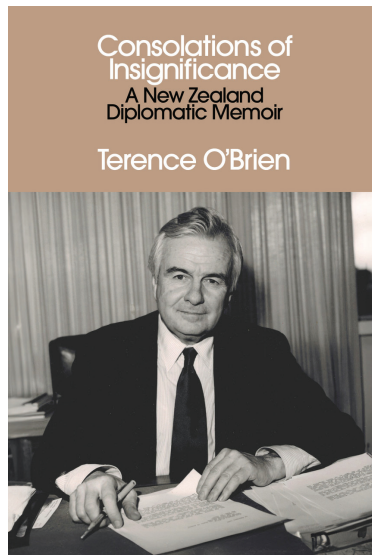


BOOK REVIEW:
CONSOLATIONS OF INSIGNIFICANCE:
A NEW ZEALAND DIPLOMATIC MEMOIR

Terence O'Brien, *Consolations of Insignificance: A New Zealand Diplomatic Memoir*, Te Herenga Waka University Press, Victoria University of Wellington (Wellington, 2024), 192 pages.



The genre of the diplomatic memoir was almost certainly invented to tempt author-protagonists into transcending the limits of their obituaries to claim an exalted place in some broader history by setting the record straight and casting their achievements in the best possible light. This means some memoirs are downright excruciating to read, especially when the author-protagonist never once got anything wrong and, even if they did appear to make a rare mistake, subsequent events proved them correct in the end.

The endless name dropping of political leaders they met during their careers, allusions to insider jokes, and the recurring mention of accolades bestowed upon them can be difficult to stomach if the author-protagonist was responsible for state violence resulting in the death of hundreds of thousands of human beings.

Thankfully, that was not my experience reading the late Terrence O'Brien's recently published memoir. Unafraid to reveal his own humility, O'Brien frequently gestures to occasions when he got things wrong as he sketches out his distinguished thirty-five-year diplomatic career, traversing his first posting to Bangkok to becoming High Commissioner to the Cook Islands, Ambassador to the European Community, and Ambassador to the United Nations where he served as President of the Security Council. Undoubtedly, he did well within his chosen profession; perhaps too well.

Replaced by a junior colleague for the dubious reason of improving the performance of New Zealand's New York mission, O'Brien was banished from the world of diplomacy. He was dispatched not to the cloistered archives in some damp basement, but to a professional purgatory where he was not quite dead, but certainly no longer among the living. Despite lacking the postgraduate qualifications usually required for academic positions and without the formal training needed to meet the rigorous standards of research and analysis required to produce scholarly knowledge, O'Brien was nevertheless appointed as founding director of the Centre for Strategic Studies hosted by Victoria University of Wellington. This all but assured O'Brien would close out his working days among former diplomats or retired defence officials desperate to lobby for their preferred foreign policies. O'Brien's non-reappointment to the role demonstrated the large extent to which the Centre was embedded in, rather than independent of, the configurations of power undergirding Wellington policymaking.

O'Brien maintains his ignorance of the real reasons for this banishment. However, his subtle critique of the current course of New Zealand's diplomacy charted toward closer defence relations with the United States suggests his career was terminated not just because his internationalist proclivities favoured multilateralism within intergovernmental organisations and in accordance with the rights and responsibilities derived from public international law. But also because O'Brien's reputation, combined with the breadth of his relationships across the international community, many of which were made and deepened during the successful campaign to gain a seat on the Security Council in the early 1990s, made him a formidable obstacle to those members of the succeeding generation of New Zealand diplomats who, sentimentally and unimaginatively, riled against New Zealand's nuclear free policy because it problematised their much-prized access to powerbrokers in Washington D.C., London, and Canberra.

The genius of this memoir's critique of the prevailing orthodoxy lies in the simplicity of its title: that is, consolations of insignificance. For O'Brien, New Zealand "threatens no one, yet possesses authentic soft power and travels internationally beneath the radar

screens of the powerful. Discrete geography at times of such high-pressure rivalry can be advantageous, provided that New Zealand cultivates an informed strategic mentality backed by agility and discernment” (p.166). Put simply, the current trajectory of New Zealand diplomacy needs urgent correction.

For serious-minded students and researchers advancing the frontiers of New Zealand security studies, this refreshing memoir offers a plethora of revealing insights into how and why New Zealand’s role in the world is crafted through a struggle among diplomats, and how the outcome of that struggle impacts current thinking on New Zealand’s approach to national security, which incessantly and impulsively genuflects to so-called international partners while rarely mentioning the United Nations. Such official discourse shapes the concepts and logics we all use to make sense of the work of our diplomats and security professionals. Fragmented and provisional, that discourse serves a narrow set of professional interests and deserves to be resisted by an informed citizenry.

Unlike many books produced by retired diplomats, this memoir is self-consciously intellectually independent of the orthodoxies that rule New Zealand’s diplomatic profession. By my reckoning, Terrence O’Brien has written an exceptional book that, I hope, will survive the test of time as a radical work of insurgency haunting those who confidently but uncritically pursue a closer defence relationship with the United States at the expense of multilateral cooperation and consensus building during a time of great turbulence within contemporary world affairs.

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