



Grappling with the Bomb: Britain's Pacific H-bomb Tests

Jessie Boylan

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Book Review

Grappling with the Bomb: Britain's Pacific H-bomb Tests. By Nic Maclellan. Acton, ANU Press, 2017. xxiv + 383 pp., illus., maps, notes, bibliog., index. ISBN 9781760461379 (pbk), 9781760461386 (online). AU\$55.00 (pbk).

What does it mean not to accept responsibility for actions taken more than 60 years ago?

Amidst a new era of cold-war tactics where the USA, North Korea and Russia are playing nuclear brinkmanship, *Grappling with the Bomb* reminds us (again) of the horrors caused by nuclear-weapons testing programmes on people and places, and brings to life stories of lives forever impacted by a struggle for global command and control. Despite the current nuclear tightrope, this book was published in the same year that the first legally binding, international nuclear-weapon ban treaty was passed, as well as the year that the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) won the Nobel Peace Prize. Both give us cause for celebration of a more hopeful, nuclear-free future.

Based on personal testimonies and thorough first-hand historical research, this book investigates the history and impacts of Britain's nuclear-testing programme in the Pacific, primarily the Operation Grapple series, in which a total of nine nuclear weapons were exploded between 1957 and 1958 at Malden Island and Christmas Island, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

All around the globe, where the British committed violent and brutal acts, signs of their repetitive dehumanization and destabilization remain to this day. Christmas Island, known today as Kiritimati, was chosen because – in 1956 at least – it was a geographically isolated British outpost, part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands colony (a protectorate declared in 1892). In other words, because *it was thousands of kilometres away from Britain*.

As a journalist and researcher, Maclellan weaves an anachronic, polemic narrative through fact and interpretive journalistic storytelling, with each chapter focusing on one or two characters. These emphasize and highlight the 'many ways that successive British governments have downplayed concern about radioactive fallout from the tests' and also how the British have avoided any accountability for the intergenerational damage caused to civilians, troops and service personnel (p. 7).

Some of the characters we learn about are leaders (politicians and scientists, for example), some are survivors, while others have stories that are more obscure and, if not for this book, would forever be left off the historical record.

In chapter one, we learn about Winston Churchill's role in the programme. Recognizing that Britain and its US allies needed to maintain a monopoly on thermonuclear weapons, Churchill was the programme's main instigator. 'We could not expect to maintain our influence as a world power unless we possessed the most up-to-date nuclear weapons ... and the thermonuclear bomb would be more economical than atomic bombing', he said (p. 33).

The other politicians we learn about are British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan – 'To keep a fire engine is not a proof that you propose to commit the act of arson' (p. 184) – and John F. Kennedy – 'The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us' (p. 268). (Three months later, Kennedy negotiated with Macmillan to use Christmas Island for new nuclear tests.)

Testimony from survivors is always painful to hear. Lemeyo Abon from Rongelap in the Marshall Islands was just 14 years old when the US exploded 'Bravo', a thermonuclear weapon of nearly 15 megatons, on Bikini Atoll, 120 km away. She recounts:

we saw the bright light and heard a boom and we were really scared Later on something like powder came from the sky The next day our hair fell out. We looked at each other and laughed, saying ‘you look like a bald old man!’ But in our hearts we were sad (p. 40).

We hear from the last survivor of the Japanese fishing boat, *No. 5 Lucky Dragon*, which happened to be in Marshallese fishing waters at the same time as the Bravo test. Matashichi Oishi, who was just 20 years old at the time, recalled: ‘I couldn’t outrun the devil – the radiation had penetrated deep into my body. It haunted all of us, robbed me of my first child, and took the lives of my fellow fishermen, one after another’ (p. 58).

Some of the other characters we learn about are the taskforce commander of Operation Grapple, Air Vice Marshall Wilfred Oulton, whose commanding officer Marshall Lees told him to ‘go out and drop a bomb somewhere in the Pacific and take a picture of it with a Brownie camera’ (p. 70), and pacifist Harold Steele, who ‘dreamed of sailing a boat into the middle of the Christmas Island test zone and halting the Grapple tests’ (p. 6). We hear about the Fiji royal naval volunteer reserves, a Fijian sailor, a Fijian high chief, women from the women’s British voluntary service, a pilot who flew one of the planes conducting tests, a telegraphist, a soldier from the royal Fiji military forces, mothers of Gilbertese labourers, and an interpreter for the British military, whose own health and that of her children was affected by being exposed to the tests. We also learn about the English women and children who were only allowed a brief three-day visit to see their husbands and fathers, and upon returning home, showed signs of radiation exposure.

The testimonies published here show just how far and wide the impacts of the nuclear testing programmes spread: thousands of connections touched by an invisible demon, passed on through the generations, physically and psychologically.

For *Grappling with the Bomb*, Maclellan drew from a large range of sources, including archival documents – some of which were pushed into his hands to expose the avoidance of accountability and ‘official perfidy’ (indicative of the horrors hidden within key documents in the UK, they are ‘still closed to public access, 60 years after the tests’ (p. 9)), as well as secondary texts, alongside the first-hand interviews from survivors which form the heart of this book.

Although Maclellan acknowledges the fallibility of memory, he states that ‘personal testimony and memoir can capture lived experience of the time and breathe life into the archives’ (pp. 10–11). It is these testimonies that have the ability to turn abstracted and erased history, secrets and lies, into a painful but digestible chronicle of our nuclear age.

JESSIE BOYLAN

Independent scholar

jessie.boylan@gmail.com

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