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The Neighbour From Hell

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The Neighbour From Hell

Abstract

Tom O'Lincoln, *The Neighbour From Hell: Two Centuries of Australian Imperialism* (Brunswick, VIC: Interventions publishers, 2014). ! Tom O'Lincoln is an Australian marxist scholar, working outside of academia. Raised in the United States, O'Lincoln attended Berkley and cut his political teeth in the Free Speech Movement (1964--65). Later he was involved as an activist in, or as an eye witness to, political events in Germany, Portugal, Nicaragua, the Philippines, and the USSR.

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Tom O'Lincoln, *The Neighbour From Hell: Two Centuries of Australian Imperialism*, Interventions publishers, Brunswick, Victoria, 2014.

by Rowan Cahill

Tom O'Lincoln is an Australian marxist scholar, working outside of academia. Raised in the United States, O'Lincoln attended Berkely and cut his political teeth in the Free Speech Movement (1964-65). Later he was involved as an activist in, or as an eye witness to, political events in Germany, Portugal, Nicaragua, the Philippines, and the USSR.

Resident in Australia since the 1970s, O'Lincoln has produced a large body of work on Australian political and economic history. This work is accessible, devoid of jargon, tightly written, and has politicising intent. Much of it is available on his website 'Tom O'Lincoln's Red Sites' (<http://www.redsites.info>).

O'Lincoln's latest book is *The Neighbour From Hell*, an 88-page exploration of Australia as an imperialist state, or, as O'Lincoln terms it, a 'boutique imperialist'. Defining imperialism via its core components of seeking "stability and security for profits and trade routes, with the aim of creating the best possible conditions for capital accumulation", O'Lincoln develops an historical overview and analysis of Australia, not as a timid lapdog/follower of the great power imperialisms of Britain initially, and later the United States, the traditional interpretation of the left, but as a proactive, aggressive, imperialist state in its own right, one that choses and picks its targets and involvements, hence his adjectival use of 'boutique'.

According to O'Lincoln, this 'boutique imperialism' began in 1788 with European settlement, spreading from its East coast beach-head to dominate the continent at the expense of the indigenous peoples. From the 1850s onwards, this continental drive for possession went in tandem with the developing desire to spread financial and territorial interests in the Pacific region. In the O'Lincoln analysis this was not a reflection solely of British imperial imperatives, but of local 'Australian' initiatives.

At the same time this twin-expansionism was taking place, colonial Australia also endeavoured to involve itself in European colonial conflicts abroad. By 1901 and Federation, the Australia depicted by O'Lincoln was a nation and a national culture with a strong 'robber and spoiler' ethos.

With this as his bedrock, O'Lincoln confidently ranges through twentieth century and current Australian foreign affairs, robustly developing his account of Australia as 'boutique imperialist', cherry picking its more recent involvements in East Timor, Fiji, the Solomons. In O'Lincoln's account, the post-World War II Australia-US Alliance was/is not a case of Australian lapdogism. Rather, it is an investment by Australia in terms of financial cost and blood sacrifice to curry favour with the US with the aim of committing the US to back-up position for Australia's imperial interests in the Asia Pacific region.

O'Lincoln also hits on the head the furphy that recent regional 'peacekeeping' involvements by the Australian Federal Police and the defence forces are primarily driven by humanitarianism as maintained by advocates. Not so, according to

O'Lincoln; behind the spin they are components of the imperial impetus. A recent essay by US anthropologist David H. Price, "Counterinsurgency by other names: Complicating humanitarian applied anthropology in current, former, and future war zones" (*Human Organization*, Vol. 73, No. 2, 2014) is a useful supportive study here.

Overall, O'Lincoln's book is timely, worthwhile, and useful, particularly for anti-war and anti-militarism activists as a source of understanding and perspective; for if O'Lincoln is correct, and I believe he is, they will have much to do. Australia will continue to be involved in boutique imperial initiatives and adventures, expressed in military and/or 'policing' terms. Far from being the easy going friendly nation promoted by propagandists, Australia is "the neighbour from hell".

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