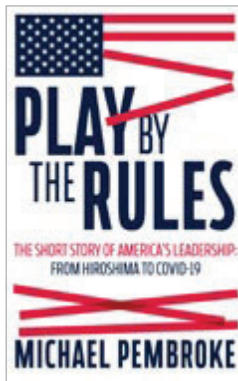


## BOOK



## *Play by the Rules*

Michael Pembroke:

In *Play by the Rules*, subtitled *The Short Story of America's Leadership – from Hiroshima to COVID-19*, Michael Pembroke charts the rise and fall of America's moral leadership on the world stage. The Preface is dated Easter 2020 and, as is clear from the subtitle, it describes events that are still continuing. This is a fast-moving area and a second edition may well be required to incorporate the likely impact of the American election which, as I write this review, is only a few days away.

Pembroke's last book, *Korea: Where the American Century Began*, was a detailed account of the Korean war, but put in the broader context of America's repeated mistakes in its self-appointed role as the world's policeman. This book describes the various world events and conflicts in which America has been involved since 1945, but in a less detailed way and in order to illustrate what Pembroke sees as a decline in 'the high standards and treasured principles' that it first espoused, albeit all too briefly, at the conclusion of the Second World War.

Even before America's entry into the Second World War, President Franklin Roosevelt had ended its isolationism and was taking steps to devise how the world should be once the war was over. In his January 1941 State of the Union address, Roosevelt propounded four fundamental freedoms for people 'everywhere in the world', including freedom from fear of national aggression. In the Atlantic Charter he signed with Churchill in August 1941, there was expressed agreement to 'the establishment of a wider and permanent system of general security', including as a cardinal principle respect for 'the right of all peoples to choose

the form of government under which they will live'. Consistent with this, the fifty signatories to the United Nations charter in June 1945, including the United States, agreed to give up their right to resort to war other than in self-defence and to be constrained by international law.

As the American jurist Andrew Jackson, who stepped aside from the Supreme Court to become the United States principal representative and chief prosecutor at Nuremberg, put it in his opening address:

It is not enough that we restore peace...All else will fail unless we devise instruments of adjustment, adjudication, and conciliation, so reasonable and acceptable to the masses of people that future governments will have always an honourable alternative to war.

As Pembroke put it in a recent opinion piece in the *South China Morning Post*:

The post-war period was supposed to be the dawn of a new age, led by a generous and prosperous America. The global leadership of the United States was unrivalled and paramount. The UN Charter was clear. Unilateral resort to war and armed intervention in sovereign countries were replaced by collective decision-making in the Security Council on behalf of all member states.

Unfortunately, such statements were not consistent with the idea of American exceptionalism, involving a 'divine mission to deliver not only success for itself but global salvation'; and presented difficulties for the United States when other countries did not share its cultural values and political system.

America's capacity for what Pembroke describes as 'hubris and moral compromise' was demonstrated even at that time by America's insistence upon predominant board representation and special veto powers in the establishment of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, rejecting out of hand John Maynard Keynes' proposals for a more equitable system.

Roosevelt's chosen successor was Henry Wallace, but the political establishment would not accept his liberal views and conciliatory attitude to Soviet Russia. Instead Roosevelt was replaced by Truman and a guiding principle of a fear of communism and confrontation with Russia.

Pembroke then moves from the detonation of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and

Nagasaki (to 'make Russia more manageable in Europe'), through the Cold War arms race, CIA coups and interventions in Iran, Guatemala, Vietnam, Chile and Iraq and into military conflicts in Vietnam, Korea, Afghanistan and Iraq. There are also many examples of America's selective adherence to the rule of law, which can be seen in policies such as extraordinary rendition. Pembroke cites many acts inconsistent with America's public pronouncements that had led to the formation of the new world order in 1945.

Voices of dissent inside America are recorded (with detailed endnotes), but these have had little effect.

The events Pembroke describes present a powerful rejection of Henry Wallace's philosophy:

Some have spoken of the 'American Century'. I say...the century...which will come of this war – can and must be the century of the common man... No nation will have the God-given right to exploit other nations... there must be neither economic nor military imperialism.

Pembroke's review of America's involvement on the world stage continues right up to the present day, noting an increased unilateralism demonstrated by actions such as its refusal to ratify a single UN convention or treaty since 1994, the failure to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child (being the only country to fail to do so), the failure to ratify the international covenant that gives the Universal Declaration of Human Rights legal effect (together with Palau, Cuba and Comoros), its withdrawal from the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice, its opposition to the International Criminal Court and its recent withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and the UN Human Rights Council.

Pembroke concludes by analysing the rise of China as the major player on the world stage through economic rather than military means. It is clear that he does not share America's negative attitude expressed towards China. He quotes with apparent approval from the Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong:

China may be communist in political structure, but it has adopted market principles in many areas. The Soviets sought to overturn the world order. But China has benefitted from, and by and large worked within, the

framework of existing multilateral institutions. During the Cold War, the Communist bloc sought to export Communism to the world. But China today is not attempting to turn other countries Communist.

Pembroke's opinion piece in the *South China Morning Post* last week summarised the views expressed in this book and was headed:

Why Australia must steer clear of America's moral crusade against China

- America's global standing is in decline, on the back of its single-minded pursuit of military might and consistent flouting of the rules-based order it helped create
- Anti-China enthusiasts in Australia also need to view China's record in a historical context.

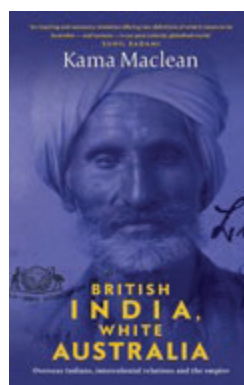
If President Trump wins (has won) re-election, America's withdrawal and unilateralism (and 'decline' as Pembroke views it) is unlikely to change in the next four years and may be irreversible. Regardless of that result, however, China's flexing of its economic muscles presents a fascinating subject. Whether this is for good or not is a question on which even rational minds may vary.

I suspect that Trump and his dyed in the wool supporters would not enjoy this book. This is, however, an absorbing and well-sourced discussion of how America abandoned its isolationism for a brief period of idealism in the mid 1940s, but rapidly left behind the altruistic principles it espoused and retreated into unilateralism. The intriguing counterpoint, with particular relevance to Australia's position in the region, is the economic rise of China as a world power, which may also hasten a decline on the part of America into irrelevance.

As I have previously noted, Pembroke's writing style is highly readable and engrossing, even when describing detailed historical events. I read this book over a weekend, but I am still reflecting on much that it had to say. I recommend it as an ideal summer read for those craving a non-fiction book with relevance to current events; and as a Christmas present for all but American unilateralists and ardent Trump supporters.

Anthony Cheshire SC  
October 2020

 BOOK



*British India,  
White Australia*

Kama Maclean

(UNSW Press, 2020)

Kama Maclean is Professor of South Asian and World History at the University of New South Wales. Her excellent new book, *British India, White Australia: Overseas Indians, intercolonial relations and the empire* (2020) examines this imperial legacy, the divergent histories of colonialism in Australia and India and the relationship between both countries. As Maclean pithily explains, '[t]his is a book about an awkward triangular dynamic that developed between Britain, India and Australia in the early twentieth century, and some of the people who got caught up in it' (p 1).

This 'dynamic' had many facets. Relevantly, the book explores early diplomatic relations between the two countries (explored in chapter 7) and debates about India's status and standing within the Empire and early Commonwealth (chapter 5); the lives of Indians in Australia before and after Federation, particularly as the White Australia policy became increasing fixated upon preventing new arrivals and on limiting opportunities for those already present (explored throughout, but particularly in chapters 1 and 2); and through how both nations perceived each other – how Indians saw Australia and how Australians saw India, as expressed through journalism, fiction, photos and even cartoons and advertising.

Australia's role in this 'awkward triangular dynamic' was inevitably shaped by its own experiences of settler colonialism and the dispossession and exclusion of Indigenous Australians, and by a refusal to recognise the limits of those experiences. Maclean acidly remarks on the often awkward history of bilateral Australia-India relations that '[t]oo

often, Australian policymakers have presumed that Australian and Indian experiences of empire were essentially the same' (p 232). The book explores how policy-makers, the press and popular sentiment sought to enforce a 'White Australia' even on completely contradictory bases; this policy was reaffirmed both by a perceived lack of 'civilisation' in India and by the perception that Indians 'might compete with, and indeed exceed, the abilities of Australians' (p 28).

Exclusionary laws could not be separated from social practices. Restrictions upon employment drove Indians in Australia after Federation into itinerant employment, often as hawkers. Maclean chronicles the lives of Indians on the margins of early-twentieth century Australian society through contemporary accounts, discussions of relevant legal frameworks, and documentary evidence, including close textual and visual analysis of photographs and 'Certificates of Exemption from the Dictation Tests' (issued to 'aliens' resident in Australia before 1901).

This is an outstanding book. It is exhaustively researched. Its prose is a model of clarity, precision and unexpected wit, addressing a myriad of topics (ranging from political developments to boot polish ads of the First World War) with verve and authority. It assumes relatively little knowledge of either Australian or Indian culture or politics in the relevant period; even to a new reader it would present a compelling story of two very different nations and the role that ideologies of white supremacy and 'colonial liberalism' played in both. Fascinating figures emerge: the communist activist Clarrie Hart Campbell, who agitated for the rights of Indian seamen in Australia and for famine relief in Bengal; Sir Raghunath Paranjpye, the first Indian High Commissioner to Australia, who became increasingly assertive and vocal as India neared Independence; and 'Chunder Loo', a caricature of the loyal, dependable (and subservient) Indian used to sell Cobra Boot Polish for more than a decade, who is now solely remembered as the origin of the word 'chunder'. This book reveals new and important facets of the colonial history of both Australia and India.

A previous version of this review was published on Law and Other Things at <<https://lawandotherthings.com/2020/08/book-review-kama-maclean-british-india-white-australia-uns-wpress-2020/>>.