

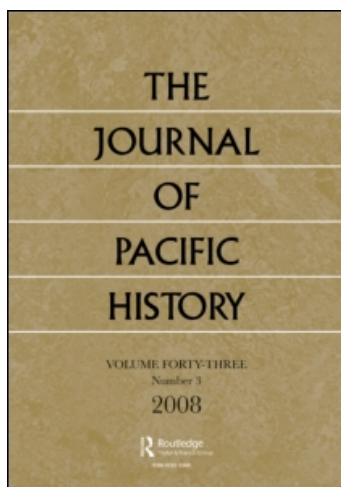
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OBITUARY

'Papa Ron' Crocombe, 1929–2009

It was another perfect trip. He had returned to Rarotonga, his centre of the universe, after representing the Cook Islands government at meetings in Asia and China. Within hours, he was back on the plane, heading to Tonga, with suitcases of books for his long-time friend, the late Futa Helu, founder of the 'Atenisi University. There, he and other eminent Pacific colleagues were inducted as honorary fellows. On his homeward journey to the Cooks, he caught a bus to Auckland airport. It was Thursday, 19 June 2009. Fellow passengers noted that after loading his suit cases, he fell asleep. He never walked off the bus.

In later years, Emeritus Professor Ronald Gordon Crocombe was better known to everyone, from prime ministers to children, as simply 'Papa Ron'. A walking encyclopaedia on the Pacific and a prolific author, at the time of his passing he was, as usual, working on manuscripts by several Pacific Islanders. Central to his lifelong devotion to the Pacific was his personal mission to assist Pacific Islanders to write and publish. I first met him in Suva in early 1974 when he was my history professor at the University of the South Pacific (USP). We, his students, were astonished by his knowledge of us! Yet so strong was his concern for Pacific people — past, present and future — that very few Pacific Islanders came to know much about Ron's own family background.

Papa Ron was born in Auckland on 8 October 1929 and raised on a farm at Piopio in the King country, North Island, New Zealand. He did not come from an educated family. Ron's father had left school at the age of 12. But Ron graduated from Otahuhu College with a yearning for travel. He spent 1948–49 in Germany, which was desolated by war. According to his son Tata, Ron had an epiphany after spending a night under a bridge in Dresden. Then and there he decided to dedicate his life to the education of Pacific Islanders.¹

On returning to New Zealand, Ron joined the Department of Island Territories (and Maori Affairs) which oversaw New Zealand's colonies of the Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau and Samoa. His first job was as clerk of works for the Public Works Department in the Cook Islands. Promotion came swiftly. In 1957, at age 27, he was appointed resident agent and head of the colonial government for Atiu, a community of over 2,000 people. With the Atiuans, Papa Ron's love affair with the Pacific began. He spoke their dialect and became fluent in the customs and traditions of the Atiuans, who adopted him. Two special relationships were forged.

One was with the paramount chief, Rongomatane Ariki, a graduate of Te Aute College in New Zealand who had served the New Zealand air force in Europe. These two young men achieved much for Atiu together. A road they built to an alternative wharf at Tarapaku, still travelled today, is one of many products of their partnership.

The other was of course Ron's wife Marjorie, a member of Rongomatane's tribe. They married in 1959, and Rongomatane claimed naming rights and bestowed the name

¹ Tataroanui (Tata) Crocombe, 'He was always learning: a son's eulogy', *Cook Islands News*, 26 June 2010.

‘Taturoanui’ on Ron’s and Marjorie’s first son. After Tata, they were blessed with two further children, Ngaire and Kevin. Ron’s oldest child, Sam, is their half-sibling.

If ever Ron had a philosophy, Marjorie gave it to him. In her address as Head Girl at Wanganui Girls High School she quoted the proverb, ‘I shall pass through this world but once, so any good I can do or kindness I can show, let me do it now, for I shall not pass this way again.’ Ron pasted this inside the many books of his library. For almost all Pacific Islanders who met Ron, his kindness was legendary.

Ron pursued his education while employed by the Department of Island Territories and gained his BA by extension from the University of Auckland. After further studies at Victoria University in Wellington, he then completed a PhD at the Australian National University (ANU) with a thesis on land tenure in the Cook Islands.² Ron’s first full academic appointment was with the ANU’s New Guinea Research Unit in Port Moresby. He was research officer from 1962 to 1965, director until 1969, and the prime instigator of the National Waigani Seminar Series, jointly sponsored by the New Guinea Research Unit and the University of Papua and New Guinea (UPNG).

But his appointment in 1969 to the fledgling USP in Suva was the turning point. From then on, his life and this institution were inextricable. He discerned the USP’s capacity to unite and empower Pacific peoples and cultures, but the relationship was not always easy. One minute Ron was the USP’s staunch advocate and the next its bitter critic. Often to the irritation of university management, Ron insisted on the USP’s goals of regionalism (sadly lacking as Fiji citizens monopolise the scholarships, tutorships and positions of power within the institution). But as Tata wrote in an email, ‘Dad loved USP, he believed in it ... He saw in it tremendous potential for good, for learning, for the development of new truths ... If he had any criticism ... it came from a position of caring deeply, possibly too deeply, as it does not help when the surgeon becomes too emotionally involved with the plight of the patient under his knife’.³

The pioneering work that Ron began in Papua and New Guinea he continued at USP. He became professor at the age of 36 and was founding head of History, Political Science, Sociology and the Institute of Pacific Studies, the Pacific Language Unit, School of Law, School of Agriculture and Division of Land Management among others. His PNG–USP connections spawned the Student Exchange Schemes between UPNG and USP. The thriving Flexi-schools (then Summer Schools) owe their beginning to his advocacy in the mid-1970s. Typical of his entrepreneurial flair, Ron’s Summer School in 1985 coincided with the Pacific History Association’s conference in Suva and capitalised on this rich gathering of international expertise. At the conference opening, Albert Wendt reminded everyone that ‘We are what we remember’ — and Ron left many memories.

In the same email on 11 August 2009, his son Tata writes, ‘I remember as a ten year old boy being at a BBQ and Dad was holding forth the need for more scholarships for Pacific Islanders. The group was all European professors. Later, he walked away and one of them said “Ron is a good guy but I wish he wasn’t so damn pro-Islander” ... that was the way he was to the very end. He was dedicated to the education of Pacific Islanders.’ While Ron is remembered by his children, in Sam’s words, as ‘a father, a friend, a doctor, a nurse’, to many students, too, he was like a father.

Kave Ringi, who studied at USP Fiji in the 1970s, shared these memories: ‘Those two (Ron and Marjorie) were like our parents. He was a father to all the Cook Islands students — very understanding, very encouraging ... And like a good father, he could see our faults but he always encouraged the positive.’ When Ringi returned to Rarotonga and became director of immigration, Papa Ron kept climbing the steps to say hello — even 25 years later! One thing stood out in Ringi’s mind: Papa Ron’s command of the

²R.G. Crocombe, ‘Land tenure in the Cook Islands’, PhD thesis (Canberra 1961).

³Taturoanui Crocombe, email 11 August 2009.

Maori language. 'I was just in awe of him — here was this *papa'a* talking to you in Maori!'⁴

The Crocombe home was the meeting place for Cook Islands students in Suva. The president of the USP's Cook Islands Students Association never had to worry about the venue for a function. 'We didn't ask... We just told them...' It was also a 'home away from home' for other students who simply had nowhere else to go. The 'Who's Who at USP' appeared there, too: the vice-chancellor, professors, senators and council members — plus the odd drunkard politician and bush lawyer.

Ron's Fiji-Indian neighbours at Mariko Street will remember him too. They shared his water, electricity and larder. And I remember his advice to me as a student: the more you can do things for yourself, the more others can do for you.

Ron wrote innumerable books and articles. His edited *Pacific Land Tenure* has been a standard text for generations of scholars, as has his *The South Pacific* (now in its seventh edition). The latter was originally written as a set of lectures for radio broadcast. *Asia In the Pacific: Replacing the West* is his most recent, monumental work, some 40 years in the making. *The Works of Ta'unga*, co-edited with Marjorie Crocombe, became a classic almost as soon as it was published.⁵

Yet his burning mission was to facilitate research and writing by Pacific Islanders. At his funeral service in Rarotonga, his son Tata said, 'Papa Ron would've frowned on this memorial service. He'd have said, "What a waste of a good afternoon. All of you could've written a thousand words for the next book on Pacific funerals rites"'⁶ Such was his single-mindedness and passion that many laid-back Island writers would tremble whenever his name was mentioned or presence in the neighbourhood was known. Stories abound of Islanders pursued to the 'death' by Ron for not making good their promises to write or finish a manuscript. There are also stories of how some of his writings were used by his Island colleagues. Ron was not one to hold a grudge. However, many from Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere experienced another side of Ron. Some remember how Ron would accuse them of mining Pacific Islanders for their PhDs and not reciprocating.⁷

When the distinguished Trinidadian scholar, Dr James Maraj, was USP's Vice Chancellor from 1975 to 1982, Ron realised a dream. He founded the Institute of Pacific Studies (IPS), dedicated to the study of Pacific people by Pacific people. In the course of 32 years from 1975 to September 2008, when the Institute was closed, the work of about 1,700 Pacific Islanders was brought to fruition and published. No other institute in the Pacific has a comparable achievement, and it would be hard for anyone anywhere to write about the Pacific without reference to an IPS publication. And Ron was a stickler for the highest possible standards. Many manuscripts were returned soaked in an ocean of red ink, with his idiosyncratic expletives peppering the margins.

Advice Ron gave not long before his passing sums up his conviction. To writers of papers for a conference on 'Cook Islands 2050' he stressed:

If you prepare a paper, you will be helping to clarify your own thoughts and those of everyone else, and helping our people and our country to light up the way forward a little better. Let us remember George Burns' advice to look to the future because that is where you will live the rest of your life; and Ann Landers who said, 'Look ahead. That is where the future lies.'⁸

⁴ *Cook Islands News*, 20 August 2009.

⁵ R.G. Crocombe (ed.), *Land Tenure in the Pacific* (Melbourne and Oxford 1961); R.G. Crocombe, *The South Pacific* (7th edn, Suva 2007); R.G. Crocombe, *Asia in the Pacific: replacing the West* (Suva 2007); Ron and Marjorie Crocombe (eds), *The Works of Ta'unga: records of Polynesian Traveller in the South Seas* (Canberra 1968).

⁶ Eulogy delivered by Tata Crocombe, 24 June 2009.

⁷ Pers. comm., Tom Ryan, 22 April 2010, Suva.

⁸ *The Year 2050*, Cook Islands Research Association Conference Program (Rarotonga 2009).

It is impossible to list all whom Ron mentored. Those in tertiary education include Ron's successor as Director of the Institute of Pacific Studies and Professor of Pacific Studies, the late Asesela Ravuvu, Marjorie Tuainekore-Crocombe, Brij V. Lal, Vijay Naidu, Claire Slatter, Sin Joan Yee-Narsey, Elizabeth Reid-Fong, Samuel Simpson, Vanessa Griffen, Vilsoni Hereniko, Roniti Teiwaki, Uentabo Neemia Mackenzie, Sione Tupouniua, Jon Jonassen, Howard Van Trease, Mere Pulea, Kauraka Kauraka, Makiuti Tongia, Joe Ketan, Parmesh Chand and countless more.

But he was not impressed by academic status symbols or confined by academe. Tata tells the story of how Ron came to work one day and found his name plate posted on the door with the impressive title of Professor. He thanked those responsible, asked them to take it down, told them his preference, and it was subsequently renamed 'Ron Crocombe'. Jean Mason, a Cook Islander, recalls going to school near Ron's home:

He had an amazing ability to talk with anyone at their own level. Adult Cook Islanders treated kids like animals — seen and not heard! Honestly, there's still that element here of "you aren't worthwhile until you are an adult", so I was quite taken aback that he would be interested in talking to us.⁹

The current *tumu korero* of Atiu, Papa Ina Teiotu, pays Papa Ron the ultimate tribute. He says, 'Papa Ron was a *tumu korero* in his own right, not only for the Cook Islands but the whole Pacific'.¹⁰

Papa Ron left a legacy for many Pacific and non-Pacific people alike. I can think of no better tribute than the following, reminiscent of the Maori *tangi* that Ron's mentor, the late H.E. Maude invoked to honour J.W. Davidson.¹¹ It is taken from a *solo*, or old Samoan lament for a departed paramount chief:

Ua ta'ape'ape pāpā,
Ua gasolosolo fo'i ao o le lagi,
Ua pa'ū le masina,
Ua gasetoto fo'i le la,
Ua gau le tau'ofe.

The rumble of thunder ceases,
The clouds move on,
The moon fallen,
The sun eclipsed,
The fishing rod, broken.¹²

MORGAN TUIMALEALI'IFANO

⁹ Jean Mason, email 1 July 2009.

¹⁰ *Cook Islands News*, 20 June 2009.

¹¹ H.E. Maude, 'James Wight Davidson', *Journal of Pacific History*, 8 (1973), 9.

¹² From a text of Samoan funeral speeches by Tuimaleali'ifano Suatipatipa II, ms in author's possession.