

# ANGLICA

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## Preface

In the early 1980s, I was invited to produce a number of entries for Mel Hurtig's highly acclaimed 1988 edition of *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Although delighted to have the opportunity to enhance my knowledge of all-things Canadian, I was utterly disheartened when my research on the Canadian-born novelist and poet Joy Kogawa revealed that her prize-winning novel *Obasan* (1981), the first to trace the expulsion and confinement of 21,000 Japanese Canadians from the West Coast during World War Two, was also the first to inform me about the racial injustices which occurred when the federal government stripped them of their property, exiled them to remote areas of British Columbia, and then pressured them to accept mass deportation after the war. Those who refused could not return to the province until 1949.

In 1988, the federal government officially apologized for its inhumane treatment of Japanese Canadians who had been rendered prisoners in their own country by offering redress payments of \$21,000 to each survivor, and allocating more than twelve million to community funds and human rights projects. That apology sparked once again the question concerning how one of the most tragic set of events in Canada's history could possibly have escaped my attention. Nowhere in my education, which included earning a Master's Degree at a university located in southern Alberta, the province within easy reach of British Columbia, which many Japanese Canadians chose as their destination once the "second dispersal" forced them to relocate at the end of the war and begin their lives yet again, did the subject of internment materialize. My shameful ignorance was troubling and led me thereafter not only to question why there was such a paucity of Canadian prisoner-of-war literature, but also to the frequent teaching of *Obasan*, a remarkable novel about a withdrawn school-teacher narrator who was a child when her family was evacuated initially to an interior BC town, and then after the war to the beet fields of southern Alberta. While I acknowledged in my brief account that while the novel was clearly "a harsh indictment of the treatment of the Japanese," I also commented that Kogawa's "lyrical prose" prevented it from becoming more than

mere “bitter recrimination,” but remained a “moving, powerful, and truthful story of human rejection and suffering” (1550).

Because the bulk of my research has been on Australian and Canadian women’s war fictions, until recently, few prisoners-of-war accounts have captured my attention. Quite suddenly, there has been a veritable “explosion” of prisoner-of-war fictions published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – and in the main by Australian women writers, which prompted me to offer a graduate seminar on prisoner-of-war fiction, but with the inclusion of the only Canadian works I am aware of: *Obasan*, as well as Francis Itani’s *Requiem* (2011) and Kerri Sakamoto’s *The Electrical Field* (1998), both set on the home front. Why so many Australian writers – with Cory Taylor, Christine Piper, Anita Heiss, and Saskia Beudel each producing a novel on the Japanese internments, and Vilma Watkins, Deborah Burrows, Goldie Goldbloom, Joanne Carroll, Susan Temby, and Dale Turner each writing on the Italian imprisonments – should have so clearly been “doing their bit” to point to their country’s shocking acts of discrimination when Canadian writers have not, remains a subject for another paper.

Had my academic career not screeched to a halt with the diagnosis of serious health problems, I would have submitted a paper which examined the much-overlooked memoirs by Betty Jeffrey (*White Coolies*, 1954), and Jessie Elizabeth Simons (*While History Passed*, 1954), both of whom spent forty-two months in prisoner-of-war camps, as well as Bruce Bedford’s film *Paradise Road* (1997) on the role music played in helping women and their families survive horrendous treatment. My goal in part was to emphasize that, as historian Christian Twomey writes, we need to examine why civilians (particularly women and children) who were themselves directly and adversely affected by war have continued to remain peripheral to a national vision about war which maintains its concentration on military service and its effects on individuals and their families (*Australian’s Forgotten Prisoners: Civilians Interned by the Japanese in World War Two*, 2001). Thankfully, this journal continues to emphasize the multi-faced nature of prisoner-of-war writing by incorporating women’s voices in fiction (Löschnigg) and film (Melnik). In each case, these works serve to demonstrate how, through perseverance and solidarity, they manage to triumph over hardship and atrocity.

And finally, I wish to stress how much I appreciate the fine work the general editor Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż has done, none of which should have fallen to her, but when it did, she tackled it with much dedication, grace, and patience. My thanks also go to Professor Dan McKay, who made the mistake of inviting me to read his fabulous introduction to a work on prisoner-of-war writing, which I learned about during a conference on Australian writing in Fairbanks, Alaska (2019). Even before realizing I would not be writing this introduction, I felt that, without question, Daniel would do a far better job of producing it than I ever could. As a result, readers will now benefit tremendously from the efforts of two superb scholars, whose joint devotion to producing a very fine journal is more than evident.

## References

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<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/obasan>

DONNA COATES teaches in the English Department at the University of Calgary. She has published over thirty articles and book chapters on Australian, Canadian, and New Zealand women's responses to the First and Second World Wars, and to the Vietnam War. She has edited twelve books: three on Canadian war drama, two on Alberta writing, and most recently seven volumes on a historical and literary examination of women and war for Routledge's history of feminism series. Sydney University Press has agreed to publish her book on Australian women's fictional responses to the First and Second World War and the Vietnam War. It is tentatively titled *Shooting Blanks at the Anzac Legend*.