

their freedom. For most prisoners, the first months of captivity and the last were the worst: in between were the years when they came to terms with their fate and with one another—and with their captors. The moral ascendancy that most British prisoners seem to have asserted over their guards is certainly striking: it may have been due to British phlegm, or to mere thick-headedness, or to a deep national tradition of thriving on adversity, but it contrasts with the violent fluctuations of more intelligent people like the French, and more vulnerable idealists like the Americans.

One of the chief interests of this book, of course, is to compare general conditions in German, Italian and Japanese camps. For our men the Germans had in general respect, and the Italians friendliness: only the Japanese showed contempt, and this was a contempt for their status as prisoners. The Germans were correct but tough: realistically, they were prepared to allow in Red Cross food parcels that enabled prisoners to keep fit enough for heavy work. The Italians seem to have been more genuinely humane, but a good deal less efficient: the Japanese were both inhumane and inefficient—for prestige reasons they allowed in a mere trickle of outside supplies, yet drove working-parties hard on quite inadequate rations. In New Zealand, if I follow Mr. Mason's account and argument, humane treatment was carried to the point where it recoiled on itself, and the shooting had to start: a simpler explanation of the lamentable Featherston incident of February, 1943, seems to be the still unexplained lack of translators and interpreters.

One part of this history that will be fresh and illuminating to most ex-prisoners, is the full account of negotiations between various Governments, and the International Red Cross, on their behalf. It is a story which should arouse belated gratitude for many barely-glimpsed and much-abused Red Cross officials. Less grateful feelings will be stirred by the obstinacy (on both sides) about reprisals in the "shackling" of prisoners in Europe: or the rigidity of War Office instructions to camp-leaders in Italy at the time of the armistice, which were so largely responsible for conveniently handing over so many thousands of Allied prisoners to the German Army. The most piquant New Zealand document quoted is the report of the Allied Repatriation Unit in Italy in March, 1945: "Any ex-prisoner arriving in our hands should be treated as a normal soldier who has returned to duty after having had a slack time."

No brief notice can do justice to the broad sweep of this book, which follows
(continued on next page)

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