

The Dark Dad: War and Trauma – A Daughter's Tale.

By Mary Kiser.

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World War Two may have ended in 1945, but this did not mean that returned soldiers left the darkness and violence of those years behind. Many continued the war on a new front – home and family. This was the case with Mary Kiser's father, Jack Arnott, who had been an Allied Prisoner of War (POW) in Italy and Germany from late-1941 to 1945. Fighting with the 2nd New Zealand Division, Jack was captured by the Germans after the two month campaign and battle of Sidi Rezegh in Libya. Little has been written about this, which is surprising because the number of dead, injured and captured is greater than that of any other campaign by New Zealand soldiers during World War Two.

The Dark Dad opens with the harrowing depiction of a night when young Mary is falling asleep in a bedroom that she shared with her brother Michael. Mary hears her mother, Margaret Ethelwyn (Ewie) running to seek refuge in Mary's bed as her father usually avoided attacking Ewie in front of the children. One night as the 'dark dad' appeared to be entering the bedroom, the children and their mother, escaped through the window. That would not be their only night of terror.

After the beginning, I expected that the book would centre on Jack, as well as POW trauma, and the effects on others, through a personal and family perspective. While there are background chapters on Jack and Ewie's lives before World War Two, the connection of this with the dark Dad is second-hand throughout much of the book; understandable with a lack of Jack's first-hand accounts, such as letters and diaries. Jack did not speak much about the war, except after a violent confrontation with Kiser when she was a teenager. The volume traces Jack's horrific wartime experience as a POW, but because of the lack of his voice, we mainly read this as a carefully researched analysis of primary and secondary sources that provide rich context of his military experience. Fortunately, Jack did keep some photographs and ephemera from his wartime adventures that were passed on to Kiser's son. They had been left untouched for years, in an old tin army trunk in the family's loft.

Kiser intersperses the sources with detailed accounts of visits to sites where her father lived during the War, providing a subjective way to reconstruct a sense of the past, and a connection with her father. Like many memoirists and biographers, Kiser weaves her own research journey through the narrative, and the sources. Personal glimpses such as her grief on visiting the site of the former camp at Gruppignano are moving.

The book contains several official war photographs. Maps showing Jack's movements are also very useful for the reader. An innovative addition is the inclusion of war artists' paintings, sketches and cartoons, although at times the art historian's voice distracts from her father's story. Artist Arthur Douglas, who made many sketches at the camps that Jack was imprisoned in (particularly at Ampezzo), also made drawings of some of Jack's photographs sent to him by his family.

The book is rich with detailed descriptions of the appalling conditions of the POW camps in Italy and Germany – the freezing cold, near starvation hunger, boredom, and brutality from the

guards. Kisler however also carefully depicts how the POWs forged their own community, established routines, laboured, even if only paid a pittance, relaxed, found innovative ways to make the most of their meagre rations, and supported one another. Kisler's father revealed very little to her about life in the camps at Campua, Chiavari, Gruppignano and Ampezzo, and the stalags at Altengrabow and Fallingbistel, although he did share some accounts of his adventures in Egypt before he was captured. Connections with loved ones at home were crucial to the POWs' morale, as well as their physical wellbeing, when parcels were intermittently received via the Red Cross. Kisler outlines how these communications were carefully curated by military officialdom in New Zealand. For example, letters to POWs were supposed to be uplifting, rather than depressing.

The book's cover has a photo of a grinning, albeit very thin, Jack, after he was liberated and repatriated via Brussels to Folkestone in England. Yet, despite the relief of freedom, many men like Jack could not quite grasp their new reality. Restlessness was a common outcome. After his return to New Zealand, Jack sought out Ewie, who he had briefly known before the war. The former boxer from Milton married the 'delicate' Quaker, and they briefly lived in Dunedin. His silence about his wartime experience was overlaid by dark moods, anger and nightmares, that were hardly alleviated by pacing the streets at night. Although a distant father, Jack could be kind, but especially when the drink had taken hold, he was not a nice man to be near, often argumentative and violent.

Kisler's book is dedicated to the men and their families who underwent similar experiences to Jack and his own close family. During the post-World War Two years there was little understanding that what many POWs suffered was Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). For POWs the trauma might be silenced and internalised because of the sense of shame they felt, having a different type of war-service to those who were in prolonged active combat, or came home with visible physical wounds. Many repatriated POWs had a lot of time to retreat into themselves, ruminating on how life had turned out for them, falling into black moods, or clinical depression, also often not understood or recognised by themselves or others. There was little understanding of the suffering POWs had undergone, and even worse, they might be labelled as cowards – a slur some came to take on and perhaps resist only when the black moods took hold.

Two short chapters and the postscript go into the relationship between father and daughter, with even less shedding light on the impact of the dark Dad on other family members. I found this somewhat disappointing, having written about the broader effects of mental depression on servicemen and their families. I would have liked to have seen the book explore more of the psychological consequences of the war and being a POW, rather than allocating so much to the military aspects. But the book is Kisler's account, as much as her father's, and she was limited by personal source material, as well as the dilemma writers and biographers face of how much personal detail to disclose, even if this information was even available. Kisler is careful in how she handles her mother's story, and states that she knows less about her time during the war, than that of her father. I gather that Ewie would not have approved of some of this family tension being publicly shared. The final section of the book does offer more insight into why, apart from being a POW, Jack was a dark Dad. His trauma stems from his childhood when he was rejected and brutally hit by Bill, the man he had thought was his father. Cruelly, Jack's uncle informed him of his real paternity on the day he sailed off to war. Great timing, not! Enlisting in the 2nd New Zealand Division probably provided Jack with the camaraderie, and sense of identity that had been missing in his life. Once Jack opens a little to his daughter, there

is a form of redemption, and reconciliation. As the adoring grandfather, he became milder, as he aged.

The Dark Dad is very well written and engages the reader. There is no index, but the eighteen short chapters that follow a chronological sequence are clearly titled. It is written from the heart, and it is obvious that this was a difficult personal reveal for the author. Kisler has taken on that task by immersing herself in the research, to show how a personal account has resonance with so many others who underwent similar experiences both during and after the war. The book left me thinking not only about the ‘dark dads’ who returned from war but also how little many of us know about our fathers, who may not have revealed much about any trauma in their lives, or what they were thinking or feeling behind their silences and grumpy moods. As such the book speaks to how gendered silences, and the silences between parents and children, develop against the backdrop of global events.