

## CHIPS MACKINOLTY

John Singe, *The Torres Strait: People & History*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1979. Cloth \$19.95. 267 pp.

That the people of the Torres Strait have been largely ignored as a subject deemed appropriate for study is perhaps not altogether surprising. Beyond the seminal anthropological work carried out by Haddon's Cambridge Expedition and Lawrie's *Myths and Legends* there has been a paucity of readily available material on the Torres Strait for the general or academic reader. Predictably, there has been less still of Torres Strait history or culture from the viewpoint of the Torres Strait people themselves. The Islanders—relatively small in numbers and occupying an area remote to Europeans—have hardly been overwhelmed by profound or sympathetic study, despite the recent academically fashionable rush to print material on blacks of the Australian mainland. Presumably, academic guilt is to be expiated on a per capita basis.

Hence, it would seem that the appearance of Singe's book would be a welcome addition to our knowledge of Australia's indigenous Melanesians. Geared to a general readership, Singe makes no pretence at writing the 'heavy' academic work, as indeed he could not—the author's lack of footnoting and sourcing of material is at best an irritation and at worst cavalier in its regard for historical practice. Instead, Singe seeks to write "the Islanders' story . . . (rather than) . . . a history of white settlement"; Europeans being included only insofar as their interaction with the indigenous people of the Strait. As such, however, *The Torres Strait: People and History* must be regarded as a failure.

In truth, Singe's book should be seen largely as a European history, and therefore an account of the invasion and subjugation of the Torres Strait. As such, it is a competent and relatively comprehensive work, moving in the style reminiscent of much of Australian historical writing: a chronological account starting with 'the discoverers and explorers' through settlement and con-

solidation of European power to the present day. A safe, but hardly adequate approach. Contrary to Singe's stated intent, Islanders essentially form the backdrop to another chapter of white colonisation. Indeed, much of it reads as little more than a tourist guide for the historically minded, demonstrating only passing concern with the "Islanders' story".

In some respects, perhaps, this is understandable. A written history is essentially alien to societies such as that of the Torres Strait, based as it is on oral traditions. Inevitably, white sources will form the basis of any such endeavour. Nevertheless, it is clear that given these considerations, Singe has made little attempt to explore the perspective of Islanders. For example, the 1936 strike against the Queensland government controlled Papuan Industries Ltd is dismissed in one sentence as "causing a ripple of concern among the white bureaucracy". The short and long term impact of World War II on Torres Strait culture and history, although having an entire chapter devoted to it, is treated lightly and, in parts, patronisingly. In a more serious omission, Singe virtually ignores the most important aspect of Torres Strait history since the War, that of the large scale migration of its population to southern centres. It seems extraordinary that he can dismiss such an important phenomenon with a couple of throwaway lines that span the period 1945 to the present. It is surely not insignificant that, for example, there are more Islanders living south of Bamaga than north; or that Townsville has the largest population of Islanders in the world.

While Singe's contention that he is writing a people's history is regrettably misleading, his treatment of Torres Strait culture is far more superficial; and by omission and commission, inaccurate in many areas. While the author acknowledges, for example, the central importance of 'religion' to the people of the Torres Strait in both traditional and contemporary affairs, Singe is blinkered by his adherence to Christianity, and therefore a Eurocentric approach to a Melanesian culture. In the book, the importance of magic in life and death has the anecdotal quality of a *Time-Life* essay. Contemporary followers of the Malo cult on Mer are described as "evil groups . . . (their) immorality under-

lin(ing) the cult's essentially anti-Christian nature". At least Idriess' *Drums of Mer* had a more racy story line. Indeed, one suspects that Singe has carried out little direct research on the Eastern Islands at all beyond second hand anthropological material, given the lack of distinction he makes, for example, with the Kab Karr of the East with the South Sea influenced Pan-Torres dancing he describes elsewhere.

Even given Singe's obvious passion for the 'benefits' to the Torres Strait of the Coming of Light on morality among heathens, no discussion is made of the religious splits that have developed particularly since World War II. Again, this is perhaps a function of his ignoring the reality of Torres Strait culture and history south of Bamaga. Nevertheless, it is a serious omission, and adds nothing to an understanding of contemporary Torres Strait Islanders. The development of fundamentalist religious groups in the South is a key to both the strength of Islanders on the mainland, and to the tensions that exist among the large communities in Townsville, Cairns and elsewhere.

Perhaps the only advantage of *Torres Strait; People and History* is that it does provide at least an adequate chronology of European colonisation of the Islands. In this, the book does perhaps bring to a wider audience knowledge of a neglected area of Australia and Australian history to a population that barely comprehends what the "Islander" part of the white bureaucratic catch-all "Aboriginal and Islander" means. However, the "Islanders' story" clearly has yet to be told. The appearance of this book, while welcome on a general level, perhaps calls into question the policy of University of Queensland Press of producing quickie 'black' histories, with little regard for black history.

