

## **SHAKESPOW**

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### **Abstract:**

In my paper, I look at the reception of Shakespeare in wartime, under circumstances that challenge and foreground the notion of national borders and territories within Europe. By looking at several Shakespeare cults during the Great War, I seek to illustrate how notions of the nation and of Europe are variable, and with it the concept of "European Shakespeare."

**Keywords:** *drama history, performance, POW experience, reception studies*

In August 1916 an anonymous pedestrian took a stroll along what he called the "Promenade des Anglais". He described it as follows:

The world contains no vista more noble and majestic. [...] Travellers who know only the Nevsky Prospekt, The Champs Elysées and the High Street, Kensington can have but a faint conception of the animated and picturesque scene which is revealed by the massive tiers of concrete, the noble sweep of gravel, and the delicate but boldly conceived tracery of wire which form the outstanding features of this cosmopolitan causeway.

Here, the erudite phraseology of the Rhodes Scholar may be heard mingling with the homely patois of Wapping; the faultlessly groomed product of Hope Brothers lounges with his less fortunate compatriot garbed in relief pattern short wear; the student of Berlitz and Colenso is seen in friendly converse with the casual stiff. Fearless athletes, with chests bared to the breeze; musicians and actors of almost international fame; burly mariners from the Dogger Bank; diminutive jockeys, tramps, nature men, vegetarians and assorted cranks, – all these and many others combine to render the Promenade a scene of picturesque and diversified confusion, a perfect riot of colour, a kaleidoscope of European curiosities.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Ruhleben Camp Magazine*, 4:1 (August 1916), 11. For an account of World War I camp journals, see Rainer Pöppinghege, *Im Lager unbesiegt: Deutsche, englische*

If this description of “a kaleidoscope of European curiosities” – where we will eventually also meet Master Shakespeare – catches your fancy, you might well wish to locate this “Promenade des Anglais” on the map more accurately. This is *not* the cosmopolitan *Promenade des Anglais* in Mediterranean Nice, but a pedestrian area further north on the map of Europe, in western Berlin, between the rather chic residential area of Charlottenburg and the industrial suburb of Spandau. We are on the site of Ruhleben Camp, a racecourse rapidly converted in October and November 1914 into a civil internment camp for some 5,000 British males, resident in Germany, visiting the country, or afloat in its territorial waters during the early months of the Great War.

Shakespeare was one of the spokesmen for the internees at Ruhleben. This may be illustrated by multiple references from the various camp journals, where literary quotations relating to Camp life are attributed to “Shakespeare K.G.” – meaning “Shakespeare, Kriegsgefangener” or “Shakespeare, Prisoner of War” – and derive from a phantom edition of the complete works ironically referred to as the “Ruhleben Shakespeare”.<sup>1</sup> Under the heading “After many days”, for example, we are given the following lines from Prospero to Miranda:

Canst thou remember  
A time before we came into this cell?  
I do not think thou canst. (*The Tempest*, 1.2)<sup>2</sup>

The local application of the quotation is clear, as the fate of Shakespeare’s two castaways is granted new relevance for the Ruhlebenites stuck on a “tropical island” – to borrow Arthur Ruhl’s intriguing metaphor for the World War I camps – in the German ocean.<sup>3</sup>

Shakespeare has been a familiar and welcome guest in prison camps worldwide for years. Even though less has been done on the subject of “Shakespeare behind barbed wire” than on the subject of “Shakespeare behind bars”, the phenomenon has been dealt with at some length, in academe and in

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*und französische Kriegsgefangenen-Zeitungen im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Essen: Klartext-Verlag, 2006).

<sup>1</sup> The Ruhlebenites sometimes (erroneously) call themselves prisoners-of-war, but since they were civilians rather than military personnel, their status was that of “civilian internees.”

<sup>2</sup> *The Norton Shakespeare: Romances and Poems*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (New York and London: Norton and Co., 1997), 1.2.38-40 (reads “unto” not “into”).

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Ruhl, *Antwerp to Gallipoli: A Year of War on Many Fronts and behind Them* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 118.

the broader field of culture.<sup>1</sup> Michael Dobson has worked on the topic in connection with his amateur Shakespeare project, which also looks at Shakespeare performed by expats and POWs.<sup>2</sup> But readers may also be familiar with David Cunningham's movie, based on a true story, and entitled *To End all Wars* (2004). Set in a Japanese prison camp in Singapore, a representative range of Britons (like the regionals in *Henry V*) move from expressing their initial existential despair through Hamlet's famous soliloquy, before taking arms against a sea of trouble, and trying to escape while the other internees are performing the action play, *Henry V*.

Less creative moments, though, are also known. As in another Japanese camp in World War II, where Shakespeare's complete works were long considered the prisoners' favourite book because its thin paper was ideally suited for rolling wartime cigarettes.<sup>3</sup> Internment or POW Shakespeare may not be an entirely new or uncommon phenomenon, but a more systematic investigation into the cultural life of a unique Camp like Ruhleben may prove a means of revitalising research into Great War Shakespeare, both in Britain and abroad, research that may challenge current academic notions of borders and territories, and make us reconsider and refine the notion of "relocating Shakespeare".

Let us return to Ruhleben. On 6 November 1914, Europe had been engaged for ten weeks in (what was to become) the Great War. Following a series of abortive negotiations between Germany and London over the return of German civilians held in Britain, the Germans, by way of retaliation, decided to arrest all Britons in Germany. This included: those who lived there as well as visitors born of at least one British parent; those born of German parents, but on British soil; as well as those born of any other parent(s) on British soil, and hence endowed with (to the Germans suspect) British citizenship. In January 1915, the additional decision was taken also to intern the British colonials in Germany, who had originally been left at liberty.

Some 5,000 male Britons were arrested, whether residents of Germany or just visitors (on business, on holiday, on their honeymoon, on the Grand Tour, studying). All these civilians (emphatically *not* soldiers) were interned on the site of the converted racecourse of Ruhleben, and most of them were held

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<sup>1</sup> For a survey of the prison literature, see Amy Scott-Douglas, *Shakespeare Inside: The Bard Behind Bars* (London: Continuum, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Dobson, "Showing the Dragon's Teeth: Amateurism, Domesticity, and the Anglophone Audience for Shakespeare, 1607-2007," in *Shakespeare Worldwide and the Idea of an Audience*, ed. Tina Krontiris and Jyotsna Singh, special theme issue of *Gamma: Journal of Theory and Criticism*, vol. 15 (2007), 27-45.

<sup>3</sup> True Shakespeareans might be interested to learn that Titus Andronicus produced a magical blue smoke. See Gavan Daws, *Prisoners of the Japanese: POWs of World War II in the Pacific* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996).

there, until 11 November 1918, when the armistice was signed.<sup>1</sup> Exceptions were gradually made for prisoners above the age of 45. They were considered unsuitable for active service in the army, and sent home. Exceptions were also made for prisoners suffering from long-term illness. These were released in the course of the years, as new prisoners arrived.

The story of Ruhleben has been told many times.<sup>2</sup> Ruhleben was the only strictly civilian detention camp in Germany, alongside some 150 prisoner-of-war camps where allied soldiers of all nations were held, and it was this unique status that soon turned it into the Great War equivalent of Camp Delta for al Qaida and Taliban suspects at Guantánamo Bay. The salient press identity of the Camp already started to grow during the War, with stories about the abominable living conditions there, with allegations that the condition of six men sharing a single horse box was a mark of luxury to those who slept in the lofts of large windy barracks where little or no daylight ever came. Newspapers worldwide were full of the implicit cruelty of the Germans to allow for such conditions to exist. There were even reports of Germans who went to watch the internees at Ruhleben as a pastime.

Part of the Ruhleben Myth – apart from the alleged German cruelty and neglect displayed there – was also the fact that there were shops on the premises for those internees with money of their own, or those receiving a weekly allowance from the British government. Shops included a grocery store, a tobacconist, a shoemaker, a watchmaker, and even a post office running a postal system with its own stamps for internal communication – stamps which are now worth a small fortune. This perhaps unusual infrastructure has on occasion suggested to some that camp conditions were more pleasant than the real situation warranted, and that the term “Ruhleben” – literally meaning “The Quiet Life” – actually applied to these Britons in Hell. Also, our memory of the “camps” of World War II has made Ruhleben seem the place to be by comparison.

Fortunately, though, sociologists – including one-time detainees like John Ketchum – have described how the emergence of a “new” society at

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<sup>1</sup> That part of the premises – with the accommodation – was rented by the German government. The middle part of it would later be rented by the British government to create an opportunity for physical exercises.

<sup>2</sup> Early accounts of Ruhleben include those by (ex-)internees and inspectors of humanitarian aid organisations, like the YMCA. The standard work on the camp has long been J. Davidson Ketchum’s *Ruhleben: A Prison Camp Society*. With a Foreword and Postscript by Robert B. MacLeod (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965). This ex-Ruhlebenite’s sociological study of camp life has only recently been complemented by Matthew Stibbe’s *British Civilian Internees in Germany: The Ruhleben Camp, 1914-18* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008). Matthew Stibbe’s grandfather was interned at Ruhleben during the Great War.

Ruhleben, of a microcosm with custom-made rules and regulations all its own, occurred in despite of great agony and suffering, both physical and mental.

A topic that has received less attention, and one that certainly deserves more, is the rich cultural life that flourished in Ruhleben.<sup>1</sup> Since Ruhleben was an internment camp – so emphatically neither a Transition camp, nor a Labour camp, or a Punitive camp – an unprecedented series of activities developed over the years. Condemned as the internees were to idle away their time when their countrymen were giving their lives in the trenches on the western front and elsewhere, these cultural as well as sports activities gave the internees a much desired sense of corporate identity, a sense of mission.

In the Ruhleben literature to date, the existence and development of a sense of corporate British identity has – not surprisingly, perhaps – been assumed rather too uncritically. However, my account of the cultural life at Ruhleben, certainly where it focuses on Shakespeare, is not a simple success story. Although two major events might seem to support the Shakespeare myth in exile – a major production of *As You Like It* in the spring of 1915, and the celebration of the Tercentenary of Shakespeare's Death in 1916, with a program including *Twelfth Night* and *Othello* – a closer look at the individual comments by the internees suggests that some adjustment to the traditional view is due. Shakespeare in Ruhleben was also a challenged presence, and this invites a comparison (too complex to be effected fully here) between Shakespearean practice within the natural borders of Britain and the appropriation of the bard behind the barbed wire of the Berlin camp. This, in turn, leads to a related issue – to which I shall not return in this paper – namely that of corporate term like “Britain” and “British” used to describe life at Ruhleben. It is distinctly misleading for a number of reasons. To begin with (a) the terminology obfuscates the distinction between matters British and matters English; but (b) more important (also for our present purposes) is the fact that, certainly in cultural terms, it is perhaps more appropriate not to think along “British” lines but along “European” lines, in terms of the “European miscellany” as the internees themselves did, the same internees who, in more enlightened, eighteenth-century terms, spoke of a “cosmopolitan” Ruhleben. If this crucial sense of European cultural identity has escaped the attention of the historians of Ruhleben so far, this is, it seems to me, because it is precisely this almost self-evident cosmopolitan sense of Europe that the Ruhlebenites shared to a degree, which came to a definitive end with the Great War itself. Put differently, the majority of the Ruhlebenites came from what Bernard Shaw called “Heartbreak

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<sup>1</sup> Stibbe's account of cultural life at Ruhleben (80-94) is detailed and perceptive, but not exhaustive. Highly recommendable is Alon Rachamimov's “The Disruptive Comforts of Drag: (Trans)Gender Performances among Prisoners of War in Russia, 1914–1920,” in *The American Historical Review* 111:2 (2006), 362-82.

House”, a place that Stefan Zweig, after the war, referred to as “Die Welt von gestern” (or, yesterday’s world).

Ruhleben Camp, for example, had a sophisticated educational program that has gone down into history as “Ruhleben University”, with internees, on occasion, also sitting exams for University of London or Oxford degrees. Shakespeare was on the curriculum, and taught mainly by A. C. Ford, who worked at the University of Lausanne before the war. The educational program but also the leisure time activities were supported by a considerable library of up to 4,000 books – books pooled and shared by the internees (and that might even have been obtained from the camp bookshop run by Mr Mussett), books sent by relatives, the YMCA and other neutral aid-supplying institutions like the Red cross and the YMCA, or by individuals with an axe to grind. Thus, the camp journal of 1916 published a report on the new books that had arrived in the camp, including the statement: “Sir Sidney Lee sent ‘the British Prisoners at Ruhleben his very kind regards’ and the latest edition of his *Life of Shakespeare*”.<sup>1</sup>

Importantly, as the “Ruhleben University” timetable illustrates, Shakespeare was only one of many subjects taught, be it in the classroom, or literally outdoors like the lecture on *Richard III* out on one of the grandstands. The teaching program for the Arts and Science Union also included French and Greek literature, as well as German literature in German, in “The English and German Classroom.” Here still prevailed a modern Erasmian “Republic of Letters”, an experience of transnational cultures that the War destroyed, and which ambitious Europeans, including European Shakespeareans, are trying to reconstruct – “a kaleidoscope of European curiosities”.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the educational program, there was entertainment at Ruhleben. During the first years anyway, this took place at a hugely popular theatre situated underneath the main (or second) grandstand. Beneath this grandstand had been the race-course restaurant facility, and this area was soon converted into a Cinema, a Theatre, and a Barber Shop. The improvised theatre had a firm stage built on top of the original restaurant counter, space for an orchestra, a seating area for an audience of up to 350, as well as a “Royal Box” facing the stage from the centre. There was a place for the Stage Carpenter, a special room for the Stage Director, a Dressing Room, and a genuine Box Office. There is a detailed description of the theatre:

The size of the hall was thirty-six yards by twelve. And as [Archibald] Welland informs us: “Upon one side there ran a strong buffet, fixed into the floor, eighteen yards long and about three yards from the wall. This was decided as

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<sup>1</sup> *The Ruhleben Camp Magazine*, 2 (April 1916), 24.

<sup>2</sup> The earliest music performed at Ruhleben was German: Bach, Händel, and Wagner.

an admirable place to build our stage. After much time and work, and expenditure of our own money, we reared a properly-equipped stage. The proscenium opening measured twelve yards, and the depth, owing to an 'apron' was five yards. A proper electric equipment of four thousand candle-power was then installed consisting of 'floats', 'lines', 'bunches', 'central flood', etc. Dressing-rooms, a male and a female wardrobe, a scenic artists 'dock', a property room, and a direction office completed the principal equipment of the 'back of the house'" [...] "A box office was built, and accommodation for three hundred and fifty seated obtained."<sup>1</sup>

As also the relative lack of success of the cinema illustrates, the real attraction of the theatre was the internee's *active* involvement in some part of the stage productions, rather than the mere *passive* viewing of these. This was, in part, theatre as therapy. Moreover, the internee's interest in entertainment, be it active *or* passive, was also motivated by the simple need for a roof over their heads, or to have a smoke out of the rain. The mere need to be indoors, rather than walk up and down the variegated "Promenade des Anglais" in the cold and rain, would occasionally interfere with the artistic running of the theatre and even challenge its very status. Situations are known in which the theatre audience was made up of those who simply wanted to get indoors, hence paying little or no attention to what was happening on the stage. Situations are also on record where the validity of the institution of the theatre was questioned, since those out in the cold considered that in a camp with over 4,000 internees a common room for all was more appropriate than an auditorium for 350 aficionados paying for Shakespeare, or Shaw, or Ibsen.

One of the most popular productions at the grandstand theatre of Ruhleben was Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, staged in the spring of 1915, following a cold and gruesome winter in the Camp. Much was written about it in the various Camp journals, in the correspondence of the internees, in diaries, and memoirs. Much of the writing concentrates on the way in which conditions at Ruhleben re-introduced the all-male cast for Shakespeare's plays. This material hardly addresses issues relating to early modern theatre research, though, but really comprises descriptions of its impact on a sex-starved all-male audience with a sharp eye for codpieces or angelic youngsters playing the female parts.

The internees mainly responsible for this early venture were Leigh Vaughan Henry and Cecil Duncan Jones. Until the time of his arrest by the German police, Leigh Vaughan Henry had been the musical director of Gordon Craig's experimental theatre in Florence. Cecil Duncan Jones came from a more traditional circuit. As a professional actor, he had toured with various travelling companies in Britain, possibly those of Frank Benson and Johnston Forbes-Robertson.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Powell and Francis Gribble, *The History of Ruhleben* (1919), 187.

Leigh Henry and Duncan Jones initiated the idea of a theatre and subsequently hi-jacked it, with apparently stunning productions of *As You Like It* as well as George Bernard Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion* – each with a set design employing Gordon Craig's flexible screens, and a conspicuous amount of especially composed music by Bryceson Taherne (who was to become the director of the School of Music in Sydney, Australia, after the war).

This production of *As You Like It* - occupying an entire chapter in the book on Ruhleben that I am currently writing - left a deep impression on the audience, and the *Ruhleben Camp Journal* also often refers to it. Naturally, this Shakespearean exile play formed an attractive comment on camp conditions. Richard Wilson has argued that "*As You Like It* is a drama of enclosure and exclusion."<sup>1</sup> It is not likely that the internees at Ruhleben would, like true visionaries, have thought along these lines when they staged the play in 1915. Instead, the personal experience of imprisonment and the uncertain future are likely to have been more prominent. This becomes apparent from the revision of Jaques' *Seven Ages of Man* speech by one of the internees, now entitled "The Seven Ages of a Kriegsgefängner" – "The Seven Ages of a Prisoner of War". The opening lines capture a wry experience:

All the world's a cage,  
And all the men within it weary players;  
They have no exits, only entrances,  
Where each spends many months ere he departs. ...<sup>2</sup>

An even more remarkable Shakespearean event at Ruhleben was the celebration of the Tercentenary of Shakespeare's death in 1916, celebrated between 23 and 30 April. As the special programme, printed in Berlin for the occasion, announces:

This festival is offered to the subjects of the British Empire interned at Ruhleben, as a Tercentenary Commemoration that cannot be without a special significance to all who reverence the ideals that spring from English soil and live in the English tongue.

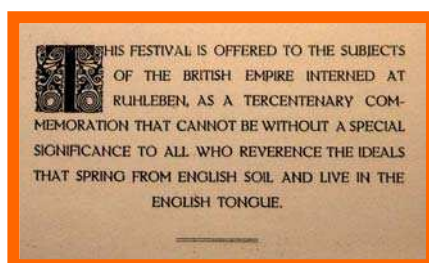
The Festival included productions of *Twelfth Night* and *Othello*, but there was also a program of Shakespearean music (madrigals mainly), lectures on Shakespeare's England (by G. H. Marshall), on the Shakespearean Lyric (by A. G. Howard), on Elizabethan Dance (by M. S. Pease), and a Commemorative Appreciation delivered by the head of "Ruhleben University" A. W. Ford.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Wilson, *Will Power: Essays on Shakespearean Authority* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 67.

<sup>2</sup> L. E. Filmore, "The Seven Ages of a Kriegsgefängner," *In Ruhleben Camp*, 1 (1915), 7.





Interestingly, the program cover comes with a quotation from *Henry IV*, in truncated form:

Shall it for shame be spoken in these days  
 Or fill up chronicles in time to come  
 That men of your nobility and power ...

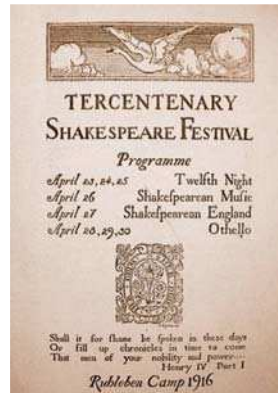
In Shakespeare, these are the lines that Harry Hotspur speaks to his father and the followers of Northumberland on the matter of their allegiance to Edmund Mortimer. At the Ruhleben Tercentenary, Hotspur's words bring into focus the issue of "shame" and "honour", but also of "political allegiance" and of protest against, here against "this canker, Bolingbroke". The suspension dots on the title page of the Ruhleben program are not Shakespeare's, whose full text runs:

Shall it for shame be spoken in these days,  
 Or fill up chronicles in time to come,  
 That men of your nobility and power  
 Did gage them both [= their nobility and power] in an unjust behalf  
 As both of you, God pardon it, have done?<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, the Tercentenary Festival was appropriated as an occasion to rally the British Ruhlebenites against their true political enemy – meaning not Richard II in this instance, but Wilhelm II, as well as those internees whose family histories (understandably, perhaps) made them favour a pro-German attitude. Given the fact that the program was produced under the watchful eye of the German guards, and printed in Berlin, the suspension dots were apparently devised as a means of circumventing censorship.

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<sup>1</sup> *1 Henry IV* in *The Norton Shakespeare: Histories*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (New York and London: Norton and Co., 1997), 1.3.168-72.



This is a unique form of political Shakespeare. Doing Shakespeare in Ruhleben, the incomplete quotation suggested, would gentle the condition of the Ruhlebenites, and morally empower the civilian internees against their captors. With its suspension dots, the title page quotation of the Tercentenary Festival program also boldly pitted cultural memory against cultural ignorance. This gains a certain ironic interest when we remember that it had only been in the 1915 issue of the *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch* that the playwright Gerhart Hauptmann had stated that Shakespeare might have been born and buried in England, but that Germany was the country where he really lived (xii). Yes and no.

The Festival Committee and the Executive Committee contained the same handful of names that we encounter many more times on the Ruhleben theatre scene: A. C. Ford, Cecil Duncan Jones, Leigh Vaughan Henry, Timothy Eden (the younger brother of the [then] future Prime Minister), and the composer Edgar Bainton. The same may be said of the rest of the program, where Duncan Jones is said to have directed *Twelfth Night*, assisted by designer Henry.

The point to make at this juncture, though, is the success of the Ruhleben Tercentenary Festival, and here – for the sake of economy – I am not yet comparing it to the Tercentenary celebrations as these were held in places like Stratford, London, Weimar, Prague, or Paris. As the 1916 “Theatrical Notes” in the Camp journal had it:

A joyous and clear note was struck which vibrated for days throughout the Camp, liberating a healthy, spontaneous laughter, strengthening our grip on our confidence in the land of which we are an outpost, and reminding us of that clear and singing spirit which, occasionally submerged, has lived through the ages as the vitalising essence of English thought and action, the peculiar mark of England’s individuality among the nations of the world.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ruhleben Camp Magazine*, 4:1 (August 1916), 33.

Summarizing the events of late April 1916, the Ruhleben camp journal recorded:

On the last week of April of this year Ruhleben celebrated the 300th recurrence of the day of Shakespeare's death. This festival, which was heralded by an article and promising programme sheet and many fine posters, was one of Ruhleben's most successful efforts and will live on as one of its most welcome memories.<sup>1</sup>

For a proper assessment of these reviews, it would be wrong to assume that Shakespeare's presence in the Camp was entirely self-evident or unproblematic. In fact, on a number of occasions over the years, Shakespeare was also a heavily contested presence. Soon after the production of *As You Like It* in 1915, for example, the camp journal printed the following warning: "We read with regret that long-haired devils wish to pump Ibsen, further Shakespeare, etc. into this Lager. We wish those people were anywhere but here."<sup>2</sup> Also, the novelist and poet Cecil Duncan Jones came in for repeated criticism. As part of the anti-Shakespearean criticism at the Camp, we find statements to the effect that Duncan Jones might enjoy directing Shakespeare but that the Bard himself was not likely to appreciate the result. Duncan Jones was also the subject of a special column in the Ruhleben camp journal, entitled "Stolen Midnight Interviews". Here, the reporter visits prominent individuals in the Camp for an interview, including "Mr C. Nacnud Senoj" – an obvious spoonerism for "C. Duncan Jones". In the article, Duncan Jones's Shakespearean interest is rather heavily satirized. Nacnud Senoj is said to have written "Two Volumes on The Subtler Errors in Shakespeare" and six more on "The correct Shakespearean Intonations and Attitudes of *As You Like It*" as well as a (no doubt equally fictional) book entitled: "My Criticism on a few gross Inexactitudes in the Definitions of the Evocative Drama." With Duncan Jones' alleged pretension to superior knowledge, Shakespeare became associated with a mixture of learning and pedantry.<sup>3</sup> In fact, "Shakespeare" and the historical period that he represented became a means of poking fun at a large number of the academic pursuits at Ruhleben. The illustration of "The Historical Circle" – represented as "Ye Historical Circle" – unambiguously links "history" with the early modern period, with doublets and ruffs, with status, with boredom.<sup>4</sup>

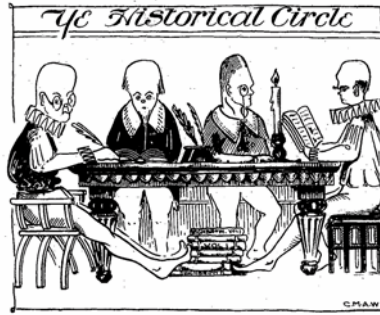
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<sup>1</sup> *Ruhleben Camp Magazine*, 4:1 (August 1916), 33.

<sup>2</sup> *In Ruhleben Camp*, 6 (29 August 1915), 45.

<sup>3</sup> *In Ruhleben Camp*, 5 (August 1915), 38-40.

<sup>4</sup> *The Ruhleben Camp Magazine* 1 (March 1916), 21 (Ye Historical Circle)



This was the other face of the same “Shakespeare” commemorated so wholeheartedly in 1916. A considerable number of internees – who apparently liked some of the plays – also considered the need to vent their exasperation with academic Shakespeare, historical Shakespeare, perhaps also elitist Shakespeare. However, before we interpret this as a popular attack on high culture Shakespeare, it is worth noting that Ibsen came in for criticism as much as Shakespeare. The anti-Shakespearean materials in the Camp are matched by attempts to also challenge the authority of the Norwegian playwright. Around Christmas 1915, the Camp journal presented a cartoon of Santa Claus reading a copy of “Ibsen” with the accompanying words: “If Santa Claus came to Ruhleben ... The poor old boy might go batchy.”<sup>1</sup> Another illustration showing Ruhleben internees on the “Promenade des Anglais” all arm in arm with attractive women, is entitled: “Not Ibsen’s Doll’s House”.<sup>2</sup> Against this background it becomes easier to appreciate the call from many in the Camp for more light entertainment, in the form of variety shows and musical comedy.<sup>3</sup>

One reason for stressing the existence of these subversive voices at Ruhleben – and there are many more – is that, towards the end of the war, the impression was created that Ruhleben ought to be considered a model for cultural production and consumption in Britain, and this impression has slowly developed into a myth. The argument about Ruhleben’s model theatre staging serious drama in times of distress, was advanced by actress-manager Lena Ashwell. She did so particularly in her writings on Ruhleben during and shortly after the Great War in which she tried to find a way out of the apparent Shakespeare malaise in Britain during the period. In Britain, Ashwell believed, Shakespeare stood no chance against the commercial theatre, which was producing cheap and second-rate musical comedies, revues, and light song programs. Of course, the

<sup>1</sup> *In Ruhleben Camp*, 10 (1915), 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ruhleben Camp Magazine*, 4 (August 1916), 31.

<sup>3</sup> The situation was first discussed by ex-internee Israel Cohen in *The Ruhleben Prison Camp: A Record of Nineteen Month’s Internment* (London: Methuen, 1917)

general population could be made to interest itself for serious drama like that of Shakespeare, but his status would need to be protected by a National Theatre. This is how Lena Ashwell perceived the situation, like Bernard Shaw, whose *Heartbreak House* of 1919 argued a similar case for a National Theatre, for which well-advanced plans had been shelved at the outbreak of hostilities in 1914.<sup>1</sup> In October 1918, Ashwell wondered:

What is the matter with the theatre in England? In Berlin Shakespeare has been played continuously during the war; in Paris two Shakespeare plays have been produced within the last few months. Even the Serbians, in their own country before its great national disaster, were able to give many productions of Shakespeare's plays; prisoners of war are able to play Shakespeare in their camps. Why is it, then, that alone in England, with the exception of the plucky enterprise at the "Old Vic", it is impossible to see any of his works played?<sup>2</sup>

With specific reference to Ruhleben she wrote:

The public in this country [...] would, in their heedless acceptance of the trivial and trashy, conclude that these men concentrated their efforts on the production of musical comedies, revues, troupes of follies, light songs and rag-time, but these were men who were passing through the school of adversity and whose minds were stimulated by disaster. They found that their greatest successes were such plays as *Everyman*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *The School for Scandal*, *She Stoops to Conquer*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.<sup>3</sup>

This representation of events has long been accepted, and never challenged. Certainly this serious drama was produced in Ruhleben camp, but there was also, as I have tried to demonstrate, considerable opposition, and the full census of some 150 plays produced at Ruhleben reveals that Shakespeare may have been a high profile playwright, but that he was not the most popular, nor the best liked.

As my research has so far suggested, Lena Ashwell's views seem to have been shaped in part by her informant on Ruhleben. The person with whom she kept in close touch during the final year of the war was none other than Cecil Duncan Jones. In the spring of 1918, Duncan Jones was sent to the neutral

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent re-assessment of the London theatre scene during the Great War, see Gordon Williams, *British Theatre in the Great War: A Revaluation* (London: Continuum, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Lena Ashwell, "The Theatre and Ruhleben," *The Fortnightly Review*, DCXXII (1918), 576.

<sup>3</sup> Lena Ashwell, "The Theatre and Ruhleben," *The Fortnightly Review*, DCXXII (1918), 574-75.

Netherlands for health reasons. While in The Hague between April and early-November 1918, he was in touch with Lena Ashwell over plans to tour the front – this is what she had been doing for years<sup>1</sup> – and to produce serious propaganda drama with a special theatre company (with The Hague as its home base) made up of those thespian Ruhlebenites who were slowly being released. Cecil Duncan Jones also drew up a so-called Memorandum about it, which Lena Ashwell was to forward to Minister of Information, Lord Beaverbrook [=William Maxwell Aitken, 1879-1964] in London, who handled the propaganda in allied and neutral countries. However, Beaverbrook believed that the cinema would be a cheaper and considerably safer means of entertaining the troops in wartime, and rejected the proposal, to Ashwell's dismay. In the end it was the YMCA – whose Hut at Ruhleben had been managed by Duncan Jones – which granted the latter permission to start a theatre company in The Hague, under their auspices.<sup>2</sup>

It seems certain that the favourable report on theatre life at Ruhleben was determined by the relationship between Cecil Duncan Jones and Lena Ashwell, even though it may be difficult precisely to say how. Cecil Duncan Jones, one of the most derided (as well as praised members of our barbed wire community in Berlin) may have looked on the “Memorandum” for Ashwell – which I have not found back yet<sup>3</sup> – as an occasion to tell the story unproblematically, which was also in his favour. Alternatively, Ashwell may have read the Memorandum selectively to argue a case of Shakespearean drama in Britain, because Lord Beaverbrook had cancelled the Shakespeare productions that Ashwell had been rehearsing on the hospitable premises of the Comédie Française in Paris. Perhaps we should not rule out a combination of both alternatives either. The point remains that the laudatory account of theatre life at Ruhleben (a) clashes with stories of internal friction, and (b) was told under circumstances in which both the narrators we knew stood to profit from a success story.

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<sup>1</sup> See Lena Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours: A Record of the Concerts at the Front* (London: Gyldendal, 1922) and Margaret Leask, “Lena Ashwell, 1869-1957: ‘Actress, Patriot, Pioneer,’” unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Sydney, Australia, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> In the end, however, his health did not permit him to realise this ambition. He was repatriated towards the end of October, and died in London on the night of 10 November 1918, only hours before the Great War ended with the official Armistice.

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Lena Ashwell specialist Margaret Leask for her suggestions and advice. Our search has led nowhere so far, but we continue. If re-discovered, the Memorandum is likely to reveal a text rather similar to that of Ashwell's 1918 article devoted to “The Theatre and Ruhleben.”

## Conclusion

This paper has tried to show how a cross section of Britons in isolation tried to make their camp existence meaningful with the assistance of POW William Shakespeare, among others. Despite the early success of *As You Like It* and the memorable Tercentenary Festival of 1916, however, the history of Ruhleben does not simply provide another straightforward success story for the annals of the “European Shakespeare” research movement. Too much emphasis on the rather conspicuous production of *As You Like It* and the celebration of the Tercentenary may blind us to the other realities of the day. Closer inspection reveals a number of cracks in the veneer of a perhaps somewhat too easily assumed Bardolatry.

In Ruhleben Camp – filled with fearless athletes, musicians and actors of almost international fame, burly mariners from the Dogger Bank, diminutive jockeys, tramps, nature men, vegetarians and assorted cranks – Shakespeare’s was *not* an uncontested presence. In Ruhleben Camp, Shakespeare was read and performed, certainly, but Shakespeare aficionados also confronted debunkers of the man and his work, and work by other playwrights also rivalled the canon.

As I have also tried to suggest, there are a number of interesting parallels between the challenged position of Shakespeare in Ruhleben Camp and his marginal position in London both before and during the Great War years. At the time in London, commercially-staged reviews and variety shows left little or no space for Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup> In fact, he became the playwright who – in the eyes of Lena Ashwell and even that great bard-basher Bernard Shaw – ought to be protected by means of a funded theatre system, on a municipal level, or even by a National Theatre. At the same time, it is likely that the account of Ruhleben has been upgraded to emphasise the enormity of the situation by contrast.

Ruhleben is a particular case of Shakespeare relocated, since it is also Shakespeare relocated by the British themselves. As a consequence, our eyes are drawn to the parallels between these two sites – Berlin and Britain – but they are limited. One notices that the trajectory in the British empire’s capital (where professional entrepreneurs were calling the tune) was also vastly different from that in Ruhleben Camp (with its curious mix of professionals, semi-professionals, and amateurs, charging symbolic entrance fees). Edwardian and Georgian entrepreneurs in London managed both to identify and mould the taste

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<sup>1</sup> See Richard Foulkes, *Performing Shakespeare in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and Gordon Williams, *British Theatre in the Great War: A Revaluation* (London: Continuum, 2003).

of the masses, and catered for them with popular drama; in the camp, it would appear, it was the spectator masses who asserted themselves and changed the theatre scene. Given the distorted mediation of the story, more research is required to obtain an accurate picture.