
This is a towering biography - but then it is only fitting, given the stature of its subject who was one of the most distinguished characters to stride across the stage of the twentieth century.

Scholar, athlete, singer, actor, orator, linguist and political figure, Paul Robeson had many of the attributes of a Renaissance man. At the height of his popularity in the 'forties, he appeared to symbolise the Great American Dream - that anyone, even a black, can succeed if talented enough. But, by the 'sixties, he was a broken human being - transformed from public hero to public enemy by the dark side of that dream - fanatical patriotism and anti-communism.

Duberman's biography charts the development of Robeson's - and America's - tragedy in rich detail. The son of a slave, he first achieved public prominence at Rutgers University when he became their first All-American football player. By the time he arrived in New York in 1919, he was "already one of 'Harlem's Darlings", the personification of the richly talented, unapologetically ambitious New Negro". Robeson trained as a lawyer but never practised. Instead, he embarked on a career as a concert artist, stage actor, recording and film star. He became a major figure in interpreting Negro spirituals and the plays of Eugene O'Neill (beginning with All God's Chillun).

His growing public acclaim did not, of course, mean that he was immune from the ugly racism of the United States. He was still refused entry to various theatres, clubs and hotels. At his request, his 1933 contract with Paramount for The Emperor Jones stipulated that he not be asked to shoot footage south of the Mason-Dixon line. Even in England, which he found so unpredjudiced compared with the United States, he was refused service at the Savoy Grill.

In the 'twenties, Duberman argues, Robeson took the characteristic position of the Harlem Renaissance intellectual - that racial advancement would come through individual artistic achievement rather than political action.

His experience with the theatre and, more particularly, the film industry, eventually paid off to that illusion. Most of his roles - with the exception of Othello and a few stage roles - depicted blacks as inferior, simple-minded 'niggers'.

While his singing was generally admired, such roles attracted a lot of criticism from the black press. A major embarrassment was the 1934 Korda Brothers film, Sanders of the Rivers, which turned out to be a glorification of British imperialism. (Jomo Kenyatta also appeared in the film - cast as a minor chieftain!)

As for many of his generation, the 'thirties transformed Robeson's politics though, in his case, it involved a burgeoning awareness of both race and class issues. He discovered Africa and the Soviet Union simultaneously.

As Duberman describes it:

In the early 'thirties, Robeson tilted towards a strong racial identification congenial to the theory of cultural pluralism. But by the end of the 'thirties, after his experience in Spain and his exposure to the Soviet Union, he would tilt more towards identification with the superseding claims of revolutionary internationalism. Much later, in the 'fifties, after his cosmopolitan hope had been trampled by the climate of the Cold War, he would renew and re-emphasise his own black cultural roots. But even then he could never be simply categorised as a 'black nationalist'. All of Robeson's shifts were subtle, none sudden or complete.

By the end of the 'thirties, he was lending his active support to a variety of public causes in England - Republican Spain, the Unemployed Workers' Movement, benefits for the Daily Worker and Welsh nationalism - despite advice that it would harm his career. Increasingly, he became identified with the Soviet cause.

He never joined the American Communist Party though, at the height of McCarthyism, he offered to as a gesture of solidarity. As Duberman observes, "Robeson's political identification was primarily with the Soviet Union in its original revolutionary purity, not with its secondary manifestation, the American Communist Party".

But, in one of those revealing ironies of American politics, as he increasingly championed the Allied war effort, the FBI stepped up their surveillance of him, concluding in 1943 that he was "undoubtedly 100 per cent communist". The FBI's campaign against him reached its apogee in the hysterical anti-communism of post-war America.

As early as 1946, he was hauled up before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). However, it was his misquoted speech to the Paris World Peace Congress in 1949 which gave the forces of reaction the opportunity for an all-out attack. Seizing on his supposed declaration that it would be unthinkable for American Negroes to go to war against the Soviet Union, the white press denounced him as a traitor. Many black leaders quickly disassociated themselves from him, a number later testifying their patriotism to special sessions of the HUAC.

In the same year, racists and police launched their infamous attack of Robeson's Peekskill, NY, concert, injuring one hundred and fifty people. Robeson was banned from appearing on the NBC network and his opportunities to work and speak dried up. Then, in 1950, the US government seized his passport.

It took Robeson eight years and countless court cases to regain his passport but by then his health and
spirit was broken. The appearances before the HUAC, the constant surveillance, the continuing rebuffs and the Cold War climate, triggered an emotional collapse in 1955 - the first bout of what was later diagnosed as "bi-polar disorder" - mania followed by depression.

Sadly, this period of enforced inactivity coincided with an upsurge of black activism, beginning with the Montgomery bus boycott. As he recovered, he tried to intervene in the struggle, urging support for Martin Luther King, but his presence was largely ignored, adding to his sense of isolation. By then, too, many of his former friends and supporters - both black and white - had deserted him.

In 1960, he visited Australia where he had to endure red-baiting again - this time at the hands of the Brisbane and Sydney press. As he toured the country, he became increasingly outraged at the condition of Australia's own black population. Watching a film about Aborigines with Faith Bandler, "the tears started to stream down his face, but when the film showed thirsty children waiting for water, his sorrow turned to anger". He vowed to come back to campaign for the Aboriginal cause.

Robeson returned to Europe deeply depressed and a few months later attempted suicide. Admitted to a psychiatric hospital and "agitated with many ideas of persecution", he was subjected to fifty-four shock treatments. Subsequent drug treatment in the United States, may have resulted in organic brain damage.

Whatever the case, Robeson was never the same again. As black America erupted in an unprecedented burst of militancy, he spent his days as an invalid, with few contacts with the outside world (though he did meet and like Malcolm X.) In 1974, the FBI concluded that no further investigations were warranted. He died a year later, still loved and admired but largely forgotten by mainstream America.

Duberman's massive biography explores all facets of Robeson's remarkable career and personality, integrating the artistic, personal and political dimensions into an impressive whole. It draws largely on the Robeson Family Archive, though this had one major drawback. The materials represent Essie Cardozo Goode, Paul's wife, far more than they do Paul.

While Essie was an invertebrate diarist, correspondent and hoarder, Paul hardly ever committed himself to paper. Duberman has tried to overcome these limitations - and largely succeeds - by conducting hundreds of interviews and a judicious reading of Essie's various 'texts'.

Duberman paints a complex portrait, managing to probe beneath the charming, genial exterior to the deep-seated anger in Robeson which became more profound as history brought its many disappointments. And he deals at great length with Robeson's problematic relationship with Essie, whom he could never quite leave on a permanent basis, especially not for a white woman. Throughout his life, Robeson was involved with many other women - mostly white - and all strong and intelligent like Essie.

This magnificent biography - one of the classics of our time - should assist in restoring Robeson to his rightful place in American history and in the hearts of people everywhere. It is part of America's tragedy that Robeson is largely unknown in his own country today - or among the postwar generation worldwide. However, unless the book is issued in paperback (it's over $50 in hardback), it will be largely restricted to an audience of ageing lefties who have their Robeson discs tucked at the back of their record cabinets. Robeson - and Duberman - deserve a better fate, particularly now that the history of socialism is undergoing such intense scrutiny. Without ever resorting to hagiography, Duberman shows that Robeson is one hero of the old socialist world who deserves a place in the new.

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Broken Promises


From the attractive cover design to the catchy title, it is immediately obvious that Land of Promises, an action research and policy study of the East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project, bids fair to deliver more than the ennui and tiresome prosiness often associated with such reports. This doubtless stems from the extensive efforts of its editors; from the illustrations, photographs and the particularly apposite quotations interspersed throughout the work; and from the multi-disciplinary backgrounds of the contributors to the project. It probably also stems from the fact that it is not a product of government departments which, in fact, failed to respond to Aboriginal organisations' requests for such a report.

It is one of the largest interdisciplinary, non-government, non-developer studies of Aboriginal policy issues produced to date. These factors have given it an independence and flexibility uncommon in providing 'baseline' information of social impact assessment on indigenous peoples.

One problem, however, does emerge. Land of Promises makes the assertion that it does not seek to speak for Aboriginal people, but seeks rather to provide a means for them to be heard. At the same time, it admits that "a limitation of the Project's approach was the absence of Aboriginal control of the Project, and the degree of Aboriginal participation", caused by such things as the fragmented nature of Aboriginal representation and the autonomy of widely dispersed researchers. Ultimately, then, the report presents Aborigines of the East Kimberley region with what it sees as options and strategies based on outside views.

This problem aside, however, it is the unusual combination of options for strategies with data collection, along with its independence of government or developer bodies, which is one of the strongest features of the report. Another strong feature is that the issues and premises raised by the report, as well as the options and strategies outlined, have a significance and application for the Aboriginal people which extend beyond the somewhat limited confines of the East Kimberley region.

As a study designed to assist Aboriginal people to deal with economic and social changes arising from resource development in the diverse East Kimberley region, it becomes a microcosm for many of the issues affecting Aboriginal people throughout Australia and those making policy decisions on their behalf.

For example, Land of Promises establishes the basic premise that Aborigines and other Australians view the development of resources in radically different ways. Aborigines are conscious of "the relationship between inhabitants' present needs and their responsibilities to future generations". Their cultural creed (and it is a universal one, not confined merely to the Aborigines of the East Kimberley region) imposes on them a sense of 'stewardship' so that destructive or sudden changes are resented and feared because they interfere with a duty imposed by the spiritual authority of their ancestors.

Other Australians, meanwhile, have subscribed to the 'development' ideology. It is based on the assumption that increased production of material goods and services will increase well-being, that development is "good for everyone". Land of Promises questions the validity of this latter assertion since benefits in a capitalist, technology and knowledge intensive world rarely flow to indigenous peoples. It also makes the point that the Aborigines' "concept of responsibility for the land has much in common with contemporary principles of sustainable development".

The Ord River Irrigation Area in the East Kimberley region is a potent example of the worst features of 'development' ideology. The story of its development is one of "grandiose visions, inadequate and ill-directed research, and decisions by politicians for short-term political advantage made without reference to the experience of the thousands of years in which the region has sustained a substantial human population". My experience is that such examples of misdirection and mismanagement are not confined to the East Kimberley region alone.

This study of the East Kimberley region also provides us with a relatively recent example of the economic and social changes which have impacted on the Aboriginal people from resource development, for it is here in the last one hundred years that the Aborigines of the region have faced several intensive 'waves' of development which have transformed their lives. These waves include the short-lived gold rushes and the pastoral development of the 1880s and, more recently, the development of the Argyle Diamond Mine; and a rapid growth in tourism and in the non-Aboriginal population of the area. In each case the impact on the Aboriginal communities has been sudden, disruptive and, in many instances, devastating. The result has been a conflict over control of resources and development in the region and the Aboriginal people are fighting to be heard.

Central to the issue is land ownership. As the report points out: 'The most profound effect of European occupation of the East Kimberley (and, we might add, elsewhere) has been the Aborigines' loss of control over
land." Yet land is the source of Aboriginal identity. Its importance is best expressed in the emotive words of the Kija man, quoted in the report: "We bin born and raised here. When we lose that country we'll be nothing. When we got a country back we'll be right."

Thus restoration of control is basic to Aboriginal priorities and dominates their strategies for the future. But in the East Kimberley, as elsewhere in Australia, Australian law is limited by the fact that most land has been alienated through leases or sales. Yet there is a de facto recognition of Aboriginal rights inherent in the system itself. This is exemplified by such episodes as the introduction of reserves, the Aboriginal Land Rights Bill and agreements with mining companies. To resolve this dichotomy, the report advocates, among other things, that "the federal government should legislate for communal and inalienable land rights for... Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people throughout Australia and recognise ... (their) ... sovereign rights and prior ownership of Australia ... " Compensation for lands lost and for social and cultural disruption must follow.

Land of Promises emphasises that... they are "constrained by limited resources and by the fact that the institutional framework within which they have formal authority to act is determined and controlled by the same, often remote, non-Aboriginal sources of power". The key to the remedy is more Aboriginal participation in and control over their own affairs, using their own skills and incorporating activities compatible with Aboriginal concepts. Recommendations on the issue of law and order made by the Australian Law Reform Commission, that Aboriginal communities be given the power to make local by-laws, enforceable in local Aboriginal courts, are a positive step in this direction. Many others are cited in the report. But self-determination must be a slow, self-generating process which involves "proceeding from planning to action, to observation and evaluation, to reflection and then to further planning".

Land of Promises should be read by all thinking Australians. It contains much that will promote public debate, understanding, even controversy, since it calls for new directions in Aboriginal affairs. Consultation and ad hoc solutions are not enough. We have to rethink national policies and to recast the structure by which they are administered so that Aboriginal people need no longer see, not only the East Kimberley region, but Australia as "a land of promises - broken and forgotten".

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Shrugging off ANZUS


The changes in Europe have been so fast that they have already overtaken this book of essays put together by John Ravenhill of the University of Sydney and published only last October. With the whole basis of alliance politics in the East-West context being open to question, the irrelevance of ANZUS seems even more apparent than through the points made by a couple of the more critical contributors in No Longer an American Lake?

This is the saddest criticism that can be made because, while the book seeks to be balanced and give space to arguments for and against the ANZUS alliance, the final chapter on future directions fails to come to grips with the fundamental questions raised.

The real issue is that the symbolism of ANZUS is so deeply ingrained in Australia's cultural framework that, despite all the changes referred to in the region, let alone the wider global changes in East-West relations, no politician dares to question its relevance or suggest that it should be allowed quietly to fade away into obscurity like the Manila Pact- or even formally dissolved.

Because this issue is not addressed, the editor fails to come up with any positive suggestions for future directions other than retreating into Cold War rhetoric and offering the vain hope that:

Washington should seek to increase the benefits of the ANZUS alliance to its partners and decrease the costs minimally, it should refrain from actions that would decrease the benefits or increase the costs.
John Ravenhill explains the political origins of ANZUS in the opening chapter, making it hard to understand the quite inadequate suggestions for the future of the alliance that he offers at the end of the book. Hopefully we shall see more such articles on the events that led to the Pacific Pact as we can shrug off the past and look more dispassionately at the historical events that led to the alliance politics of the post-war world.

If the Europeans can use the 1990s to consider the origins of NATO and the Warsaw Pact with a view to replacing them with Common Security and non-offensive defence strategies, then surely Australia can admit that the same changes can lead to a reconsideration of the relevance of ANZUS in the South Pacific?

Now we learn, too, that the United States is considering the withdrawal of up to a third of its forces in the Pacific. Surely the whole Dulles strategy of constructing a chain of alliances to box up China and the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War needs to be quietly eradicated and replaced with arrangements reflecting current realities.

The tragic refusal of so many Australian politicians and Foreign Affairs/Defence specialists to acknowledge that security issues in the Pacific are based on North-South concerns and not the East-West framework dictated from Moscow and Washington after 1945 is not reflected anywhere in this book. If Henry Albinski as a US specialist in Australia and New Zealand could be invited to contribute to Not an American Lake? then there should have been at least one chapter from an academic at the University of the South Pacific, and an indigenous New Zealand contribution instead of the chapter by Michael McKinley. This would have given the book more balance and might have produced more constructive suggestions than those offered.

Richard Higgott's chapter on the 'Ascendancy of the Economic Dimension in Australian-American Relations' is an important contribution because it shows up the meaningless nature of a relationship between a large power and a small power. This topic was dealt with in a New Zealand publication last year - ANZUS in Crisis - Alliance Management in International Affairs, edited by Jacob Bercovitch. Higgott points out that the domestic considerations of Mid-West farmers will count for more in Washington than the whining noises of politicians in other nations.

He documents the changes in the post-war economy as it affects Australia in the Asia-Pacific and the global economy, concluding that "the magnitude of the US economic problems forms the context in which Australia will have to manage the bilateral relationship".

Ironically, the chapter (originally drafted in June 1987) was written before the changes in the East-West situation offered the opportunity for the US economy to get its act together, leading TIME magazine to make Mikhail Gorbachev 'Man of the Decade' and business journals to write enthusiastically of the opportunities offered by a massive cut in military expenditure.

The danger now is that Australia will react to the changes in the Pacific by joining the prestige arms race in the region and taking the view that potentially unsettling situations in places like the South China Sea and Melanesia mean that Australia should view these developments as direct threats to our own security.

The reduction of the US and Soviet presence offers a major opportunity to reassess our whole attitude to national defence and security. The way forward lies through quietly burying ANZUS as a military alliance, developing a regional initiative for common security and naval arms control in the North Pacific to match the European talks, and switching over to a strategy of non-offensive defence.

Some of these ideas will be developed in a forthcoming book, Australia's New Militarism - undermining our future security, to be published by Pluto Press in March 1990. This will complement Dr Joe Camilleri's more critical assessment of ANZUS (ANZUS: Australia's Predicament in the Nuclear Age, Macmillan, 1987) and should set the direction for the last decade of the twentieth century as Australia finds its feet in the Pacific and finally throws off its dependence on 'great and powerful friends'.

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