

MAXWELL LEIGH: CAPTIVE COURAGEOUS. SOUTH AFRICAN PRISONERS OF WAR WORLD WAR II. Ashanti Publishing, Johannesburg, 1992, R75,95.

This book deals with the vicissitudes of more than 17 000 South African soldiers who spent years behind barbed wire as prisoners during the Second World War. Some were in captivity for more than five years, and they were released only at the very end. Many died in captivity. Maxwell Leigh covers a broad canvas of events: from the appalling cages of the North African desert, under hatches in filthy ships' holds, in cattle trucks and railway box cars and on long forced marches, from the **campi concentramenti**

di guerra in Italy and **stalags** in Germany to the dreadful conditions endured by many of these men in working camps and the coal mines of Silesia. He also tracks the paths of some after escape. He tells the story of their resourcefulness in their endeavours to rebuild morale in captivity by organising newspapers, games and entertainments, music, hobbies and art, and even studying to further their education.

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1. Net idees gee aan Geskiedenis waardigheid, grasia en intellektuele waarde.
 2. Groot geeste besprek idees. Mindere geeste besprek gebeure. Klein geeste besprek mense.
 3. Alexis de Tocqueville in 1840 on some of the characteristics peculiar to historians in democratic centuries.

Democracy in America

For myself, I am of opinion that at all times one great portion of the events of this world are attributable to general facts, and another to special influences. These two kinds of cause are always in operation: their proportion only varies. General facts serve to explain more things in democratic than in aristocratic ages, and fewer things are then assignable to special influences. At periods of aristocracy the reverse takes place: special influences are stronger, general causes weaker - unless, indeed, we consider as a general cause the fact itself of the inequality of conditions, which allows some individuals to baffle the natural tendencies of all the rest. The historians who seek to describe what occurs in democratic societies are right, therefore, in assigning much to general causes, and in devoting their chief attention to discover them; but they are wrong in wholly denying the special influence of individuals, because they cannot easily trace or follow it.

The historians who live in democratic ages are not only prone to assign a great cause to every incident, but they are also given to connect incidents together, so as to deduce a system from them. In aristocratic ages, as the attention of historians is constantly drawn to individuals, the connection of events escapes them; or rather, they do not believe in any such connection.

Those who write in democratic ages have another more dangerous tendency. When the traces of individual action upon nations are lost, it often happens that the world goes on to move, though the moving agent is no longer discoverable.

From: Democracy in America. Oxford UP, The World Classics 496, 1965.

4. Historians should subscribe to the idea that there is such a thing as greatness, genius, uniqueness, that people should celebrate and aspire to such qualities, that there are truths that transcend race, gender, and class, and that all people can share in such truths and be educated by them. Gertrude Himmelfarb in 1991 in her Jefferson Lecture on receiving the highest US award for achievement in the humanities.
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