

## Book Review: Grappling with the Bomb: Britain's Pacific H-Bomb Tests by Nic Maclellan

*In Grappling with the Bomb: Britain's Pacific H-Bomb Tests, Nic Maclellan gathers together oral history and archival materials to bring forth a more democratic history of the British hydrogen bomb test series Operation Grapple, conducted in the South Pacific between 1957-58. Centralising the experiences and voices of Pacific islanders still affected by the detonations and still fighting for recognition and recompense from the UK government, this book — available to download [here](#) for free — offers a textured, multi-layered story that gives urgent attention to historical legacies of nuclear harm and injustice, writes Tom Vaughan.*

***Grappling with the Bomb: Britain's Pacific H-Bomb Tests.* Nic Maclellan. ANU Press. 2017.**

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Sixty years after the British hydrogen bomb test series Operation Grapple was conducted in the South Pacific, its remaining survivors — now octogenarians — continue to fight for recognition and recompense from the UK government. The Grapple series, running from May 1957 to September 1958, consisted of nine nuclear detonations across test sites on Malden and Christmas (Kiritimati) Islands and announced the UK's arrival as the world's third thermonuclear power. As a shrinking Empire trickled through Britannia's fingers, Grapple briefly salved the rapidly developing British condition of [postcolonial melancholia](#) by anointing the UK with destructive capabilities disproportionate to its diminishing influence, and helping to secure British 'seats at the table' in global affairs for decades to come.

The Grapple tests, overseen by the British Army, were supported by Commonwealth troops from New Zealand — formally independent from the UK since 1947 — and Fiji, which would declare independence thirteen years later in 1970. Christmas Island and Malden Island formed part of the Gilbert Islands, which gained independence from the UK as the Republic of Kiribati in 1979. Gilbertese civilians were employed in logistics and support roles during the tests, and some worked on coconut plantations on Christmas and the surrounding islands. Despite official British claims that both participants and bystanders received 'little or no additional radiation' (4) as a result of the Grapple tests (a frankly untenable position that, as of 2018, the British government maintains), islanders and ex-service personnel continue to report chronic illnesses, birth defects and premature deaths. The legacy of Grapple, in part, is another shamefully familiar story of Britain's abdication of its responsibilities to former colonial subjects.

However, Nic Maclellan's *Grappling with the Bomb: Pacific H-Bomb Tests* — available open access to download [here](#) — is a successful effort to contextualise and augment this narrative. Using meticulously-gathered oral history and archival materials, Maclellan aims to search for experiences beyond victimhood, exploring how the Pacific islanders themselves experienced — and indeed participated in — the operation. Others excluded from mainstream accounts, including Fijian veterans and political figures as well as the only two women stationed on Christmas Island during the tests, are also afforded a prominent position in the book. The result is a textured, multi-layered story that is surprising and sobering in equal measure.





Image Credit: Grapple-Y test, Christmas (Kiritimati) Island, 28 April 1958 ([Atomic Weapons Research Establishment Public Domain](#))

Maclellan approaches the task of weaving a more democratic history of Operation Grapple by organising the book into a series of vignettes, each one loosely centred around a particular individual or group involved in the tests: the diverse cast includes (among many others) British pilots, Japanese trawlermen, an Australian businessman, Gilbertese mothers and President John F. Kennedy. Each chapter begins with a brief biography, producing a series of remarkable accounts of how the participants of Grapple — in many cases radically separated by physical distance, social class, race, gender, colonialism and occupation — were drawn together into the labyrinthine world of nuclear geopolitics. Many of these participants are still alive and interviewed in depth by Maclellan, in some cases still battling the British government for recompense (or even simple recognition), adding a further dimension of urgency and contemporary relevance to their character studies. Their stories develop into wider discussions of Grapple's political and historical legacy.

This is a novel way to structure the book, and one which makes *Grappling with the Bomb* an arresting read: it offers up a profoundly human account, rather than a stuffy piece of diplomatic history. Almost every chapter offers an unusually revealing nugget of information or thought-provoking observation of unusual poignancy: for example, that Fijian High Chief Ratu Penaia Ganilau was fiercely loyal to the British crown up until his death from leukaemia, which his family attribute to exposure to fallout during the Grapple tests (154), or that the British government was so concerned with obscuring the human effects of nuclear testing that it refused even to acknowledge that previous testing had provoked 'slight alarm' among Gilbert and Ellis Islanders in official Colonial Office reports to Parliament (50). One drawback with this approach, however, is that it makes for a slightly disjointed and confusing read: despite the chapter titles implying a detailed focus on a particular person or group, some of the vignettes are relatively short and quickly give way to broader discussions. This is not a particularly serious criticism; Maclellan is correct not to advance a simplistic linear narrative. *Grappling with the Bomb* ably demonstrates that the British nuclear tests were messy affairs, complex pieces of [geopolitical](#) theatre which involved a multitude of actors beyond the UK and its military.

Perhaps the biggest strength of *Grappling with the Bomb* is its relevance to current and emerging debates in nuclear studies. Maclellan explicitly situates himself among other historians of nuclear testing and the South Pacific, rightly differentiating his work from existing accounts by 'tell[ing] some unfamiliar stories that show the human impact of the Grapple tests, with a particular focus on perspectives from the southern hemisphere' (10). However, *Grappling with the Bomb* is likely to find considerable favour across disciplines, offering extremely useful insights to scholars of International Relations (IR), Science and Technology Studies (STS), history, human geography, anthropology and beyond.

Maclellan deftly exposes the inter-departmental struggles over Grapple and atomic weapons more broadly that took place inside the British government, echoing historian [Gabrielle Hecht](#)'s study on the 'technopolitics' of French nuclear power after World War II, which investigates how the physical properties of technologies can embody competing political agendas. The book also sharply demonstrates the myriad forms of agency and participation in world politics that can be brought about by new technologies: a subject of great interest to [those who advocate for IR to recognise the analytical importance of technology](#) and to better integrate insights from STS. There is even something on offer for students of literature, with Chapter Three ('The Fisherman') discussing the responses of Fijian, Marshallese and Māori poets to nuclear testing.

As a policy-focused journalist and researcher, Maclellan can scarcely be criticised for not engaging more deeply with these debates, even though this reader (typically, for a student of IR) found himself scanning the pages in vain for conceptual embellishment. *Grappling with the Bomb* can nonetheless advance our understanding of world nuclear histories by illuminating a treasure trove of raw materials to help us think about nuclear weapons and their devastatingly human effects in a more nuanced way. For those with even a passing academic interest in the topic, this book comes highly recommended.

However, with *Grappling with the Bomb*, Maclellan makes a far more important contribution — one which transcends the boundaries of scholarly thought, which we are all guilty of taking far too seriously. Aside [from the odd lonely voice in the Scottish Parliament](#), the lasting human damage of Operation Grapple is rarely officially recognised in Britain. This book highlights the hypocrisy of the UK government, its determination to ignore the transgressions of Empire and its callous disregard for those who bear the scars of Grapple today. By letting those touched by the British hydrogen bomb speak for themselves, it provides sorely-needed amplification to the small chorus of Pacific voices that continue to demand justice. The book's concluding chapter quotes the Fijian sailor Paul ah Poy:

To the government of Great Britain, the people of Great Britain, we would like to say, please, do what is right. We have done our duty to our Queen and our country. We can only wait and see, hopefully, that you will do something (338).

*Grappling with the Bomb* reminds its British readers in particular that to 'wait and see' is not an adequate response to nuclear harm and injustice.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economic*