

**TO THE ISLANDS: White Australians and the Malay Archipelago since 1788.** By **Paul Battersby**. Lanham (MD): Rowman & Littlefield Publishers (Lexington Books). 2007, xv, 249 pp. (Tables, figures.) US\$75.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-7391-2051-4.

The Timor crisis, the Bali and Jakarta bombings, West Papuan refugees, impounded Indonesian fishing vessels and a steady stream of Australians in jails in Indonesia and Thailand—these have been just some of the recent prompts for fresh bouts of hand-wringing over the general ignorance that is purported to exist between Australia and its neighbours of the Malay Archipelago. Paul Battersby's book provides an extended genealogy for this time-worn claim. His basic argument is that improvements during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in shipping and communication resulted not in a closer integration of Australian interests within its immediate region, but in a reassertion of ties to Britain, Europe and the United States and the entrenchment of a perspective fixed firmly beyond the local horizons. Australian ventures in the region, though they extend back to the origins of European settlement in Australia, have seldom been sustained, and reciprocal interest in Australia from Southeast Asian partners has been welcomed only infrequently.

Battersby aims to write against the seeming inevitability of this mutual indifference, in a bold attempt to recapture the sense of regional possibility embraced by nineteenth-century travellers from Australia, embodied in the broader geographical reference once enjoyed by the term "Australasia." This enlarged sense of region is matched by the book's wide-ranging scope of enquiry. Drawing largely on Australian sources, he approaches regional connections through the prism of trade, demonstrating the overwhelming dominance, both by export and import, of traffic between Australia, New Zealand and Britain, to the virtual exclusion of Southeast Asia. The late nineteenth-century transport revolution and the explosion of tourism as a mass leisure activity introduced a new generation of Australians to the Pacific and to Asia, though this does not appear to have been reflected in any change in the orientation and value of trade. Nevertheless, Battersby insists, Australians were active throughout the region in search of opportunity, principally in the mining sector, pursuing gold in New Guinea and tin in Siam and Malaya. The most detailed sections of the book deal with Australian investment in Thailand, both before and after World War II.

Though there is no doubting the essential merit of the book's argument, its impact is undermined by the sheer ambition of its scope. While broadly similar in range to Alison Broinowski's 1992 study, *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia*, it lacks the conviction of connection between different genres of source, or the generous and judicious use of illustration in her study. Eleven different tables and six graphs dealing with trade flows make the simple point about the poverty of regional economic exchanges, but

the author's claims for a much broader engagement are not aided by the thinness of his material, which draws eclectically on diplomatic exchanges and advertising copy for shipping and tourism. I was left wanting more of the texture and feel of these engagements; we learn that Ida Kalenski, a resident of the Straits Settlements who wrote a series of vignettes for the *Queenslander*, "offered insights through Australian eyes into everyday life in Singapore" (73), but not a word of hers is tendered in evidence. Readers are not likely to be enlightened by the frequent recourse to anachronisms, such as the "adrenalin rush" of riding rapids (81) or "Arc of Instability" as the title for the chapter on World War II; and occasional lapses into generic characterization—"many Australians exhibited an ethos which marked them out as different" (114)—invite rather than provide further explanation.

It is difficult to identify what the publishers have contributed to justify the cost of this volume. Woeful editing and an obvious reluctance even to run the text through a spell check further distract the reader's attention from the merits of the author's argument; tables are incorrectly aligned (table 2.2) or captioned (table 7.1), references missing or wrongly given, sentences are not completed and quotations mangled, though the reference to Java as "over-num [sic] with tourists" (57) appeals. More worryingly, for a book that makes the case for improved regional exchange, names are incorrectly given ("Jakasta," "Halamhera," "Mahatir"), and local geographies become unmoored—pity the miners sent to dig eastward from the Louisiades to New Guinea (72)! This is a useful introduction to an important theme in regional history, but it deserved better service for its author and readers alike.

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