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Anna Kent, Mandates and Missteps: Australian Government Scholarships to the Pacific – 1948 to 2018

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Anna Kent, *Mandates and Missteps: Australian Government Scholarships to the Pacific – 1948 to 2018* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2024), 255pp. eBook. ISBN: 978-1-7604-6616-9.

Australia has long seen itself as a protector and chief benefactor of the Pacific. From the earliest days of colonisation in Papua New Guinea and Fiji, through the Second World War and today, with military interventions in Bougainville, and peacekeeping operations in the Solomon Islands, Australia exerts a degree of strength challenged by some, but matched by none. For many, this is indicative of a neo-colonial Australia, hellbent on exerting military force into its environs. However, Australia has also endeavoured to be a soft power leader within the region. This has included the establishment of sporting and social links, but most importantly has been the education of generations of Pacific Island students in its schools and universities. In the book *Mandates and Missteps: Australian Government Scholarships to the Pacific – 1948 to 2018*, Anna Kent has examined the role of Australia as educator to the broader Pacific.

Kent's focus on the Pacific parallels with the experiences of the Columbo Plan – Australia's Cold War-era policy of educating the future leaders of Asia. As she points out, the Columbo Plan did not actually apply to the Pacific; instead, a separate system emerged which paralleled that system but focused on the colonial Pacific. These scholarships were Australia's contribution to international development, and the sheer mass of students educated still shows even today.

The book looks through the lifespan of the scholarship scheme from its inception in the post-Second World War Pacific until 2018. Through this time, Kent points out that the scheme very rarely changed. In the town I grew up in, for example, we had the Gatton Agricultural College. A steady stream of Pacific Island students passed through learning skills in agriculture and animal husbandry, making our small country town a bit more multiethnic.

Kent's use of the personal stories of students emphasises the importance of the program on the individual, as well as the wider society. The story of Cyril Chan, for examples, shows the challenges faced by the students in coming to Australia to study. Language and cultural barriers proved difficult for many students, as indicated by the excellent case studies, but as many students were brought to Australia to undergo secondary education, these could be resolved. The school which I attended was a frequent host for many students on this scholarship scheme, forging long lasting bonds between Toowoomba and the wider Pacific islands. In my experience, these students have gone on to become leaders in medicine, law, business, and engineering, particularly in Papua New Guinea. Kent also points out the challenges faced by students due to ingrained racism within Australia at the time.

Kent's analysis of the challenges faced in establishing and managing this most beneficial scholarship scheme is sublime. She really provides the reader with the insight on the internal workings of the programs as well as international considerations of the schemes allows the reader to marvel in the achievements that these scholarship schemes were. She has created a very interesting and readable book and should be compulsory reading for anyone interested in Australian foreign policy, education or for understanding the leadership of the wider Pacific region.

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