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Bill Apter, *Rethinking the Australian Dilemma: Economics and Foreign Policy 1942-1957*

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Bill Apter, *Rethinking the Australian Dilemma: Economics and Foreign Policy 1942-1957* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2021), 292pp+xx. Hardback. £64. ISBN: 978-1-4331-8139-9.

In this self-described revisionist study, Bill Apter argues that the foreign policy 'dilemma' confronting Australia in the face of Britain's decline in the aftermath of WWII was resolved by policy driven by the Dominion's economic interests. Apter is at pains throughout his well-researched book to synthesise Australian diplomatic and economic history: to 'fill the gap' between traditional foreign policy studies and revisionist studies that privilege economic forces. Although he accords economics primacy he is reluctant to speak of 'economic determinism' or to represent his work as influenced by neo-Marxist traditions of political economy prominent in New-Left historiography from the late 1960s. Nonetheless, he consistently argues throughout that during the 1940s-50s 'economics' were 'a fundamental [foreign] policy determinant'. Unequivocally, Apter states that his work returns 'economics to its position as the central policy factor' responsible for Australia's pivot from Britain to America. In summary, he argues that while the Curtin and Chifley Labor governments sought to strengthen links to the Mother Country, after 1949 the Menzies administration took decisive steps towards realignment with the US. (pp. xv, 6, 13-15, Pt. III Reconciliation, Pt. IV 'Separation', 267-8).

Apter's work is important and original. It largely succeeds in providing a corrective to a dominant historiography which, as he insists, 'treats foreign policy in isolation' and 'ignores the priority afforded to economic development by post-war governments,' both Labor and conservative. This theme is captured throughout in a range of apposite quotes that emphasise the 'entanglement of development with security'. It is evidenced most forcefully in Menzies' 1957 statement to parliament asserting that '[d]efence policy and economic policy must run together' (pp. 229-34).

Most historians accept, as does Apter, that the controversial ANZAC Agreement of 1944 signalled a cooling of relations with Washington and Labor's determination to resurrect links to Britain and Empire (indeed it sought to use the power of the Commonwealth to offset American domination of the Pacific Peace settlement and of post-war multilateral economic arrangements symbolised by the controversial US-sponsored Article VII of the Lend-Lease agreement (pp.49,119ff)). Surprisingly, Apter downplays the role of economic nationalism as an influence on foreign policy under Labor, suggesting that its efforts to resurrect ties to Britain and the Empire reflected the unwavering pull of 'British race patriotism', 'cultural Britishness' or 'Britishness' (pp. 6-15, 124-25, 167, 195, 221, 230). Without compelling evidence, he argues that traditional cultural ties retarded Labor's independence and foreign policy ambition. In contrast, policies pursued by the Menzies administration after 1949-50 recognised the 'primacy' of domestic economic interests (and by extension, as ANZUS implied, the realistic pursuit of Australia's national interests, unrestrained by ties to Britain and Empire). This view runs counter to a left-nationalist historiography that celebrates Curtin's and Chifley's efforts to assert and foster Australia's separate military-security, political and economic interests in war and reconstruction during the turbulent 1940s. It also underestimates Australia's enhanced international status – and role – in negotiating the ANZAC pact; influencing the terms of the Lend-Lease settlements and multilateral economic/trade arrangements at Bretton Woods and Geneva; helping to define the terms of the Japanese peace and occupation; and its important contributions to the establishment of the UN and other multilateral agencies after the war.

Apter might be on firm ground in arguing that Menzies' policies reflected the pursuit of 'Australia's separate national interests' (pp.15-20). However, the suggestion that in contrast to the Coalition, Labor policies were constrained by anti-Americanism and ties to the UK, is not convincingly sustained. Unfortunately, discussion of Anglo-Australia's dual nationalism - whether under Labor or the Coalition - is not informed by recent scholarship in cultural studies or history. Given Apter's desire to separate the strands of foreign policy formation and execution, the very sketchy exploration of political culture and national sentiment undermines efforts to assess 'Britishness' as a force differently affecting the economic and foreign policy orientation of Labor, 1942-49, and the Coalition, 1949-57 (pp .6-15, 20, 124-25, 167, 221, 195, 253).

Rethinking the Australian Dilemma traverses ground familiar to students of Australian foreign relation, reassessing so-called turning points during war in the Pacific and the first decade of the Cold War in Asia. This endeavour is informed by extensive primary research, particularly in Australia's archives but importantly also in those of the UK, USA, and Canada. It is shaped by a determination to resolve debates that divide Australian historiography and challenge interpretive orthodoxy (albeit not always convincingly). Apter's scholarly claims are ambitious. Some, especially those offered beyond the field of economics, are not adequately supported. While less conceptually original than it claims to be, *Rethinking the Australian Dilemma* is nonetheless a significant reminder that economic security is central to the 'national interest' and is too often neglected in studies of Australia's changing ambitions and place in the post-war world.

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