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Operation Hurricane

By Paul Grace

Hachette Australia

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Paul Grace is the grandson of a pilot sent out to track the fallout from the detonation of the first British atomic bomb test at the Montebello Islands off the coast of Western Australia in October 1952.

In the first half of his book, Grace deftly works from official documents to outline the logistics of Operation Hurricane as the site was chosen and prepared for the arrival of the atomic bomb. Many of these primary sources are available, some for download, from the Australian and UK National Archives.

Grace also shows how the press, especially in West Australia, reported the decision to test the British atom bomb eighty miles off the mainland despite Australian and British government attempts to keep them away. These articles are fortunately still retrievable from the National Library of Australia's invaluable Trove website of digitalised print media.

Grace also points to film evidence available online for each of the twelve detonations in Australia from 1952, including up to a month before the 1956 Olympic Games opened downwind in Melbourne.

As well as these three forms of primary evidence there are the vastly under-researched transcripts of the 1984–85 Australian Royal Commission into the British Nuclear Tests in Australia, which are fully downloadable from the National Archives of Australia.

This is where Grace's major contribution to the historiography of Operation Hurricane lies. He uses a score of submissions to the Royal Commission from the lower-ranked British 'subalterns' of the tests to give us their observations about the work

they were required to perform and the absence of what today might be called PPE—Personal Protective Equipment—against radiation exposure that the official documents show us was known and expected by the boffins and their political controllers, both British and Australian.

Grace has shown how rich these primary sources are in getting at the truth of many aspects of what happened at the Montebello Islands seventy years ago. The book is well-written and available online as well as in print. It can be used in a variety of ways to teach today's students about 'why the United Kingdom conducted 12 major nuclear weapons tests in Australia between 1952 and 1957 at the Montebello Islands, Emu Field and Maralinga and why opposition to the testing grew in the 1950s' (elaboration VCHHK157 of the Victorian Curriculum Foundation–10: History) while at the same time helping our future historians in 'organising a range of primary sources and/or perspectives in chronological order to support the development of a historical argument about effects or changes (VCHHC121) and to 'Analyse and corroborate sources and evaluate their accuracy, usefulness and reliability' (VCHHC123).

Clearly more research is needed, but we are indebted to Grace for this case study in the use of primary materials to shed light on the past.