

# Over the Top: Writing Australia into South East Asia <sup>1</sup>

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On 1 November 1891, Dutch authorities at the Moluccan entrepot of Ternate arrested Captain John Carpenter, captain of the Burns Philp and Company whaling barque, *Costa Rica Packet*, on a charge of piracy. An American-born but naturalised British subject, Carpenter's arrest developed into a major international incident involving the Dutch, British and New South Wales Governments. Although the issue at hand revolved around the salvage, or theft, of a Malay *prau* belonging to a former business acquaintance of Carpenter, by the time a New South Wales select committee appointed to investigate the case handed down its report in 1894, the issue had broadened to include the freedom of the seas and rights of Australians to trade in the Indies. Few details emerged about the origin of the charge of piracy laid against Carpenter, which were subsequently dropped, leading the NSW Committee of Inquiry to conclude that this was a deliberate act of political intimidation. As the Committee reported,

We desire to call to attention to the fact that independently of the direct injury inflicted on the persons immediately concerned in this case, who are citizens of this Colony, the whole of Australia has suffered from the attitude assumed by the Netherlands-India Government, as further enterprise by our colonists has been checked when the field of the proposed operations has been the Malayan seas or islands, even though not subject

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to the Netherlands-India Government....<sup>2</sup>

Given Australia's history of racism and xenophobia, a persistently inward-looking island mentality, and a national cultural inclination towards the Anglo-Saxon world, it is surprising to find any historical evidence at all of Australian interaction with what we know today as maritime or island South East Asia. And yet, and without venturing the spurious claim that Australia has always been 'part of the region,' European Australians have interacted with the peoples of this geographical area virtually from the beginning of British colonization. Outward-looking Australians, encouraged by nineteenth century geographical ideas, thought themselves rightfully at the centre of this fascinatingly diverse island world. When Australian politicians in the late nineteenth century declared that Australia must assert its primacy in the Pacific, the Pacific region in their understanding, incorporated much if not all the Malay Archipelago, a name made famous by the English naturalist Alfred Russell Wallace for the arc of islands reaching from the Malay Peninsula to the Solomon Islands.

To nineteenth century Australian colonisers, the Archipelago defined their northern maritime frontier. Here was a zone of economic opportunity, a source of cheap and compliant labour, a vital defensive barrier, a playground for the affluent, and a source of biological and moral contagion. Equally significant, these islands also formed a 'gateway' to somewhere else, to British India, the Americas and to Europe. When patriotic Australian colonists dreamed of a railway line linking the southern colonies to Darwin they thought less of securing access to the wealth of the East than of creating an interlocking network of railways and steam-shipping routes spanning the Indonesian Archipelago, Malaya, Burma and India, that would weave Australia and the British Empire in Asia into an imperial federation. Only very gradually did New Guinea, Java, Singapore and Manila become primary destinations for growing numbers of Australian business travellers and pleasure seekers, as the increasing sophistication of international transport and commercial linkages drew Australia into closer engagement with the 'near north.'

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<sup>2</sup> 'Report from the Select Committee on the *Costa Rica Packet* Case together with the proceedings of the Committee and minutes of evidence', New South Wales Legislative Council, *Votes and Proceedings*, vol. 51, 1893, p. 175.

Regional boundaries, like nation-state boundaries, are elastic, permeable and subject to revision, as are the names arbitrarily imposed upon geographical spaces. Appropriated from European Enlightenment philosophers, the name Australasia embodied William Charles Wentworth's vision for a New Britannia in the Antipodes centred on the Australian continent but surrounded by 'island vassals' to which the new Australasian nation would naturally give protection.<sup>3</sup> Arguably the nineteenth century's most widely read book on island South East Asia, Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago* (1869) unwittingly conferred a semblance of scientific legitimacy on Australian regional aspirations. Wallace believed that the biogeographical boundaries of Asia stopped at Bali, to the east of which lay the 'Austro-Malayan' sub-region where, he wrote subsequently in *Australasia* (1879), the Australian continent 'forms its central and most important feature.'<sup>4</sup> Wallace's impact upon Australian conceptions of physical geography and racial distribution was substantial. His *Island Life* and *The Malay Archipelago* were reference works for Australian travel writers and extremely popular among Australians heading north, over the 'Top End' into Asia. Travellers often turned the experience of reading Wallace into an informal lesson in applied geography by availing themselves of nautical charts and atlases provided in their ship's library. Australia travel writers quoted extensively from his work as did those adventurers and tourists who sought celebrity by publishing their accounts of the Archipelago in the lifestyle pages of the *Brisbane Courier* or the *Queenslander*.

A settlers' guide to northern colonisation, William Brackley Wildey's *Australasia and the Oceanic Region* (1876) faithfully relayed Wallace's geographical, ethnographic and zoological observations. Boasting then utility and rigour of his book, Wildey composed a reference guide for travellers seeking to educate themselves in advance of a journey into the Indies and Malaya. Implicit is the common presumption that all places described on the Australian continent and further north were open to those with sufficient energy and capital. Echoing the opinions of early British navigators on the utility of a free port on the northern Australian coast, Wildey reinforced the popular view that the Dutch had no legitimate claim on the Aru Islands or New Guinea. Like many Australians gazing towards the Archipelago, he

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<sup>3</sup> W. C. Wentworth, *Australasia*, University of Sydney Library, Sydney 1997 (1823), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> A.R. Wallace, *Australasia*, Edward Stanford, London, 1879, p. 2. P. Van Oosterzee, *Where Worlds Collide: the Wallace Line*, Reed Books, Melbourne, 1997, pp. 23-27.

regarded Britain's decision to relinquish control of Java in 1815 as a major imperial miscalculation.<sup>5</sup>

School children too learned of Australia's geographical proximity to Asia and of dubious Dutch and Portuguese territorial claims. W. Wilkins, former Under-Secretary for Public Instruction in New South Wales, introduced his textbook, *Australasia* (1888) thus,

The future of Australia is, in some measure, bound up with that of the countries which lie around its northern and eastern shores, not merely from the fact of their proximity, but also from the commercial intercourse which must of necessity take place, and from the political relations which, sooner or later, must be established between them.<sup>6</sup>

Australasia, as defined by Wilkins, incorporated Wallace's Austro-Malayan division of the Archipelago, New Zealand and Polynesia, countries which bore 'natural relation' to Australia, the 'central mass' of this geographic region, and which, he added prophetically, might one day become 'either useful allies or dangerous enemies' of the British empire.<sup>7</sup> A schoolbook written by a government education official is perhaps a more potent source of evidence about the dominance of certain geographical ideas than a popular novel. Wilkins deliberately implanted in the minds of Australian youth the perception that Australasia was their region for the taking. The western portion of New Guinea he wrote, was only 'nominally' under Dutch control and in a state of utter disorder while in Timor the Dutch and Portuguese 'had done nothing towards developing the resources of the country or civilizing the inhabitants.'<sup>8</sup> Written at a time when Australian commercial and political ambitions in the eastern Archipelago were at their height, *Australasia* can hardly be dismissed as an innocuous, value neutral textbook.

For much of the nineteenth century the Malay Archipelago was a zone of commercial rivalry between Britain, the Australian colonies and the Netherlands Indies. The Dutch were according to John Barrow, Second Secretary at the Admiralty, 'our greatest

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<sup>5</sup> W.B. Wildey, *Australasia and the Oceanic Region*, George Robertson, Melbourne, 1876, pp, 79, 143..

<sup>6</sup> W. Wilkins, *Australasia: A descriptive and pictorial account of the Australian and New Zealand colonies, Tasmania, and the adjacent lands*, Blackie, London, 1888, p. v.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. v, 1,

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 238-239, 251-252.

Commercial Enemy in the East.’<sup>9</sup> Colonial Australian entrepreneurs were prepared to test and at times flout Dutch sovereignty in the eastern Archipelago if commercial gains justified the risks of reprisal. The East India merchant and former Sydney trader, Captain William Barns is the acknowledged protagonist of British planning for a new Singapore in northern Australia. Citing blatant discrimination against foreign traders in the Indies as a serious challenge to British commercial interests, Barns argued a new British port on the Gulf of Carpentaria would open the Archipelago from Timor to the Solomon Islands to the ‘British Flag.’<sup>10</sup> Often dismissed as imperial folly, Fort Dundas (1823-29) Fort Wellington at Raffles Bay (1827-29) and later Port Essington (1838-49) in what is now the Northern Territory, were bold if poorly executed experiments that had the much wider purpose of drawing the eastern Archipelago within the commercial orbit of New South Wales.<sup>11</sup> Barns and the East India Trade Committee predicted Batavia’s significance as an entrepot would decline in the face of challenges to its hegemony from British free ports to the north and south. Trepanng, tortoise shell, sandalwood and pearl shell abounded in the seas of Australasia. Barns even presumed that Portuguese Timor might be used for coffee growing and Timor Laut for nutmeg to furnish additional commodities for the China trade, although giving no indication as to under whose direction.<sup>12</sup> What emerges is an impression of northern Australia and the eastern Malay Archipelago, from Timor to the Solomon Islands, as a ‘natural’ commercial sphere.

Figures 1 and 2 below illustrate the significance regional economic ties to NSW in the mid- nineteenth century. The vast proportion of two-way trade was with Queensland and Victoria but by dispensing with statistical divisions between British colonies and foreign countries and instead bracketing the Australian colonies, New Zealand, New Caledonia, New Guinea, Java, Singapore, and the Philippines, we can sense the scale of a ‘regional’ Australasian economy centred on Sydney. Although the growth of Australasian trade in large part reflects the expansion and deepening

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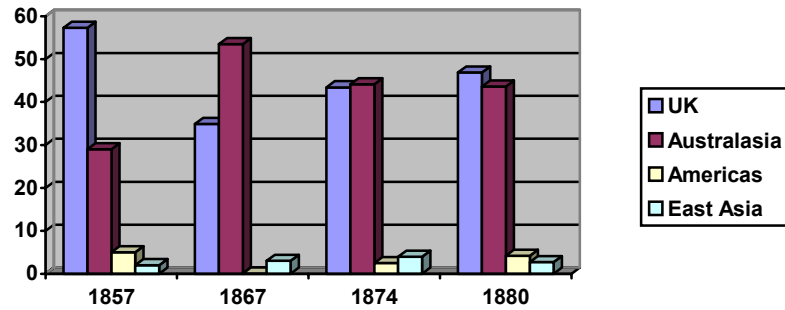
<sup>9</sup> John Barrow to Under Secretary Horton, 22 January 1824, *Historical Records of Australia* (hereafter *HRA*), series 3, vol. 5, p. 753.

<sup>10</sup> W. Barns to Under Secretary Horton, 15 September 1823, *HRA*, series 3, vol. 5, 1922, pp. 737-739.

<sup>11</sup> D. Howard, ‘The English activities on the north coast of Australia in the first half of the nineteenth century’, *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society Of Australasia, South Australian Branch*, Volume 33, Session 1931-32, pp. 56-57.

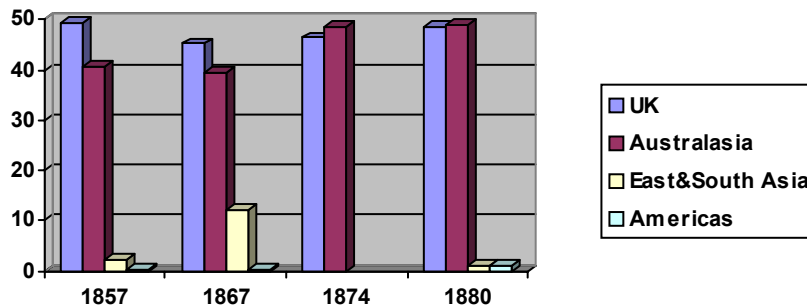
<sup>12</sup> Barns to Horton, 15 September 1823, *op. cit.* G.G. de H. Lapent, Chairman, East India Trade Committee, to Under Secretary Horton, 13 December 1823, *HRA*, series 3, vol. 5, 1922, pp. 742-747.

Figure 1: NSW imports by region of origin



Source: NSW Legislative Council, *Votes and Proceedings*, 1858, 1868, 1882.

Figure 2: NSW exports by region of destination



Source: NSW Legislative Council, *Votes and Proceedings*, 1858, 1868, 1882.

interconnection of colonial Australian economies in the latter part of the nineteenth century, more than one-third of NSW imports were sourced from the Malay Archipelago. Colonial Australians consumed sugar from Java and the Philippines, coffee, tobacco, copra, spices, whale products and pearl-shell. Subtly, without challenging the cultural nexus between food and identity, colonial consumption patterns mirrored rather than confounded Australia's geography.

When we examine the cultural, social and economic orientations of northern Australia in the late nineteenth century, we find, as Henry Reynolds writes in *North of Capricorn* (2003), a place that 'more clearly and closely reflected its geographical milieu than has been the case any time since.'<sup>13</sup> Reynolds reveals a multi-ethnic world quite distinct in

<sup>13</sup> H. Reynolds, *North of Capricorn*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2003, p. ix.

its cultural and geographical orientation from that of Sydney or Melbourne. Although the institutionalisation of White Australia retarded this rising social interchange across the Torres Strait, and Arafura and Timor seas, Reynolds reminds us that tolerance and business cooperation across ethno-linguistic boundaries was possible, in spite of the groundswell of racist vitriol in the popular press.

Reynolds' claim is harder to quantify in economic terms firstly because between 1872 and 1879 Queensland unilaterally incorporated the Torres Straits and with it the pearling industry centred on Thursday Island. Secondly, Queensland became an exporter of tropical commodities displacing Java and the Philippines as a source of sugar and tobacco in colonial Australian markets. At least one section of Queensland's commercial class believed it was their destiny to rule in the Malay Archipelago. Serious planning for the annexation of New Guinea, effected by Thomas McIlwraith in 1883, dates back into the 1870s and can be interpreted as the working out of an historical idea proposed by Queensland's first governor, Sir George Ferguson Bowen. Bowen advocated for the establishment of a new Singapore overlooking the Torres Strait on the grounds that this would give the British Empire a strategic grip over the entire Archipelago. 'Convergence' he argued would one day make the Torres Strait a major thoroughfare for commerce between the Pacific and the 'East.'

Writing of the 'tightening net' of nineteenth century international commerce, Eric Hobsbawm emphasised the importance of grasping the significance of 'speed', 'intensity', 'rapidity' and 'range of repercussion' in defining nineteenth century international economic relations.<sup>14</sup> Advances in marine technology 'compressed' travelling times and transformed travel into a marketable service industry. Early examples of the packaging of tropical travel experiences for Australian audiences, promotional news items published in the Queensland and Singapore press stressed the scenic beauty of the Torres Strait Route. Steam navigation companies vied to attract passengers through the smooth waters and past the picturesque tropical scenery offered as reward for those willing to endure the melting heat of the Archipelago.<sup>15</sup> Timetabled travel permitted synchronisation of shipping and rail services creating opportunities to

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<sup>14</sup> E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875*, Abacus, London, 1985, p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> *The Queenslander*, 20 December, 1873. *Straits Times*, 5 September, 1873

develop new travel products. Recognising that mobility and transferability of tickets were important to the wealthy, time-affluent travel consumer, shipping companies provided a menu of travel options that included round the world tours and ticket transferability. Viewed at one level, the commoditisation of exotica merely confirmed Orientalist imagery and reaffirmed attachments to culture and empire. But both the lived and the imaginary experience of Asia could but alter geographical perspective of those who dared to travel – conservatively, a few dozen in the 1860s; a few hundred in the 1880s rising to a few thousand in the decade before World War One.

Low trade volumes between Australia and its immediate neighbours relative to trade with Britain need not therefore be interpreted as evidence of Australian disinterest in Australasia. Neither should the relatively limited movements of people across the Arafura or Timor seas. Telegraphic communication, railways and steam shipping routes were the transmission belts of British cultural as well as economic and military power that drew together disparate colonial possessions and delivered goods to distant markets.<sup>16</sup> Overlooked or treated as secondary concerns in histories of Australia's international affairs, these Austral-Asian movements and exchanges were part of much larger 'vectors' of social, cultural and economic interchange that connected Australians to Britain's Asian empire and to Britain.

Gavin Souter writes in *Lion and Kangaroo* that Australians travelling to England in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even the Australian-born, 'were corpuscles travelling from an extremity of Empire to the heart, and the fact that they had never been there before never diminished their sense of homecoming.'<sup>17</sup> If British Australians thought Britain their cultural homeland, they nonetheless felt a strong attachment to the Australian continent which they regarded as home in a practical and emotional sense. The Australian mining investor, Herbert Pratten dubbed Australian mine managers, engineers and prospectors in Malaya as 'patriotic sons' of Australia who 'sleep for choice facing the South so that they may at night see the Southern Cross -the symbol associated by most exiles and wanderers from her shores with their sunny Austral

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<sup>16</sup> A.G. Hopkins, 'The History of Globalization – and the Globalization of history' in A.G. Hopkins (ed) *Globalization and World History*, Pimlico, London.

<sup>17</sup> G. Souter, *Lion and Kangaroo: The Initiation of Australia*, 2nd edn, Pan Macmillan Australia, Sydney, 1992, pp.109-134.

Land.’<sup>18</sup>

The Archipelago, more so than the Pacific Islands, became a distant pleasure periphery for Australians and tourism, more so than trade and investment, contributed significantly to the domestication of Australia’s orient. The relaying of holiday travel images through Australia’s print media meant that Java, the Straits Settlements, Malaya and later the Philippines acquired an aura of familiarity. For the thousands of London-bound saloon passengers who endured enforced stopovers at Asian coaling ports, physical and cultural landscapes were little more than an engaging novelty. For those who stepped away from the relative security of their saloon or holiday hotel to face the cultural challenges of adjustment there is evidence that attitudes towards Australia’s near Orient could change – especially those who lived between two worlds, ‘expatriate’ managers and their families, for example, for whom the passage from their familiar Australian ‘home’ to Eurasian commercial centres or mining camp was a matter of routine. Coming from a culture that, according to Ray McLeod ‘celebrated the practical virtues of sobriety, hard work, and the addition to knowledge of facts hard won from nature,’ these travellers stood for material progress, industriousness, individualism and the triumph of ‘systematic empiricism.’<sup>19</sup> Confronted by glaring differences the attributes of ‘Australia’ were a frame of reference against which more thoughtful travellers measured cultural distance and gauged their new environments – sometimes with surprising results.

Some were disturbed by what they interpreted as the moral laxity of European colonists in the Indies and Malaysia. Copeland worried at the effect of climate on the moral character of British colonisers, suggesting their penchant for servants resulted from heat-induced idleness. Entertaining a vague notion that one day Australians might assume some of the ‘white man’s burden’ somewhere in Britain’s eastern empire, the tropics, he reflected, were suitable only for European north Queenslanders who were biologically adapted to the stresses of equatorial temperature.<sup>20</sup>

The Malay Archipelago was a vast commercial crossroads. At its western edge lay the Malay Peninsula extending south from southern Siam to the Malay state of Johore.

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<sup>18</sup> H. Pratten, *Orient to Occident*, Ferguson, Sydney, 1908, p. 11

<sup>19</sup> R. Macleod, ‘The practical Man: Myth and Metaphor in Anglo-Australian Science,’ *Australian Cultural History*, no. 8, 1989, pp. 34-37.

<sup>20</sup> Copeland, *A Few Weeks with the Malays*, Straits Times Press, Singapore, 1884, pp. 10, 29.

Singapore and Batavia drew trade inwards from the Archipelago for re-export to China, India, Europe and the Americas. At the eastern edge, the eastern Australian colonies absorbed much of the commerce of New Guinea, the Solomons and Fiji. In between, the Netherlands Indies remained protective of its position in its eastern islands, lest these be drawn too closely into an enlarged Anglo-Australian sphere. As British subjects, Australians travelled and traded under the protection of the British Crown but exploited opportunities to assert an Australian identity for commercial advantage.

However much trade fluctuated from year to year, or shipping services varied their ports of call, the value of Australian export trade with the Archipelago followed a long-term growth pattern, reversing the import dependence of the early 1800s. From being a major exporter to Australia in the 1850s, the Philippines became a major Australian export market. Despite notable successes however, bilateral trade with regional neighbours fluctuated wildly. Recognising that the absorptive capacities of British markets were diminishing, state and commonwealth governments flirted with the idea of trade promotion. Manila, Batavia, Singapore, equally important ports of call for commercial agents as they travelled through Asia selling Australian flour, butter, coal, jam, and preserved meats 'door to door.' Australian foodstuffs were sold primarily to European consumers. Sometimes the poor quality of Australian export produce created friction in regional trading relations but, despite periodic complaints about quality, demand for Australian frozen beef from the Netherlands Indies commissariat and, after 1898, the American army in the Philippines, was consistently strong.

Comparatively small trade values disguise significant Australian business investments and investment-related activity in South East Asia. By the 1890s, Australian prospectors, gold and tin miners could be found across an arc starting in New Guinea and stretching to the Malay state of Kelantan on the Malay Peninsula. In New Guinea, Nelson writes that 'some thought they were Australian pioneers, extending the Australian frontier. Others thought they were to be civilisers in a foreign land.'<sup>21</sup> The recruitment of Tennison-Woods and the success of the Raub Australian Goldmine demonstrated that Australian technical skills were very marketable and portable throughout Australasia. A handful of profitable, if short-lived, Australian owned tin

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<sup>21</sup> H. Nelson, *Taim Bilong Masta: The Australian involvement with Papua New Guinea*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Sydney, 1982, p. 12.

mining companies were established on the Larut tin fields in Perak but the most famous Australian Malayan venture was the Raub Australia goldmine in Pahang. Twenty years later this mining frontier reached the tin districts of Phuket and Ranong on the west coast of Siam. Investment patterns that linked Australia to Asia and Britain, made Australian investors as sensitive to price movements half a world away as they were increasingly sensitive to political and economic developments geographically much closer to home.

Although culture exerted a powerful influence over Australian trade and investment patterns, the interests of Australian and British capital were never completely in alignment. Australian mining companies in Siam were frowned upon by their British counterparts and by British diplomats. Where the Melbourne journalist, writer and businessman, Ambrose Pratt was able to walk a fine line between Empire loyalty and private business interest, others, like the Australian mine managers who dominated the Siamese Chamber of Mines, were quick to assert their competitive advantage.<sup>22</sup>

Attempts to promote Australian exports through trade commissioner services at state and federal levels produced mixed results.<sup>23</sup> Rather than point the blame at an allegedly disinterested business community, or at half-heartedly implemented trade policy, we should also look to the protectionist policies of Australia's nearest trading partners. Colonial governments in Malaya, the Netherlands Indies, and the Philippines, were concerned to develop domestic industries through import substitution, a policy approach to economic development repeated by governments in the newly independent states of South East Asia in the 1950s. Each enjoyed protected metropolitan markets, trading outside their respective imperial spheres only to disperse surplus produce. In this respect, European colonies and their successor states were no different to Australia in their intention to protect domestic markets while seeking to maximise export income.

The Pacific War represents an important disjuncture in the history of Australia-Asia interactions, to which, in terms of national policy and cultural orientation, Australia has yet to fully adjust. Involvement in Asian theatres of war drew thousands

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<sup>22</sup> P. Battersby, 'No Peripheral Concern: The international political implications of Australian tin mining investment in Thailand, 1903 to the 1950s,' PhD Diss. James Cook University, 1996.

<sup>23</sup>F.H. Stewart, 'Advisory Committees on Eastern Trade,' Cabinet Submission, October 1933, AA, A601, 410/12/1 part 1. For a list of State Advisory Committee members see 'To the Honourable Minister,' September 1933, AA, A601, 410/12/1 Part 1.

Australian servicemen and women into a region and in circumstances they would have rather avoided - the same can be said on a smaller scale of the war in Vietnam. Following the Japanese surrender in 1945, Australian aspirations for a sphere of influence in the Archipelago were quickly thwarted in the interests of Anglo-American strategic cooperation.<sup>24</sup>

Evatt claimed Australia's right to be involved in the formulation of Allied policy towards a reconstituted Netherlands Indies, and in the pattern of decolonisation in South East Asia. Expressing ideas revived later by Australian Labor Party politicians in the 1970s and 1990s, he hoped for the 'evolution' of a regional community of independent states '*in South Eastern Asia and Indonesia* [emphasis added]' bound 'by ties of trade, legitimate investments and political co-operation and Mutual Aid.'<sup>25</sup> Again, economics was presumed to be both the principal rationale for regional community and the substance of community relations. But the task of securing Australia's outer perimeter required, it was believed by Evatt and his advisers, the formation of an Australia-centric common 'security zone' spanning South East Asia and the South West Pacific.<sup>26</sup> The involvement of the Netherlands Indies in Pacific Island affairs was viewed as desirable but by 1946 it was already acknowledged in Canberra that 'communications, political interest and economic development' made Dutch New Guinea part of Asia while the Australian-administered eastern half was part of the Pacific.<sup>27</sup> Asia now officially stopped at a meridian of longitude 141° 1' 47.9" east of Greenwich.

It would be more accurate to assert that Australia sought security from Asian communism during the Cold War. Both before and after the Pacific War, Australian governments demonstrated that they were prepared to support authoritarian Asian leaders engaged in the suppression of movements deemed hostile to Australian interests. Though drawn into South East Asian conflicts as a consequence of its alliance with the United States and historical defence ties with Britain, Australian governments formed defence relations with more politically tolerable regimes, in

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<sup>24</sup> Advisory War Council Submission by Curtin, 20 September 1944, *DAFP*, vol. 7, p. 541.

<sup>25</sup> H.V. Evatt, Minister for External Affairs to Makin and Chifley, 23 November 1945, *DAFP*, vol. 9, p. 635.

<sup>26</sup> Department of External Affairs to Ballard, 26 September 1946, *DAFP*, vol. 10, p. 236.

<sup>27</sup> W.E Dunk, Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs, to Evatt, 30 June 1946, *DAFP*, vol. 9, pp. 567-568.

Malaysia through ANZAM, with Thailand and the Philippines under SEATO. Australia gave tacit approval to the extermination of Indonesian 'communists' at the establishment of Indonesia's New Order, condoned Indonesia's failed attempt to colonise East Timor and looked on as the Indonesian military endeavoured to exterminate the former Portuguese colony's revolutionary army, Fretlin. It is not unreasonable to argue that, from the perspective of Australian conservative and Labor governments celebrated 'Asian dictators' from Chiang Kai Shek to Suharto did much that enhanced Australian security.

It is tempting to interpret the nascent AFTA-CER as representing a sudden Australian rediscovery of Australasia. From the Australian point of view, the idea represents the persistence of a regional vision dating back into the early years of British colonisation. Even though the name went out of currency after 1900, Australasia never really left the Australian geographical imagination. Australasia was a single tourist destination marketed through the official travel magazine *Walkabout*. Even for Japanese regional visionaries, the South Seas encompassed the Malay Archipelago. The region also remained a defensive barrier subject to the strategic calculations of defence planners in the 1940s and again in the 1980s where it defined the boundaries of an ostensibly 'new' approach to Australian security. Repositioning Australia in relation to ASEAN, Gough Whitlam argued the cultural significance of mass tourism in an address at the University of the Philippines,

Australians in particular - by force of their history and their geographical isolation in old days of slow and costly travel, unfamiliar, even uneasy, with their own neighbourhood - are getting to know better the region in which they live. The more they get to know it, the more they feel at home in this region; their region; and this region is their home for all time.<sup>28</sup>

Conveying an impression of Australians coming to terms with their place in the world, Whitlam explicitly connected travel with identity. In 'getting to know' South East Asia, Australians he claimed were shedding old cultural orthodoxies to create a new geographical identity, and a new sense of 'home.' The centrepiece of Whitlam's appeal for regional acceptance was the claim that mass travel was transforming the Australian world view and making Australians feel at home in South East Asia. This emphasis upon the educative value of travel and its identification as a 'driver' of regionalism

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<sup>28</sup> Address by the Prime Minister of Australia, Mr. E.G. Whitlam, at the University of the Philippines, 11 February 1974, *Australian Foreign Affairs Record*, vol. 45, no. 2, 1974, pp. 86-87.

became salient in public discourse on regionalism and community in the 1990s. The Washington bureau chief of the Japanese newspaper, *Asahi Shimbun*, Yoichi Funabashi, argued controversially and famously that expanding regional economic, social and cultural interactions were generating a resurgent Asian consciousness of particular 'Asian values' that distinguished Asian countries from the West. For Funabashi, journeys were the thread from which the 'New Asia' was being woven.

Perhaps it is the variety of overlapping and contradictory names and images in part explains why Australians have historically regarded their geography with such celebrated ambivalence – if not indifference. Gareth Evans and former Labour Prime Minister, Paul Keating (1991-1996), took a quantum leap towards defining Australia as part of an emerging regional community. Keating defined Australia as no longer a cultural misfit, but part of a dynamic region characterised by its cultural diversity and interdependence. Embracing the neo-liberal rhetoric and logic of globalisation, Evans argued that a pattern of 'cultural convergence' was reshaping the Asia Pacific driven by modern information communication technologies and by rising economic interconnectedness. But what was this region to which Australians purportedly belonged? Was it Asia? Was it the Asia Pacific? Was it an East Asian Hemisphere community? Did Australia really have a regional policy when the federal government treated South East Asia and the South West Pacific as two distinct regions requiring two distinct policy approaches? The Australian difficulty with regional nomenclatures persists to this day.

A useful longer term perspective on this question can be developed if we accept that Australian ideas of region tend to be governed by the prevailing patterns of global relations, and dominant ideologies of political and economic organisation. In the imperial age of the nineteenth century Australians spoke, dreamed, and on occasion planned a British-Australian empire in the Archipelago. By the beginning of the twentieth century the international fashion for free trade had given way to protectionism and the newly federated Commonwealth followed its colonial neighbours in encouraging import substitution behind tariff walls. National strength was to be derived from the development of national resources, although Australian tin miners in Malaya and Siam went against the trend. Today, even though the Western triumphalism of the 1990s is somewhat muted by the emergence of an Islamicist

reaction to the West, neo-liberal ideals; harmonisation, efficiency, productivity, 'transparency,' still set the agenda for regional diplomacy. Reflecting the tenor of the times, engagement across borders is increasingly negotiated in terms of managed processes, subject to international regulatory regimes for oceans governance, trade, investment, social control, and the control of migration.

It would be easy, and quite counterproductive, to greet the new Australia- Thailand Free Trade Agreement and the foreshadowed AFTA-CER as marking the triumph of conservative diplomacy over cultural critique. A shared propensity to trade can, in an appropriate legal and political environment, enable individuals to overcome cultural barriers, but economic exchange cannot negate culture or cultures. Convergence is an unfortunate and much abused term that can be taken to imply the inevitability of homogenisation when, at a theoretical and a practical level, global capitalism thrives on cultural diversity or heterogeneity. Ironically, it is the enduringly strong resource-orientation of the internationalised Australian economy which brought Australia again closer in geographic and economic terms to South East Asia, to the point that Australia today shares maritime borders with Indonesia, East Timor and Papua New Guinea, defined, and in the case of East Timor, disputed by competing commercial interest in sea-bed mining and fisheries. Where once open seas separated Australian from the Archipelago, with the Torres Strait the exception, now Australia and its neighbours countries patrol common maritime borders that enclose extensive maritime spaces.

There is much to be gained by thinking about historical interactions between Australia and its geographical region without making the erroneous claim that Australia has always been 'part of Asia.' Australia was once part of the imagined exotic East, but then British colonisers built white enclaves along its eastern and southern shores and began rolling back the frontiers of the Orient, expelling or otherwise subduing 'indigenous' Australasians to make Australia and its surrounds safe for white civilisation. Attempts to cross, and subsequently bridge, the vast maritime frontier to Australia's north have suffered from the greater investment of time and energy in the conquest of the Australian continent. 'Engagement' with Asia is a messy process, fraught with contradiction and paradox. There is little point in waiting for Australia, or Asia for that matter, to be cleansed of racism, ignorance, cruelty and injustice before engagement can be allowed to

proceed unchecked.