

Michael Ravell Walsh (2019). *A history of Kiribati: From earliest times to the 40th anniversary of the Republic*. Independently published. xxiv+517pp, pbk. ISBN: 979-8-6953-5895-7. No price given.

A history of Kiribati is an extended labour of love by an author with long residence in and a deep commitment to the Republic of Kiribati (formerly known as the Gilbert Islands), a group of coral atolls and reef islands in the Pacific Ocean. It is the first general text on Kiribati as a whole since Barrie Macdonald's *Cinderellas of the Empire* in 1982. Broad in its sweep and something of a behemoth, Walsh's text looks at most aspects of Kiribati culture and history, taking the story to 2018. He stresses that it is not 'an original work of scholarship' but, rather, a synthesis written in response to an 'unsatisfied hunger amongst I Kiribati people, and those of I Kiribati descent, for historical knowledge' of their own recent and distant past.

The first part of the book takes the story to the establishment of a British Protectorate in 1892. Starting with the human settlement of the group, Walsh explains the defining features of the atoll environment and the people's adaptation to their low-lying islands, comprising generally infertile soils and a limited range of biota. Spread over almost 800 km of ocean from north to south, and straddling the equator, the Kiribati islands are far from uniform: Walsh describes variations in their social organisation, from the gerontocracies in the southern islands to the more chiefly systems to the north. Unlike the relatively fertile northern islands, those in the south are prone to severe and sometimes prolonged droughts, resulting in a willingness of those affected to leave in droves for the rigours of work on overseas plantations. On a *per capita* basis, the southern Gilbertese were perhaps the most active participants in the 19th century Pacific Islands labour trade. Missing from the pre-1892 section of the book is an adequate discussion of the extent of the changes wrought by missionary activity.

What unfolded post-1892 takes up the rest of the book. The unique feature of Kiribati when part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands was the discovery of high-grade phosphate on Ocean Island/ Banaba, some 460 km to the southwest, in 1900. Banaba was immediately added to the Protectorate. Phosphate royalties underwrote the Colony's administrative costs; but Kiribati was still run on the cheap and few benefits accrued to the ordinary people, apart from wage employment on Ocean Island, which enabled the sending of remittances to those left behind. Otherwise, Kiribati is a localized variation on the familiar tale of paternalist (and not always benign) British colonial rule, of the outside pressures that led to political independence (in 1979, for Kiribati), and the subsequent contortions of an aid-dependent microstate in juggling the pressures confronting it (recently aggravated in atoll states like Kiribati by rising sea levels).

Walsh acknowledges that he often has 'strong views' on these matters; part of the charm of this book is his willingness to express them. Moreover, some of the authority and the refreshing nature of this encyclopedic text stems from personal acquaintance: the author lived through some of the recent events he writes about. As Walsh explains, he arrived in Kiribati as the colonial administration's first professional economist at age 22 and he "shock[ed] the colonialists by refusing to wear white shirts/shorts/socks, in favour of colourful shirts and jeans (and to play subversive songs on the 5-string banjo). But that is a story for my memoirs". Let us hope that his autobiography is not long in coming.

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