. Of the 734 Italian civilians on board, 486 lost their lives; of the 479 Germans, the death toll was 175. These are official figures. Discussions with survivors of the *Arandora Star* suggest that these numbers represent what could be an under-estimation. Of certainty is that some 444 survivors were plucked from the water by British and Canadian warships and later re-embarked on board another ship taking internees away from Britain: the 12,615-ton hired (or chartered) military transport (HMT) *Dunera*, bound for Australia. Altogether the *Dunera* carried 2,288 other internees, making for a total prisoner complement of 2,732. There were 141 guards and crew manning the vessel.

Australia had been approached to take internees after Canada. Without much delay, the Australians agreed to take six thousand, including women and children, *provided their role would simply be that of guarding the internees and there would be no possibility of their remaining in Australia after their release* (whenever that should be). The *Dunera* was thus the first of what were to be several transports: in the end, it was the only ship to come to Australia from Britain carrying internees. (Mention should be made here of the *Queen Mary*, which came to Australia from Singapore in September 1940 carrying over two hundred internees, men, women and children, who were immediately sent to the internment camp at Tatura. These people fell into the same general category of 'Overseas Internees' as the *Dunera* internees did.)

The story of the trip has been frequently told, and shall not be retold here.² In all of the accounts, however, instances are recorded of the most appalling injustices and mistreatment perpetrated by the guard detachment charged with security on board. The guard was made up from companies in the British Pioneer Corps, and from members of the Royal Norfolks, Suffolks and the Queen's Own Regiment. They were commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel William Patrick Scott; his second-in-command was Lieutenant John O'Neill VC, MM. Neither of the two officers are remembered as humanitarians by the internees. Many of the other guards hardly acted any better; according to at least two authors, the reason can be found in their social character and origins. One of these authors, Barbara Winter, can be quoted in depth:

Internees said the guards were mainly what they called 'Soldiers of the King's Pardon', men released from various prisons for this specific task. Many documents relating to the disgraceful conduct aboard the *Dunera* are not open to public scrutiny; one reason for this may be that this was not a group of ordinary soldiers who happened to turn vicious, but in many cases they were known criminals with previous convictions for theft and violence, and this was known to the British authorities. Someone had blundered or did not care; those in authority should have known that many of these men, including many officers, were entirely unfit to be entrusted with any responsibility. Thus prisoners

were robbed, beaten and starved aboard *Dunera*. Considering the quality of many of the guards, this should have been expected.³

Whether this is true or not was irrelevant to the internees themselves: all they knew was that some members of the guard detachment were responsible for beating, looting, robbery, torture, and intimidation.

As the ship sailed halfway around the world, its key ports of call were in West Africa (Freetown and Takoradi) and South Africa (Cape Town). From there the ship proceeded directly across the Indian Ocean to Australia. A brief narrative of subsequent events would read something like this: on 26 August the Australian coastline was sighted for the first time, and the next day the *Dunera* docked in Fremantle; on 3 September the ship arrived at Melbourne, where a number of internees were disembarked and sent to the internment camps at Tatura; on 7 September the ship docked in Sydney and off-loaded the remainder (and the majority) of the internees. The next day, after a nineteen-hour train trip, these internees arrived at Hay internment camp where they were divided into two groups; Camp 7, which mainly comprised Jewish internees, and Camp 8, which was made up of political internees and Catholic Germans. The internees then quickly began to settle into an existence which was intended to efficiently and, so far as possible, comfortably enable them to survive the experience of captivity and perhaps even gain something positive from it.

While all this was taking place, in Britain events were in train which would greatly affect the status of the *Dunera* internees. Even before the worst of the Blitz had passed, by September 1940, questions about the arbitrary nature of the arrests of internees earlier in the year began to be asked in the House of Commons. The upshot of these questions saw a new set of exemptions from internment published in October 1940. These exemptions included most of those who had been sent to Australia on the *Dunera*.

Acknowledging they were wrong, therefore, the authorities in the British government contacted the Australian government with the information that the internees were now eligible for release, subject to an appeal on behalf of each internee before a reclassification board. The Australians were delighted, no more so than when the British went on to suggest the way in which the releases should take place. An Army Officer seconded to the Home Office would be sent to Australia to help facilitate the repatriation of the internees to Britain, where they would then be released. The Australian view was that this was the most logical and acceptable solution. Until this Officer arrived, however, the internees had no option but to remain in internment. That had been the arrangement agreed to originally, and there was logical reason, in the view of either the Australians or the British, to depart from this.

It will be recalled that the Australians had originally agreed to act merely as jailers for the British; they would house the internees, guard them and feed them (all with substantial reimbursement from the British government), but *under no circumstances* would the internees be permitted to enter Australian society as immigrants. It was as if the internees were hermetically sealed off from Australian society: they would be *in* Australia, but not a part of it. The Australian authorities, moreover, had always said that if their status should ever change in Britain, then it should be in Britain that their situation should be rectified — but not in Australia.

The British government thus acknowledged its mistake, and duly despatched its Home Office Liaison Officer to Australia to rectify the situation. He was Major Julian Layton, a London Jew who had already a great deal of experience with refu-

gee and internee matters. In the early 1930s, he had gone to Australia in an attempt to facilitate refugee entry; he had been in Germany on numerous occasions dealing directly with the Nazis in trying to arrange exit visas; and he had for a time been in charge of the Kitchener Transmigration Camp at Richborough, where he had got to know many of those who were later interned. He was thus known (and respected) by many of those in Australia, on both sides of the wire.

After his arrival in March 1941 (after journeying via Canada, where he apprised himself of conditions prevailing for the 'overseas internees' who had been sent there just before the *Dunera* voyage), Layton quickly found that the task of repatriation was not going to be as simple as he had at first anticipated. The usual bureaucratic inertia which takes place when mistakes require rectification had taken hold, and things were going to 'take time'. Not deterred by this, Layton set about achieving the possible, and allowing the 'impossible' to work itself out. Two early measures are worthy of note.

The first of these saw the internees transferred from the Camps at Hay to Tatura (Victoria), an altogether better climate which was both needed and appreciated by the internees. The second saw the beginning of a process whereby compensation would be paid by the British government to the internees for the losses they incurred on the *Dunera*. This was an important concession, as it must not be overlooked that the drama took place during wartime, a time when all manner of injustices and threats to civil liberties can (and do) take place. It must also be noted and remembered that the British government was very quick to acknowledge its mistake, and sent an officer halfway around the world in order to redress the situation and arrange for the repatriation and release of the internees. Three of the guards who behaved so brutally on the *Dunera* were tried by court-martial on a variety of charges upon their return to the United Kingdom; one was actually found guilty, reduced to the ranks, sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment and dismissed from the Army. The British government went out of its way to pay restitution to the internees, a figure of £35,000 eventually being paid out as compensation for physical losses incurred during the voyage. That this took place at a time when Britain was engaged in a war for survival, when it needed literally every penny for the war effort, is strong evidence that the mistake was sincerely regretted and that the British government was sensitive to the injustices to which the internees had been subjected.

As a result of Layton's efforts for repatriation, several hundred of the internees ultimately did manage to return to Britain, risking a hazardous sea voyage at a time of total war. Others were able, again with Layton's help, to move to other countries while the war was still in progress. Those who did not want to return to freedom in Britain, or who were concerned that to do so would entail more risks than if they remained in Australia, elected to remain in internment until conditions improved or changed. There was no 'release-into-Australia' option — and the internees had been repeatedly told this. It was not a matter of Australia keeping them there: the Australians stuck by the original arrangement, and allowed the British government to rectify its own mistake — as it had always said it would do.

It is ironic, therefore, that so many of the *Dunera* internees ultimately stayed and became valuable members of the Australian community in a staggering variety of professional and technical fields. What brought about the change? A constant theme running through the internees' whole experience was a desire to be released, in most cases so as to contribute to the war effort against the common enemy. After the entry of Japan into the war, when Australia was itself threatened, the Australian

government provided the internees with the opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty in a practical way by joining the Army in a non-combatant labour role. Almost all who had not yet returned to Britain took advantage of the offer. Their ultimate reward, though it is problematical how many had sought it, was a further offer from the government: this time to stay permanently in Australia. The internees had done their bit; they had shown themselves to be 'dinkum'. For the Australians, no accomplishment by a foreigner could be greater than this.

For all this, the question must be asked as to what can be concluded about the affair. The British, for their part, had admitted their mistake; had sent an officer across the world to arrange the repatriation of the internees; had compensated these same internees to the value of £35,000 at a time when the resources of the nation were stretched beyond capacity; and (a point omitted earlier) consented to the now former 'enemy aliens' joining the British Army in order to perform labour duties in the Pioneer Corps. The Australians, in turn, had stuck to their original arrangement with the British, and had not abandoned the internees or allowed their condition (in fact quite the opposite); had agreed to the transfer of the internees from Hay to a better climate at Tatura; had gone against their own arrangement with the British government, by allowing the internees to join the Australian Army in a labour capacity; and, their 'loyalty' having been demonstrated, ultimately permitted over seven hundred of the internees to stay on as permanent settlers.

When all these measures are taken into consideration, the question of whether the *Dunera* experience was a scandal or not surfaces very clearly. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, the word 'scandal', so defined, is something which occasions a 'general feeling of outrage or indignation, esp[ecially] as expressed in common talk, opprobrium'. In that context, there should be no doubt that the journey on board the ship *was* a scandal; this was acknowledged when the British government went so far as to put three of the guards on trial and pay compensation to the internees for losses incurred on the ship. Other than that, there are few other aspects of the *Dunera* experience which can be described as 'scandalous'. The fact was that the original round-up and arrest in Britain was a blunder — a monumental mistake — but performed at the time with wholehearted support from a great many British people (and possibly even a majority). There followed the trip, which was, as stated, truly scandalous; but once the internees arrived in Australia their treatment, though unfortunate and frustrating (and all too frequently humiliating, such as when the internees had to write their letters on prisoner-of-war paper), was not scandalous. Indeed, the process of extremely slow, but gradual release was not so much scandalous as appreciated by those whose fate had in 1940 been extremely uncertain in Britain.

It is therefore difficult to accept arguments which suggest that there was any sort of 'conspiracy' involved in the *Dunera* affair. This is suggested throughout Cyril Pearl's book *The Dunera Scandal* (the very title is a giveaway as to his position) through a clever use of suggestion and innuendo, and has recently been reinforced in the popular media through the pages of the *Age Good Weekend* magazine (1 September 1990). In this article the author, Alan Gill, quotes Cyril Pearl's widow Paddy along the following lines:

The British admitted to their fault straight away. . . . Immediately the ship left, there was a howl in the press, they realised what they had done. There were debates in the House of Commons. In contrast, when they [the *Dunera* Boys] got to Australia, the Government headed by Menzies was not the faintest bit interested. . . . He bunged them into Hay and wasn't moved by pleas from anyone.⁴

This does not consider the fact that the *Dunera* internees fell under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Army, and its Minister, nor that the internees were not so much 'banged' in Hay than placed in camps which had been specially constructed for them while they were still *en route* from England. This notwithstanding, Gill then provides his own contribution to the 'scandal' idea:

Two decades after [Cyril] Pearl began his researches, I found Australian Archives staff in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne almost embarrassingly eager to please. Thanks to recent computerisation of records, I obtained a list of all Government files (about 30) bearing the name *Dunera*. They contained fascinating revelations concerning British and Australian official attitudes, but no letter or memo to or from the PM. This supports theories of a cover-up.⁵

The logic leading to this conclusion is most unfortunate. Pointing to an absence of documents bearing the Prime Minister's signature does not prove that he had no interest: all it shows is that the researcher has not found any documents to back up his preconceived notions. It does not 'prove' anything — least of all the existence of a cover-up. A balanced position has either not been considered or has been edited out of the final copy; either way, readers of the article may be confirmed of earlier suggestions that a cover-up has taken place. Claims of a conspiracy have fuelled the allegation that the *Dunera* affair was a scandal. As this paper has attempted to show, however, the word 'scandal' is really inappropriate when describing everything but the trip itself.

There is one area, for all this, where the post-*Dunera* experience does fall under the heading of 'scandalous' — and it is still with us today. In his 1983 account, Cyril Pearl drew the public's attention to the 'ludicrous 100-year ban' which the British Home Office had placed on the *Dunera* files in London.⁶ This ban has not been challenged recently, so it may be assumed the ban still stands. Many of the files in the Australian Archives are also closed, or open only with exceptions. Perhaps, then, the time is again right for the wisdom of these restrictions to be questioned, in light of what we now know of the *Dunera*. The challenge before the governments of both Britain and Australia should now be to re-examine the closed files with a view to overturning earlier bans. In 1990, fifty years after the event, there is little to be uncovered of which the wider reading public is not already aware. Those who lived through the *Dunera* affair are owed a debt of explanation which only the release of the relevant documents can provide. The continued failure of both governments to face up to this is, it can be argued, the real *Dunera* scandal: and it is still to be resolved.

NOTES

1. These figures are derived from Ronald Stent, *A Battered Page? The Internment of 'His Majesty's Most Loyal Enemy Aliens'*, London, Andre Deutsch, 1980, p. 96.
2. See, generally, the following: Ben Zion Patkin, *The Dunera Internees*, Sydney, Cassell, 1979; Cyril Pearl, *The Dunera Scandal: Deported by Mistake*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1983; Peter and Leni Gillman, 'Collar the Lot! How Britain Interned and Expelled its Wartime Refugees', London, Quartet, 1980; and Paul R. Bartrop with Gabrielle Eisen (eds.), *The Dunera Affair: A Documentary Resource Book*, Melbourne, Jewish Museum of Australia/Schwartz and Wilkinson, 1990.
3. Barbara Winter, *Stalag Australia: German Prisoners of War in Australia*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1986, p. 79. This story is corroborated in part by Ronald Stent, who writes: 'One internee says that there were ex-jail birds amongst the soldiery who had been granted a Royal Pardon upon joining the Army. They had been considered unfit for normal combat or garrison duties, but entirely suitable as guards.' At the same time, he footnotes that 'the recollections of several internees about the regiments vary. The information may therefore not be entirely accurate, or comprehensive' (Stent, p. 115).
4. Alan Gill, 'When Friends Were Enemies', the *Age Good Weekend*, 1 September 1990, p. 24.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Pearl, p. v.