White, B. T. (2020) Protection or isolation? Humanitarian evacuees in Australian quarantine stations. In: Scott-Smith, T. and Breeze, M. E. (eds.) *Structures of Protection: Rethinking Refugee Shelter.* Berghahn Books: Oxford, UK, pp. 187-198. ISBN 9781789207125

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Deposited on 24 July 2019

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Protection or isolation? Humanitarian evacuees in Australian quarantine stations

Benjamin Thomas White

The refugee camp, Liisa Malkki once wrote, is a technology of both care and control (Malkki 1995: 231): a tool for the efficient delivery of shelter and humanitarian aid to displaced people, on the one hand, and a means of immobilizing and isolating them, on the other. Recognizing the tension between these imperatives, in 2014 the United Nations High Commission for Refugees adopted a policy of seeking alternatives to camps that stresses the 'significant negative impacts' they can have (UNHCR 2014: 4). But the emphasis on control that makes camps uncomfortable for UNHCR, not to mention their residents, is the thing that often makes appealing to states. The sites chosen for refugee camps often indicate the host state's commitment to holding refugees at a distance, from the military transit camps where France accommodated Spanish Republican exiles in 1939 to the remote Azraq or Dadaab camp complexes in contemporary Jordan and Kenya. The prior and later functions of such sites often also show how refugees are grouped with other 'controlled' populations: in the French example, a camp like Rivesaltes, created to keep colonial troops away from metropolitan populations, was adapted first into a refugee camp, then into a internment camp for 'undesirables' and prisoners-of-war, and later still into accomodation for migrant workers, and then an immigration detention centre (Mémorial du camp de Rivesaltes n.d.).

What holds for camps also holds for individual structures and complexes of buildings. In 1914–19, for example, the theatre and other buildings at Earls Court showground were adapted to house thousands of refugees, mostly Belgians (British Government War Refugees' Camp 1920). The central location and minimal restrictions on residents' movements indicated the British government's commitment to caring for, rather than controlling, the citizens of its war allies. But in other cases, the location and biography of buildings used to shelter refugees can indicate a desire to contain and isolate them that may be at odds with the rhetoric of protection. In this chapter I explore that tension between care and control, protection and isolation, using site biographies of two distinctively Australian cases: the old quarantine stations at North Head, Sydney, and Point Nepean, near Melbourne. Both of these sites have also been used to house humanitarian evacuees—groups of refugees who were ostensibly benefitting from a particularly generous form of protection. In their buildings we see a logic underlying refugee shelter that is as much carceral as humanitarian.

Quarantine and confinement in Australia

The coastline of Australia is dotted with old quarantine stations, often set near to, but apart from, major cities. For much of the country's modern history, control of disease meant control of mobility, often in locations that were also been used for other kinds of confinement. On Torren's Island near Adelaide in South Australia, for example, a quarantine station was later joined by a notorious First World War internment camp for 'enemy aliens'. At Woodman Point near Perth in Western Australia, a quarantine station became a Second World War POW camp. Near Darwin in the Northern Territory, the immigration detention centres at Bladin Point and Wickham Point, recently closed, stood on what was previously known as Mud Island, where Chinese

and Aboriginal men with leprosy were quarantined in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: even at the time the appalling conditions there drew considerable criticism (Find & Connect n.d.; Northern Standard 1928).

Australia's history of quarantine is different from that of other countries in Europe and Asia. Maritime quarantine regulations were enacted later, but lasted longer, and they had a more central place in government policy. At federation in 1901, quarantine was the only area of public health regulation to be assigned in the constitution to the new Commonwealth government, and Australia's modern Department of Health emerged from the Federal Quarantine Service (Bashford 1998: 388, 397). The notion of quarantine as part of the emerging nation's defences against invasion from abroad was central to public health policy. As such, quarantine, as Alison Bashford has argued, played an important discursive role in marking the bounds of the Australian nation, both territorially (as an 'island-nation') and politically (with black or yellow bodies much more likely to be confined and excluded). In an article with Carolyn Strange, Bashford extended this analysis to draw connections between the history of quarantine detention going back to the nineteenth century, the twentieth-century internment of enemy aliens during wartime, and Australia's more recent policy of mandatory detention of asylum-seekers, and any other 'unlawful non-citizens'. All three forms of detention have served an important nation-defining role in Australia: these are indeed *national* histories (Bashford and Strange 2002: 518-519). Given these connections, it is not surprising that the same sites were often used for more than one kind of confinement.

The parallel histories of North Head and Point Nepean are apparent even from a brief visit. Each stands just inside the mouth of a natural harbour, where a port city of European settlement developed further inland. Both are today located within national parks that combine natural heritage—coastal habitats threatened by suburban sprawl—with human heritage. There are gestures to the traditional owners of the land, fairly insubstantial for the time being but programmed to increase (Peter Freeman Pty Ltd et al. 2000: 22-42; Parks Victoria 2016). The vestiges of coastal fortifications are extensive, though, as are the quarantine stations themselves: they are material evidence not of two distinct histories, but two aspects of the same history, manifested at the same locations (Bashford 1998: 394). They are beautiful but eerie places to visit.

North Head, Sydney

North Head is the older of the two stations, as Sydney is the older of the two cities. It opened in 1832 at Spring Cove, where the first European ships to enter Port Jackson had anchored sixty years earlier (Clarke and Frederick 2016: 522; Bashford and Hobbins 2015: 392). Although the central business district of modern Sydney—the site of the original settlement—is only a few miles away up the harbour, it is out of sight beyond Middle Head, which separates the main expanse of the harbour from its northern offshoots. Like its counterpart at Point Nepean, the old quarantine station at North Head feels more remote than its actual location suggests.

The buildings remaining on the site today show its development into the twentieth century. At the wharf was a luggage store, a boiler house with a tall brick chimney, and a disinfecting room where luggage was steamed in enormous cast-iron

autoclaves. On the slopes above the cove a spacious complex gradually spread out, with accommodation areas reproducing the class hierarchies and racist hierarchies that pertained aboard ship. The first class passengers in their comfortable accommodation were protected from mingling with second class residents by high fences and a stretch of 'neutral ground', while third class passengers were elsewhere again and 'Asiatics' were housed in crowded dormitories with an external communal kitchen. Obliged to stay at the station in 1930, the golfer J.H. Kirkwood found the segregation insufficient (The Argus 1930):

> I am an Australian, and I always thought that this was a white man's country, but when I have seen Chinese, Indians, and Fijians with the same bathing and toilet facilities as white men in this quarantine station I have not been able to help feeling disgust. However, we are resigned to our fate.

For residents suspected of carrying disease or showing symptoms there was an isolation zone at one end of the site; for those who became ill there was a hospital, and in the final necessity a burial ground.

In recent years the site has been developed as a cultural heritage destination (Peter Freeman Pty Ltd et al. 2000) and simultaneously, thanks to a 'linkage' grant from the Australian Research Council, intensively studied by a large historical archaeology project based at the University of Sydney. The inscriptions that mark the site, from highly visible carvings in the sandstone by the road leading down to the wharf to faded scribbles of ink on the internal paintwork of buildings, were a key focus for this project. Some of these inscriptions are formal, clearly executed by skilled craftsmen, while others are more amateurish and/or incomplete, but they commemorate the stay at North Head of the passengers and crew of numerous ships. The oldest was made by sixteen-year-old John Dawson in 1835, but they continue late into the twentieth century, carved, painted, or scratched onto external and internal surfaces (Hobbins, Frederick and Clarke 2016). Among the most interesting are those made by Chinese, Arab, or Indonesian sailors, whose voices are hard to recover from other historical sources for Australia's racist nineteenth and twentieth century (Hobbins, Frederick and Clarke 2016: chapter 6).

Maritime quarantine restrictions outlasted coastal naval defences, though only by a decade or two. Long-range bomber aircraft—and, later, intercontinental ballistic missiles—made coastal artillery batteries irrelevant by the middle of the twentieth century. Mass civilian air travel took a little longer to do the same for quarantine stations. In 1963, when the North Head fortifications fell permanently out of use, European immigrants were still arriving in Australia by ship, as part of the country's enormous postwar programme of state-supported immigration. But by then, one building on the site, identified by the number A20, had already been adapted to a different kind of confinement: immigration detention (Clarke, Frederick and Hobbins 2017: 405; Clarke and Frederick 2016: 531-533).

Although quarantine restrictions were winding down, Australian migration policy became steadily more restrictive in the 1960s and 70s. From 1959 to 1976, building A20 accommodated 'non-criminal deportees': foreign citizens who had not committed any crime but were in Australia without a valid visa. Three hundred and twenty-seven separate inscriptions scratched or scrawled onto the paintwork by

detainees at North Head remain, despite decades of repainting and what archaeologists term ‘adaptive reuse’ (the building is now a wedding venue). They offer ‘a counter-narrative to the rosy image and official record of late-twentieth-century immigration to Australia’ (Clarke, Frederick and Hobbins 2017: 405). Indeed: one of them simply reads ‘Fuck Australia’ (Clarke, Frederick and Hobbins 2017: 416).

Most of the surviving graffiti in building A20 that can be dated (only about 20% of the total) were inscribed in one year, 1975. In that year, another mobile foreign population was housed at North Head, this time on their way into rather than out of Australia: Vietnamese children, controversially brought into the country as part of the US military’s ‘Operation Babylift’. This was an evacuation of children, some of them the offspring of American servicement, from Saigon prior to its fall. About three hundred were brought to Australia, mostly to Sydney, in the midst of bitter recriminations over the country’s participation in the war and responsibility for Vietnamese refugees (Forkert 2012). A hundred and fifteen of them were brought to North Head, where the now little-used quarantine station was able to accommodate them (Peter Freeman Pty Ltd et al. 2000: 68): Prime Minister Gough Whitlam visited them there (Sydney Morning Herald 1975). This was not the first time the station had been used to house evacuees. As well as briefly accommodating British evacuee children in 1940 and Portuguese refugees from Timor in 1942, it had more recently housed Australians evacuated from Darwin after Cyclone Tracey struck in 1974. (It would take more Vietnamese refugees in 1977: Peter Freeman Pty Ltd et al. 2000: 87-88.)

Point Nepean, Melbourne

The quarantine station at Point Nepean was founded later than the one at North Head, in 1852, as the population boom sparked by the Victoria gold rush was just beginning. Melbourne’s colonial population in 1851 was between twenty and thirty thousand, but in 1852, 619 incoming ships brought over 55,000 passengers to and through the city over just four months. The following year over four times as many ships arrived, and the boom continued until the 1890s, by which time the city had nearly half a million people (eMelbourne 2008). Among the 1852 arrivals were the passengers of the clipper *Ticonderoga*, which departed Liverpool in August and arrived in Port Philip, the large and almost completely enclosed bay on whose northern shore Melbourne stands, in November (Kruithof 2004). But by the time the clipper reached the Rip—the narrow, treacherous seaway at the bay’s entrance—nearly a hundred of its passengers had died, mainly of typhus, and almost four hundred more were ill with fever, dysentery, and diarrhoea. As a result, it was anchored at Point Nepean, where the passengers could be quarantined to protect the city. Another seventy died there. Interpretation boards at the site detail this history, and a modern memorial stone commemorates the dead.

Point Nepean is further away from Melbourne than North Head is from Sydney. It is on the long, thin extremity of the Mornington Peninsula, one of the two peninsulas that encircle Port Philip. Like North Head, Point Nepean was heavily fortified from the late nineteenth century into the mid-twentieth century, and the fortifications seem to attract more visitors than the quarantine station. The quarantine station resembles Sydney’s in many ways: the boiler house, the autoclaves for disinfecting luggage; the

isolation hospital and morgue standing at a slight remove from the rest of the complex. By the shore, the memorial to the passengers of the *Ticonderoga*, erected in 2002, marks the site of the station's original cemetery: in 1952 the remains were moved to protect them from coastal erosion, which also affects one of the burial grounds at North Head.

From 1952, the Point Nepean quarantine station shared its site with the military, which ran an Officer Cadet School there. It was finally closed in 1978-80. From 1985 to 1998 the site was used by the School of Army Health, and, in the early 2000s the site was passed over to a local community trust for heritage management. In 2009 it was incorporated into the national park that occupies the rest of the point and includes other old military buildings. Whereas the North Head quarantine station was redeveloped as a heritage attraction by a private company, the Point Nepean station is directly run by the state parks and wildlife service of Victoria (Parks Victoria n.d.).

In 1999, when the site still belonged to the military, it briefly found another use that creates a further parallel with North Head. In the northern hemisphere spring of that year, during the NATO bombing campaign against Serbia, tens of thousands of Kosova Albanian refugees fled into Macedonia, a small new state with little capacity to assist them. Recognizing that its own aerial campaign had contributed to their displacement, and that international public opinion might hold the alliance responsible for their suffering, NATO organized a large-scale humanitarian evacuation (Huysmans 2002). This was the first time that the term 'humanitarian evacuation' was used to describe such an international action: Sadako Ogata, then head of the UN High Commission for Refugees, described the operation as having 'no precedent' in the organization's history (White 2019: 1). Although it was not a member of the alliance, Australia participated by hosting evacuees (Carr 2011).

Of the nearly four thousand Kosovo refugees who were brought to Australia under Operation Safe Haven, around four hundred were accommodated in the old quarantine station at Point Nepean. (The State Library of Victoria commissioned photographer Emmanuel Santos to document their stay.) The others were scattered around nine other military sites. The government considered but rejected the idea of housing the evacuees in very remote locations, such as the Woomera base in the South Australian desert, where an immigration detention centre would open later that year to confine 'unauthorised arrivals' under Australia's mandatory detention policy. But several sites, like the Singleton barracks in New South Wales, nonetheless held them at a remove from the general population (Carr 2011: 158-9). Point Nepean is as far away from Melbourne as it is possible to be while still remaining 'close to Melbourne': this narrow spit of land is literally at the end of the road.

Australia's response to humanitarian evacuees shifted between the earlier evacuation of children from Vietnam and the Kosovan case in the late 1990s. Operation Babylift was controversial, like the country's participation in the Vietnam War. In opposition, Gough Whitlam and the Australian Labor Party had been critical of the war; in power, their reluctance to assist refugees from South Vietnam led to 'humanitarian' criticism from the right that they were abandoning Australia's former allies to communist tyranny (Forkert 2012). Operation Babylift offered a way to offset that criticism, at a time when Australia was progressively abandoning the 'white Australia policy' that had restricted non-European immigration since federation. Whitlam's government

removed the final restrictions in 1973, reversing the Labor Party's earlier adherence to 'white Australia'; his Liberal opponent and replacement as Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, was committed both to a liberal immigration policy and to assisting Vietnamese refugees. By the 1990s, however, Australian public debate on immigration had soured, especially where asylum-seekers and refugees were concerned. Both main parties were increasingly committed to restriction.

Operation Safe Haven in the late 1990s was therefore a tricky political issue for John Howard's Liberal government. Howard had diplomatic reasons for assisting NATO by participating in the evacuation, but political ones for ensuring that the evacuees left quickly. The grudging nature of Australia's humanitarian response can be seen across several areas, from legislation to location. A new class of temporary visa was created for the evacuees, but most of the text of the legislation was given over to establishing the immigration minister's rights to shorten, revoke, or withhold such visas (Parliament of Australia 1999). Evacuees received a weekly cash allowance, but it was so miserly—at first only $20, a quarter of what Kosovo evacuees in Germany received—that they were virtually confined to their 'Safe Havens' (Carr 2011: 160). Notwithstanding the claim by the then Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs that 'every effort was made to enable the Kosovars to participate in the local community' everything indicates that the evacuees were to be held at a distance (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 1999). They arrived in May and June, but half were gone by September. By April 2000 only a hundred or so remained, mostly for medical reasons.

Conclusion

Kate Coddington, writing of the parallels between federal policies towards Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory and asylum seekers arriving on Australia's northern shores, has found 'a common logic toward policymaking in Australia that relies on *containment* to engage with populations perceived as threatening to perceptions of Australian nationality' (Coddington 2014: 2-3). The housing of Vietnamese child evacuees at North Head might simply be explained as a pragmatic choice determined by the availability of more or less suitable accommodation. The 'quarantining' of the Kosovo Albanians at Point Nepean more clearly indicates that these humanitarian evacuees, too, were caught up in the logic of containment, isolated as well as protected. Despite the Australian government's own decision to bring them to the far side of the world in recognition of their humanitarian need, the Kosovo evacuees remained within the increasingly carceral framework of Australia's asylum and refugee policy.

When we research histories of confinement, including quarantine and immigration detention, we often start with states' policies, laws, and practices, and only then note specific sites where they took effect. Similarly, when we study humanitarian operations on behalf of displaced people it is easiest to start by investigating the policies and practices of states, international organizations, and humanitarian agencies—with UNHCR's policy on avoiding alternatives to camps, or the actual practices of building them. To move beyond these institutional perspectives and explore the experience of people living in confinement or in camps, social scientists use ethnographic research. Historians, for their part, can use personal testimonies: oral history (Green et al. 2017), diaries, or—in the example of quarantine—the 'ship's

newspapers' created by passengers and crew (Maglen 2005; Hobbins, Frederick, and Clarke 2016; Foxhall 2017). We also need such sources to deepen our understanding of humanitarian evacuations from the perspective of the evacuees (White 2019; Carr 2011: 336).[1]

The inscriptions that historical archaeologists have studied at sites like North Head or Kilmainham Gaol (McAtackney 2016; Clarke, Frederick, and Hobbins 2017) could be taken as a specific form of personal (or in some cases collective) testimony. But their layering over time, and across different forms of confinement, also illustrates the value of a site biography approach—one that starts with a specific site and moves outwards to consider the *different* policies, laws, and practices that have been manifested there. A historian of quarantine might never learn, from legislative texts or the diaries of confined passengers, that the buildings of a quarantine station also served to house immigration detainees or shelter humanitarian evacuees; a historian of refuge might not realize that a camp where refugees were accommodated also held prisoners-of-war, 'undesirable aliens', or migrant workers. Site biographies give us a richer spatial awareness of what confined populations experience. But more than that, they also allow us to understand the underlying logic of containment that is applied to very different kinds of mobile populations when, even if they are being protected, they are viewed as a threat. Researching the past and present of specific sites gives us a more textured understanding of the tension between care and control in refugee shelter.

Acknowledgements

Descriptions of North Head and Point Nepean here are drawn from site visits in August 2017, made during a visiting fellowship at the EU Centre for Shared Complex Challenges, University of Melbourne. I would like to thank Prof Joy Damousi for suggesting that I apply for this fellowship, and Peter Freeman for making a copy of the 2000 *North Head Quarantine Station Conservation Management Plan* available to me.

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[1] I have not yet been able to consult Carr's recently-published book of his thesis (Carr 2018), which may take up the challenge he set himself here.