

Roger C. Thompson, *Australian Imperialism in the Pacific. The Expansionist Era 1820-1920*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1980. Pp. 289, maps. \$A29.00.

Until the publication of Roger C. Thompson's volume, *Australian Imperialism in the Pacific. The Expansionist Era 1820-1920*, in early 1980, a deep hiatus existed in Pacific and Australian historiography. Since 1964, New Zealand history writing has been complemented by Angus Ross's study of that country's aspirations in the Pacific in the nineteenth century, but Australia had no comparable work. Noting this, Thompson has set out to survey the history of Australian subimperialism in Melanesia, or in his words, write "a study of Australian moves for the addition of Pacific islands to the British Empire."

At the outset, Thompson declares that his approach is two-sided. On one hand, he seeks to contribute to the body of political and diplomatic research which, although he does not admit it, has become a relatively unfashionable pursuit amongst Pacific historians in the last two decades.

Quite explicitly, he states that this history is not one of Pacific island peoples per se, but of Australian public and political opinions which laid the foundations for distinctive Australian foreign policies and postures in the post-Federation era. On the other hand, however, Thompson also addresses his study to the genre of literature which seeks to analyze the broad field of imperialism, colonialism and neocolonialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In general, Thompson successfully accomplishes these tasks, but in doing so, he has had to grapple with several methodological difficulties, the most problematic being the task of defining Australian public opinion and attitudes toward the Pacific. To this end he places heavy emphasis on a wide range of Australian newspaper editorials although, by his own admission, he is wisely and preemptorily weary about the extent to which the views of editors equated with public opinion of the times. Moreover, Thompson attempts to tackle the shadowy, often ambiguous, distinction between Australian policies and attitudes toward the Pacific. Noting that although many historians still decline to talk of Australian foreign "policies" toward Oceania prior to Federation, Thompson concludes that clearly defined expansionist postures were being espoused by some Australian colonial governments as early as the 1880s.

Structurally, Thompson's work is based on eleven chapters; the first eight deal with Australian attitudes and policies in the nineteenth century, whilst the remainder examine Australia's imperialist aspirations from 1901 to 1920. This schema, however, conceals two important chronological distortions. First, well over one-third of the entire study or four chapters are devoted to the events of only four years between 1883 and 1887. Secondly, chapter one, which investigates the 1820-1953 era, or one-third of the total time span of the study, only comprises about 5 percent of the written text.

Moreover, by way of examining Thompson's work, the reader must firstly ask why he choose 1820 as the starting point for his study. As Thompson admits, commercial intercourse between Sydney and the Pacific islands was the embryo of later attitudes, but he fails to acknowledge that early Australian colonial trade with the islands, though desultory, actually began in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Whaling, sealing, and the trade in pork, *bêche-de-mer*, trepang, sandalwood, coconut oil and pearl shell were being actively pursued throughout the administrations of Governors King (1800-1805), Bligh (1806-1808) and Macquarie (1809-1821), and a *mélange* of Sydney-based entrepreneurs such as the exconvicts Simeon Lord, James Underwood and Henry Kable were growing rich on the proceeds.

Chapter 1 is too truncated in relation to the ground Thompson attempts to cover and, besides, contains at least three errors of fact or interpretation. For example, he argues that when Dumont D'Urville voyaged to the Pacific in 1826 the French were "not yet interested in annexing any territory in the remote Pacific region." But Thompson failed to note that D'Urville himself considered that New Zealand would become a seat "*d'un grand empire*" and that during the Bourbon Restoration in 1818 the Minister for Navy and the Colonies urged the establishment of a colony in the South Seas. Subsequently, a French naval station was built at Akaroa, on the east coast of the South Island of New Zealand in 1829. Similarly, it is plainly wrong for the author to assert that "pressure from Australia . . . had nothing to do with the decision to annex New Zealand" in 1840. The facts are that since the early 1830s the governors and many sections of the public and press of New South Wales had been agitating for British intervention in New Zealand especially in light of the absence of law and order and the detrimental effect that this lawlessness was having on the burgeoning trade between New Zealand and the Australian colonies.

Moreover, Thompson considerably underscores the significance for Australians of the French move into New Caledonia in 1853 by stating that even "in New South Wales, the colony closest to New Caledonia, the threat of a French military outpost was not widely discussed." Again, this is an understatement as reactions to France's activities in the region were widespread and damning. The French seemed to be moving closer to Australia with each annexation--to some Australians stepping nearer to realizing the earlier French plan to make the continent *Terre Napoléon*--and the British appeared to be doing little about it. The significant point, which Thompson neglects, is that the 1853 incidents mark an important point of departure between Australian views and British policy toward the Pacific. Thus the *Sydney Morning Herald* in late 1853 condemned "the laxity of the British Government, notwithstanding the earnest representations that have been made to it" and the Crown's "cowardly policy" in letting the French gain strategic bases in the south Pacific.

Despite these initial problems, the remainder of the work is usually well written and highly interesting. Chapter 2 discusses the Australian agitation to "raise the flag in Fiji" between 1853 and 1874 through such devices as Australian-backed commercial imperialism, especially by the Melbourne-based Polynesia Company, and political ruminations like those heard at the 1870 Intercolonial Conference which demanded that no foreign powers occupy the islands of the South Seas. The third chapter, entitled "Attempts to Extend the Empire in Melanesia, 1872-1882" analyzes the growing Australian interest in the strategic and economic

advantages which were to be gained by annexing New Guinea and the New Hebrides principally gleaned from a survey of over fifty newspapers, even as far afield as the *Western Australian Times*.

Chapters 4 to 7, which deal with the period from 1883 to 1887, however, form the crux of the study. Thompson discusses Queensland's unilateral annexation of New Guinea in order to forestall alleged German moves into the group; the attitudes of prominent Australian leaders such as Victoria's Premier James Service; the Intercolonial Convention in 1883 which advocated the so-called Australian "Monroe Doctrine;" Britain's grudging abandonment of its minimum intervention policy in respect of the acquisition of New Guinea in 1885; and, the public agitation against any French moves into the New Hebrides in 1887. Chapter 8 provides a close analysis of the Melbourne-based campaign which was waged to eject the French from the New Hebrides throughout the 1890s. Of special interest is Thompson's study of the connection between the Presbyterian church, many prominent Victorian politicians and businessmen, and the formation of the Australian New Hebrides Company whose major aim was to debunk the powerful *Compagnie Calédonienne des Nouvelles-Hébrides*.

The last three chapters deal with the policies of the Australian Commonwealth governments toward the Pacific from 1901 to 1920 and dwell particularly upon the clashes between Australian policy which viewed the Pacific, especially the New Hebrides, as a *de facto* part of the Australian empire, and British imperial policy which was more concerned with complexities of continental diplomacy than Pacific politics. Thompson concludes the work by noting the Australian occupation of German New Guinea at the outbreak of the Great War and the attempts by the fiery Australian Prime Minister, William Morris Hughes, to secure an indefinite Australian mandate over these territories at Versailles in 1919: certainly a far cry from the all-encompassing cries of the 1880s.

In all, Thompson's study is a valuable contribution to a much neglected area of Australian and Pacific history. As Thompson admits, the book took twelve years to research, but the product is well worth the wait.

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