

Introduction

Desmond Ball and Sheryn Lee

Coral Mary Bell AO, one of the world's foremost academic experts on international relations, crisis management and alliance diplomacy, passed away in Canberra on 26 September 2012, aged eighty-nine. She worked at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) in London in the 1950s, was a Senior Lecturer in Government at the University of Sydney in 1961–1965, a Reader in International Relations at the London School of Economics (LSE) in London in 1965–1972, a Professor in International Relations at Sussex University in 1972–1977, a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of International Relations at The Australian National University from 1977 to 1988, and a Visiting Fellow at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) at ANU for the next two decades.

She was a prolific author. She published eight major books, including *Negotiation from Strength: A Study in the Politics of Power* (1962), *The Debatable Alliance: An Essay in Anglo-American Relations* (1964), *The Conventions of Crisis: A Study in Diplomatic Management* (1971), *The Diplomacy of Détente: The Kissinger Era* (1977), *Dependent Ally: A Study in Australian Foreign Policy* (1984), and *A World Out of Balance: American Ascendancy and International Politics in the 21st Century* (2003). She edited five other books, published some twenty monographs, and wrote about seventy-five chapters in edited books and articles in academic journals. (A full list of her publications is included at the end of this volume). She was still working on five different papers at the time of her death.

This volume is divided into three parts. Part One describes Coral's personal constitution and provides an overview of her career. Chapter one, by her brother Harry Bell, recounts her early years. They were not easy. Her mother died when she was only seven years old, her father lost his job at the beginning of the Great Depression, and she was looked after by relatives during her primary school years. She was fifteen at the time of the Munich Crisis. She started at Sydney University just a few months before the Battle of the Coral Sea. She was worried that the presence of Japanese submarines in Sydney Harbour presaged a Japanese invasion, and worked with a degaussing unit at the National Physics Laboratory at Sydney University on techniques to protect Australian ships against magnetic mines. She later acknowledged that her life-long interest in international crises and her 'realist' perspective originated in this period. She had initially sought a career in the Australian Diplomatic Service, but as

Desmond Ball tells in chapter two, she ran afoul of a group in the Department of External Affairs who were spying for the Soviet Union and wanted her away from their predacity. Academia was essentially an accidental vocation.

Geoffrey Barker provides in chapter three a journalistic description of Coral. He describes her as 'perhaps Australia's most eminent and respected international security scholar' who 'was present at the creation of the post-War world of U.S.-Soviet superpower competition'. He recalls her 'scholarly modesty' and notes that 'she did not play the media game and seek to promote her views To her, international security issues were too profound to be reduced to the often glib formulas to which journalists seek to reduce complex issues'. She described her work as 'a sort of meditation on history'. Meredith Thatcher worked for Coral as a research assistant in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre from 2002 to 2010, and describes her, in chapter four, from a quite different perspective. She notes that Coral was a very rare woman in a male-dominated profession, at least when Coral entered it. She characterises Coral as 'an optimistic realist', who was also compassionate, gracious, and humble, with 'a dry wit and warm personality'.

Robert O'Neill provides in chapter five a comprehensive overview of Coral's academic career. She obtained her doctorate at LSE in the early 1950s and then worked at Chatham House, where she enjoyed the tutelage of Martin Wight, and began her association with the founders of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London in the late 1950s, and then accepted a professorship at Sussex University in the 1970s. Her last three decades or so were spent with the Department of International Relations and the SDSC at ANU. O'Neill characterises her as a 'conservative realist', who shared the conservative political philosophy of Michael Oakeshott, but was opposed to the US (and Australian) intervention in Vietnam in the 1960s and early 1970s, critical of covert operations of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) such as the overthrow of Iran's populist prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, in 1953, and despaired at the simplicity of the foreign policy views of successive conservative Australian governments. She was a fan of Henry Kissinger in the 1970s and applauded the way President Ronald Reagan dealt with the Soviet Union in the 1980s, but she later supported the basic approach to international affairs articulated by President Barack Obama, who she praised for recognising that the world had undergone a 'profound, irreversible redistribution of power' towards Asia.¹

Most of Coral's academic career was spent in Departments of International Relations, but she was always more interested in critiques of policy rather than

¹ Coral Bell, 'Seven Years to Get it Right', *American Review*, November 2009, <http://americanreviewmag.com/stories/Seven-years-to-get-it-right> (accessed 11 November 2013).

International Relations theory. Indeed, she disdained theoretical approaches to the field.² Nevertheless, as the contributions to Part Two of this volume show, she inevitably possessed a theoretical framework, albeit rarely explicated and somewhat inchoate. In chapter six, Ian Hall argues that ‘her international thought’, which he calls an ‘agent-centred interpretive theory of international relations’, was actually quite sophisticated. She accepted from Martin Wight that the disciplines of philosophy, literature and history could ‘capture truths about human societies’, and that politics was best explained in terms of ideas (the beliefs and perceptions of policy-makers) and institutions (including conventions and norms of behaviour as much as formal institutions), with events being determined essentially by ‘agency, contingency and contestability’. JDB (‘Bruce’) Miller, in chapter seven, reiterates this perspective. He notes that Coral ‘brought a practical and sophisticated analysis to the study of the international system’, in which the beliefs of policy-makers, mediated through decision-making processes, are paramount. In chapter eight, James L Richardson locates her in ‘classical realism, grounded in history and the humanities’, not at all deterministic but providing great scope for political and diplomatic choice.

Part Three moves from international relations to the realm of power politics, which Coral explored with respect to practical policy-making concerning such critical matters as crisis management, Cold War competition, alliance diplomacy, US and Australian foreign and defence policies, and the construction of a stable and sustainable international system. In chapter nine, Brendan Taylor relates that she was a devoted Australian, always conscious, in her own words, of ‘her own country’s efforts to provide for its future security’, and that this laid ultimately in the durability of ‘the central balance’ between the great powers, and Australia’s alliance with a principal power in this ‘balance’.³ He is greatly impressed by her unremitting sense of optimism and her ‘unrelenting drive to look imaginatively toward the future’. He notes that as far back as the 1960s, in *The Debatable Alliance*, she was already searching for alternative power-sharing arrangements, developing the concept of a ‘shadow condominium’.⁴

In chapter ten, Michael Wesley examines Coral’s interpretation of the Cold War. He notes that her ‘first professional engagement with international affairs was as a practitioner’ in government service and that this had ‘a lasting impact on her work’. Moreover, this formative period coincided with the beginning of the Cold War, which she watched closely through to its end. He stresses her intuitive capacity, which allowed her, ‘without being cased in ... ponderous methodology’, but nevertheless grounded in fecund concepts, to portray the

2 Coral Bell, ‘The State of the Discipline: I.R.’, *Quadrant*, vol 12, no. 1, January-February 1968, p. 82.

3 Coral Bell, *The Asian Balance of Power: A Comparison with European Precedents*, Adelphi Paper no. 44, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, February 1968, p. 1.

4 Coral Bell, *The Debatable Alliance: An Essay in Anglo-American Relations*, Chatham House Essays No. 3, Oxford University Press, London, 1964, pp. 108-113.

Cold War and its outcome primarily in terms of the characters, beliefs and judgements of the key policy-makers involved. Over the long term, the US emerged victorious because it proved better able to 'negotiate power'.

In chapter eleven, Robert Ayson reviews Coral's work on crisis management. He notes at the outset that she was concerned with 'the ideas that could be gleaned from the practice of international diplomacy'. This 'made her more of a commentator than a theorist', but she was 'an exceptionally adroit commentator'. Crisis management for Coral was a fundamental alternative to catastrophic war. Wars have become potentially much more destructive, but they still flourish. Crises can only be managed by the parties to 'the central balance of power'. Only the dominant powers can affect 'central crises', and only they can prevent local crises from turning into central ones. The quality of crisis diplomacy is determinate, which in practice means the policy choices of the decision-makers of the dominant powers. Shared conventions, or patterns of behaviour, are more important than formal institutions. Power, represented by armed force, is crucial, but it is mediated by 'signals' (which communicate threats or offers to the other party to the crisis); shared conventions ensure that the signals are correctly understood by the respective decision-makers.

William Tow, in chapter twelve, reviews Coral's work on 'alliance politics', which includes her assessments of both US leadership of the Western alliance system and, more particularly, the functioning of the US-Australia alliance. Again, diplomatic history rather than international relations theory was her main instrument in these endeavours. With regard to US leadership, she appreciated by the early 2000s, following the terrorist attack on the US homeland in September 2001 and the 'ineffectual US invasion and occupation of Iraq' in 2003, that global power was inevitably being redistributed by 'economic, demographic and technological changes', as well as 'Jihadist challenges', and that this required new forms of alignment, but she remained persuaded that the US would 'remain the paramount power of the society of states' for the foreseeable future. With regard to the US-Australia alliance, she believed that by hosting US facilities such as Pine Gap, Australia had become less dependent on the US. The alliance had become 'considerably less unequal', transmuted into 'interdependence of a relatively symmetrical sort'.⁵ She remained convinced that Australia would remain 'inextricably and beneficially tied to US power as the best means for ensuring its own national security and for pursuing global stability'; but she also believed that Australia could play a positive role in adjudicating US reconciliation of its Cold War bilateral alliance system with the burgeoning construction of multilateral institutions in the Asia-Pacific region.

⁵ Coral Bell, *Dependent Ally: A Study in Australian Foreign Policy*, 3rd edn, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1993, p. 183.

Hugh White brings together and develops the key themes articulated in earlier chapters in his culminating essay on ‘The Concert of Power: Avoiding Armageddon’. He recapitulates the impact of strategic developments in Coral’s formative years on her subsequent career—the destructiveness of the Second World War, the development and use of the atomic bomb, the practitioner’s perspective on the workings of the international system, and the importance of diplomacy. She was an optimistic realist, believing that the policy-makers in the dominant states could reach and sustain modes of communication and agreements which could minimise the risks of war and hence avoid atomic Armageddon. Following on from Martin Wight and other members of the English School of International Relations and also the influence of Henry Kissinger, she moved from implicit support for notions of a ‘shadow condominium’ to being a dedicated advocate of a ‘concert of powers’. In a conflict-ridden world, with nuclear weapons aplenty, only a concert in which power is shared in the over-riding interest of preventing major wars can avoid Armageddon. White agrees with this analysis, but believes that Coral underestimated the difficulties involved in the construction of such a concert. He concludes with the admonition that, precisely because avoidance of catastrophic war should be our highest priority, we should all—academics and policy-makers alike—devote our energies to overcoming those difficulties, especially with respect to achieving an accommodation between the US and China (and Asia’s other great powers).

Finally, then, after hearing from more than a dozen of her friends and colleagues, it should be possible to say who Coral Bell was, what she was like, what she did, and what was her legacy. She in fact had many close friends, which attests to her charm, compassion, generosity and engaging personality. And she had many colleagues willing to write about her, which signifies that the things she did were both important and interesting.

Coral’s legacy is difficult to summarise; it is primarily indirect, through her ideas and arguments. O’Neill reckons that ‘her analytical legacy is a view of the world where US power and influence have been eroded through poorly thought-out policies and lack of understanding of the United States’ own weakness in the first decade of this century’. It is surely broader than that, encompassing the whole discourse on power politics and international relations, including crisis management and alliance diplomacy, as well as other periods when US power was ascendant rather than eroding. As Taylor notes, her impact was frequently second-order, through ‘the people she worked with, taught and mentored’, and in particular, ‘her education of a significant number of emerging scholars’, many of whom subsequently took up ‘senior positions in academia, government and the military’. An important legacy concerns gender, where she opened the path for women into the international politics field. For over half a century,

'ever since her appointment as one of Australia's first female diplomats, ... [she served] as a mentor and role model for female scholars and practitioners' in this field. Internationally, she lifted Australia's 'diplomatic profile'.

Unusually for academics, she attracted the respect of policy-makers from around the globe. Denis Healey, a founder of the IISS and the Secretary of State for Defence from 1964 to 1970 and Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1974 to 1979, observed, with her in mind, that 'from the middle fifties Australia has contributed more to international understanding of defence problems than any country of similar size'.⁶ Henry Kissinger, former National Security Advisor and Secretary of State under President Richard Nixon, invoked her ideas in his own writings.⁷ Sir Keith Waller, Australia's first career ambassador to the United States (1964-70) and Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs in Canberra (1970-74) said that 'her work has brought a new lustre to the reputation of Australia in all countries where people follow the serious study of foreign affairs'.⁸ Kim Beazley, former Minister for Defence and leader of the Australian Labor Party, said in 2008 that Coral 'stood out' as one of the two scholars (the other being Hedley Bull) who had 'captured the attentions of policy practitioners'.⁹ Her funeral was attended by former heads of the Australian Department of Defence and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO) and the Office of National Assessments (ONA).

She was clearly a realist, for whom power, relational and broadly defined, was the central concept in the functioning of the international system. But her realism was unique; she could be characterised not only as a 'conservative realist' or a 'classical realist', but also, a much rarer breed, an 'optimistic realist'. Indeed, she could be called a 'constructivist realist'. It has been said (by Ayson) that she was a commentator, not a theorist, but she was never content to be merely descriptive. Her commentaries were invariably *prescriptive*, stipulating how the international system (or statecraft, for agency was more important than structure) *should* function. In fact, adept statecraft can create sound structures. It has also been pointed out (by Wesley) that Coral emphatically opposed value-laden foreign policies, but not because she lacked values; rather, values were difficult to negotiate, whereas contests over power could be bargained and managed. In fact, contests over values were usually resolved by power contests anyway.

6 Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life*, Michael Joseph, London, 1989, p. 192.

7 See, for example, Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?*, 2nd edn, Touchstone, New York, 2002, p. 288.

8 Cited in Coral Bell, *Crises and Australian Diplomacy*, Arthur F Yencken Memorial Lecture 1972, Australian National University Press, 1973, p. 1.

9 Kim Beazley, 'Thinking Security: Influencing National Strategy from the Academy; An Australian Experience', Coral Bell Lecture 2008, Lowy Institute for International Policy, Sydney, 19 March 2008, p. 5.

For Coral, the ultimate value was the avoidance of catastrophic war (or Armageddon) and the 'preservation of human life and human society' in a conflict-ridden world.¹⁰ As Hall argues, she held 'a vision of international relations that was both human and humane'. In the end, she was a committed humanitarian.

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10 Coral Bell, *The Diplomacy of Détente: The Kissinger Era*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1977, pp. 32-33.

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