

Nationalism and Imperialism – Australia’s ambivalent relationship to Papua New Guinea and the Pacific islands.

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Australia, unlike New Zealand, has never had any clear consciousness of its relation to the ocean of islands that constitutes the Pacific. This is despite its own imperialist involvement, from the nineteenth century blackbirders who kidnapped islanders for near-slavery on Queensland plantations, to companies like Burns Philp who developed more respectable trading networks through the islands, and twentieth century venturers like Emperor Goldmines, whose activities were one of the factors behind the military coup in Fiji in 1987. The response by the Australian government to this coup reflects Australia’s general ambivalence to this whole area.

This ambivalence, which surfaces only when events break through a more general indifference, contrasts with the more intense relationship Australia has had with Asia during the last sixty years. While Australian troops fought in the Pacific during the Second World War, their conflict was with an Asian power, Japan. Since then, they have been involved in five other military conflicts in Asia, and only one in the Pacific, where the country was rather reluctantly drawn into the Bougainville dispute. Despite talk to the contrary – and, according to rumour, the wishes of the then Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans – no attempt was made to provide military support for the democratically elected government of Fiji. Australia became more involved in the Pacific when the French were using it as a testing site for nuclear weapons, but now that that program has ceased attention has again fallen away. Most recently, the current Prime Minister declined to attend this year’s meeting of the Pacific Forum.

Unlike Australia, New Zealand did not perceive a threat of invasion from Asia during the Second World War, where its troops remained involved in Europe and North Africa rather than nearer to home. Its military involvement in Asia has since then been similar to Australia’s, but at a lower intensity. On the other hand, it has maintained close political, economic, trading and educational links with the nations of the Pacific. Most recently, it played the leading role in brokering peace on Bougainville. Writers from the Pacific, like Albert Wendt, have made their home in New Zealand, as indeed has Satendra Nandan in Australia, but more importantly New Zealand writers themselves have been interested in the Pacific. Maori writers in particular have maintained an awareness of their part in a Pacific culture.

A New Zealand friend has said to me that, when New Zealanders stand on their shore, they know they are at the end of the world, but they see the Pacific. When Australians look out from the shore, they see Asia. If history has turned New Zealanders towards the Pacific, it has turned Australians inwards, towards a centre that promised prosperity but delivered disappointment. The image of Australia has been of a people clinging to the shores while sending inland repeated waves of explorers, settlers and pioneers to graze, farm and mine for riches. The reality has rather been of a globe connected to the continent through five cities – “five teeming sores”, as A.D. Hope called them – that drain its wealth to the imperial centres. By directing its gaze inland, Australia has been able to avoid recognising the way these cities have extended their own tentacles to serve a similar function in the Pacific islands.

Nigel Krauth has pointed out, in the Introduction to New Guinea Images in Australian Literature, how New Guinea offered Australian writers contrasting images of wealth to be exploited and evil threatening moral and physical destruction. This has been true of the Pacific as a whole. As recent a writer as Xavier Herbert, long before he had ventured further than Sydney, wrote tales of death and adventure in unspecified Pacific islands. He was following in the tradition of Louis Becke, whose nineteenth century tales of the Pacific, loosely based on fact, used the ambivalent figure of Bully Hayes, trader, blackbirder and pirate, rogue and hero, as an image of the European corrupted by life in the islands but still triumphing over circumstance. Although he carried no suggestion of a mission to civilise the natives, and missionaries were despised as lacking a proper sense of manhood, he still represented the a man triumphing by his will over native treachery and laziness. But Hayes is not the only figure in Becke’s cast. Some of the others are as villainous, but most are irresponsible rather than

evil, and a few rise to nobility in defence of the natives. More strikingly, Becke allows some natives – women as well as men -- their own agency and an occasional nobility that has nothing to do with their supposed primitive state. The south seas of his stories thus become not merely a site of colonial subjugation, although that occurs, but a place of freedom outside civilisation where people of all races pursue their own objectives and are forced to take responsibility for their own actions.

Not until the second world war did the Pacific Islanders again emerge in Australian consciousness as people in their own right. Even then, they remain as adjuncts to Australian activities, tending wounded soldiers or acting as loyal bearers or guides. Then, after the war, such writers as Louis Lette and Olaf Ruhen endowed them with purposes of their own. Lette's story 'Treachery' is particularly remarkable for the way it first explains and then reverses the stereotype of the treacherous native luring innocent a venturers to their death. "Treachery?" he writes. "Yes. But, after all, the essence of civilized military strategy is in the deceit and surprise of the enemy..." He then allows one of the men who took part in the ambush and murder of a Australian miner to tell the story from his own perspective, as a proper exercise in resistance. Yet his story places this history in the past, and at the time of telling the witness to the murder has been co-opted as a servant of the plantation, the independence of his people lost forever. It is not until 1970, in The Crocodile, by the Papua New Guinea novelist, Vincent Eri, that we see Australians directly through native eyes, as brutal masters rather than sympathetic leaders. Moreover, Eri's novel show them developing their own strategies for survival and growth after the conquest and during the war against Japan.

New Guinea was central to the wartime change in Australia's perception of its relationship to Asia and the Pacific, yet New Guinea is neither Asian nor Pacific, but remains stubbornly itself. Its multitude of mutually incomprehensible languages and its nearly impermeable jungles and mountains have isolated its people from each other. Even modern communications fail to overcome the divisions between north and south, islands, coasts and highlands. Its task of building a nation is, as recent history demonstrates, immense. A similar imaginative effort is required of the former colonial authority, Australia, to comprehend its neighbour. This effort involves coming to an understanding of the people of Papua New Guinea on their own terms, as well as of our own past as both colonisers and colonised.

A wartime diary, now held in the War Memorial in Canberra, provides a first-hand record of the way the New Guinea experience transformed the eager young patriot into a battle hardened cynic. The diary, written by Stephen Murray-Smith, later to become, as editor and writer, one of Australia's influential radical nationalists, was written after his return to Australia, but its immediacy suggests that it was based on detailed notes he made at the time. It shows also how the New Guinea landscape laid the basis of a lifetime affection for New Guinea, although it is notable for the almost complete absence of the native people from its pages. This no doubt is an accurate rendition of fact. For the first few months of the patrol, in contested territory behind enemy lines, the local people no doubt kept well clear of troops from both sides. At this time, the only signs of the natives seen by the troops were the abandoned huts they occupied for themselves from time to time. They carried their own supplies. Only when the force became better established in the mining area around Wau did they start to employ native carriers, but these play little more than instrumental parts in Murray-Smith's narrative. Nevertheless, he admired their efforts. "Peter," he wrote, "was an exceptionally fine type of native, but then the type that stuck with us was mostly very fine. ..."

Of course, most of the success of the N.G.V.R. ... was due to the co-operation of their boys. ... the big majority of natives was controlled by ANGAU, at all times an unpopular but probably maligned institution, which generally relied on 'coonbashing' technique to get the requisite amount of work done. The patience and longsuffering with which the natives carried for us never failed to amaze me, and they did some wonderful jobs." (p. 66)

His main attention, however, necessarily went to the sheer physical hardship imposed on the troops by the climate and the terrain.

... We toiled in the pelting rain, our groundsheets about us, rain running down our bare legs as it dripped off the bottom of the "gumi", our bodies sweating under its stifling

embrace. Unsprigged boots slipped and slithered on the red mud track which was now the runnel of the stream rushing down the hill. ...There were not enough lamps and the ones there were blinded us. We were fighting for breath and sobbing with exhaustion as we slogged our way up that hill ...(pp. 37-38, 30 Aug 42).

Yet, in the midst of hardship, he had time to admire the countryside. In the midst of this hard day's journey, he had the energy to observe that

The country we passed through we saw, prior to the light's failing, to be very picturesque. After the heavily wooded Crystal Creek area one passes over the Bulolo on a light swing bridge and continues to wind in and out along the sharp ridges rising up from the bed of the Bulolo on a light swing bridge and continues in and out along the sharp ridges rising up from the actual river. We rested here and watched the light fade. (p. 37, 30 Aug, 42)

On an earlier occasion, during the platoon's first march along the Markham valley, he had relaxed into the simple beauty of the place, albeit tempered by discomfort:

Soon after this we got into undulating country and then into thickly timbered hills. About an hour's walk through some of the prettiest country in N.G. brought us to Partep Camp ...The camp was in a steep and narrow gully through which flowed a fast stream, bearing along great quantities of mica particles. It was one of the best concealed camps we were ever in, blanketed too for a large part of the time in fog. Needless to say it was very cold.

...About half a mile along the track we turned a bluff ...and saw unfolded the whole great valley, 40 miles down to the Markham River, shining faintly in the distance. Peaks rising each side of the valley, falling into tropical rain forest, green and humid, into which we were about to descend. (p. 7, 7 June 42)

Murray-Smith continued to write about these experiences after the war, drawing on them for an ambitious plan to make New Guinea over completely into an Australian colony. In this article, never published, he envisaged a country where the natives would be safely secluded in villages where they could pursue their traditional ways with the support of profits from the Australian enterprises, staffed by ex-servicemen, that he imagined settling in the unoccupied parts of New Guinea in the same way their forebears had settled the emptiness of the Australian continent.

This early exuberance, however, did not last, and by 1961 he went out of his way to meet Brian Cooper, Australian public servant who had fallen foul of the colonial administration, and was consequently tried and imprisoned for sedition, and later committed suicide. Murray-Smith embraced Cooper's vision of autonomy:

His attitude to New Guinea coincides with that of a letter in a recent Outlook which he commented approvingly on. He wants a 'genuine' Melanesian federation. He says that we are all, conservative and progressive alike, hopelessly out in our time-scale for New Guinea. He claims that the people are far more politically advanced than we believe - fascinating stories of great political meetings with delegates from hundreds of miles away that are held in secret -- and that the dissatisfaction is far greater than we gather. He sets two years as the minimum time they could start a major drive for independence which, he says, would inevitably be successful. New Guinea would be unworkable if civil disobedience got going on any concerted scale, and the colonialists would have to negotiate or try to launch a full scale war, which he believes could not be done.

Murray-Smith gave practical support to Cooper's vision by publishing it in his journal, Overland. The same year, he published 'Four Faces of Papua New Guinea', in which the film-maker Holmes reported on the racial tensions, the idealists, the cynics and the exploiters who infested the colony, and on the frustration building up among the native peoples. In 1971, Murray-Smith devoted an entire issue of

Overland to work by Papua New Guinea writers, the first collection of this work published anywhere in Australia.

The change and development in Murray-Smith's attitudes and actions is an index of change in Australian perceptions generally. As independence drew nearer, various journalists, old colonial hands and more recent officials gave their own accounts of life in New Guinea. These works endeavour to take New Guinea on its own terms, rather than as a place of exotic romance and mystery. This has been accompanied by a renewed interest in the nature of Australian experience in New Guinea, demonstrated in a number of documentary films on Australian settlers like the Leahys, and on the subsequent lives of their New Guinea families. This interest also drives Bill Gamadge's recent history of the last of the great European exploring expeditions in New Guinea. The Sky Travellers tells the story of the expedition led by Jim Taylor and John Black over fifteen months of 1938 and 1939 into the western highlands of New Guinea. But Gamadge, an historian who harnesses the insights of anthropology to his analysis of the documentary evidence, is as interested in the uses made of the expeditioners by their native police and carriers, and by the tribes they visit, as he is in the actions of the explorers. He shows not only the complex political and personal intrigues among the huge party led by Black and Taylor, but also the way they are changed by their experience as they come to question the colonial motives that had put them there in the first place.

Accounts of the islands written during and after the war, and in the years leading to independence, emphasise change and development, and the consequent dangers, as New Guinea was drawn into the modern world. Osmar White, in Time Now, Time Before (1967), recounted slightly fictionalised stories from his time as a journalist in New Guinea, Indonesia and the islands during the war onwards. His stories concern mainly the motley collection of expatriates, who range from the amusing to the arrogant to the incompetent. The Admiral, "a man with enormous character and limited intelligence", would stand for many of them. Yet beneath the stories there is the knowledge that their time is finished, that they are mere flotsam on the tide of events. His attitude to the natives is patronising yet sympathetic, and he understands that their plight is the result of a colonialism that has precipitated them into the modern world without being able to equip them with the techniques to handle it. As he writes of a time when he is waiting for the local tribesmen to attack a district office while the man in charge lies in a drunken stupor, "Why had the little people allowed themselves to be ruined by the whims of a drunken Johnston, backed by no more than the rifles of a dozen black policemen disciplined to obey uncritically even the most ridiculous instruction ... In Johnston, in Donohue, in me was embodied some malign magic which paralysed their will to resist even the most lunatic and degrading demands ..."

The planter and writer Ian Downs, in his novel The Stolen Land (1970), faced the same dilemma of the failure of Australian control either to sustain the a masters or to prepare the indigenous people for independence. He shows the feeling of the indigenous people for their land and the way the racism of the a authorities alienates them from it. Its central character is not a man but the disaffected native, Joseph Makati, who, educated by the church in Australia, becomes a formidable leader who expresses his people's rage only to be destroyed by the storm of nationalism he raises. But the novel remains too much a polemic for policies to counter racism, keep the people on the land and avoid the dangers of revolutionary rhetoric and nationalist politics.

Writing after independence, Trevor Shearston, in his novel Sticks That Kill (1983), provides an historical perspective on later events and attitudes. His novel contrasts British and Australian colonialism at the time of Australian federation, when Australia was preparing to take control of Papua from the British. Although his Australians are refreshingly relaxed, they prove as exploitative and ultimately powerless as their own former colonial masters. In his short stories, Shearston explores the violence which underlies these relationships.

Alongside these more or less realistic accounts of life, another group of writings portrayed New Guinea and its people as having access to a spiritual truth that has been lost in modern cultures. Foremost among these was James McAuley, who fell under the spell of New Guinea when, during and after the war, he became indirectly involved in its administration. In the pagan rites of its people he saw a spiritualism, denied by secular materialism, that he believed could be recovered through the rituals of Catholicism. The exotic image of the Bird of Paradise became, in his poetry, the Holy Spirit that

descended first as a dove. The figures who reconciled New Guinea paganism with Christianity were the noble but fanatical Archbishop Alain de Boismenu and his acolyte, the mad nun Marie Thérèse Noblet. Only distantly in touch with modernity, and doubtfully comprehending the cultures of the people they sought to serve, they nevertheless for McAuley sanctified the island with a potential holiness that failed to engage in its practical problems. Olaf Ruhen pursued a more eclectic and practical sense of spirituality that anticipates New Age ecological primitivism.

The novel that takes the spiritual dimension of New Guinea furthest is Randolph Stow's Visitants, but this also provides an unillusioned and sardonic view of the Australian masters in the last years of their rule. The two main Australian characters, Cawdor and Dalwood, are notable more for their hostility to each other than for any effectiveness in their actions. The narrative, which proceeds chronologically, is shared by all the participants in the action, each of whom takes up the story as another leaves it off. This style, simulating the depositions at an inquiry into the events of the novel, introduces a multiplicity of viewpoints and realities without giving authority to any one. This reflects the novel's metaphysical interest in the nature of truth and the impossibility of communication between even members of a single culture. The failure of communication means that colonialism can at best impose a stereotype of order which fails to capture the truth of any of the events or people it seeks to control. Cawdor, the officer who attempts to learn the language and transcend this gulf, finds himself lost in an incomprehensible world of spirits. He is at once a visitant bringing strange truths to the villagers, and a captive of the visitants the villagers believe they have seen. Similarly, these visitants are figures from both a western fantasy of flying saucers and the cargo cult of Pacific fantasy. The riots brought on by these fantasies destroy Cawdor and the villages he tries to govern. Order is eventually restored, not by his white deputy, but by the younger generation of natives and their emerging leader. Dalwood, the younger government officer, discovers an equality and a unity with the natives through sex, but this is not enough for him to recover an authority that has irrevocably shifted to the local people.

Papua New Guinea seems to offer a European like Cawdor the kind of spiritual promise that McAuley believed he had found there. But while McAuley saw this spirituality being fulfilled through Christianity, Stow's missionaries left behind only an empty church to be filled by symbols of the cargo cult – both a primitive superstition and a modern variation of the western cult of Mammon. McAuley's vision was a fraud that finally kills those who pursue it. The west has destroyed the primitive, and the primitive returns to destroy the modern representative of the west. Anthony Hassall suggests that The Visitants is to be read as moving in the opposite direction to Conrad's Heart of Darkness, where Kurtz is finally blanketed in evil mystery. Cawdor, he argues, finds the mystery of colonial New Guinea all too penetrable. Yet, while Cawdor may not surrender to its darkness, and certainly strives to prevent a multiplication of bloodshed, he does seek to align himself with the visitants from an extra-terrestrial world, and is destroyed by those who take this world literally. For Cawdor, born in the Solomons of European parents, there can be no home.

The novel closes with Cawdor's dying words: "My house is bleeding with the footsteps of the visitor, and the person who lived there before is dying. That person is bleeding. My house is bleeding to death." The European attempt to make New Guinea its home has failed, but it has destroyed the culture that it found there. If there is any future, it lies with the modern, secular native leader who has left the dying house behind to build his own. The task for Australia, since Papua New Guinea independence, has been to shed its own proprietary attitudes to a house it had tried to make its own, and to learn to live with the new nation that it has, for good and ill, and often unwittingly, helped to shape.

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A note on terminology: The term New Guinea applies to the whole island. During the colonial period, the eastern part of the island was divided into Papua, governed first by Queensland, then by the United Kingdom, and after 1901 by Australia, and New Guinea, governed by Germany until 1919 and then by Australia as a League of Nations Mandated Territory. The government of Papua and New Guinea was combined after the Second World War, and after 1975 the new nation took the name of Papua New Guinea. In the text, I have used the term New Guinea to refer generically to the island, and Papua New Guinea to the colonial territory and the independent nation.

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