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VIBRANT, STIMULATING VIEW OF REGION'S NATIONALISM AND MEDIA

Blood on their Banner: Nationalist Struggles in the South Pacific, by David Robie. London, Zed Books, 1989; Sydney: Pluto Press, 1990; Manila: Malaya Books, 1991; (available in the Pacific from UPNG Press, 1995), 313 pp. ISBN 0-86232-865-9. Price: K20.

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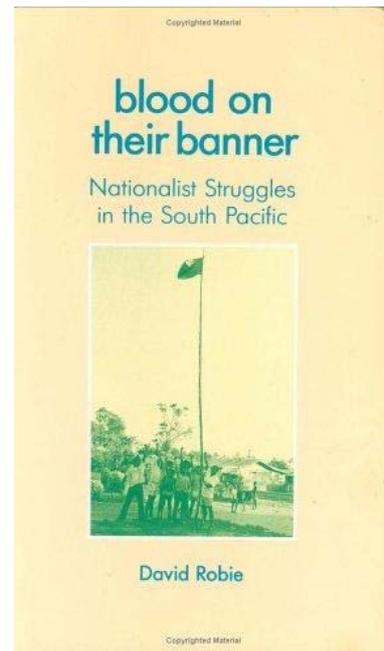
EVENTS in recent years in the South Pacific have dispelled hitherto widely held perceptions of the region as a peacefully modernising backwater of traditional societies. In particular, the 1987 coups in Fiji galvanised the attention of politicians and academics. But in truth, this was just one of a series of crises besetting South Pacific island states.

David Robie's *Blood on their Banner* goes beyond the many accounts focusing on the Fiji coups to link together a range of events under the rubric of responses to colonialism and the emergence of Pacific nationalism. His credentials for doing this are excellent.

Robie, who earlier wrote the only insider's book on the French bombing of the *Rainbow Warrior*, has worked as a journalist in the region for a number of years, winning the New Zealand Media Peace Prize in 1985 and Qantas Press Awards in 1987 and 1988 for his Pacific coverage. His personal experiences and political engagement give the book vitality and coherence.

Blood on their Banner ranges over a number of post colonial crises in the Pacific from the recolonisation of East Timor and West Papua to the various, sometimes comic opera, on-going colonial excursions of the French -- very timely with this reissue of this book in view of the recent Moruroa upheaval.

In this account of might triumphing over right the Indonesians and the French emerge as particularly culpable, but the sometimes dismal exercises in *realpolitik* by Australia and New Zealand in response to these episodes is also rightly condemned.



Robie is at his best when he deals with matters he has followed closely as a journalist. His discussion of the Pacific news media, Kanak struggle and the sinking of the *Rainbow Warrior* is particularly engaging.

The long section on the Fiji coups differs from the other episodes discussed in the book in having no obvious colonial villain. Yet Robie sees the events in Fiji as a culminating act of forces resisting nationalist reconstruction in the South Pacific.

Successive British administrations had fostered an Eastern chiefly elite for the purposes of mediating indirect rule and it was principally this group which governed Fiji until its defeat by the Labour coalition of Timoci Bavadra.

Occasionally Robie overstates the case for the coalition. Some Western Fijians saw Bavadra as a political messiah but the election returns don't bear out the contention that they were all that numerous.

However, there is no doubt that the coalition government was seen by various traditional interests as a threat. Its anti-nuclear policies were obviously viewed with disfavour by the United States and France. And the new-found influence of economic nationalists evoked the hostility of foreign-controlled concerns like the Emperor Gold Mines. Thus there are grounds for viewing the resurrection of a government in cahoots with these interests as a defeat for the nationalist forces.

Yet while the Fiji coups were certainly the most dramatic culmination of the region's post-colonial unfolding, they were at least initially not seen as a defeat for nationalism by many Pacific nationalists. Reflecting this, the island states of the South Pacific Forum were for the most part less willing than Australia and New Zealand to condemn the coups.

Nationalism per se, is a motor of limited potential for the attainment of distributive justice. It is often asserted by defensive elites in diversionary populist appeals and can sometimes be a mask for communalism and racism. Robie shows his awareness of the conundrum which arises out of this when he asks if the solution to colonial racism will be sought in the substitution of indigenous chauvinist supremacy.

Blood on their Banner is a remarkably stimulating and well-written introduction to modern political developments in the South Pacific. It takes a stand against injustice and compellingly presents the case for the oppressed which is not the least of its achievements.

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