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**Somes Island Internment Camp**  
**for**  
**Enemy Aliens**  
**During the First World War:**  
**An Historical Enquiry**

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partial fulfillment of the  
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Originally this thesis was to include more personalised information on internees. However, as the previously hidden story unfolded on an unanticipated scale, and in order to remain even remotely in touch with its designated word length, I was forced to set most of this aside for a proposed enlarged project on the camp. However, I still wish to acknowledge the historically invaluable information they supplied. They are: Ann Sheeran, Levin (daughter of Elizabeth Hargreaves, formerly Nickel), Wilma Phillips, Eastbourne (daughter of Harry Rather), Erika Grundmann, Cortes Island, British Columbia, Canada (who is researching the much travelled George Dibbern), my second cousin Gordon Burr, Foxton (grandson of Ludwig Eder), Glen Middendorf, Queenstown (granddaughter-in-law of Anton Middendorf), Bob Milverton, Palmerston North (step-son of Frank Kellerman), Laurie Rands, Silverdale, Auckland (great

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**"New Zealand has taken part in this world's war according to her strength and ability. New Zealand's part in this war is but a small section of the whole, but it is New Zealand history.  
They who love best their land, love truth best.  
When the desire for truth has given place to unreasoning passion, dispassionate historians will find the records of  
Somes Island Internment Camp for civilian internees  
a black page in the book of this Dominion's History.  
Your Honour, we do not ask for privileges or for favours.  
We request that we receive the treatment and consideration that we (are) due from members of one civilised nation to another and such as are consistent with the claims of humanity.  
Signed, Karl Joosten, Spokesman."**

*From a statement addressed to Justice Chapman during the  
1918 Royal Commission of Inquiry into the  
treatment of "enemy aliens" interned on  
Somes Island. 28 May 1918.  
(Somes Island Statements, MS Papers 2071, WTU)*

## Abstract

New Zealand's history undoubtedly contains many unusual situations that await reassessment, and it is only natural that some of these situations will show the country, or its government, or its people in a less than pleasant light. This country prides itself on its fair-mindedness, concern for others and a wide range of positive attributes, yet the First World War prejudice that targeted New Zealand's ethnic minorities of "enemy origin" - with its epicenter based on Somes Island - places considerable pressure on those beliefs. New Zealand was, of course, not alone in its response to the effects of that war nor to the planned anti-German propaganda campaign which occurred at that time.

Matiu/Somes Island, located on Wellington's doorstep, is largely ignored on a daily basis by thousands of people. Some aspects of its history seem relatively well-known, for example, its long career as quarantine station for both humans and livestock. Even the internment camp on the island in World War Two is increasingly well-known and well-documented. On the other hand, New Zealand's first prisoner of war internment camp for so-called "enemy aliens" remained a mystery until now. Beneath this largely forgotten camp, however, there lies an enormous archival iceberg. The New Zealand Government solved a potential local and international problem in 1919, by shipping most of it back to Europe. At the same time it also shipped out of sight a significant aspect of the country's social history.

## WE PRISONERS OF WAR

Since every country calls its men  
 Beneath the flags and colours,  
 At least those men who freely can  
 Now earn their fame through valours,  
 It is for us a little bad,  
 Not that we care for fame,  
 But that we are prisoners without crime  
 Is going to make us tame.

Before the war we worked the land  
 In Navvies' and Bushmans' graces,  
 We worked on stations, gave a hand  
 In flax and sawmill places,  
 We helped in England's Merchant Fleet  
 As Firemen and Sailors,  
 Made clothes, put shoes on many feet  
 As Bootmakers and Tailors.

We made us friends as Germans do  
 Amongst this Country's people,  
 And many girls we loved to woo  
 Then our race is not feeble,  
 But since the war we have perhaps  
 Lost many friends in number,  
 Oh! may this wartime soon elapse  
 And soon succumb in slumber.

By PAUL ARNOLD  
 Interned Auckland 10 August 1914  
 Repatriated per *Willochra* 14 May 1919  
*(Somes Island Statements, MS Papers 2071, WTU)*  
*(Also AAAB 482/32e, Arnold, Paul, NA)*



## Introduction

Despite its apparent easy accessibility, Wellington Harbour's largest island, now officially named Matiu/Somes Island, has long been out of reach of the general public. In 1995 its management was transferred from the Ministry of Agriculture & Fisheries to the Department of Conservation (DOC). As a result, DOC is now working to protect and restore the island's historic and natural resources. Although readily accessed by the public via the harbour ferry, the island's reserve status is based on its scientific and historic value rather than its potential as a tourist attraction. For example, tuatara have recently been released on the island.

A Maori settlement in pre-European times, Matiu/Somes served from the 1870s as Wellington's quarantine facility. Not only did it accommodate newly imported livestock, but it also housed potentially contagious human immigrants when the need arose. As a result, for many decades casual visits to the island were strictly forbidden. During both World Wars, the fortress-like island served a more sinister purpose. In addition to standard military uses, such as providing an ideal site for anti-aircraft guns during the Second World War, the old quarantine barracks and the island's handy yet isolated location, saw it transformed into the country's main facility for the internment of civilian prisoners of war.

The Second World War internment camp is increasingly well documented. Researchers experience little difficulty obtaining information on the experiences of inmates. For a start, some internees and guards are still available to be interviewed<sup>1</sup>. Publications discussing this camp are also increasingly available. For example, James N. Bade's *Out of the Shadow of War: The German connection with New Zealand in the Twentieth Century* (1998) covers the period, including a glimpse at the camp. Paul Elenio's book *Alla Fine Del Mondo: To The Ends of The Earth* (1995) includes a chapter on the 38 Italians interned on Somes during this time<sup>2</sup>. Maurice Gee's 1998 novel, *Live Bodies*, based on the memoirs and internee files of prisoners, describes the life of an Austrian Jew held there<sup>3</sup>. The play *Eulogy*, performed in Wellington in 1998, provided another look at conditions in the camp during this period, including clashes involving ideology (Nazism) and ethnicity (Germans, Jews and Samoans)<sup>4</sup>. Other books recording the island's Second

World War experiences include *Scars on the Heart: Two Centuries of New Zealand at War* (1996). Even so, this book's single reference to the earlier camp is not even indexed<sup>5</sup>.

By comparison, the minimal coverage of the First World War Internment Camp in existing publications, infers that it was a mere footnote in history. The aforementioned imbalance in *Scars on the Heart* is one example. Bade's *Out of the Shadow of War* again briefly covers the camp while outlining the period. Similarly, Simon Johnson's 1975 thesis, *The Home Front: Aspects of Civilian Patriotism in New Zealand during the First World War* provides a glimpse at the camp in its chapter on "enemy aliens"<sup>6</sup>. My own 1996 BA(Hons.) Research Exercise, *German-ating the Seeds of Anger, The Great War's Impact on Germans in Manawatu and Rangitikei*, provides an introduction to the topic through the personal files of the small number of internees from the districts covered. The camp also appears, albeit briefly, in at least one novel, Alexander Evelyn's obscure 1944 work *Thord*<sup>7</sup>. However, once again a minority ethnic group became the first documented in any detail, with Andrew D. Trlin's study entitled, *Now Respected, Once Despised, Yugoslavs in New Zealand*, of the experiences of the few Dalmatian internees<sup>8</sup>.

Usually, though, the First World War camp appears only in vague terms in generalised references to Somes. These include books on Somes itself, or on Wellington Harbour (Port Nicholson) and its waterfront suburbs. Typically, photos of happy internees stare back from pages and the vague published details are quickly abandoned in favour of the exciting von Luckner story. Consequently, the rich and highly troubled history of the 1914-1918 camp soon succumbs to the story of a man who never set foot on the island.

The 1918 Chapman Royal Commission of Inquiry<sup>9</sup> examined claims of ill-treatment on Somes and is now a valuable source of information on the camp. Unfortunately, being written at a sensitive time and with a legalistic agenda meant that its many explicit truths can seem unclear in its conclusion. It is, therefore, easy to underestimate problems in the camp. One example of this, subsequently quoted in a 1996 DOC report<sup>10</sup>, is David McGill's *The Pioneers of Port Nicholson*, published in 1984. McGill claimed that Justice Chapman, who conducted the Royal Commission, dismissed all charges of ill-treatment

to internees by the guards, except one where the guard concerned had since been dismissed<sup>11</sup>.

This thesis seeks, therefore, to rediscover the 1914-1918 Internment Camp and also to reassess the generally accepted arguments relating to it. Sources included newspapers of the day, especially the *Evening Post* for the entire period. Interestingly, this newspaper also proved to have been the only significant source of regular “off-island” information available to the internees. Other major sources through which the internee “sub-culture” itself speaks, include a series of 1916 petitions to the American Consul General<sup>12</sup> and also the evidence presented during Chapman’s Inquiry<sup>13</sup>. This material, combined with camp records (no master collection of key records has yet revealed itself) and the personal records of many of the hundreds of participants, both internees and guards, reveals that Chapman’s strictly “legal” methodology obliged him to overlook or understate the value of a significant amount of this evidence. He did, however, generally accept that many things were not as they should be as regards the administration of the camp.

In hindsight, and without Chapman’s limitations, evidence he regarded as exaggerated is often plausible, despite the times and the personal circumstances of some participants. Quite simply, these men risked criticism, ridicule and possibly retribution if they lied, as, with the exception of the Chapman statements, the authorities religiously filed duplicate copies of their accusations, and also collected and filed information from their inward and outward personal correspondence. In addition, two internees risked their lives swimming to the mainland in an unsuccessful attempt to seek help. Realisation that New Zealand conveniently “repatriated” most of these men to their homelands in 1919 (unlike World War Two) maintains the disquieting aura surrounding the camp. Just as “dead men” can no longer talk, neither - effectively - can their descendants or their memoirs when these sources of information now reside in Europe.

This thesis aims, then, to rediscover and investigate the obvious complexities of a largely ignored chapter in New Zealand’s history. A “black page” in fact, as key participant Karl Joosten claimed in 1918<sup>14</sup>. The 1914-1918 internment camp eventually held almost

double the population of the 1939-1945 camp. Therefore it seems unusual that so little is known of it in comparison with the later camp. This thesis also aims to place the Somes experience into an international context.

<sup>1</sup> e.g. Nicholas Boyack, 'Guarding enemy aliens on Somes Island was a farce, soldier recalls,' in *Hutt News* 13/2/1996, pp. 33,36. Steve Braunias, 'A voyage around my father,' *The Listener*, 9/9/1995, pp. 32-36, and 'Gregory Riethmaier', in James N. Bade (ed.) *Out of the Shadow of War: The German Connection with New Zealand in the Twentieth Century* (Auckland, 1998), pp. 218-223

<sup>2</sup> Paul Elenio, *Alla Fine Del Mondo: To The Ends of the Earth* (Wellington, 1995) pp. 57-70.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Gee, *Live Bodies* (Auckland, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> *Evening Post* (EP) 2/3/1998 'Strange stories of island internees.' The author also attended this play.

<sup>5</sup> Chris Pugsley, et. al., *Scars on the Heart: Two Centuries of New Zealand at War*. (Auckland, 1996). pp. 100, 214-215.

<sup>6</sup> Simon Johnson, *The Home Front: Aspects of Civilian Patriotism in New Zealand during the First World War* (M.A. Thesis, Massey University, 1975)

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Evelyn, *Thord* (Wellington, 1944). pp. 277-280.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew D. Trlin, *Now Respected: Once Despised, Yugoslavs in New Zealand* (Palmerston North, 1979). pp. 99-133.

<sup>9</sup> *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives*, (AJHR) 1919, Section H-33.

<sup>10</sup> Tony Walton, 'Somes Island Archaeological Site Survey' (Department of Conservation, Wellington, 1996). p. 3., citing McGill, 1986[sic]: 180-182.

<sup>11</sup> David McGill, *The Pioneers of Port Nicholson* (Wellington, 1984). p. 182.

<sup>12</sup> Somes Island Statements, MS-2071 [Note: These appear to be the originals held by the internees] (WTU). Also AAAB 449/52a, Complaints by POWs to American and Swiss Consuls (NA)

<sup>13</sup> Somes Island Official Papers 1917-1918, Micro MS-18 (WTU)

<sup>14</sup> K. Joosten to Justice Chapman, 28/5/1918. Somes Island Statements, MS Papers 2071 (WTU)