

Facing Asia: A History of the Colombo Plan

David Oakman

Reviewed by Dr Malcolm Kennedy

The author's assertion that there was a need for a good general history of Australia's role in the Colombo Plan cannot be disputed; however, the resulting work does not provide a balanced or fair account of this remarkable program. This book's emphasis is largely and naturally, on the post-war period; however, there is an unfortunate set of ahistorical assumptions, which inform the work's thesis, on the long-term nature of Australia's relationships with South, Southeast and East Asia.

Four important problems arise. First, the notion, implicit in the book, that Australia and Australians, in the pre-federation period had no meaningful knowledge of Asia is false. A number of historians have demonstrated an extensive web of travel, trade and employment between Australia and Asia. Indeed a sampling of city and rural newspapers from the 1850s to early 1900s provides convincing evidence of such an interest in and interaction with Asia. Second, the author could have given greater consideration, to the events in Asia from 1880 to 1900, so as to understand the intensity of political leaders' views of the region at the time of federation. A study of Australia's economic experience during the 1890s would better inform any explanation for the emergence of the cross-party 'White Australia' policy advanced by the likes of Deakin and Hughes. Third, while the author focuses on a number of key players in the Colombo Plan story, such as Spender and Casey, he seems to have given little time to discovering the views of the many Australian civil, diplomatic and military personnel who had extensive pre- and post-war experience in and of Asia. A few are mentioned, but no evaluation is made of the quality of relations that they had established and maintained across the region.

Finally, the popular assertion that the Australian government, and by extension most Australians, were highly racist and xenophobic for most of the period up to the 1970s is unproven. The crimes committed against Australian Prisoners of War created much anger toward the Japanese; however, even this quickly faded. Moreover, the war created a strong sympathy for the people across the region who had suffered even more than Australians.

It is also important to challenge the author's fixation with the White Australia policy. This government policy was not unlike immigration policies held, and still held, by most nations across the region. He notes the criticism of the policy by a few opinion makers in Asian nations, but fails to note the nature of the views held by the majority of the elite in these nations. Colour was not, but race and nationality were and are, used by Asian nations to prohibit inter-regional migration.

Historians need to explain the past in terms of the ideas, beliefs and values held in each particular era. In this volume what could have been an exciting and instructive account of one of Australia's first major attempts to give aid to our neighbours has been lost to the interjection of a leftist ideological world-view to the past.

This tone is set by a lengthy, but largely irrelevant apologia for

Bert Evatt's idealist view of the UN, contrasted with the more sceptical position taken by Spender, and later, by Casey. In addition, the repeated bagging of the anti-communist position taken by many Australian leaders and the simplistic argument that the Colombo Plan was essentially a weapon in the Cold War fail as historical explanations. The failure of communism to provide democratic freedoms and economic wellbeing to Asian nations appears to have escaped the author's notice.

The central contradiction, for the author, is the official policy of the Australian government, which he admits was progressively changing over the period, and the extremely positive experiences of the Colombo Plan students. Made welcome as equals and not subject to any form of racial regulation, most students established long-term friendships with Australian families and individuals that have been maintained for the rest of their lives.

There are a number of rather odd omissions. Comparative statistical material is limited to one table of expenditure over a short part of the program. The economic theory on which the Colombo Plan was based is described, but there is no evaluation of its actual successes or failures. In particular, the Australian emphasis on education has proven to be a key element in successful economic development in the countries assisted.

Pandanus has produced a volume that offers readers a full complement of scholarly apparatus. The book has a good index, by current publishing standards, and a valuable bibliography. The abbreviations and endnotes' key would be better placed before the text. The pictures are valuable but appropriate maps need to be included. Part of Oakman's conclusion states 'Full of quasi-imperial intent, the Colombo Plan was a defensive response to a particular construction of Asia and the anxieties, threats and promises that lay within that region'. Apart from the promises that lay in the region during the period, for most of those who were involved in the Colombo Plan, his other premises are largely false. ♦

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