

John Kinsella, *Post-colonial: A Récit* (papertiger media inc, 2009)

John Kinsella's *Post-colonial* is indeed, as his subtitle proclaims a *récit*. According to Dictionary.com a *récit* is a brief novel, usually with a simple narrative line. *Récits* also have the distinction of being studiedly 'simple but deeply ironic tales in which the first-person narrator reveals the inherent moral ambiguities of life by means of seemingly innocuous reminiscences.' Kinsella's novel set in Western Australia and in particular the Cocos Islands, a coral atoll administered by the Australian government but densely populated by Malays who are Muslims, is a poetic and experimental narrative about cultural intrusion and appropriation. The Cocos Islands were known in Australia as the territory of the eccentric Clunies-Ross family whose notoriety lay in their ability to turn the islands and their copra industry into a personal fiefdom/kingdom. The workers, most of whom were imported Muslim Malays, were considered no better than slaves and were paid in a currency called the Cocos rupee that could only be redeemed at the company store. It was late as 1978 that the Australian government succeeded in evicting the last of the Clunies-Ross descendants and the following year that the Islands received some form of political autonomy and self-determination.

Kinsella's narrator David travels to the Cocos Islands to collect oral histories of the Malay-speaking people and to delve into their colonial past. The story that he unearths is 'reconstructed from oral histories, from marginalia on official scientific documents' (152). He soon discovers that there is a dichotomy even within the Cocos Islands. On the one hand a Malay Muslim population lives on Home Island (HI), while a predominantly white Anglo Australian community (foreigners) lives on West Island. What is of greater interest and importance is that the Cocos Malays are not 'natives' but brought to the islands through trade and migration as a result of European colonialism. However, although the Cocos Malays are themselves from elsewhere, they are much more connected to the Cocos through their folk wisdom and collective memory than the Westerners can possibly be. Various hybrids and dissidents move and connect these communities.

The narrator offers a sophisticated exploration of issues of history and self-determination among the local Cocos Malay of Home Island and the non-Cocos Malay foreigners of West Island. Not only does Kinsella through his narrative, expose the colonial past of the Cocos Islands and the fact that a part of Asia and Islam is very much a part of Australia however much the Australians may wish to deny its presence, he also foregrounds and critiques the internal imperialism and class hierarchy that exists even in the present times. Tomas of the Home Island succinctly and trenchantly underscores this when he points out: 'When they build the tourist resort it will mean a new and substantial source of income for the Islanders. They will work there and they will supply it with fish ... But then the Australian Government will take a large slice of the profits – you can be sure of that' (142). Notwithstanding the fact that *Post-colonial* is a critical and panoptic re-writing of an important part of Australian history, it makes pleasant reading due to its intimacy and interconnectedness with its subject.

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<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>