**BOOK REVIEWS**

**Indonesia**

by Bruce Grant

MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY PRESS, THIRD EDITION, 1996

248 PAGES

"Contemporary history is hard to write with assurance." This is the opening statement in Bruce Grant’s chapter on “Indonesia” in *Asia in Contemporary History*. Recent events in that country would not inspire Grant’s confidence. The book was first published in 1964 and this edition, while extensively revised, retains the readability and sympathy for its subject that made the original version a success.

Although Indonesia is the largest Islamic country and the fourth most populous country in the world, it generally gets short shrift in the secondary school and university curricula. Grant offers a good, well-written introduction to this often ignored part of the world that provides valuable information for instructors at both levels.

The book is divided into twelve chapters. The first chapter gives a historic overview, and Grant points out that “the so many nations created artificially by the European colonial powers, Indonesia had to set about imagining itself as a community after it became independent, in order to create itself as a modern nation.”

The second chapter is devoted to the Sukarno era. The period 1965-1973, commodity-led, and an army attack on the leadership in Jakarta, and its indelible impression on subsequent Indonesian history is clearly examined, as is the whole issue of East Timor. Grant is adept at giving understandable explanations of complex events and their implications.

Chapter three looks at Sukarno and Suharto in a sympathetic but reasonably objective manner. Despite serious recent problems, Indonesia has clearly made great strides as a nation under both these men. In this chapter and in chapters four, five, six and twelve, Grant gives tantalizing glimpses of B. J. Habibie, but never enough to form a clear impression. Not being prevalent is one of the difficulties faced by the contemporary historian. It would be nice to know more about Habibie, the man who has currently inherited a troubled economy along with the Presidential title.

There are brief looks at the role of army in Indonesia, both historically and currently. It is, says Grant, “…the self-appointed protector and guardian of Indonesian nationalism.” In the culture chapter, Grant gives a discussion of Panca sila as well as examining the importance of adat (custom) as a unifying factor among the diverse islands and peoples that are Indonesia. This chapter is the least satisfying in the book because it is so difficult to capture the diverse rich cultures of this complex mixture of peoples. There is an assumption that culture cannot be justly described briefly.

The view of Indonesian culture is augmented by the most interesting chapter, the one titled “People.” Here the author identifies men and women from different strata of society, from a variety of locales, and has from comment on how they view their country and their life. In the introduction he explains that these conversations are an amalgam of his interviews with many people and do not represent the exact views of a single individual. Even though the sampling technique may not be truly representative, this chapter shows how some Indonesians really see themselves, their country, and the future. These interviews have been updated, and this version is still as fascinating as the earlier edition.

Chapter 11 discusses Indonesia’s foreign policy, past and present. Its interesting relationship with Australia is explored in some depth. The final chapter discusses Indonesia and the future. The problems with a successor to Suharto are discussed. The author did not real treat the grave economic and political difficulties with which Suharto and Habibie have had to contend, nor was Grant sure that Habibie would be Suharto’s successor.

The book includes an useful glossary, bibliography, and index. While, in the author’s words, it is not “scholarly” (there are no footnotes), the book is easy to read and would provide the high school teacher or survey-level university instructor with a firm background and perhaps the impetus to make Indonesia a part of the curriculum over and above “a current event” mention.

**Thomas Bieber**

THOMAS BIBER is Head of the Teacher Preparation Academy at The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and was co-ordinator of a five-week Fulbright Study Tour of Indonesia in 1994. Bieber has also participated in three study tours of Japan.

**Black Clouds over the Isle of Gods and Other Modern Indonesian Short Stories**

Translated and Edited by David M. E. Rokous

ARMSING, NEW YORK: M. E. SHARP, 1997

323 PAGES

**Black Clouds over the Isle of Gods**

T he short story is “by far the favored prose form” in Indonesia, David M. E. Rokous tells us in the introduction to this collection (p. xii). There he discusses also the dilemmas of translation, as well as the major historical events and conditions that inform these stories of the last two centuries—the revolution for Indonesia’s independence, the 1965 coup and its catastrophic aftermath, the wide-spread ambivalence about development, and a bureaucratic, authoritarian state. Rokous imagines his readers as persons interested in the “real foundations of modern Indonesian life,” those who want to look behind or beneath the surfaces a tourist might capture with a camcorder (p. xvii).

Paired with the author’s useful introduction, a section of notes and comments closes the book. And another such collection on each of the eighteen writers introduce the reader to some of Indonesia’s best known authors of contemporary fiction, including Idris, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Achmad Kautsar Mihardja, A. A. Nyas, Nashir Djarm, Satyagraha Hoebij, N.B. Dini, Taufiq Ismail, Putu Wijaya, Dananto, and Putu Oka Sukanja. References to the writers’ other major works provide entry to a wider literature. Only through Rokous’s notes and comments, in fact, will most students understand what is especially “Indonesian” about these works.

Rokous selected some stories to evince the figural realism that is the mainstream in modern Indonesian fiction, that is, writing that presumes a “belief in the efficiency and truthfulness of words” (p. 205). Pramoedya’s “For Him” fits into this category, vignettes about poverty and transfer through the eyes of a young boy whose life is privileged by comparison to that of the tragic family he describes. “Three Tales from the Occupation” by Idris, short stories also in the realist mode, set off the “bouquet words” of Jupenese propaganda against a deadly backdrop of savagery and cannibalism.

Other stories strike an avant-garde paroxysm, parodying life rather than simply imitating it, or including “neutral terms” by erasing the line between nightmare and reality (in Satyagraha Hoeibij’s “The Last Trun Bot One”), a youth gradually realizes that he is trapped aboard a ship with an endless corridor, and bound for eternity.