

Negotiating Mechanism of Control and Isolation

How Italian PoWs Shaped the Environments of Allied Prison Camps During the Second World War

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How Italian PoWs Shaped the Environments of Allied Prison Camps During the Second World War

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During World War II, as many as one million Italian soldiers became prisoners of war (PoW). They were detained in camps across the USA, Britain and its colonial possessions, together with Italian migrants who were considered enemy aliens. These detention facilities became islands of containment where Italians from all parts of the peninsula, Fascist and anti-Fascist alike, were brought to live together and were faced with the problem of how to make a home.

Italian PoWs and internees constructed sleeping quarters, ablution buildings, camp gates, detention blocks, and mess halls under the direction of the Allied Armies, but they also shaped their environment in ways that were culturally relevant to them. These regulation buildings had plain interiors that PoWs decorated with personal items and were sometimes frescoed by both professional and dilettante painters. Even detention blocks were decorated with drawings and graffiti. Other interiors, usually mess halls, were converted to chapels and theatres. Exteriors made up a large proportion of the detainees' spatial experience. Bounded by barbed wire with one formal area set aside for roll call, camp exteriors were largely amorphous, thus creating ample

space for interventions. Here detainees created bocce courts, fountains, garden beds, bridges, and other landscaping, as well as monuments to honour their dead. In this way, PoWs and internees did what many migrants have also done: recreate their homeland in a range of distinctively different environments that effectively hybridise traditional practices with locally available materials in what Beynon and Woodcock have termed diasporic vernacular.¹ But this was an enforced diaspora within islands of barbed wire surrounded by Egyptian desert, Indian jungle, Australian farmland and, in the case of the Orkneys, the North Sea. In Helwan, British authorities did not let PoWs build a theatre, so stages were set up in mess tents. Spectators brought their cots in for seating and the whole setup was dismantled after the show. Each pen set up its own theatre company: serious theatre, musical comedy, and folk theatre, often divided along regional lines. Receptions after the show were hosted by PoWs playing female parts who stayed in costume for the occasion. Resident painters and architects took care of the sets and, together with directors and writers, gave what PoW Michele Palladino called in his diaries an air of Italian-ness and professionalism.²

1.

David Beynon and Ian Woodcock, "Diasporic Vernaculars? Different Australian Commercial Precincts," *Design and the Vernacular: Interpretations for Contemporary Architectural Practice and Theory*, ed. Paul Memmott, John Ting, Tim O'Rourke and Marcel Vellinga (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 213–229.

2.

Michele Palladino, *Pantaloni con la toppa. Diario di un P.O.W. Helwan (Egitto) – 1945* (Rome: A.N.R.P., 1999), 12.



Figure 1:
Fountain in the Italian Garden in Murchison,
Camp 13. (Used with kind permission of Tatura
Irrigation and War Camps Museum)

In India, many of the altars and accompanying statues were built of mud and, once dry, they were painted and either set up as an outdoor ritual area or transported into one of the barracks.³ These places of worship were strongly tied to their identity as Catholics. Prisoners in Australian camps, such as at Cowra in New South Wales and Murchison in Victoria, spent a lot of their time turning the spaces between buildings into highly curated landscapes that included all the familiar elements of an Italian garden. This began with patches to grow vegetables like zucchini and eggplants and extended to stone paths and bridges. They also built numerous fountains, relying both on skilled labour and knowledge of hydraulics (Figure 1). Like the fountains in the main piazzas of their hometowns, they became a favourite backdrop for photographs to send to loved ones.⁴

But one of the more enduring and holistic examples of how Italian PoWs shaped their environment is on the small island of Lambholm, one of the Orkney group of islands located between the Scottish mainland and Shetland. Approximately 1,000 PoWs had been brought there from Egypt to help build underwater barriers that doubled as breakwaters and links

between islands. With the help of a local engineer Gordon Nicol, they repurposed two Nissen huts. With the imaginative use of concrete (of which there was ample supply), they built themselves a small chapel, one of very few of these collective works of creativity still standing today. The interiors were frescoed by an artist who also sculpted the altar out of Orkney clay, made a plaster cast and then poured concrete into it. The team included a stonemason, a blacksmith, a carpenter, two bricklayers, and two electricians. Others pitched in by gathering brass, iron, and tiles from sunken military ships around the Scapa Flow so that they could be repurposed to create the rood screen and other interior elements – even one of the lamps was made from bully beef tins.⁵

Italian soldiers from all walks of life lived in these islands of containment for as long as seven years. Here they were able to exercise their professional skills and, in many cases, learn new ones, so that they could shape their environments using local materials and traditional practices. This enabled them to mitigate their feelings of trauma, loss, and displacement by creating temporary homes away from home.

3.

Joseph Bonnici, *Italian Prisoners of War in India. An Authentic Account of Italian Prisoners of War in British Hands in India Related by One Who was Actually There*, (Croydon, Vic.: Joseph B. Bonnici, 2007), 27–29.

4.

Anthony White and Flavia Marcello, "Italian Prisoners of War in Australia: Carceral Aesthetics at the Cowra Prisoner of War Camp (1941–1946)," in *Captivity and Creativity: The Cultural and Material Production of Italian Prisoners in Western Allied Hands (1940–1947)*, ed. Georgia Alt and Elena Bellina (New York: Fordham University Press, in production).