

The raid that changed Australia

HISTORY

CARRIER ATTACK: DARWIN 1942. By Dr Tom Lewis and Peter Ingman. Avonmore Books. 368pp. \$49.95.

Reviewer: **ROBERT WILLSON**

This absorbing and comprehensive account of the first enemy attack on Australian soil is subtitled *The Complete Guide to Australia's own Pearl Harbour*.

It refers to the ferocious Japanese attack against Darwin by carrier aircraft on February 19, 1942. There are surely further questions still to be answered, but with *Carrier Attack* Lewis and Ingman make a major contribution to our knowledge and understanding of that day.

The authors acknowledge other accounts of the Japanese air raid on Darwin, but they point out that their book is the first in-depth analysis to draw on the Japanese official history, and other newly translated Japanese documents.

They have also made excellent use of the transcripts of evidence given to the royal commission appointed to investigate all aspects of the raid, including both military and civilian issues.

The Japanese raid on Darwin has become part of Australian folklore and Lewis and Ingman not only try to give the facts but also to debunk myths.

There is, for example, a story that a Coastwatcher Lewis and Ingman named John Gribble sent a warning message from Melville Island about the approaching Japanese attack some 20 minutes before the genuine warning of Father John McGrath, a Catholic missionary on Bathurst Island. But there is no evidence to support the Gribble story.

Another persistent myth is that there were many more deaths than the approximately 235 officially counted in the two raids on Darwin on February 19, 1942. Some have suggested there was a cover-up, and that more than 1000 people died. But again, there is no support for such a claim, as military historian Dr Peter Stanley stressed in a talk on the 70th anniversary of the attack, in 2012. Stanley states



The aftermath: An aircraft hangar at the Parap civil airfield in Darwin after the Japanese raids.



that news of the raid was diminished but not suppressed by the Curtin government.

Even the 2008 film *Australia* appears to show Japanese infantry landing on Australian soil. They did no such thing, but for those who learn their history from movies, this could be the making of a new myth.

The raid began with 179 Imperial Japanese Navy machines overhead,

and another nine engaged at the other end of the harbour, launched from four aircraft carriers less than 400 kilometres away. They were, the authors tell us, the experienced warriors who had destroyed Pearl Harbour two and a half months previously. Those aircraft, and another 54 Japanese bombers later in the day, left Darwin in ruins, and the survivors were resigned to sharing the fate of Singapore, which fell a few days earlier.

Many people assume, as I did, that this was a rather insignificant action. But the authors stress that by the standards of the Pacific War this was a very significant air attack indeed.

It would remain the largest air attack ever conducted by the Japanese in the South West Pacific during the entire war. About half of the dead were Americans, and 88 of them were from the now-sunk destroyer USS Peary.

After introductory sections detailing the rise and

expansion of Japan as an ally of Germany and Italy, and the steps that led to the Pacific War in 1941, the authors give an hour-by-hour account of the fateful day. They examine accusations of unpreparedness and inefficiency towards the civilian and military forces in the north and ask how justified these accusations were.

The main conclusion about the motive for the raid was that the attack was not a prelude to an invasion of Australia. Rather it was believed by the Japanese Command that the modest naval and air forces based in Darwin represented a threat to the Timor invasion operations scheduled for February 20, and therefore had to be neutralised. The Japanese attack on Darwin eliminated this threat to the Timor operation, which then went ahead comparatively smoothly.

In spite of the fact that the air raid did considerable damage, the authors conclude that the raid might have been more effective had fewer attacking aircraft been used.

They conclude that, from the Allied perspective, the Darwin attack could easily have been more catastrophic.

But Darwin was a victim of its own geography, brushing up too close to events of strategic necessity to the Japanese.

The authors say that, while it was a tactical victory for the Japanese, the Darwin raid mattered little in a strategic sense. But the raid dramatically affected Australians' notions of their own vulnerability and defence became, and remains, a matter of national pride.

Carrier Attack is beautifully produced, copiously illustrated and has fine colour maps.

Chaucerian carnage in mediaeval London

FICTION

A BURNABLE BOOK. By Bruce Holsinger. HarperCollins. \$29.95.

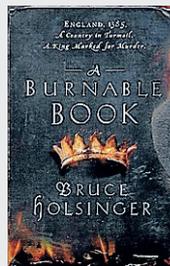
Reviewer: **STEPHANIE DOWNES**

Goeffrey Chaucer was once accused (later acquitted) of raping a young woman, known only in court records as "Cecily Chaumpaigne". It is this hint at a darker, seedier urban culture that Bruce Holsinger, a professor of mediaeval English, draws the reader into in his first novel, a literary thriller set in 14th-century London.

Holsinger pays careful homage to the genre, from Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and Iain Pears's *An Instance of the Fingerpost* with shades of Ellis Peters's

Cadfael, and he is nothing if not committed to the historical moment. There is a gleeful relish to his descriptions of the stench and squalor of the city, from the tavern to the inns of court and "Gropec--- Lane". This is familiar mediaevalism, but more *Game of Thrones* than *Monty Python*. The plot itself is populated by knights, butchers, priests, squires, scholars and whores, characters who might have been lifted from the pages of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The most important of these are the poets, John Gower and his shady friend, Chaucer.

The novel opens with the brutal murder of a woman on the outskirts of town. The "burnable" book of the title – a treasonous work that foretells the death of King Richard II – is smuggled away from the scene by the pretty young Agnes, one of several prostitutes who



"swyve" their way through the action. The narrator – Gower – is a "trader of secrets", whose knowledge of the intimate lives of many of those at court gives him power over them: he trades his silence for their speech. But Chaucer alone knows Gower's secret, and blackmails his friend into tracking down a copy of the treasonous book.

The novel is called a historical thriller, though it doesn't quite have the breathlessness of a Dan Brown novel. Mediaeval London is still no match for modern Europe. Gower – an ageing poet – is not as sprightly a crime-solver as Brown's Robert Langdon. But the plot gathers pace as the bodies pile up. The prospective assassination of the king during a public procession generates suspense and self-consciously references another such act in more recent American political history.

Holsinger's characters are clearly modelled on the colour and variety of Chaucer's pilgrims. But, unlike *The Canterbury Tales*, all becomes clear in the end, and like the *Tales*, it is all in good – if grimy – fun.