

tion do not rate a mention in the index. 'Secret Government' — security police, spies and the like — warrants a whole section, Medibank four words.

The editorial comments are not always models of scholarly objectivity or temperate language. I suppose there is no harm in school students knowing that historians have political views, but the standing of the discipline can only suffer if these views are allowed to twist and distort the presentation of the sources. Sir John Kerr is introduced to the reader as 'the egregious Governor-General'. Professor Leonie Kramer is described as the only literary critic in the English-speaking world who did not hail Patrick White as a genius. The wording of the Commonwealth constitution 'conferred on the Governor-General powers . . . vast enough to do almost anything he pleased'. The first of these statements might be defensible, but egregious for what? I suspect that the second is factually incorrect. The third is certainly so.

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The Phosphateers: A History of the British Phosphate Commissioners and the Christmas Island Phosphate Commission. By Maslyn Williams and Barrie MacDonald. Melbourne University Press, 1985. xvii, 586 pp. Australian price: \$24.00.

THIS BOOK is an important contribution to the historiography of the South Pacific. Based mainly on the records of the British Phosphate Commissioners, it is concerned with the enormously profitable exploitation of rich phosphate deposits on the small islands of Nauru and Ocean Island — profitable for the imperial mining enterprise, though disastrous for the unfortunate Banaban inhabitants of Ocean Island, whose homeland was despoiled and made uninhabitable.

Williams, an Australian film producer and author, wrote the first two parts of the volume, dealing first with the pioneer antecedents of the British Phosphate Commission (BPC), and then with the work of the BPC itself, from 1920 to World War II. He writes entertainingly for the general reader. He is concerned primarily with personalities such as Albert Ellis, a New Zealander who discovered in 1899 that a doorstep in the Sydney office of the Pacific Islands Company contained high-grade phosphate of lime. From that discovery flowed the British annexation of Ocean Island and the formation of the Pacific Phosphate Co. to mine the phosphate rock both there and on Nauru. The company was London-based, though with a substantial German shareholding, reflecting the fact that Nauru was a German colony.

In 1914, Australian armed forces occupied Nauru, and Prime Minister Hughes, recognizing the economic value of the island, was determined to hold on to it. New Zealand was equally determined to secure a share of cheap agricultural fertilizer for its farmers. The outcome was an Empire mandate over Nauru, and the formation of the BPC to mine Nauru and Ocean Island as a monopoly, taking over from the private company. Britain, Australia and New Zealand each appointed a commissioner, New Zealand's choice being Ellis. These developments, and the subsequent clashes between the powerful BPC and governments, and between one commissioner and another (each resident in his own country), are adequately described.

There is also some interesting material on the political influence of the Pacific

Phosphate Co. in London (its chairman was first Lord Stanmore, then Lord Balfour; and William Lever was a substantial shareholder) as well as on the company's hostility towards Australians, particularly because of the 'White Australia' policy and the apparent menace of Sydney trade unions. The 'White Australia' policy and the strength of the Seaman's Union were regarded as incompatible with the company's reliance upon cheap imported labour (indentured from the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, Japan and China) to work on Nauru and Ocean Island.

Yet the picture which Williams draws is shallow. He has no interest in economic matters, so that little information is given about the economics of mining, capital and labour employed, shipping arrangements and markets. The profits were enormous, though Williams makes only casual, disconnected references to them. He mentions that in 1917 the 44% German shareholding in the Pacific Phosphate Co. was sold in London, yet he misses the point that the unstated price of £575,000 paid for it implied a total value of about £1,300,000 for the company as a whole. This figure may be contrasted with the compensation of £3,500,000 which the three governments agreed to pay the company in taking over its assets in 1920. The company's history is a classic example of the use of state power for private benefit.

Williams would perhaps argue that he set out to write the history of an institution, narrowly conceived though it is, and that he brings out clearly the interests of the Australian and New Zealand governments in ensuring the provision of cheap fertilizers for their farmers through the BPC. Nevertheless, one would expect the study of the BPC and its predecessors to include relations between them and the islanders whose land was being used. In fact, islanders are mentioned only in passing, and the manner in which they were defrauded and bullied is more or less justified by Williams as standard practice for the time. So much for the devoutly-held Christian beliefs which, the reader is repeatedly told, were held by Pacific adventurers! The islanders would have been better off dealing with humanists.

Part III of the book is the work of a New Zealand academic historian. MacDonald writes about the work of the BPC from 1945 to 1980, including its involvement in management of Christmas Island mining. The picture which emerges is of an institution which was highly successful in productive terms, but was a paternalist anachronism in a new world of decolonization, United Nations trusteeship, and industrial strikes by Gilbertese and Chinese as well as European employees. In 1980, the BPC terminated its operations. Independence had come for the Nauruans, though it was too late to save the Banabans' homeland — they had to be content with a hard-fought compensation victory in the English High Court.

MacDonald's style of writing is less lively than his co-author's, but Part III is more satisfactory than the previous sections. It has more substance as well as being concerned with broad trends and forces rather than individuals. MacDonald conveys an air of professionalism, leaving fewer questions unanswered (or unasked).

A final professional point: in a note on sources, the authors acknowledge that 'some of the academic trimmings are missing'. In fact, there are no footnotes at all in the book, although there are quotations from various sources. This is not good enough, especially as cost was evidently not a consideration. Scholars are entitled to detailed information about sources, if only to check accuracy.

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