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Abstract

Australia's Asia is a timely collection that offers an historical background to the recent debates on Australia's Asian Century. As the use of the term 'yellow peril' in the subtitle suggests, there is a strong emphasis in this book on Australia's ongoing anxieties about the rise of Asia.

Keywords

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Review of David Walker & Agnieszka Sobocinska (eds), *Australia's Asia: From yellow peril to Asian Century*.

Julia Martínez

Australia's Asia is a timely collection that offers an historical background to the recent debates on Australia's Asian Century. As the use of the term 'yellow peril' in the subtitle suggests, there is a strong emphasis in this book on Australia's ongoing anxieties about the rise of Asia. In their introduction, David Walker and Agnieszka Sobocinska rightly point out that rhetoric concerning Australia's Asian Century needs to be viewed in the context of past claims about the potential threat of a strong Asia, recognising that "current exhortations reproduce Orientalist patterns" (p. 7).

The collection works well as a follow-on to David Walker's 1999 ground-breaking publication *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939*. In terms of its geographical scope, *Australia's Asia* is slightly weighted in favour of China, having five chapters on Chinese migration; three chapters on Indonesia — including Ruth Balint's evocative epilogue on north Australia and eastern Indonesia; two on Japan; and one on India. For much of the book, however, the central topic is Australian responses to an amorphous and imagined Asia.

The book is one of contrasting representations, moving from Greg Watters focus on early Chinese migrants as purveyors of disease, to Shirley Jennifer Lim's study of the glamorous Chinese-American actress, Ann May Wong, who visited Australia in 1939. The emphasis on mini biographies brings a welcome sense of how personal experience of Asia both challenged and sometimes reinforced anxieties. These experiences are admirably captured in Kate Bagnall's study of white wives of Chinese men who travelled home with them to China, and in Agnieszka Sobocinska's chapter on Australians in Japan and Indonesia.

Readers of *Labour History* might be disappointed at the absence of a detailed study of Australian responses to Asian labour. In their introduction, Walker and Sobocinska are critical of mainstream labour history for overlooking Asian labour, particularly when, as they argue, "the construct of Australia as a 'workingman's paradise' was premised on a contrast with Asian coolie labour" (p. 17). Having said that, none of the chapters take up this important point. In Greg Lockhart's chapter he includes an overview of the Australia-Asia literature, and acknowledges the role that labour historians have played in looking for a "post-colonial pulse" in the Australia-Asia story. In particular he notes works on Australia-Asia labour collaboration such as Rupert Lockwood's *Black Armada*, and more recently Heather Goodall's study of Indians and other Asians in 1940s waterfront unionism.

In the last few years, the rapid rise of Asian contract labour in Australia has certainly put the question of Asian labour back in the political spotlight. Perhaps the time is ripe for labour historians to publish a collection like *Australia's Asia*, with a labour history theme, so as to provide a follow-on from earlier collections such as Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus' 1978 *Who Are Our Enemies?* It would be important, however, to move beyond representations of Asian labour as a threat, and to recognize the extent to which Australia benefitted from the labour of Asian workers. If nothing else, such a collection would provide a much-needed resource to be used in teaching Asian history in our schools. In Sally Percival Wood's chapter on the National History Curriculum, she spells out the 2012 'organizing ideas' (p. 341) around which Australia's engagement with Asia could be taught, and they are notably biased towards the study of Australia and Australians engaging with Asia, with little

recognition of the role of Asians in Australian history. We need histories that acknowledge the role of Asian workers in developing our mining, agricultural, and maritime industries, or in building key infrastructure projects such as the telegraph and the railways. While *Australia's Asia* is to be commended for alerting us to the ongoing problem of negative representations, it does seem that such representations are only able to flourish because so few Australians are aware of vital Asian contributions to what should be regarded as mainstream Australian history.