

BELOVED LAND: STORIES, STRUGGLES AND SECRETS FROM TIMOR-LESTE

Gordon Peake (2013, reprinted 2014) *Beloved Land: Stories, Struggles and Secrets from Timor-Leste*, Brunswick, Australia: Scribe Publications.

Review by Paul Hainsworth

Gordon Peake's travelogue-cum-national soul searching of Timor-Leste is a remarkable achievement. It draws upon the author's recent few years living and working in the territory and, in part, examines his experiences therein through the lens of his native Northern Ireland. The headline title 'Beloved Land' is a heartfelt reference from the Timorese people to their own country, and the author appropriates it sympathetically whilst telling the tale(s) of this much-troubled nation. It is not that the author does not find things to criticise and find fault with in the Timor-Leste nation and psyche, but he nonetheless embraces the territory and its people wholeheartedly, warts and all, based on his interactions in the capital city, Dili, and beyond. Indeed, geographically, the narrative takes the reader from the country itself – occupied and liberated – to neighbouring West Timor, to the detached East Timorese enclave of Oecusse (located on the 'blank half of a map' [111] inside Indonesian ruled territory) and further afield to the diaspora of Timorese citizens living and working as migrant workers, over the past decade, in Dungannon, Northern Ireland.

The sub-title of the book accurately sums up the content in that the chapters deal with a variety of tales from Timor-Leste ranging from the historical and political context and the customs, culture and traditions of the territory to more contemporary issues such as the oil-dependency of the nascent state of Timor-Leste and (in Chapter 6 'A Land of Babel') its linguistic situation whereby Portuguese, Tetum, English and Indonesian feature as the competing and coexisting main languages of the Timorese people. Indeed, (in Chapter 7 'Learning the Language') the author spends some time explaining how he came to terms with learning how to speak the

lingo in his new-found home. Another theme that, unsurprisingly, runs through the book is the issue of dealing with the past and concomitant issues such as forgiveness, truth, conflict, and reconciliation within a society that is marked by a terrible history of colonial repression, killings, torture and impunity under Indonesian rule from 1975-1999. In this context, Peake relates a fascinating personal odyssey of crossing the border into Indonesia – Chapter 5 ‘The Other Side of the Border’ – in order to interview infamous, anti-independence, militia men and ask them about their activities in the heady days of the East Timorese voting, in a referendum overwhelmingly, for an independent nation-state in 1999.

Timor-Leste, of course, is a relatively new nation-state – barely a decade old after winning its independence after a quarter of a century of repressive control by the Republic of Indonesia, which itself followed centuries of Portuguese colonialism. The early part of Peake’s book, notably Chapter 1, focuses on the Portuguese legacy and much of the rest of it draws upon the post-referendum Timor-Leste. One of the most illuminating and revealing chapters – Chapter 3 ‘Down from the Mountains’ – tells of how the resistance movement, spearheaded by the Armed Forces for the Liberation of Timor-Leste (FALANTIL), came down from their positions on high and whose leader, Xanana Gusmão, became the President and later the Prime Minister of the new nation. The chapter relates the problems of demobilisation and resistance fighters adjusting to a new post-conflict scenario, which itself was interrupted by serious unrest and rioting in Dili in 2006, that subsequently ended in prime ministerial resignation (of Mari Alkatiri) and subsequent attempts by discontented war veterans to assassinate President José Ramos-Horta, one of the legendary individuals in Timor-Leste’s struggle for independence, and the new Prime Minister and ex-president, Xanana Gusmão. This phase of ‘post-conflict’ Timor-Leste politics and civil unrest was messy, murky and somewhat perplexing. As Peake (71) suggests, in relation to it: ‘If this sounds confusing, it was.’ But the merit of his analysis here is that it is made much clearer and understood by the painstaking and detailed presentation by the author, who picks his way (for

us) through this key interlude phase of regress and uncertainty in Timor-Leste's evolution towards a more stable and resolved independent state.

Within virtually all the chapters, Peake is able to draw upon his contacts and communications with a wide range of interlocutors, who help to tell the stories of Timor-Leste and thereby make the book a good and informed read. Interviews with people, players at the centre of Timorese history, politics and society, are at the heart of the book and they serve to enrich the narrative greatly. They help to make the book a fascinating read and bring the narrative to life. As the author explains (4), 'For both Timorese and internationals, this is a story of intertwining personal histories, hope and despair, ambitions and frustrations, personal flaws and strengths, and, sometimes tremendous hubris and naïveté. At its core, this book is a story about people.' And for sure, the people interviewed are a very diverse constituency: presidents, politicians, and paramilitaries; journalists, migrant workers and non-governmental organisation (NGO) activists; and so on. Moreover, the interviews are enhanced greatly by the author's painstaking approach to them that consists of explaining in some depth the context and the setting behind the interviews.

The author's own experiences of upbringing in a conflict ridden society provide an interesting dimension to the book. Thus, in several places in the book, Peake suggests that the territory of Timor-Leste reminds him of his native Northern Ireland, and that this subjective correlation reinforces in a way his affection for the place and the people that he writes about. As Peake explains (9), 'I felt strangely at home in Timor-Leste almost from the first day I arrived. In many ways it reminded me of a hot and humid version of where I was brought up ... Even though I had travelled far I felt that I had never left home.' In this context, there are obvious commonalities that the author highlights: both entities are small, disputed territories, marked by conflict, border disputes, divided peoples and narratives, with common issues to the fore, such as dealing with the past, reconciliation, forgiveness and so on. Both territories are halves of islands and products of contested history and struggles. Religion too – notably Catholicism – is a marker of identity

and national belonging for the peoples of both territories and family is an important attribute and value therein.

These comparative themes provide an interesting dimension to the book and serve to widen the appeal of it to a larger audience. The Northern Ireland/Timor-Leste connection is particularly explored in Chapter 10 'Far from Home', wherein the author narrates the story of his visit 'back home' to meet with Timorese migrants in the mid-Ulster small towns of Dungannon and Portadown. Benefitting from Portuguese passports and hopeful of finding work, given the high unemployment and limited opportunities in contemporary Timor-Leste, many Timorese have come to these areas in Northern Ireland to achieve a better level of living for themselves and their families. The book provides some interesting material on the migrants' experiences in their new-found homes: their problems of housing overcrowding, social exclusion and racism, balanced though (for some) against their acquisition of much needed financial returns. One of Peake's interviewees here is the well-known political activist and former Westminster MP Bernadette McAliskey (possibly known still to some by her maiden name, Devlin) who, as the coordinator of the South Tyrone Employment Programme (STEP), explains her own experience of working with and on behalf of Timorese migrants. Interestingly, McAliskey had characteristically critical words of observation to say about the Timorese political officials who came from afar briefly to visit their citizens in Northern Ireland (231): 'Many of the Timorese politicians struck me as being as craven, pompous and self-interested as our own are nowadays!'

As an entity, the book is a difficult one to pin down and put on a dedicated library shelf – although, to be fair, this is not really necessary, nor intended. It is a mixture of things, a pot-pourri, by intention and by design: a travelogue; a personal odyssey; a historical-cum-cultural-cum socio-economic analysis; a book about nation-building, about family, tradition, language, social mores; and much more. If it misses out on one thing in particular, it is the absence of photographs – photos of the key characters and venues at the centre of the stories and travels that would have helped to put

faces and places to the stories and struggles. One or two more (enhanced) maps to add to the solitary basic one of the island of Timor would have been useful props for the reader too, especially for those unfamiliar with the lie of the land. But, overall, these are not too serious omissions from the book. Again, it is not specifically an academic research book (nor does it pretend to be one), but it does inform this realm and some useful sources are included at the end. As already intimated, it's a very personal and subjective contribution to understanding the nature of Timor-Leste and its people. Well-written and well-informed and positively received globally, it appeals to readers steeped in Timorese matters, but it should also whet the appetite and thirst for knowledge for the interested and inquisitive uninitiated. Indeed, already the book is into its second print – a veritable sign of successful uptake. A book of many parts, it is quite a unique offering that reaches the parts that some approximate competitors do not do so.

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and (with Stephen McCloskey, co-editor) (2000) *The East Timor Question: The Struggle for Independence from Indonesia*, London and New York: IB Tauris.