Matthew Jordan review of Lachlan Strahan, *The Curious Diplomat: A Memoir from the Frontlines of Diplomacy*

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Lachlan Strahan, historian and former Australian diplomat, has published an important history of Australian attitudes towards China in the second half of the twentieth century,[1] a detailed account of a series of criminal trials in New Guinea and the Moluccas in 1947–48,[2] and a fascinating retelling of the events surrounding the pursuit and capture of Ned Kelly.[3]

In all these books, Strahan investigates the role of culture, race and national mythology in shaping Australia's view of itself and, especially, its approach to the world. He combines a lively writing style with a flair for storytelling to produce engaging and, at times, very personal assessments of his subjects. In the case of *Justice in Kelly Country*, he uses his family connection to one of the police officers involved in apprehending Kelly—Senior Constable Anthony Strahan, a great-great grandfather—as a departure point for reassessing the 'Kelly myth' and probing the frequently neglected role of historical characters on the 'other side' of the legend.

The Curious Diplomat, which describes in copious detail Strahan's 30 years in the Australian foreign service, is about as personal as it gets. Unlike Strahan's historical publications, this *Memoir from the Frontlines of Diplomacy*—as the subtitle fashions it—is not based on the archival record but on Strahan's direct experiences, encounters and challenges as a former Australian diplomat. As such, it is a welcome addition to the modest (but growing) corpus of memoirs written by former Australian officials, especially foreign policy practitioners.

After completing a PhD in Australian history at the University of Melbourne, subsequently published as *Australia's China*, Strahan joined the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in its graduate program in 1992. Given the subject of his research thesis, he was initially placed in the secretariat for the Australia–China Council in DFAT's Cultural Relations Branch. In the Russia section a year later, he reported on the collapse of the Soviet Union before being sent on his first posting

1 Lachlan Strahan, *Australia's China: Changing Perceptions from the 1930s to the 1990s* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

2 Lachlan Strahan, *Day of Reckoning* (Pandanus Books, 2005).

3 Lachlan Strahan, *Justice in Kelly Country: The Story of the Cop Who Hunted Australia's Most Notorious Bushrangers* (Monash University Publishing, 2024).

to Bonn, which, Strahan writes, 'set the pattern for my overseas assignments'. As he explains: 'I ended up serving in an eclectic range of locations. Bonn would not be the last unexpected posting of my career' (p. 43).

Returning to Canberra in 1999, Strahan found a seriously depleted DFAT (and public service) following major cuts by John Howard's Coalition government. While still in Bonn, Strahan encountered aspects of the new government's approach that he found disturbing, including the attitude of senior officials to public servants. One senior Liberal reportedly lauded the secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Max Moore-Wilton, for administering a long-overdue 'enema' to the Australian Public Service. 'Many public servants preferred not to be subjected to an "enema"', Strahan quips, and so they 'communicated more cautiously', producing a state of affairs that 'undermined the core duty of a diplomat: to provide accurate, honest and timely reports'. Especially aggravated by reports that were critical of Australia's actions on climate change, the government, Strahan notes, sometimes resembled 'a child covering its ears to block out unwelcome admonishment' (p. 72).

Joining the China Bilateral Section, Strahan worked on the state visit of President Jiang Zemin in 1999, assisting in the production of five agreements, including one covering law enforcement at a time when the flow of illicit drugs and illegal immigrants was a major concern for Australia. Strahan describes the cultural minefield of negotiating such visits (for example, avoiding gifting a green slouch hat to a Chinese dignitary as this signified a cuckold in Chinese culture) but notes the undeniable rewards of such exchanges (p. 102). Other aspects of the relationship, such as human rights, were more problematic. Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer's decision to grant an interview to Wei Jingsheng, a dissident who had spent 17 years in a Chinese prison, during Jiang's visit brought 'a high-pitched protest from the Chinese embassy'. As Strahan puts it, 'lines were being constantly negotiated' (p. 109).

Following a stint heading DFAT's Chemical and Biological Disarmament Section—during which he crossed swords with United States officials instructed to block more effective compliance measures—Strahan was posted to Seoul at a critical time in the relationship. From a purely economic point of view, South Korea was Australia's third-largest export market by the early 2000s. Strahan's account of a visit into the 'Dark Land' of North Korea as part of a mission aimed at persuading the regime to abandon its nuclear weapons program is as fascinating as it is terrifying. North Korea's boasts of a workers paradise are contrasted sharply with scenes of people trudging along the road in the biting cold; severe malnutrition, although this depressing picture was 'relieved by kids mucking around, as kids do the world over'; and the complete absence of 'normal' activity: 'the arrivals and departures board [at the airport] was entirely blank'; 'There were few other vehicles on the road … Even bicycles were rare'; 'The elite, naturally, lived an entirely different existence' (pp. 179–80). When the North Korean foreign minister quipped that Strahan might return to North Korea as the Australian ambassador, Strahan smiled but thought, 'Not bloody likely' (p. 194).

Posted to India as deputy high commissioner in 2008, Strahan was fortunate to work for two first-rate Australian diplomats, John McCarthy and then Peter Varghese. Together they navigated the relationship at a time when Australia's refusal to sell uranium to India and, even more damagingly, its (mis)management of the 'Indian Student Crisis' produced a serious rift. The first problem was resolved when Prime Minister Julia Gillard persuaded the Australian Labor Party to modify its decades-long opposition to selling uranium to non-signatories of the Non-Proliferation Treaty—including India and Pakistan—in 2011. The student crisis was more drawn out, Strahan observing that although the trouble had been brewing for a long time—triggered mainly by the proliferation of private vocational education and training providers and poor oversight procedures—'it was still startling when the level of violence escalated in May 2009' (p. 270).

Many Indians keenly remembered the White Australia policy, Strahan observes, and often saw the attacks as 'a dangerous manifestation of Australian racism'. Strahan handles the complexities of the student crisis with great skill and sensitivity, noting that although some of the attacks were undeniably racist, the overwhelming majority were motivated by robbery. 'The diaspora has an almost talismanic significance', Strahan writes, 'with the treatment of Indians taken as a marker of the level of respect or otherwise towards India as a whole'. This drove much of the Indian newspaper coverage, which showed no appreciation of Australia's development as a modern multicultural society—reflected in the appointment of Varghese as high commissioner—and 'too often relied on outdated or pejorative assumptions about white Australia' (pp. 272–4). Possible damage to the broader relationship was mitigated to some extent with visits by Gillard (as deputy prime minister) and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (pp. 280, 284–6). It was only when it was revealed that a series of attacks in 2010 were perpetrated by Indian citizens—one self-inflicted—that the issue settled down. It was nevertheless 'an intense and discomforting time' for Strahan as a diplomat (p. 294).

Perhaps the most engaging section of Strahan's memoirs covers his last posting as high commissioner in the Solomon Islands. This followed stints in the International Division of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2013–15) and DFAT's Multilateral Policy Division (2015–18). This was another one of those appointments that came as a surprise to Strahan—reinforcing his own perception of an 'eclectic' career in DFAT. 'I had not thought Honiara was an option for me', Strahan candidly admits: 'I was floored.' With the request coming directly from the foreign minister, Marise Payne, Strahan felt obliged to accept. But he and wife Lily were also excited by the posting because of the strategic importance of the Solomons to Australia. A senior Indian diplomat exclaimed: 'Why have they banished you?' But Strahan was philosophical: 'The world looks very different depending on where you are located' (p. 418).

Leading the High Commission during a period of high tension in the relationship, natural disasters and the outbreak of COVID-19, Strahan was most preoccupied with the growing importance of China to the Solomon government, led by Manasseh Sogavare. While Australia was scrupulous in its observation of the Solomon government's right to make its own foreign policy choices, Strahan contends that no-one in the High Commission was persuaded by talk that the relationship with China was about development cooperation. He concedes that Australia and China were competing for strategic advantage in the Solomons—he calls it a 'contest'—and that Sogavare's repeated assurances that Australia was its 'primary security partner', while genuine, came into question following riots in Honiara in November 2021 and Sogavare's decision to commit to a 'security cooperation framework agreement' with China—leaked on social media only hours after Strahan and Sogavare had issued a joint press release reinforcing 'an enduring Australian … security presence' (p. 502).

As Strahan puts it, 'the shit hit the fan'. The draft agreement 'appeared to be granting it [China] a beachhead in the South Pacific', prompting ill-judged statements back home. Casual references to the Solomons being located in 'our backyard', while common for Australians, were deeply insulting to Solomon Islanders. Sogavare later commented that 'the backyard is where the toilet is. It is a place where pigs and chickens are located. It is where rubbish is collected and burned' (pp. 505–6, 526). Strahan recalls how assiduously he worked to prevent the situation from deteriorating—even if it was from Canberra after he sustained a serious back injury. However, once the issue had been politicised, he found himself increasingly drawn into the controversy. He was accused of being warned in advance by the Solomons Opposition leader of the approaching agreement but doing nothing about it. When Strahan insisted on correcting the record, Canberra demurred (pp. 507–8). A series of visits by senior Australian officials followed—except for the 'notoriously cautious' Payne—but 'Sogavare was not for turning' (pp. 510, 514). The agreement was signed, creating a lot of unnecessary angst in Australia, in the opinion of Strahan, who maintains that the bilateral relationship remained strong due to a long record of Australian investment in the Solomons (pp. 528–30). A visit in June 2022 by the new Australian foreign minister, Penny Wong, 'stopped the cycle of recrimination and anger and helped stabilize the relationship at a vital juncture' (p. 535).

The Curious Diplomat demonstrates, in rich detail, how diplomats operate and the importance of having 'boots on the ground'—a phrase we happily employ to justify military ventures around the world—to enable foreign policy practitioners to provide informed and timely advice to policymakers back in Canberra. It dispels the myth perpetrated by former diplomats such as Alan Renouf, whose careless choice of title for his own memoirs—*The Champagne Trail*[4]—confirmed for an already sceptical domestic audience that diplomats swan around the world living the high life, all at the taxpayer's expense. Strahan shows that diplomats work tirelessly behind the scenes

4 Alan Renouf, *The Champagne Trail: Experiences of a Diplomat* (Sun Books, 1980).

and often without recognition—hence the lack of a 'domestic constituency'—to secure advantage (both tangible and less tangible) for the Australian community, whether it be trade agreements, consular assistance, promoting bilateral relationships, improving Australia's image overseas or protecting the country's strategic interests.

Strahan makes some interesting observations about the nature of Australian diplomacy. He contends that 'Australian diplomats do not typically beat around the bush, do not like bullshit and do not thump tables' (although DFAT has certainly produced its fair share of 'table-thumpers'). They are often irreverent, 'plain-speaking to the point of being blunt' and 'unlikely to play games'. They like to 'find a solution and solve a problem' (p. 573). But, like many former diplomats, Strahan regards the identification of a 'distinctive Australian style of diplomacy' as less important than the essential business of maintaining 'a robust and adept foreign service, especially in a world grappling with a less reliable United States, surging xenophobic populism, rising geopolitical tensions and several vicious wars'. With this in mind, Strahan, after querying the merits of spending A$368 billion on submarines—'which might or might not arrive over the next two decades'—under AUKUS, is critical of successive Australian governments for allowing the foreign service to shrink during his 30-year career and insists that 'dialogue and diplomacy are not second-order; they are indispensable' (p. 575).

On a critical note, the book lacks an index—which is unforgivable for a tome of this size. The detail is at times excessive. Certainly, much of it is justified. As a professional historian, Strahan goes beyond the usual limitations of the genre and provides valuable historical context for the events in which he was directly involved. At one point, he warns against the tendency of contemporary policymakers to indulge in the presentist belief that only they face 'difficult, unprecedented circumstances' in the international arena. Policymakers should always remember that 'every era faces its own fluidities and uncertainties'. The trick, Strahan adds, donning his diplomat's hat, 'is to judge the kind of change unfolding at any point and define why that matters' (pp. 558–9). But, at almost 600 pages, the book might have benefited from a closer edit. That said, Strahan's easy writing style, skilful scene setting and capacity to tell a good yarn makes the book eminently readable. For anyone interested in the way Australia engages with the world—not to mention the budding diplomatist wanting a career in the Australian foreign service—*The Curious Diplomat* is required reading.

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