



STALAG 383—interior of hut at night

BOOKS

Behind the Wire

PRISONERS OF WAR, by W. Wynne Mason, Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, 1939-45; Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 25s.

(Reviewed by James Bertram)

“AN honourable chapter in New Zealand's history,” writes Sir Howard Kippenberger in his foreword to this exhaustive and, at first sight, rather daunting volume. No one who perseveres to the end is likely to challenge his adjective: it has been a mark of our age (in which the concentration camp preceded the prisoner of war, and has outlasted him) that there is usually more honour inside than outside barbed wire.

Who will want to read this book? Ex-P.O.W.'s and their relatives no doubt: ten years is just about the right time to make this psychologically possible, and to develop the sort of academic curiosity that appreciates checking up on details, and getting the whole picture straight. But I hope the book will be widely read both by serving soldiers who did not share the central experience it describes, and by that general public whose ideas about prison camps still fluctuate uneasily between the thrills of escape and the horrors of Belsen. For this book—unlike the personal narratives that are often so much more lively, but never tell the whole truth—is sober, balanced, impersonal, and crammed with facts. And that, one feels, is just how the whole thing needed to be treated at this stage.

Mr. Wynne Mason could easily have written a more dramatic and colourful history: the material was there; again and again it reaches at heroic or tragic intensity through the compressed, police-court anonymity of his low-toned prose. But we have had enough rhetoric, and we have probably had enough heroes—a good many of them may be spotted for the briefest of instants in these pages, breaking cover between a quiet sentence and a foot-

note. What does emerge is a clear outline of that still insufficiently known figure, the average New Zealand prisoner of war. By suppressing all individual spotlights, by the painful accumulation of detail and by the deliberate muffling of crescendos, the author is able to keep attention firmly where he wants it: on the basic elements of P.O.W. experience, and their inevitable human consequences.

And the reader who feels, after a few laconic accounts of evaders in Crete or Northern Italy, of epidemics in transit camps and the torpedoing of enemy transports, that Mr. Mason cannot write with warmth and feeling about anything, should turn in advance to his final chapter, which contains the fullest and fairest summing-up of the position of the ex-P.O.W. in post-war society that I have met in print. This is the right place for emotion and the appeal to our sympathies, for this is a difficult social adjustment that is still working itself out. The main history is concerned with the establishment of facts; and these, however they may work upon our imagination, call in the first place for clear-headed understanding.

There were over 9000 New Zealand prisoners of war—more than one in every two hundred of our population; and the majority were in captivity for more than three years. This history makes clear both why the numbers were so large in the first place, and why most had to wait till the end of the war for

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