

New Guinea: crossing boundaries and history, Clive Moore, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2003. xiv + 274 pp. Maps, b & w photographs, notes, bib., index. ISBN 0-8248-2485-7 (cloth).

It may be said of New Guinea, as Napoleon said of Italy, that it is merely a geographical expression, and this has been the challenge for writing its history. It is hardly to be wondered at that no one has attempted the task since the 1960s, when first Gavin Souter and then Peter Hastings wrote books that dealt with the whole of New Guinea, rather than one or other of the modern political halves.¹ The difficulty for the historian is the lack of any unifying principle to give the work coherence. The land mass is so vast and variable, and its indigenous cultures so heterogeneous, that it is only in living memory that people can be said to have had anything like a common experience, to make it possible for a historian to attempt to write 'a history' rather than a set of unconnected 'histories'.

The convergence of historical experience began with the colonial period, but only now that the influence of modernity is so common can one make meaningful generalisations about the whole. However, the attainment of shared experience is not the subject of Moore's history; rather, he has attempted to record the long history to which the twentieth century and its profound social and political changes is merely a footnote in its chronological span. The striking difference between Moore's book and its predecessors, apart from the differences in the research base that has become available in the last forty years, was that its author was almost ready to leave off writing at the point at which they began.

Moore's purpose was to write the history of Melanesian New Guinea, which means beginning 40,000 years ago when the environment was greatly different from what it has been in historical times, particularly in the greater proximity of Asia, and the continuity with the Australian landmass. The first chapter thus deals with remote prehistory, in which Moore suggests that trade led migration, that New Guinea societies were advanced by contemporary standards. The second chapter becomes more fine-grained and delineates the development of cultural spheres

and trading systems in the last 5,000 years or so, making use of what comparative linguistics and archaeology have been able to reconstruct of the ethnographic relationships. The emphasis necessarily is on western New Guinea, where contact with Asia was more apparent. This emphasis continues in the next chapter, on western New Guinea and the Malay World, the theme of which is that New Guinea was on the periphery of the south-east Asian cultural and trading systems: Papuan products and persons engaged with the wider world through these networks, and foreign artefacts of metal and ceramics came into New Guinea trading systems.

The coming of Europeans to south-east Asia supplies the background for the next chapter. From about 1520 there was a surprising amount of contact between Europeans and the western and northern coasts, by both Dutch and English traders and explorers. There were even attempted British trading settlements in western New Guinea, and the eventual Dutch annexation in 1828, based on supposed claims of the extensive sovereignty of the Sultanate of Tidore, was to keep British traders out.

With chapters 5 and 6 Moore is able to swing the focus of attention to the eastern half of the island, to discuss trade, missions and settlement, and chapter 7 is mainly a discussion of the character of early stages of culture contact spanning two centuries. Moore's interest here is to draw attention to violence as a constant factor, and to try to explain it. This section of the book represents the most successful attempt to write history as it might have been experienced or perceived by the Melanesians. An attempt at quantification is made, with plausible estimates of the number of incidents and the fatalities on each side. Moore discerns some patterns reflecting European concerns rather than indigenous ones, but ultimately has no explanation or theory as to why encounter should have been so violent. The final chapter compresses the colonial and post-colonial periods of eastern and western New Guinea. This is the least successful chapter in my view: the subject is too big and complex. Moore has picked out certain themes: colonial rule, economic change, social change, the Second World War, and political change embracing decolonisation and independence. Inevitably, the generalisations seem too glib, the author in my view too judgmental,

the statistics and assessments too devoid of context, the subordination of periodisation to themes too distorting; the very continuities are lost in an attempt to pick out significant trends in a history that even during the twentieth century was heterogeneous. Making the complex and eventful twentieth century—surely the most profoundly significant hundred years in the last 50,000—merely the eighth and final chapter draws attention to the enormous time scale of the whole; it is an oblique way of saying that the foregoing centuries were also important, also had their human achievements. But we can know nothing of these, and we can be sure that none of them compressed so much into a few life spans. We should probably think a history of Europe that gave as much (or greater) attention to Europe's relations with the Middle East during the sixteenth century than to the energy revolution in the twentieth century a bit unbalanced, and so it is with the history of New Guinea.

The book is a model of thoroughness in its research, a monumental achievement in its scope, and its limitations are those of the subject itself. These are for most of the period the shortage of evidence, and for the last century too much to be digested. The central chapters of the book show over and over again how little can be known of New Guinea's history for most of the time, even in the last millennium. Much of the exposition is not directly about New Guinea at all but about such matters as the trading systems of south-east Asia, Macassan contacts with Arnhem land or Queensland frontier history, often concluding with a remark about how similar things 'must have' occurred in parts of New Guinea. In the absence of known facts to produce about New Guinea itself much is speculative, and however plausible, does not create certainty.

For all the protestations of Pacific historians for half a century about the subject being properly the study of Pacific Island societies, when it gets down to detail often all that can be said is about the history of European activities in relation to the Islands, and European–Islander contacts. New Guinea does not have a knowable history of its own until very recent times, and the abiding truth of its history, demonstrated perhaps inadvertently by this book, is that everything known that is of historical significance arises from its relationship with either Asia or

Australia. Despite the best of efforts, despite the author's scholarship, erudition and professionalism, this book is probably not a history that Melanesians will recognise as being about their world. It is nevertheless, one that they and others interested in the liminal region between Asia and the pelagic Pacific would do well to read.

Note

1 Gavin Souter, *New Guinea, the Last Unknown*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1963. Peter Hastings, *New Guinea: problems and prospects*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1969.

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