

Scholars at War: Australasian Social Scientists, 1939-1945

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In her contribution to *Scholars at War: Australasian Social Scientists, 1939–1945*, Cassandra Pybus recounts the story of a late night drinking session in Melbourne in the middle of 1944. Alf Conlon, head of the ‘Directorate of Research’ reporting to the Commander of the Allied Land Forces in the South West Pacific, and Roy Douglas ‘Pansy’ Wright, the Professor of Physiology at the University of Melbourne, were speculating about what might happen if the northern hemisphere was to be really wrecked by the war. ‘Why shouldn’t Australia be ready to be the new Constantinople?’ they asked. There and then, they set about devising a plan to build a new university that would sit ‘in the front garden of the Commonwealth government’ in Canberra and be staffed by eminent Australian academic expatriates (pp. 66–7). Their proposal, drafted that night over beers and whisky, was communicated the next day to the Australian Prime Minister. In time it would come to influence the founding of the Australian National University.

The themes of masculine sociability, belief in academic expertise, optimism and opportunism that characterise this story echo throughout the chapters collected in Geoffrey Gray, Doug Munro and Christine Winter’s volume on the activities of a select group of Australian and New Zealand social scientists during the Second World War. Taking Geoffrey Bolton’s 1991 dictum as its epigraph – ‘So much Australian history is written by intellectuals, [but] so little is written about them’ – *Scholars at War* proceeds by way of collective biography. The book is divided into two sections. The first part takes up the lives of a group of Australians, with separate pieces on the Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, A.P. Elkin; the ‘professional student’ and wartime administrator, Alf Conlon; the anthropologists H. Ian Hogbin, W.E.H. Stanner, and Ronald Murray Berndt; the educationalist and Papuan expert, Camilla Wedgwood, and

a retrospective by the historian, J. D. Legge. The second part then turns to the New Zealanders: teacher and Samoan anthropologist Derek Freeman; historians, J. W. Davidson and Neville Phillips; and the novelist and publisher at Oxford University Press, Dan Davin. 'Individual lives', argue the editors, 'can help us to make sense of a piece of the historical process ... [helping to] illuminate particular events and the larger cultural, social and even political processes of a moment in time' (p. 2). Collective biography, they contend, 'enables comparisons to be made, similarities and differences to emerge, and connections to be revealed' (p. 1).

For much of the volume this biographical approach works well. Together, the chapters reveal the importance of private forms of knowledge and informal networks in the wartime involvement of these would-be experts. They build up a detailed picture of the certainty and ambition that characterised the slightly haphazard activities of these Australians and New Zealanders, and offer up a wealth of fascinating and often amusing detail that rewards the reader. Particularly rich is the portrait painted of Alf Conlon, who, as well as having a chapter devoted to himself, waltzes through many of the contributions in the first section. Legge describes him as 'stocky, crew cut, pipe-smoking': 'a familiar and perhaps conspiratorial figure in the corridors of power – that is, the back corridors' (p. 152). Talking the Directorate of Research into existence, once Conlon had established himself in the administrative hierarchy he appointed a band of young men to work under him, and, pipe in mouth, engaged enthusiastically in what Stanner called 'jockeying ... behind the scenes' (pp. 55, 109).

The biographical approach, however, also brings with it a number of limitations. Somewhat inevitably there is the issue of selection. As the editors acknowledge, it is historians and anthropologists that the book considers, rather than social scientists more broadly. I would be interested in knowing how different the volume might have looked had lawyers, educationalists and economists been included. Women feature only briefly and gender hardly at all. The chapters on the Australians in particular tend to be a bit repetitive, while the piece on Freeman seems to be furthering rather than analysing the 'war' over his reputation its author identifies (p. 170).

But more frustratingly, although in their introduction the editors successfully draw out the context of inter-war academia in Australia and New Zealand, this wider focus tends to disappear from the individual chapters. The larger historical processes to which the editors allude sometimes fail to find their way into the contributors' analyses. The book's exclusive concentration on the years of the war is part of the problem. It mattered whether or not a person studied under Radcliffe-Brown or Malinowski; had been influenced by the British idealism of Sydney's Professor John Anderson; or had taken a degree in England. It mattered whether or not they were able to draw upon the unseen academic labour of wives and daughters (on this count Catherine Berndt's story in this volume is revealing); had the background and connections that enabled them to access scholarships and fellowships; or were adept at the homosocial practices associated with intellectual production and academic career progression. The ways these scholars were able to navigate the intellectual and institutional structures of the imperial academic world in the inter-war period had a direct bearing on their activities during the conflict and in some of the chapters it would have been helpful to have been given a greater sense of this.

More than anything, the biographies gathered here point to the fundamental porousness of disciplinary, institutional, and national boundaries at a time in which all of these were up for grabs. With the borders of South East Asia in flux, the state and the military looked for experts who could understand and shape the behaviour of colonial subjects, just as a new generation of anthropology and history graduates – unable to find work in the limited number of Australian and New Zealand universities – were struggling to make careers for themselves. In many ways, this is what makes John Pomeroy's chapter on A. P. Elkin and Pybus' chapter on Conlon two of the most interesting and revealing of the pieces in this volume. In them we see the contest between competing elites playing out as Elkin struggles (but ultimately fails) to assert his academic authority in the face of conditions that Conlon is actively exploiting, as he seeks to undermine established structures and establish the power of a progressive new elite (p. 55). Conlon's men were lower middle-class boys like himself who had entered university via the selective state school system. It is not surprising, then, to learn that it was in Conlon's unit that the anti-establishment Ern Malley poetry hoax was concocted (p. 157). But neither, perhaps, is it surprising to find that, despite his self-mythologising and his frenetic talk,

without a formal qualification or area of expertise, at the end of the war Conlon struggled to find a place for himself in the fledgling Australian ‘expertise industry’ and went back to university to qualify as a medical doctor. Indeed, it is in the universities that most of his new men go on to to make their subsequent careers. These two chapters are successful because they effectively tease out the mutually constitutive relationships between the production of knowledge, individual agency, and the social, material and political structures of power.

Scholars at War is as much about a generation of university-trained social scientists who sought to use the conditions of conflict to fashion lives and selves and disciplines, as it is about their intellectual contribution to the war effort. Freeman enlisted as a way of getting to Britain (p. 181) and the Berndts moved across borders in order to avoid military service (p. 137). Therefore, although this book is focussed on the Second World War, with a few exceptions, not many of the individuals we meet actually saw active service. Rather we find them in administrative back rooms, in the field, or in the pub. For them, the conflict acted as both common room and laboratory. It either (in the case of the New Zealanders) fast tracked them into wider British academic networks, or (in the case of the Australians) facilitated a structure that allowed them to circumvent these older practices. And as it did so it gave these young scholars a field in which they could test their ideas about governance, social organisation, education and labour. That the indigenous communities of the region – in the Pacific, Papua New Guinea, and aboriginal Australia – were frequently the sites in which much of this intellectual assertion was worked out, is a point that this volume does well to highlight. Under the League of Nations mandate system, Australia and New Zealand too were imperial powers, with the former administering the Territory of New Guinea and Nauru, and the latter Western Samoa. As Conlon’s plans to acquire control of the civil administration in Borneo suggest, as well as a time in which they demonstrated their loyalty to Britain and the empire, the Second World War was also an opportunity for these southern Dominions to expand and consolidate their own territorial ambitions.

Here the frequent conceptual slippage between the terms ‘imperial’ and ‘transnational’ is telling (p. 14). During the Second World War, Australia and New Zealand were nations in the process of construction. Historians in the second part of the 20th century have too often written of this period as one in which they were already in existence, reading the post-imperial nation back onto a period in which it did not yet exist. Although Conlon’s dreams of pacific expansion were very much evidence of incipient nation-building, and although the growing power of the United States was clearly a reality, as the editors themselves note, ‘empire networks were not diminished by the war, but rather were strengthened and invigorated’ by it (p. 14). Not only were many of the scholars this volume examines engaging in a sub-contracted form of imperialism, but they were also very much still part of an expansive academic system that carried scholars between Britain and its Dominions. It is crucial that these imperial aspects of 20th-century academia are considered, not least because knowledge and the control of knowledge was so much a part of the imperial project.

Scholars at War is a welcome contribution to recent scholarly efforts to rethink the social and institutional contexts of academic and intellectual endeavour in twentieth century Australia and New Zealand.⁽¹⁾ I can not help but think that Alf Conlon and Pansy Wright would be as pleased as I am that it is available free, online, through the ANU E-Press. Although I would have liked to see some of the larger structural and conceptual questions associated with the lives and work of these individuals more fully developed in the body of this book, their stories have much to tell us about the shifting intellectual and political landscapes of the 20th century, and much to tell us about the relationship between expertise and power in this period.

Notes

1. See for example, James McNeish, *Dance of the Peacocks: New Zealanders in Exile in the Time of Hitler and Mao Tse-Tung* (Auckland, 2003); the special issue of the *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 54, 3 (2007); Jim Davidson, *A Three-Cornered Life: The Historian W.K. Hancock* (Sydney, 2010); and Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark* (Melbourne, 2011). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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