

Jacqui Murray. *Watching the Sun Rise: Australian Reporting of Japan, 1931 to the Fall of Singapore.* Lanham and Oxford: Lexington Books, 2004. ix + 285 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7391-0782-9.



Reviewed by Charles C. Kolb (National Endowment for the Humanities)

Published on H-US-Japan (June, 2006)

Manufactured News: Australian Journalism and Perceptions of Japan,

Australian author, broadcaster, journalist, and historian Jacqui Murray is editor of the Brisbane Institute e-bulletin, *The Brisbane Line*. Her career encompasses the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) as well as newspapers, magazines and journals throughout the world. Murray graduated from the University of Queensland in 2003 with a doctorate in Asian studies and undertook her interdisciplinary-based research in the areas of history, journalism, and Asian studies. Her thesis considered the Australian media representation of Japan from 1931 to the fall of Singapore in February 1942 and, in particular, critically examined whether the media served Australian public interest. In brief, she came to the conclusion that the media had betrayed the Australian people and the national interest, through cynicism, alcoholic journalists who knew little about China and Japan, poorly qualified correspondents with a lack of foreign experience, and Australia's dependence on overseas sources (particularly Japanese and even Nazi German sources). This unique, critical, and

fresh view from an Australian perspective on the decade before World War Two is the subject of *Watching the Sun Rise*. To be sure, this is a rewritten doctoral thesis, but the number and diversity of the bibliographic citations document the meticulous research that went into this volume. There is nothing in English or Japanese that comes close to the topics, witness Ofer Feldman's *Politics and the News Media in Japan* (1993) and Catherine Luther's *Press Images, National Identity, and Foreign Policy: A Case Study of U.S.-Japan Relations from 1955-1995* (2001).

Murray's bibliography lists 17 categories of materials consulted and includes 165 sets of primary materials from diverse sources including the National Archives of Australia (44 major files), Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (44 files), interviews and correspondence (21 files), audio-visual materials (19 items), personal papers (12 sets), and newspapers and magazines (64 runs). In addition, she cites 250 books, 50 journal articles, 5 studies and occasional papers, 7 reports, and 7 theses and unpublished manuscripts. Alas, there

are no illustrations--the reproduction of newspaper headlines or front pages would have added to this compelling narrative.

Her analysis commences with a general contextual essay that sets the scene and covers issues such as the Great Depression, Nazi propaganda, Japanese-Australian trade, and Australian journalistic coverage of events in Japan. Murray begins with the startling statement that "it has long been claimed that fear dominated Australian thinking about Japan before the Pacific War. This holds true as far as government and the arcane world of confidential prime ministerial correspondence is concerned. Before that war, however, the Australian people heard quite a different story. Their government, as reported by the media, manufactured a consensus view that Japan did not represent a serious military threat and that dependence on Britain, and its naval base at Singapore, ensured national security" (p. 1). She then proceeds to document this thesis and characterize pre-World War Two Australia, contending that the interwar years (1919-39) was a period of "drift and lost opportunity," during which Australians were disillusioned and more concerned about the "invasion" of foreign workers than foreign soldiers. In a forceful narrative she points out that Australians suffered economically and experienced a repressive government; they were racist, ignorant of Asia, and held the Japanese in disdain--"small myopic individuals who made shoddy products" (p. 3). Likewise, she takes Australian journalists to task for their failures, among them alcohol abuse, cynicism and, especially, their minimal knowledge about Japan and China. Western Australians, she notes, were concerned about the continued purchase of Australian wheat and wool by Japan, and Australians in general had little interest in the events taking place in China or even in eastern Australia. The primary Australian concern in the early pre-war era, enhanced by British concerns expressed in the London *Times*, was focused on Russia and the spread of communism.

Murray moves to a compelling discussion of the importance of the Mukden Incident (also known as the Manchurian Incident) which began on September 18, 1931 when an explosion occurred on the tracks of the South Manchurian Railroad north of the Chinese city of Mukden (today Shen-yang). This confrontation, a well-planned assault by radical Japanese army officers, gave Japan the impetus to set up a puppet government in Manchuria by February of 1932. At a time of confusion and inaccurate reporting, the Japanese army waged a disinformation campaign against its own government, diplomats and journalists. No independent Western journalists witnessed the events at Mukden and the few foreign correspondents that came to cover these events were inexperienced. The Australian newspapers became victims of Japanese misinformation since no Australian journalists were ever stationed in China or anywhere in the Japanese Empire. In addition, Australian journalists did not have radio-telephone or cable access to Japan or China, and there was a reliance on local stringers, some of whom simply passed on Japanese propaganda. As a result, the Australian Press Association (APA) was not a truly international news agency.

For information on foreign issues, the Australian press was dependent upon overseas news sources, particularly those from Japan sources and the distant London *Times*, which was influenced by the Eurocentric political views of Edwin Preston in London. For example, she observes that the Melbourne *Herald* picked up and used Japanese propaganda without critical assessment. However, the author calculates that 85 percent of the overseas news Australians received came from British sources, relaying mostly European news, so that very little came from Asia outside Japan. Reuters was not a viable pre-war news bureau; it suffered through staff and office reductions, and went into bankruptcy in 1938. Hence, there was little in-depth reporting and this was exacerbated

by newspaper closures and mergers during the Great Depression.

Radio as a powerful new medium of spreading propaganda grew steadily from 1920 when there were only twenty stations in Australia to sixty-eight stations fifteen years later. Australian newspapers suffered a serious decline during this same period. The Australian Federal government began radio censorship and regulation in 1923 and radio quickly became an instrument of government policy. Like the print press, the radio stations had no overseas bureaus or foreign correspondents and radio news bulletins were non-existent in Australia until 1936. From the late 1930s until 1941, even an "implied criticism of any foreign nation's policy was prohibited" (p. 139). During this period, Japanese and Nazi radio propaganda became acceptable news sources to the extent that during the Spanish Civil War, references to atrocities at Guernica deleted the word "German." BBC rebroadcasts in Australia were cancelled starting in 1938 and English-language broadcasts from Japanese and German shortwave radio stations and Radio Saigon became the sources of foreign news. Few voices were or could be raised by Australians against this managed and propagandistic news to the extent that a pro-fascist, pro-Japanese "Japan Australian Society" was formed and the "Australia First Movement" was launched in Australia as late as October 1941. Hence, "for ten years [1931-41] the prime minister and ministers regarded radio as a propaganda instrument of government" (p. 157) and used it to advantage. Likewise, the Japanese missed few opportunities—"Australia became the first English-speaking country in the world to pioneer Japanese language education on the radio and as an examination subject in schools" (p. 177), and Japanese studies courses in Australian schools and universities were taught by Japanese instructors supplied by Japan and the course content was controlled by the Domei, the Japanese Foreign Office propaganda agency. Therefore, in pre-Pacific

war Australia, the populace was provided with a seriously distorted image of Japan.

Australia's intelligence services were both underfunded and underdeveloped during the decade of the 1930s, while Japanese propaganda activities in Australia were well financed and linked to espionage activities. Covert Japanese propaganda through news reports and editorials and intelligence gathering was stepped up after the start of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. The rise of Nazi Germany and Russian communism's inroads in China were the threats perceived by the Australian government until Japan joined the Axis in September 1940 by signing the Tripartite Pact. But even then Australians remained "curiously detached" about Japanese-Australian issues until the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. This development shook the Australian government because, until that time, the Axis partner nations of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy had commercial and cultural access to the United States while the Japanese had full access to Britain, Australia and Singapore. Murray notes that World War Two, even before Pearl Harbor (September 1939 to December 1941), ushered in "truly repressive censorship" in Australia (p. 222); among the banned subjects was all criticism of the Japanese government and politics. Even after 1941, Australian news concentrated overwhelmingly on the London Blitz, the Battle of Britain, AIF campaigns in North Africa and Greece, and the Nazi invasion of Russia. Australian censorship deceived the Australian public and assuaged Japanese sensitivities so that Australia was ill-prepared for war and, although Britain expected Australia to look after itself, the nation was also to contribute to the economy and defense of the Empire. At the same time, Murray contends that both the British and Australian governments went to great lengths to keep unpalatable news from the public. However, in early 1941, British and Australian intelligence, specifically the Special Operations Executive and the Australian Secret Service, initiated a black propaganda campaign against Japan that involved

secret payments to Australian correspondents and newspapers to prepare negative news reports and editorials about Japan. After December 1941, there was a great influx of American print journalists and radio newsmen into Australia and Singapore; similarly, Australian journalists also traveled to Singapore. Some of the latter met a terrible fate--killed or captured--when Singapore fell in February 1942.

Murray's superbly critical hard-hitting analysis of pre-World War Two Australian journalism is a solid piece of historical analysis derived from a review of public and private primary sources, many now available for the first time as official papers from the era of World War Two are declassified. The documentation she provides indicates conclusively that when the government-controlled Australian media did provide information about Japan during the early and mid-1930s it was sporadic, lacked context and invariably reinforced cultural stereotypes of Japan and the Japanese. Because of a "timid" Australian media, lack of independent analysis, and the dependence upon foreign news sources with greater and greater reliance on Japanese and Nazi propaganda during the late-1930s, Australians were distracted by domestic economic problems and became complacent. The Australian government's policies led to a citizenry that was disinterested in, and misunderstood, the activities and ambitions of Japan. Isolation, managed news and Axis propaganda were at the heart of a problem that was exacerbated by a unique provincial, inward-looking and ethnocentric national character and a determination by Australian ministers that the public need not know "the truth." Murray has written a highly readable and sobering no-holds-barred account of Australian print and radio journalism, and about government regulations that were oblivious to the Australian citizenry. One wonders if isolationist America during the 1930s might have become more like Australia except for a free and inquisit-

ive print press and radio that did not suffer such regulation.

Note

[1]. Disclaimer: The opinions expressed herein are those of the reviewer and not of his employer or any other federal agency.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-us-japan>

Citation: Charles C. Kolb. Review of Murray, Jacqui, *Watching the Sun Rise: Australian Reporting of Japan, 1931 to the Fall of Singapore*. H-US-Japan, H-Net Reviews. June, 2006.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11856>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.