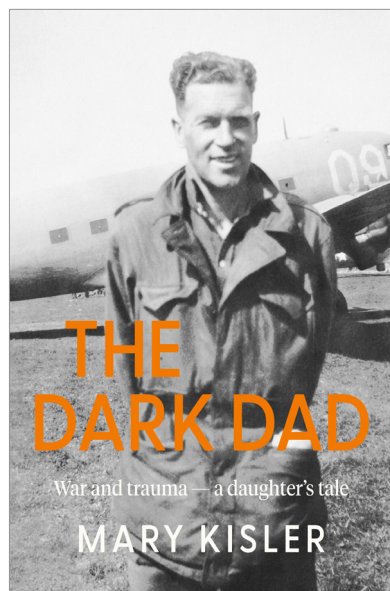


The Dark Dad

War and trauma — a daughter's tale

MARY KISLER



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THE DAMAGE DONE TO A FAMILY BY WAR

Art historian Mary Kisler grew up in the early 1950s with a father who talked little, whose affection she cherished and whose anger she feared. She later came to understand the trauma that lay behind his dark moods: rejection and violence in his childhood and the brutal experience of being a prisoner of war in Italy and then Germany from late 1941 to 1945.

In this affecting memoir, she traces back through her father's life and war record, discovering a man who had suffered but who ultimately found peace of mind among the people he loved most.

'A powerful, redemptive story and one of forgiveness' — **Mihingarangi Forbes**, RNZ's *Saturday Morning*

'Evokes such a deep sense of sorrow I went off and had a little cry' — **Linda Herrick**, *NZ Listener*

'A memorable, plain-speaking book of dogged research' — **Sally Blundell**, *ReadingRoom*

'Exceptionally well researched' — **Jenny Nicholls**, *Waiheke Weekender*

'An engaging and balanced narrative' — **Anne Kerslake Hendricks**, *Canvas*

'Those who have read Kisler will know how she can look at a painting and, supported by assiduous research, guide you methodically around it, with pellucid prose deciphering it into an accessible world of story and meaning. Here she does the same with her father and the locations in which he found himself in World War II. These skills of an art writer serve a memoirist well' — **Guy Somerset**, *Aotearoa New Zealand Review of Books*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Kisler is the Curator Emerita of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Her previous books are *Angels & Aristocrats: Early European Art in New Zealand Public Galleries* (2010), *Frances Hodgkins European Journeys* (with Catherine Hammond, 2019) and *Finding Frances Hodgkins* (2019).

SALES POINTS

- A well known and well regarded author
- Contributes to the ongoing interest in the Second World War and its long legacy of psychological damage
- Affecting and moving



My father's best friend.

8.

Capture

When I was a child that our father had been injured when he was captured during the Battle of Sidi Barrani. He had kept the long shank of shrapnel that had been dug out of his leg, and I used to take it out of his drawer and run my fingers over its jagged spine. He also had a crudely carved wooden doll, the bottom of which had been broken off and which may have been damaged at the same time. Somewhere I got the idea that many of the soldiers were given hot oil to keep them safe when they sailed for Egypt, but I've only found one photograph of another POW wearing one.

An unnamed infantryman's diary of events at Sidi Barrani on 30 November gives more details about how many New Zealanders were captured.

I look again through the loophole on my side and I can scarcely believe my eyes. The sun has set and through the moonlit dusk two hundred yards in front of me scores of men from all directions are walking in among the German



The trainline from Naples to Capua. BOGGER SMITH

9.

The journey to Campo PG 66, Capua

All most all POWs captured in North Africa were eventually transported to Italy. Many of those who were severely injured were sent to a rough and ready hospital in Bari, but others were sent directly to Naples. Conditions on the ships ranged from poor to abominable: as prisoners were packed like sardines below decks. Bertinus Martin, an artillery sapper (military number not located) who was captured at Tobruk, described a fairly standard crossing for soldiers:

We were taken to the ship and battered down in our handcuffs, there were no toilet facilities at all. It was absolutely atrocious there or four days of sheer hell in the boat. It was completely dark, and it was so crowded that if you moved your leg you found someone else's leg. It was the done thing to urinate in your boot, there was nowhere else to go. When we eventually got off the boat in Naples, we only just had strength to walk.

glasses, light summer suit and dark tie made him stand out from the prison guards, is seen questioning this same man in another photograph. Speaking in English, the soldier seems to be urging the POW to reveal all, much to the suppressed fury of the fascist officers looking on who likely would not have understood what was being said. Between the two figures, the Commandant can be seen with his hands on his hips, one forming a fist beside his holster, as if he will shoot the man dead if he gives too much away. They look like the chieftains in a comic opera.

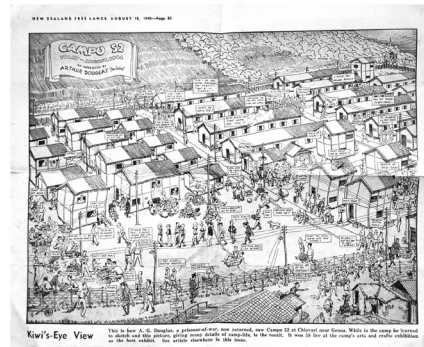
In spite of the prisoners' smiles for the camera there was no humor in the situation observed by the delegation. Prisoners took the opportunity to complain that food was scarce, that they were not receiving regular Red Cross parcels or packages from home, and that the camp was riddled with parasites. British airman Philip Green, who didn't arrive at Capua until August 1942, after my father had been moved further north, was shocked at the ongoing lack of organization: 'Tents might have been fine in mild weather, but as soon as it rained they became sodden and mud-stained, a poor environment for men weakened by their Libyan experiences. Those who had been injured or had suffered infections had still received no treatment unless they needed urgent surgery of some kind.'



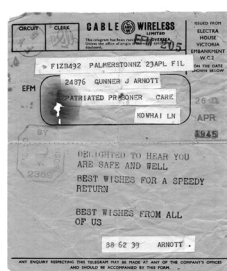
The Red Cross delegates were not alone in criticizing the state of the camp. The military health directorate of Naples, whose representatives inspected the camp multiple times, felt conditions were 'deeply inadequate'. A document issued by the deputy head of the Italian army's prison of war office was scathing about the hygiene conditions not just at Capua but also at several other transit



Above: My father and some of his fellow prisoners outside their tent at Capua. INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS ARCHIVES. Below: The Red Cross Inspector Monsieur de Salis questioning the POWs in front of Italian Commandant and guards at Capua in early 1942. INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS ARCHIVES.



Arthur Douglas's sketch of Camp PG 66, made in 1942, was published in the New Zealand Free Lance on 15 August 1942. ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY. The caption reads: 'New Zealanders in Camp PG 66, Capua. This is how it is. A G. Douglas, a prisoner of war, now returned, saw Camp PG 66 in detail, near Capua. While in the camp he learned to sketch and this picture, giving many details of camp life, is the result. It was 50 years at the camp and only exhibited as the best exhibit.'



My grandfather Frances Armit's radio to Jack, Jack Armit's archive.

of lack of food and the long marches were immediately apparent, and about 250 of the first tranche of POWs were admitted to Haime Hospital. An unexpected side-effect of the now plentiful food was the rebellion of starved stomachs, exacerbated if too much alcohol was consumed. My father seemed in relatively good physical condition, apart from his weight loss, and unlike many had managed to hang on to his upper dentures.

Each prisoner had to answer a range of questions about their individual experiences in the camps, including whether they had ever tried to escape, cause sabotage in any way, or had collaborated with the enemy. The army was particularly eager for evidence of war crimes by their captives, and there was a separate form to record whether the Geneva Convention had been observed. Once these details had been taken, a cable was sent to inform families in New Zealand of the safety of their loved ones. When Dad's mother Frances received notification that Jack was safe and well, she immediately replied, selecting the approved phrases numbered at (Obligated to hear You are Safe and Well); 62 (Best Wishes for a Speedy Return); and 59 (Best Wishes from Us All).



Dad and other New Zealanders who had trained in the North Island were directed to Freyberg Wing in Folkestone, which was housed at either the Grand Hotel or its neighbour, the Metropole, both highly desirable summer residences in peacetime. The town is steeped in the history of both world wars. Among the vast number of men and women who sailed from Folkestone to France in the First World War was the doomed poet Wilfred Owen, who described the Metropole as a 'place of luxury... with carpets as deep as the mud...'

18.

The final struggle

In 1986, Dad was diagnosed with lung cancer. I took him to the hospital for surgery, and was allowed to sit with him before he was wheeled into theatre. My mother stayed at home, unable to bear the worry of it all. One lung was excised, but cancer remained centrally, where the bronchi join the trachea, impossible to remove. After two weeks, Dad was sent home, and he refused to return to the doctor despite his increasing pain.

When he started coughing up blood again, my mother covered a cardboard box with rather nasty, beige-flecked wallpaper as a receptacle for stained tissues, which she took down for burning in our old concrete incinerator in the garden, fearful of contamination. Dad must have known that his days were numbered. He added a codicil to his will, leaving his body to the university's school of Medicine, or to any other similar institution in New Zealand, in the hope of saving my mother the expense of a funeral.

Two weeks before he died, I finally drove him in his much-loved Holden Kingswood to his doctor, who was appalled that Dad had struggled on without pain relief for so long. On one of my daily visits, I found a cheery man with a fetching winkle who had come

from the Mercy Hospice to check on his progress. On the day he couldn't get out of bed, the ambulance came. The drivers had some difficulty negotiating the steeper part the acacia that lined the side of the front steps, but they eventually loaded Dad in and I followed the ambulance in his car.

The Mercy Hospice was then situated on Mountain Road, and Dad was placed in a room on the top floor with a view of Mount Pentecost. Mount Eden, the maunga we gazed at every day from Landscape Road. After a visit from a young doctor, who asked Dad the routine questions about his date of birth and current address and examined his fingernails (I still do not know why, but perhaps they are an indicator of decline), I was left to tell Dad that there was no longer any treatment he could have.

When my son came to say goodbye, Dad struggled out of bed, determined that his grandson would think him strong to the last. My mother and younger brother arrived, but Mike was too distressed to stay long and took Mike home again. The next day Dad gradually slipped into a coma, and in the late afternoon, when the nurses suggested I take a break, I drove his car to Penitence to have a quick meal with friends. Just as I was about to leave, the call came, and I raced back to the hospice only to find the main door locked.

A chase worthy of an English cop show ensued as I ran frantically around the building trying to find a way in. After that I had difficulty finding the lift. Somehow it seemed a fitting finale to the chaos of our earlier lives. By the time I reached his room Dad had died, although the nurses assured me they had told him I was coming.

Perhaps he wanted to spare me the sight of him gasping for breath. He was perched upright, like a Baroque painting of the death of St Jerome, his face still showing signs of recent struggle. I was led into the adjoining chapel while they attended to him. When my mother and brothers arrived, he was lying flat and covered with a