

## CELEBRATING BOB O'NEILL

Launch by Professor the Hon Gareth Evans AC QC, Chancellor of The Australian National University, of Daniel Marston and Tamara Leahy (eds), *War, Strategy and History: Essays in Honour of Professor Robert O'Neill* (ANU Press, 2016), Canberra, 20 July 2016

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An extraordinary career deserves extraordinary recognition, and with this splendid collection of essays from peers, former students, followers and admirers around the world Bob O'Neill has been given absolutely the recognition he deserves.

What an extraordinary career it has indeed been for this army officer, scholar, teacher, mentor, institutional leader, policy analyst and advocate – and all-round gentleman. While this won't be news to a great many people here, the scroll as it unwinds through these 300 pages really is quite breathtaking when you add up all its key elements:

- First up, we have the young Robert O'Neill going from Scotch College to Duntroon in 1958, choosing a military career at a time, as Gaines Post puts it in his chapter, “before the Vietnam conflict eroded the ideals of patriotism and service that the ‘last good war’ [ie WWII] had inspired”; then taking an engineering degree at Melbourne University, leading to a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford in 1961, and a doctoral thesis published in 1966 as *The German Army and the Nazi Party 1933-1939*, work which, as Michael Howard tells us in his Foreword, won accolades from doyens of military history like Sir Basil Liddell Hart
- Then back to the army, to Vietnam for a year in the middle of the action as a battalion intelligence officer, where (as described in the chapters here by Ashley Ekins and Tony White) he developed an acute understanding of the need for popular support in counter-insurgency operations, recorded in his second book *Vietnam Task* published in 1968, and informing his biography of General Giap published a year later. Which might have saved us a lot of tears in Afghanistan and elsewhere in later years had his advice been followed (as is well brought out in the chapters here by Mats Berdal, and Dan Marston & Carter Malkasian)
- Then from real-world bloodsports to academic ones, moving to ANU in 1969, initially as a senior fellow in the Department of International Relations, then succeeding Tom Millar as the second head of the SDSC – whose 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary we are celebrating this week – and leading it brilliantly from 1971-82, as the chapters by Des Ball and his equally long-serving successor Paul Dibb amply testify. During this period he edited or co-edited seven very collegiate books through which the Centre, as Des describes it, led the “conceptual revolution in Australian defence policy, from ‘dependence on great and powerful friends’ to ‘greater self-reliance’ and from ‘forward defence’ to ‘defence of Australia’”.
- It was during this period that Bob wrote his justly lauded two-volume history of *Australia in the Korean War 1950-53*, which set new standards for the writing of war

history in this country both in terms of its emphasis on the diplomatic and strategic dimensions of the conflict and the sheer quality of the scholarship, as the chapters by Peter Edwards and David Horner make clear. More generally, this and the other products of his SDSC period, made a serious contribution – as Michael Wesley describes in his chapter – to evolving Australian thinking about the complex challenges, not just in defence but more broadly, that would be posed by emerging Asia.

- Then in 1982 to London, recruited by his Oxford examiner Michael Howard to succeed him as Director of the IISS, where he stayed until 1987, though coming back as Chairman of the Institute from 1996-2001. And from there his final ascent to everyone's idea of academic heaven, a fellowship at All Souls Oxford – students optional, and research, while not quite optional, not as obligatory as wining and dining – succeeding Michael Howard again as Chichele Professor of the History of War, where he remained until coming back to Australia in (notional) retirement in 2001.
- During these two decades – when he also played a role, usually as chair, in a number of other organizations, including the Imperial War Museum, the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, and the Centre for Defence Studies at Kings College London (Michael Howard describes him as “a chairman made in heaven”) – Bob played an absolutely central role in the strategic studies and policy community, both in Britain and wider afield, as Lawrence Freedman, Catherine McArdle Kelleher and John Hillen all describe in their chapters. This was a period when established frameworks for thinking about security were turned upside down, when everyone was struggling to identify new conceptual frames of reference with the last twitches of the Cold War dinosaur, the unexpectedly abrupt end to that bipolar world, then the post-Cold War turmoil of the 1990s in the Balkans and Middle East – and Bob, with his IISS and Oxford hats in particular, was as influential as anyone in guiding that conversation.
- It was during this period I first really came to know Bob personally and experience at first hand the wisdom and quality of his advice, especially in the context of nuclear policy, about which Marianne Hanson writes so well in her chapter. He had been wrestling for years with the theory and practice of nuclear deterrence, including the implications of ballistic missile defence, and was becoming increasingly clear in his own mind about the need to get really serious about nuclear disarmament. As such he was a standout choice to join the all-star international cast (including Robert McNamara and Michel Rocard among others) on Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons which Paul Keating asked me as foreign minister to put together in 1995.
- That Commission produced – with Bob a very active and influential participant in its writing, as Des Ball describes – a report which was the first (and I think remains to this day the one which has made the most overall impact, though I have chaired or participated in a few others myself), to make a serious case for a nuclear weapons free world, and to articulate a credible strategy for getting there. Not that Bob or I have succeeded in persuading everyone, including one very distinguished chapter-writer

sitting in this audience, who I will leave to out himself, who describes himself in the book as a ‘craven intellectual...cheerleader for deterrence’.

- I am glad to say that Bob was a much more willing and enthusiastic participant in the Canberra Commission exercise than some others I sought to recruit. Some of you will have heard me tell the story of the phone call I made in this respect to the former UK Prime Minister James Callaghan. After listening to my blandishments, he responded: ‘My dear fellow, I’m afraid I can’t possibly join your commission. I’m a CLOOF’. ‘What on earth’, said I, genuinely puzzled, ‘is that?’ ‘Well’, he replied, ‘I can’t believe you are unfamiliar with that expression, but if you insist, a CLOOF, of course, is a Clapped Out Old Fart’. I have to say that I have found that a useful line myself in recent years to employ when trying to escape invitations for which I have lacked the time, inclination or energy. The only downside is that, as time goes on, I find myself getting less and less pushback...
- Then finally, as if all this wasn’t enough, we have Bob returning to Australia with Sally in 2001, purportedly to retire to his property out west as a rural gentleman (for which it has to be said he has always looked the part) – but of course not retiring at all. The chairman made in heaven becomes, as Hugh White and Allan Gyngell describe in their chapters, once again the model of a model chair guiding the fledgling Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) into existence, notwithstanding – on the question of contestable defence advice – one or two of Mr Howard’s ministers showing somewhat less exuberant support for this in practice than they had in theory. And just to make sure he didn’t get bored, he was there at the beginning on the boards of the Lowy Institute and the US Studies Centre at Sydney University.

Through all these multiple roles, stretching across nearly six decades, Bob O’Neill consistently showed remarkable personal qualities – quite apart from his obvious intellectual strengths, fine policy instincts and all-round diplomatic skills – which shine through every one of this book’s eighteen chapters.

- There are the *leadership* qualities, evident in all his “organizing adventures” (as Catherine Kelleher describes them) on which everyone remarks: always sensitive, having worked so often on both sides of this fence, to the very different roles of CEO-leadership and chairman of the board leadership;
- There are the *nurturing and mentoring* qualities of which so many of those who worked or studied under him write with both reverence and affection in these pages;
- There is the total commitment to *academic independence and research integrity*, his willingness through successive university and think tank roles to let the evidence and argument go where they must, and not be cowed by external pressure – on which Des Ball writes particularly feelingly about how Bob stood up for him against the might of Sir Arthur Tange and the Defence Department on his Pine Gap research; and

- There are, above all, the very *personal qualities* – of charm, grace, sensitivity, easy capacity to interact with people at all levels -- (with which by no means every one in public life is equally endowed) which have meant that throughout his public and professional life, as is abundantly evident from these pages, Bob is not just someone who has commanded respect, but very genuine affection.

The editors of this volume, Dan Marston and Tamara Leahy, and the publishers, ANU Press, have done Bob O’Neill proud. All too many of the festschrifts one sees are disorganized jumbles of style and content, with biographical snippets mixed up with what often seems like random hobby-horse riding.

But here we have a coherent tone, style, and sequential narrative thread throughout – which enables many fascinating side themes to be pursued (like the evolution of strategic studies as a discipline, the role and influence of think-tanks, counter-insurgency best practice, the utility of military responses to atrocity crimes, and the current state of play on peacekeeping) without ever losing the sense that this is a book about a man who really has made a difference, and whose contributions to making this world of ours just a little bit safer and saner than it might otherwise have been deserve to be fully documented, and honoured.

So congratulations to Bob for all that he has achieved and is here recorded, and congratulations to Dan Marston – to whom I now turn over the floor – for producing with his co-editor, contributors, and publisher this genuinely splendid book, which I now have pleasure in declaring duly launched.