

Ruth Balint

TROUBLED WATERS

Borders, boundaries and possession in the Timor Sea

188pp. Allen & Unwin. Paperback, AUS\$24.95.

1741143616

Ruth Balint's award-winning account of the collision between the traditional and the modern in the Timor Sea begins with the haunting story of an Australian warship encountering a small wooden fishing boat which has drifted into Australia's northern waters. The boat is towed back to the mainland with the fishermen still on board, desperately pumping water until it becomes clear she is doomed, and their livelihoods along with her. "Defeated, the fishermen ride the rest of the journey facing backwards on the deck of the naval vessel, watching their boat break up under the strain."

The best parts of *Troubled Waters*, like the prologue, tell the stories of the people who make their lives in the waters between Indonesia and Australia. Balint describes deftly the historical connections between Australian aborigines and sailors from Macassar and Timor; the heady atmosphere of the pearling town of Broome at its height, with its opium dens, Japanese soup stalls and pearl divers drinking French champagne out of tin mugs; the way the keel of a *perahu*, the wooden fishing boat of Eastern Indonesia, is pieced together; and the lives of the fishermen from the tiny West Timor village of Roti, who harvested the sea for pearl shell, sea cucumber and shark fin for centuries, but now find themselves ousted from their traditional fishing grounds and locked up in Australian gaols. It seems that the Timor Sea appears very different depending on the direction from which one looks: from the northern shore its islands and reefs are "gardens in the ocean"; from the south, many see only fishing incursions, illegal immigrants and tsunamis.

The book is less convincing as a polemic on high policy. Australia's unfortunate recognition of Indonesia's annexation of East Timor, for example, is ascribed simplistically to greed rather than *realpolitik*, and only the most oblique reference is made to the penance Canberra did by leading the international force which restored peace to East Timor after its brave people voted for independence. Balint underplays the complexity of the matter of dividing oil and gas revenues from the Timor Sea, and the final chapter recounting Australia's response to the passage of Middle Eastern asylum seekers across the waters in 2001, though depressing, is not new. Anyone who doubts that a fear of outsiders is a recurring theme in Australian history need only glance at the cannon erected around Sydney Harbour to protect the country from, among others, the French, Americans, Russians and Japanese.

Lines drawn on a map can divide communities and do violence to individuals. The most interesting writing in *Troubled Waters* is that which describes these effects at sea level.

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