

The story of the return of these exiles, comprehensively researched and engagingly related by Frank Bennett, a former US diplomat now living in Melbourne, provides an illuminating record of how relations between the Australian, Dutch and Indonesian governments developed in those early months of Indonesia's struggle for independence. 'Australia was [then] in the process of defining a distinct foreign policy of its own', he notes, 'and the *Esperance Bay* incident was part of the evolutionary development of such a policy'. Because various issues arose, some of them quite minor ones, on which the Chifley Government found itself seriously at odds with the Dutch (and sometimes also the British, whose forces had landed in Java and Sumatra to handle the surrender of the Japanese), Australia became directly involved in making decisions about both the exiles and the new Republican government in Indonesia, which crucially influenced the course of Australian policy there from the outset. Bennett points out that the various Australians who became directly involved in negotiations with the Indonesian leaders, MacMahon Ball, Justice Richard Kirby, Tom Critchley and Alfred Brookes were favourably impressed by them, but mostly critical of the stiff-necked stubbornness and arrogance of the Dutch, who even then were trying to re-establish their former pattern of colonial rule.

Chifley and the young Acting Secretary of External Affairs, John Burton, also became increasingly unsympathetic to the Dutch and their policies, although Australia remained committed to *de jure* recognition of Dutch sovereignty. Bennett makes an interesting point that a comparison of the situation in Indonesia with that in French Indochina shows that the lack of interest in the latter by Mountbatten's forces (and, politically, by the US) enabled the French to re-establish their rule quickly, which later gave rise to the long and bitter war of liberation there. Conversely, in Indonesia the involvement of the British and Australians, and later the Americans too, made it essential for the Dutch to start negotiating with the Republic of Indonesia almost immediately. So the Australian government was thereby 'pushed into a direct relationship with the new Republic from its earliest days' by its experiences with the seamen and refugees', as well as 'the pressure to get them out of Australia'.

Perhaps we were lucky that our controversial immigration policy had such a serendipitous political outcome! Although the voyage of the *Esperance Bay* forms the major part of his book, along with the later, less controversial three voyages of HMAS *Manoora* in 1946–7, Bennett has traced very well the background to the broader story of how the Indonesians came to be in Australia between 1941–5 and what they did here after they heard about the proclamation of Indonesian independence. (Those of

us who knew of the parts played by Molly Bondan and her splendid Indonesian husband will be pleased to read of their sensible handling of some politically complex problems in their relations with the Australian authorities.) Old naval men like me will also find a lot of intriguing nuggets of interest in the very detailed story, almost too detailed at times, of the *Esperance Bay*'s unique problems of transporting an over-crowded boatload of Indonesian men, women and children whom it had promised to deliver to a port under Republican control at a time when neither the Dutch nor the British military authorities in Batavia were at all happy about receiving them anywhere.

My only (minor) complaint about this book is that not enough effort has been put into the job of transforming a good and very detailed Monash University MA thesis into a more attractively readable book. Not that the book is not readable: it is. But it is overburdened with the scholarly apparatus required for a thesis, such as references and footnotes, and it has so much detail that it could easily have been pruned drastically. Short books are generally better books. And a book and a thesis serve different purposes. A graduate student's concern to satisfy demanding examiners about a thesis should not apply to a book, since any assiduous reader can go to the thesis for further details if they are needed. Bennett says he hopes his book will help to make this remarkable story better known than it is to today's young Australians. His conclusion that 'the story of Australia's reaction to the Indonesian exiles and their campaign of resistance to the Dutch is an inspiring one' deserves our respect and appreciation. ♦

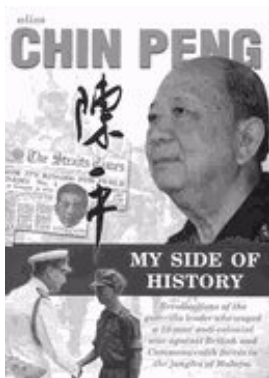
Frank C. Bennett Jr., 'The Return of the Exiles: Australia's Repatriation of the Indonesians, 1945–47', Monash Asia Institute, (Monash Papers on Southeast Asia, Number. 58), Monash University, 2003, paperback, 328pp, RRP \$59.95.

Alias Chin Peng: My Side of History

Chin Peng

Reviewed by Professor Peter Edwards

Imagine, for a moment, that Osama bin Laden were to remain alive, if not especially active, for some decades in the remote sanctuaries on the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. Then (to continue the hypothetical



scenario) he admits defeat, negotiates immunity from prosecution and emerges from seclusion, looking more like a mild-mannered and moderately prosperous businessman than a fanatical terrorist. With the aid of a couple of Western journalists, he writes his memoirs, consulting the archives

of the governments against which he directed his attacks. In the book he candidly admits to mistakes and errors of judgement, but also responds vigorously to many of the assertions made against him, both by political leaders at the time he was active and by historians during the intervening decades.

Historical analogies are never perfect, but that scenario will give some idea of the impact, at least on some people of a certain age, of the notion that Chin Peng has written a book to present his 'side of history'. In the early 1950s, during the Malayan Emergency, he was 'Public Enemy Number One' to the British colonial authorities fighting the insurgency led by the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) of which he was Secretary-General.

After the Emergency was declared over in 1960 (minor guerrilla activities petered on in Southern Thailand and northern Malaysia until the early 1980s), he based himself in Beijing. His forces remained on the Thai-Malaysian border until 1989 when they finally laid down their arms.

In 1999 he came to Australia as part of the process of writing these memoirs, carrying out research in the Australian War Memorial and participating in a fascinating workshop at the Australian National University with a number of historians working in relevant areas.

The book is as easy to read as a spy novel, but more satisfying for being non-fiction. The principal source is Chin Peng's memory, which must be extraordinarily powerful if every detail in this book is accurate. But it has an authentic ring, and the book gains credibility both from its balanced tone and from its willingness to admit tactical errors and false judgements. Specialists will find it frustrating that there are no footnotes. Thus, when Chin Peng (or, to give his real name, Ong Boon Hua) criticises 'Western historians' for this or that claim, as he frequently does, his targets are not clearly identified. But it is hard to not be impressed by his assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of major players on both sides.

Among the leading British politicians and soldiers, for example, Malcolm MacDonald emerges as a scheming manipulator and Gerald Templer as a

choleric egotist, but Lieutenant General Sir Harold Briggs, author of the Briggs Plan, is generously acknowledged as the principal architect of the CPM's defeat. Robert Thompson, the official whose reputation as an expert in counter-insurgency took to him to leadership of the British advisory mission in Vietnam, is not even mentioned.

For Australian readers, perhaps the most interesting passage relates to the 1948 visit to Singapore by Laurence Sharkey, head of the Australian Communist Party, on his way back to Australia from a communist congress in Calcutta. At the time, the British argued, Moscow had directed communist parties around the world to adopt a more militant line, and Sharkey had carried this message to the comrades in Malaya. The outbreak of the Emergency therefore showed that the British were fighting against global communism, not an anti-colonial insurgency.

Chin Peng's account dismisses the 'Calcutta Conference' approach to the outbreak of the Emergency. He portrays the CPM as motivated by nationalism, rather than by adherence to Moscow, and insists that he had virtually no contact with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The book, especially its last chapters, presents an authentic picture of the relations between communist parties, especially the balance between independence and subservience that the CPM had to display towards Beijing.

But there is an extraordinary aspect to Chin Peng's account of the Sharkey visit. The CPM leaders, it is said, asked the Australian how he dealt with non-union strikebreakers. Sharkey, admired as a strong and effective communist leader, says: 'We get rid of them'. He explains that he means that the Australian communists kill strikebreakers, but only in rural and mining areas.

According to Chin Peng (p. 204), 'Sharkey's words sent a rush of reinforced fervour through our gathering'. Sharkey was almost certainly indulging in braggadocio, but he may well have encouraged the CPM on a path that led to many more Chinese than Europeans being killed in this supposedly anti-colonial uprising.

There is much else of value and interest in this account from 'the other side of the hill', not only to historians of the Malayan Emergency. Those conducting the 'war on terror' today would do well to read it and reflect on its insights. ♦

Peter Edwards was Australia's official historian for the Malayan Emergency.

Chin Peng (as told to Ian Ward and Norma Miraflor), 'Alias Chin Peng: My Side of History', Media Masters, Singapore, 2003, paperback, 527pp, RRP 39.95.