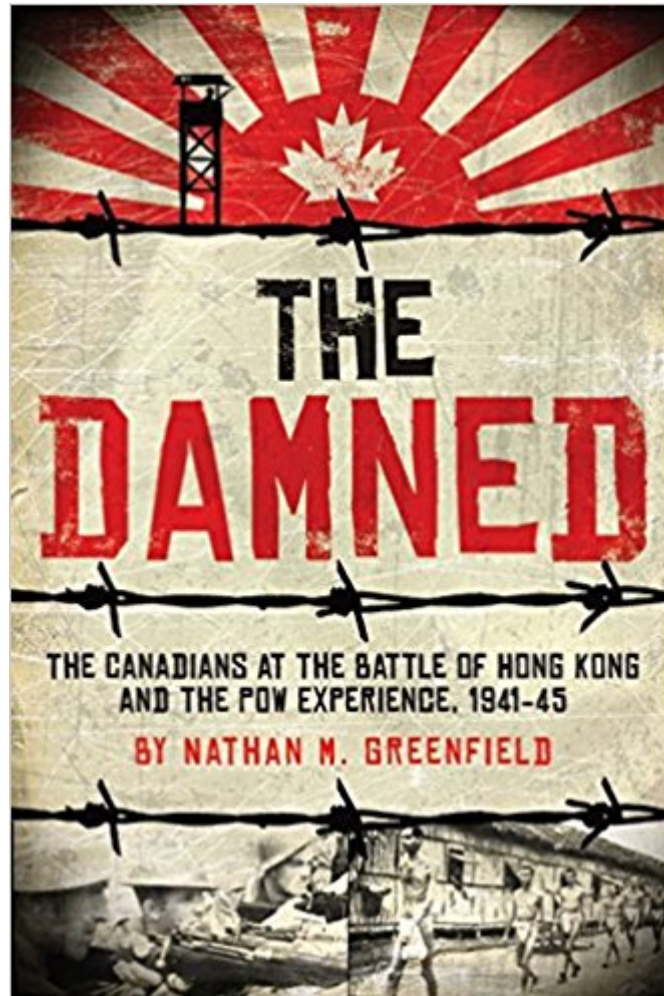




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The Damned



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Synopsis

2011 Governor General's Literary Awards Finalist - Non-Fiction
The Damned tells the largely unknown saga of Canada's first land battle of the Second World War -- fought in the hills and valleys of Hong Kong in December 1941 -- and the terrible years the survivors of the battle spent as slave labourers for the Empire of Japan. Their story begins in the fall of 1941, when almost 2,000 members of the Royal Rifles and Winnipeg Grenadiers were sent to bolster the British garrison at Hong Kong. In the seventeen day battle for the colony following the attack on December 8, the Canadians suffered grievous losses: 927 men were either killed or wounded and, by the end of the battle, 1,185 soldiers and two nursing sisters had been captured -- a casualty rate of 100 percent, the very definition of a military catastrophe. The second part of their story -- of how the Canadians survived the horrid conditions of Japanese POW camps -- lasts three and a half years. Many prisoners died, some from malnutrition or disease, some as a result of torture, and others from the effects of brutal slave labour in factories, shipyards and coal mines. But despite the circumstances, the young Canadian soldiers remained unbowed and unbroken. Theirs is a story of determination and valour, of resilience and faith.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

NATHAN M. GREENFIELD, PhD, is the Canadian correspondent for Times Educational Supplement and is a contributor to Maclean's, Canadian Geographic and TLS. He is the author of The Damned, which was a finalist for the Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction; Baptism of Fire, which was a finalist for the Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-Fiction; the widely praised

The Battle of the St. Lawrence; The Forgotten; and The Reckoning. Greenfield lives in Ottawa.

excellent

The author, Author Nathan M. Greenfield, appears unable to decide whether to write an academic study or a dramatic battle narrative. Unfortunately, it appears he attempted both--and the result is unsatisfying on both counts. The author is both an academic (Ph.D.) and a journalist. In academic style, Greenfield includes significant data at the end of the book (extensive bibliography; complete list of the dead--at Hong Kong, and later, in POW camps; compendium of medal winners.) His research (including a dozen very valuable interviews with survivors for which Canada owes him a debt of gratitude) is extensive--even exhaustive. However, the author demonstrates little dramatic sense, relating gut-wrenching life-and-death struggles in arms-length academic style. The result: hair-raising, breathless episodes are rendered matter-of-fact and emotionless. A journalistic "news story" approach (facts first, eschewing colourful language and dramatic approach) does not serve the book well, either. If ever there was a story in need of a great story-teller, it is this one. Unfortunately, Greenfield is not the story-teller. The book is disorganized. Early examples: the last half of the lengthy preface would have made an excellent epilogue. Greenfield interrupts the narrative of the Royal Rifles' Stand at Sai Wan to offer a page-long (!) dissertation of the philosophical difference of the two opposing forces regarding prisoners of war ("In medieval Japan, 'the way of the warrior' was roughly equivalent to Europe's chivalric code...") Better that the author had simply inserted some brief references into the natural flow of the narrative. Similarly, Greenfield yanks readers away from a riveting account of the carnage of Japanese shelling to deliver a bizarre explanation the mechanics of detonation ("The centrifugal force, an effect of the shell's rotation caused by the gun's rifling, opened the shutter, creating a flash hole. As the shell hit the gate, the striker in the shell's nose depressed...etc, etc.") Equally distracting is Greenfield's lengthy aside concerning conflicting diary entries ("In Appendix H [Brig.] Wallis wrote...") which should have been shifted from text to the appropriate appendix at the end of the book, or briefly integrated into the narrative in a number of appropriate places. The writing is confused and confusing (for instance, after a shell explodes and stretcher-bearers are called, the reader is left wondering: are the men dead or still alive?) Certain individuals and details are included in the text before being properly introduced. i.e.: "Winnipeg Grenadiers ...answered...Major Stewart's call for help for his garrison at Jardine's lookout..." Major who? (In any case, Stewart never appears again, and his role never made clear.) The reader doesn't discover what, exactly, Jardine's lookout was for another three

pages. One result is the reader is constantly forced to consult the index in the (sometimes) vain hope of learning more or attempting to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Maddening--that's the author's job! Worse the writing--even basic sentence structure--is clumsy ("Bishop entered the dugout sheltering Clayton" instead of simply, "Bishop entered Clayton's dugout...".) Diary entries--wonderful testimonials--are badly integrated; Greenfield squanders terrific first-hand material. The author's inability to decide how best to utilize these bits (verbatim quote or quick summary?) is obvious. A good editor would have corrected all these "first-draft" oversights. Nobody has done so. In fact, the most basic editing errors escaped the editor's notice. I counted a number (such as, "One of his Yoshinki Kubo's flights over Hong Kong...") before page 70. The publisher has let down this author--and readers--very badly. The book cries out for more and better photos. They do exist; I have seen them in other books. What confounds me is how this book merited finalist status for the coveted Governor General's Award. As a Canadian, I really wanted this book to be very good. There have been other Canadian books about the Canuck aspect of this mostly forgotten struggle, a struggle over-shadowed by Pearl Harbour's "Day of Infamy" which occurred the day before this engagement began. No other book concerning the Canadian contingent approaches the comprehensive nature of *The Damned*; Greenfield certainly has the edge on research. For some (few) survivors of the conflict, and a small group of die-hard military enthusiasts, that may be enough. Other readers--even those who are fairly interested in military history--might do well to give it a pass. And that's a shame.

This book is divided into two sections. The first part is the Japanese attack on Hong Kong from China in 1941. The second part is the captivity of the Canadian soldiers by the Japanese until the end of World War II in August 1945. The second part is by far stronger and more readable. It is also heart-wrenching to read of the barbaric treatment accorded the Canadians at the hands of their Japanese captors. They were ill-fed and ill-clothed. Many died of diseases due to vitamin deficiencies in their minimal diet (if it can be called "diet"). Also there was sadistic treatment meted out to them. Those who survived had to endure this physical and psychological torture for over 3 1/2 years. As Mr. Greenfield points out surrender was an unknown concept to the Japanese who adhered to a Bushido mythology where death was honourable, whereas to be taken prisoner was seen as a humiliation to the nation. It should also be pointed out that many prisoners (non-officers) were sent to Japan for slave labour; working over twelve hours a day in mines and shipyards. These prisoners in Japan had, perhaps, a more vigorous struggle for survival than those who remained in Hong Kong. In Japan the weather was colder and as the war progressed - with worsening

conditions for Japan - the food rations diminished even more. The officers who stayed on in Hong Kong had better treatment - more food and less labour to do - but they were also the victims of the hostile treatment given by the Japanese guards. The first part of the book (and this consists of almost 2/3 of the content) is a description of the Battle for Hong Kong. I found this overly detailed and unless you have a geographical background of the hills, peaks and valleys of Hong Kong the events become somewhat confusing. The individual descriptions of battle are very poignant and harrowing. These new Canadian soldiers experienced the ruthlessness and arbitrary destructiveness of war. A British commanding officer (Cedric Wallis) was highly critical of the performance of the Canadians during the Battle of Hong Kong. For the general reader, I felt that Mr. Greenfield spent an inordinate amount of time refuting this British critique. Over seventy years have now passed and whether a snooty Brit felt that the Canadians were derelict in their duty is beside the point. The fact is, the troops in Hong Kong were over-whelmed and could never have held out against the Japanese invader, who not only out-numbered them but had air supremacy. The Canadians sent to Hong Kong were merely a token force, and it was inevitable that they were to be slaughtered or taken prisoner. Unfortunately Mr. Greenfield chose to emphasize the Battle of Hong Kong which hardly lasted for twenty days. The real story is the long incarceration of those woebegone prisoners, who held out for many long years under the most dismal of conditions with little hope of liberation.

This is a thoroughly engrossing military history. It is an incredible tale of hard combat and punishing conditions in prisoner of war camps. Author Greenfield sets out to right a few wrongs in this work: to tell the definitive story of Canadian military performance during the battle for Hong Kong; challenge Brigadier General Wallis' War Diary; and relate the horrors of years in Japanese prison camps. His research is thorough, the detail satisfying, and style of writing engaging. The young men from Manitoba (The Winnipeg Grenadiers) and Eastern Quebec (The Royal Rifles of Canada), some sixteen or seventeen years of age, were thrown into an incredibly difficult situation. Hong Kong was, of course, very foreign; British military leadership challenging; and general support back in Canada skewed towards defeating the Nazis. The book is divided into two parts: the battle and time in the camps. The battle is well laid out with the defensive strategy brought to life through incredible first person accounts. The confusion brought on by the overwhelming Japanese forces is visceral and the numerous accounts of heroism inspiring. Disturbing is the conduct of many Japanese during the conflict and at time of surrender. The content is even more difficult when it moves on to the soldier's time as prisoners of war. Disease, beatings, hard labor, inadequate food, executions for escape,

and countless other deprivations are astounding. So too is the stoicism, discipline, and pride the men displayed throughout. As Rifleman Bill MacWhirter stated to the author in 2008, "I never surrendered." As a Winnipegger and now resident of Ottawa, visiting the Hong Kong Veteran's Memorial Wall will have deeper meaning and increased understanding.

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