

Cite as: Natali Jane Pearson (2018) Archipelago: a journey across Indonesia, by Ian Burnet, Asian Studies Review, 42:1, 188-189, DOI: 10.1080/10357823.2017.1317620

Book review

Archipelago: a journey across Indonesia, by Ian Burnet, Kenthurst, NSW, Rosenberg Publishing, 2015, 184 pp.

Few books evoke the magic and sense of beguilement I felt when I first visited Indonesia. I knew next to nothing about the country or its people when I signed up for an intensive language program in Central Java in the middle of the Asian Financial Crisis. It was not that I felt I *should* learn about Indonesia. Australia's economic future and the importance of understanding our Southeast Asian neighbours were far from my mind. Nobody was talking about the Asian Century yet. Instead, Indonesia compelled me with its complexity, its diversity, its smoldering volcanoes and its complicated histories. I could capture neither its essence nor its appeal in a single sentence, but I was hooked.

Since then Australia's understanding of Indonesia has changed. There have been spying scandals at the highest levels and anger over the cattle export industry. For many Australian tourists, Bali has changed from a conveniently located island paradise to a place where Australian citizens are killed, either by the state or by terrorists. I often question whether Indonesia would be my first destination were I a young school-leaver today.

It is for these reasons that Ian Burnet's new book, *Archipelago: A Journey Across Indonesia*, should be welcomed. Burnet offers a combination of wonder, warmth and information, drawing the reader into an engaging adventure through Indonesia in a way that neither a guidebook, with its focus on logistics and practicalities, nor an academic text, dense with theory and foot- notes, can. His perspective is uniquely Australian. Despite the ups and downs of the bilateral relationship, Burnet's affection for Indonesia has not diminished since he first visited in 1968 as a young geologist. His previous publications, *Spice Islands* (2011) and *East Indies* (2013), focused on early histories of Indonesia. *Archipelago* departs from this model by taking a more personal approach in which learning about history is a by-product of his travels rather than the main focus.

Burnet starts his journey in the Malaysian port city of Malacca, which acts as his entry point to Jakarta. Moving eastwards "by bus, plane, train, ferry, boat, car and motorcycle", Burnet explores Java before island-hopping his way through Bali, Lombok, Sumbawa, Komodo, Flores, Solor and Timor, both West and East. The final four of the seventeen chapters in *Archipelago* are dedicated to East Timor (Timor Leste), including the enclave of Oecusse. Timor Leste has not been part of Indonesian territory since the popular consultation of 1999, and its inclusion indicates Burnet's interest in this new nation rather than a strict adherence to precise definitions of "Indonesia". Along the way, he shares his appreciation and knowledge of Indonesia's landscape, food, people and history. Religion features strongly too, although politics and economics are set aside. The result is eminently readable.

Burnet enjoys many of the quintessential Indonesian tourist experiences. He watches the sun rise over Borobudur temple, marvels at Java's active volcanoes, and visits Komodo and its eponymous "dragons". He evokes Paul Theroux in extolling the virtues of travelling alone. While Burnet's writing is sprinkled with quotes from many of the standard sources – including Sir Stamford Raffles and "that greatest of all archipelago travellers, Alfred Russel Wallace" (p. 10) – he also makes use of inscriptions, manuscripts and letters. The text is further enlivened by the generous use of colour images: marvellous maps, both ancient and modern, colonial-era drawings and paintings, and many of Burnet's own photographs. These textual and pictorial sources add both historical flavour and literary depth.

For readers accustomed to academic texts, the absence of footnotes or detailed image captions will be frustrating. But this is not an academic text, and does not aspire to be. Instead, *Archipelago* fills an important gap by (re)introducing readers and hesitant travellers to the wonders of a country at times overshadowed by its political and economic conditions. Burnet's enduring enthusiasm for

Indonesia is refreshing. *Archipelago*, with its sprinkling of history, personal musings and gorgeous colour plates, is an ideal format with which to communicate this enthusiasm. Despite the decline in Indonesian language offerings at Australian universities, students still have opportunities to travel to Indonesia under the auspices of exchange programs such as ACICIS or the New Colombo Plan. *Archipelago* is an accessible reminder of the richness and diversity of our nearest neighbour, ideally suited for these students and their parents. If it encourages a student to choose a Field School in Indonesia over an exchange to Europe or America, that alone will be worth the cover price.

Natali Jane Pearson
University of Sydney