

The Weekly Notebook

BY ALEX MITCHELLON SEPTEMBER 7, 2017

Exploring Australia-China history

Canberra writer and journalist Rob Macklin has written a highly relevant, timely and utterly riveting book on the intricate relationship between Australia and China. Over the years, I've read most of Macklin's 28 books but this is his best. It's a cracker.

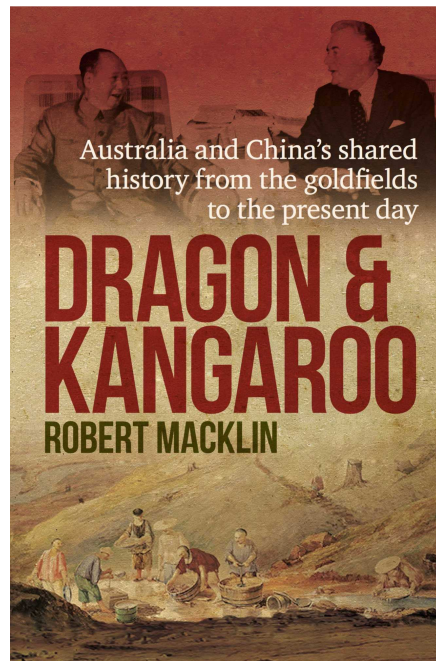


Author Robert Macklin

With China established as Australia's major trading partner, and the Beijing rulers under enormous Western pressure to declare all-out economic war on their nearest neighbour, North Korea, Australians have been obliged to consider soberly the "China question". Can Australia maintain its current twin-track policy of a) profiting from trade with China while b) joining the

US and British strategy to encircle China with a menacing military and diplomatic cordon?

Macklin's new book, *Dragon & Kangaroo*, deserves to be read by every thoughtful Australian concerned with Canberra's pro-US diplomacy and the risks of a military escalation.



Macklin is a refreshing voice in the field of history which has been hitherto dominated by academic historians whose narrative echoes the philosophic standpoint of Western imperialism. What they have written – and what most of us have been taught in the classroom – is a pro-capitalist and pro-colonialist view of history.

The underlying theme is racist, or at least xenophobic, because the West invariably comprises the “good guys” while the black, yellow and brown people are invariably cast as the “bad guys”, or at least violent, sly, lazy, untrustworthy and unappreciative.

The China challenge

As a journalist with decades of experience on Brisbane's *Courier-Mail*, Melbourne's *Age*, *The Bulletin* and the *Canberra Times*, Macklin has become an authentic, independent people's historian.

His sources are primary ones – letters, documents, parliamentary debates, press articles and personal diaries – and not the official line of the US State Department, the Foreign Office or Canberra’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). This ground-breaking approach takes courage and a fierce devotion to digging up facts however uncomfortable they might be.

In *Dragon & Kangaroo* Macklin is not afraid to canvas Australia’s official commitment to the White Australia policy since the dawn of white settlement in 1788 and its lingering malignance in the 21st century.

Readers will be shocked, amazed and enthralled by Macklin’s page-turning account. Buy a copy for yourself, lend it to a friend and ask your local public library to grab a copy – or donate one!

Macklin has concluded his book with the conundrum: can Australia strengthen its ties with China without offence to its security alliance with America? He attempts to answer the question with a challenge: “If successful, the result [of strengthening ties with China] would secure Australia’s future safety, security and prosperity.”

The author says that a successful policy outcome will depend upon “the response to the question that had bedeviled Australia since almost the beginning of its colonial history: could the prejudices of the past be replaced by a sense of realism, an appreciation that there was much to be gained from a growing Chinese engagement across an ever-broadening spectrum of endeavour; and much to be lost by refusing to learn from a history that until now, if seen at all, has been viewed through a glass darkly?”

- ***Dragon & Kangaroo*** – *Australia and China’s shared history from the goldfields to the present day* by Robert Macklin. Hachette Australia 2017

China and two great Australians

In reviewing Macklin’s 2016 biography *Hamilton Hume* which established the reputation of the great Australian-born explorer, I welcomed enthusiastically the author’s ability to re-examine history from an Australian viewpoint and write an account which celebrated indigenous

Australians as well as the best of the settlers. At a much higher level, he's done something similar in *Dragon & Kangaroo*.



George Morrison

Woven into the economic and cultural history of China and Australia are the lives of two great Australians, George “Chinese” Morrison and Bill Donald, and Macklin tells their story with affection and understanding. There are also numerous tributes to Chinese-Australians who devoted much of their lives to building a respectful alliance between the two countries they called “home”. They include Mei Quong Tart, business battler, restaurateur and community leader, Pine Creek-born diplomat Charles Lee, businessman William Liu, Melbourne barrister William Ah Ket, political activist Pamela Tan (Chinese name Tan Pingmei), Chairman Mao’s Australian-educated doctor Li Zhisui and many more.

The late Cyril Pearl wrote a marvellous biography of Morrison called *Morrison of Peking* (Angus and Robertson 1967) and Macklin and his longtime literary collaborator London-based Peter Thompson wrote a Morrison biography called *The Man Who Died Twice*, Allen & Unwin 2004.

However, it seems to me that Macklin has re-calibrated Morrison’s role as a journalist, adviser and ambassador-at-large during the tumultuous events in the Middle Kingdom at the turn of the 19th century when the feudalist emperor system was being challenged by a coalition of influential nationalist merchants led by Sun Yat-sen.

When Morrison died on 20 May 1920, aged 58, a wreath was placed on his coffin with the note: "In sorrow and gratitude, from the President of the Republic of China."

When Donald died on 9 November 1946 the *China Press* wrote: "Australia can be proud of Donald who served as a better Ambassador of Goodwill than could have any career diplomat, for in his every word, in his every deed, Australia showed the marks of the tradition of democracy which has made Australia what she is today. Yet Donald was more than an Australian, more than any man of 'European' background. He was something far greater, far finer – a citizen of the world."