

Blood on Their Banner: Nationalist Struggles in the South Pacific, by David Robie. London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed Books; Leichhardt, NSW: Pluto Press Australia, 1989. ISBN 0-86232-864-0, 313 pp, illustrations, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, A\$49.95; paper, A\$15.00.

David Robie's work as a journalist specializing in the Pacific Islands has given him unusually wide personal experience of the region. He was in Fiji when Timoci Bavadra became prime minister. He has made numerous visits to New Caledonia, and was once arrested by the French military. He was on board the Greenpeace vessel *Rainbow Warrior* for almost three months in 1985, not only when it evacuated the people of Rongelap Atoll to Mejato, but also on the fateful voyage to Vanuatu and New Zealand (where the carefully planted bombs of the French secret service revealed the lengths to which France would go in opposing its South Pacific critics). He knew Eloi Machoro, the martyr to the cause of Kanak independence, and saw him at Thio several days before he was shot dead by French police snipers in January 1985.

Indeed Machoro's violent death was the traumatic event that inspired the writing of this book, which, in Robie's own words, "traces South Pacific liberation struggles of the 1980s amid the escalating conflict, repression and deaths in the region" (23). Among these South Pacific struggles he includes "the forgotten wars" (41) in the Indonesian provinces of East Timor and Irian Jaya, as well as the Santo rebellion in Vanuatu, the independence movement

in New Caledonia, conflict over the nuclear-free constitution in Belau, and the Fiji coups.

Blood on Their Banner has unique value as a largely firsthand account of recent events in the most troubled parts of the Pacific and Indonesia. Its strength lies in narrative, observation, detail, and readability. I have only one reservation about this approach: because *Blood on Their Banner* has political conflict and violence as its focus, readers unfamiliar with the region may gain the impression that the Pacific Islands are uniformly wracked by extreme political tension. That is not the case.

For Robie the troubles of the region ultimately arise from the burden of past and present colonialism. He condemns French colonial rule in the Pacific; he considers the United States' record as a colonizer to be "equally disturbing" (19); and he identifies Indonesia as the region's third major colonial power.

Behind the coups in Fiji he sees "growing poverty, uneven development, government corruption, economic exploitation and cultural traditions disintegrating under the influence of Western values" (21), a potent brew that allowed Colonel Rabuka to mobilize Fijian feeling against Indo-Fijians and use it to restore the political power of the eastern chiefly elite. "Indigenous rights" might have been the rallying cry of the coup, Robie says, but chiefly privilege at the expense of the rest has been its reality. Robie has no time for the view, advanced by Rabuka and accepted by some journalists from Australia and New Zealand, that the coup represented a genuine struggle for

indigenous rights. Nor is he impressed by the failure of South Pacific countries to condemn the violent overthrow of constitutional government in Fiji.

Robie does not sympathize with the way many Pacific Islanders have interpreted the events in Fiji, and he refuses to patronize them. Instead, in a remarkable passage, he confronts the people of the islands with these questions:

Do they subscribe to the colonialist notion that nations must be organised and developed along ideologies of racial, political and economic supremacy over other races and cultures? Is the solution to colonial racism the substitution of indigenous chauvinist supremacy? If nationalist movements in the South Pacific are concerned with the development of more just, equal and democratic nations, can they achieve this by means that are unjust to other communities in the same territory in which they live? (285)

At the heart of Robie's case lies a distinction he draws from another articulate opponent of the Fiji coup, Jone Dakuvula, the distinction between "reactionary nationalism" and "progressive nationalism" (285). While the ethnonationalism of the present Fiji government serves the interests of privilege and inequality, Robie is saying, the nationalisms of the East Timorese, the Irian Jayans, the Kanaks, the Belauais, and the Maohi people of French Polynesia are in the service of good causes such as political independence and a nuclear-free Pacific.

"Nationalism," says Robie, "invokes the sovereignty of the political nation and not just the sectional interests of one island, one tribe, one clan or one

culture" (286). In this appeal to what he sees as true nationalism, Robie puts his finger on the central political issue in much of the contemporary Pacific: What is the nation? Who is to define it? Who is to benefit from that definition? Who is to lose?

The ideology of nation, land, and sovereignty is being used in the Pacific to justify a wide variety of political causes, from ethnic supremacy in Fiji to a better deal for Bougainvillean landowners and an independent republic of Kanaky. In two "nations" defined in former times by their colonial rulers—Fiji and Papua New Guinea—people are in conflict over fundamental redefinitions of just what the "nation" is. In others, independence movements call for the removal of the nation supposedly represented by those territories, France in Kanaky and Polynesia, and Indonesia in East Timor and West Papua.

While there is much still to be said about good and bad nationalisms, I like Robie's perception that the political contest over resources in many island countries is played out in an ideological arena of nationalist and subnationalist loyalties. Nothing is more sacred in the contemporary Pacific than the rights of landowners and the heritage of the original occupiers of the land. I welcome this book. It is by far the best general survey of political conflict in the South Pacific on the market.

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