ENTANGLED STORIES
personal, local and global histories

Michael Monsell-Davis
University of the South Pacific

I WAS lucky in that I had good history teachers: at St George's School, Windsor, Aubrey Havard taught 'Ancient History' and the wonders of Greece and Rome (wousld that Biblical history had been taught the same way); Mr Kelly made the sweep of European History, and Britain's place in it, come alive; and at Altyre in Scotland, Mr Grieg steered us through the years 1485–1766. Unfortunately, the limitations of Britain's O level syllabus at the time left those three centuries hanging in a vacuum: British history began with the conclusion of the Wars of the Roses and ended with the Jacobin Rebellion.

No matter, my geography teachers stirred my interest in faraway places and people—by the time I was 12, I knew more about Australia, Canada and India than I knew about Britain. And my mother insisted on our visiting museums, galleries and other places of interest, and instilled in us a love of reading.

All this was in the context of Empire.[1] The atlases we used still had vast areas of the world coloured pink, and our coins still had 'IND. IMP.' embossed around the image of the monarch.[2] We had cousins in America, Australia, Africa and Eire. My father's brother was killed in India. My mother's brother was briefly employed on a tea plantation in Malaya, and then served in Palestine and Africa. I was born in Egypt. We were brought up on a diet of Empire: Gordon of Khartoum, the Relief of Mafeking, Clive of India, the Hudson Bay Company, *The Wonder Book of Daring Deeds* (which, with its politically incorrect attitudes, would probably not find a

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publisher today), Kipling's tales and sea heroes such as Drake, Raleigh and Cook. Only much later did we understand that men like Raleigh were little better than pirates, sanctioned only because their buccaneering was carried out in the name of the monarch, who received a large share of the booty.

So we were brought up with an unquestioning acceptance of the glory of Victoria's Empire and the fitness of British rule. Coupled with this were complex notions of service and sacrifice. Service to God, to the Monarch, to the Empire, to the public, to the oppressed, to anyone who needed assistance—these were instilled by our Anglican upbringing, my school and later by the philosophy of the Australian Outward Bound school for whom I worked for several years, as well as by my father who was born in Australia but brought up in the west of Ireland.

One incident from 1951, when I was 10, lingers with me. My father and I had just been to the Festival of Britain, and were walking beside the Thames on our way to the railway station. A man emerged from the shadows and asked my father for two shillings for a busfare to get home. My father gave it to him. A hundred yards down the path a second man appeared, asking for two shillings, which again my father handed over.

We walked in silence for a while, then suddenly my father stopped and leaned on the railings overlooking the Thames. I copied his stance and waited expectantly.

'Don't tell your mother', he said.
'What will I not tell my mother?' I asked.
'That I gave money to those men', he replied
'Why?' I asked.
'Because she'll just get angry', he answered
'Then why did you give it to them?' I insisted.
'Because they may really need it', he said. 'They may be lying, but they may need it. Who am I to judge them? I give them the benefit of the doubt.'

I did not tell my mother. If she reads this, it will be the first time she has heard the story. But these various influences—church, school, father and so on—have taught me a sense of anger at injustice, a sense of sympathy for the underdog, the oppressed. Perhaps this also comes from the Irish and Scots in me: Irish forebears were jailed by Cromwell, and ancestors on my maternal grandfather's side fought for the Stuart Pretender

during the Jacobite Rebellions, and fled from the defeat at Culloden—or so our family's oral traditions suggest.

So what was I to do? In my 'teens, Elvis Presley, Dixieland Jazz and Country and Western Music were as influential as Scott of the Antarctic, Douglas Mawson and David Livingstone. I was edging 20, and bored with the mindlessness of commuting every day to a multi-storey office block in London. I had dreams of Assam and tea-planting. I wanted to work the land rather than work in an office. But the Empire had, finally, become the Commonwealth and the options and opportunities were changing.

I migrated to Australia—where I had distant cousins—on the 'ten-pound scheme', and found myself working as an instructor at an adventure school on the Hawkesbury River. An idyllic period, walking the hills and paddling canoes up rivers and through mangroves—I often wondered at the sheer good fortune of being paid to undertake such enjoyable tasks!

While on the Hawkesbury, I saw a news item about a 'Multi-racial Teachers' College' in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea. Curious, I wrote to the Department of External Territories, who simply sent me an application form without answering my questions. I filled it in, was called for an interview, and some months later found myself in Rabaul, Papua New Guinea, undergoing basic teacher training. Not long thereafter I was posted to Mt Hagen and then to Yule Island as a Vocational School Teacher.

Experiences in Australia and Papua New Guinea opened up new questions for me about racism, colonialism, aristocracy, egalitarianism and oppression. Mt Hagen in 1965 was a small frontier town with, essentially, two classes of inhabitants: Europeans (the *Mastas*) and natives (*bois*). There was one Chinese, Robert Cheung, who was an honorary European for the purposes of everyday life. One day a Chinese girl came up from Rabaul. She spent a few days with me while waiting for a flight to take her to her fiancé in Mendi. On one occasion Janet and I decided to go to the Country Club for a drink. This was an exclusively European establishment, and as we walked through the door, silence fell like a clap of thunder—I had never, ever heard a pin-dropping silence before.

The silence lasted for a few moments, and then acquaintances realised what was happening and became paternalistically solicitous: they called us over. 'Come along my dear', they said to Janet. 'Come and sit beside us'—patting the bench. 'What would you like to drink?'

We left after one drink, and I went back on only one further occasion when some Hagen friends of mine wanted a carton of beer one evening, and I was pleased to go in and buy it for them. (I had got to know them because, as part of my job, I was teaching Tei Kome, a young man of my own age from the Dei area, how to drive. We went up and down the roads, sometimes spending the night in Dei villages, and his uncle, Council Nori, who owned the Toyota Stout vehicle, often brought me vegetables and the occasional chicken.)

Soon I was transferred to Yule Island in Papua. I was to teach 'general subjects' at the Kairuku Junior Technical School. Here, stories told to me by my schoolboys about the miracles performed by cargo cult leaders, and their escapes and resurrections from death at the hands of government patrol officers, made me ask new (for me) questions about the activities of a cult leader in a colonially oppressed society two thousand years ago (although in my first job in London as a mail-sorter and then credit control clerk, an Anglo-Indian friend, Eugene Lock, had introduced me to the works of Krishnamurti—thus loosening my Anglican bonds).

These experiences all made me question, in an inchoate way, the rightness of colonial rule, but I suppose it was my time as an undergraduate at the University of Papua New Guinea between 1968 and 1970 that was most influential. I was drawn headlong into student life by men like George Obara from Yule Island, became editor of the student newspaper *Nilaidat* and was peripherally associated with the Politics Club. On the teaching side, people such as Ralph Bulmer, Epeli Hau'ofa, Gerry Ward, Ken Inglis, Nigel Oram, Jim Griffin, Ann Chowning, Hank Nelson, Charles Rowley, Bob Gollan and Ruth and Sione Latukefu were important influences, as were the books I was asked to read. Particularly interesting was *Slavery* by Stanley Elkins (1968). His depiction of the psychological oppression of slavery and its effects on individuals I could easily relate to my observations of the smothering embrace of colonialism, and its 'pointless interference' (Rowley 1965:72) in almost every aspect of native life.[3]

All this by way of some observations on the topic of Pacific history: it has been fashionable to ask 'who owns Pacific history?' Do non–Pacific Islanders have the right to comment on Pacific history, or does the task belong exclusively to indigenous Islanders?[4] From a strictly personal perspective I believe there are several ways in which I can argue that at least

some aspects of Pacific history 'belong' as much to me as to any 'native' Islander.

First and most obviously, I have lived and worked in various parts of the Pacific for well over 30 years—almost the whole of my adult working life. I spent important formative years in rural areas of Papua New Guinea and as a student at UPNG. I have taught and/or conducted research in PNG, Fiji, Niue and Kiribati. Living at Nabuapaka Village in Papua, while undertaking PhD research, I found myself involved and identified in unexpected ways. I once received a letter from a neighbouring village addressed to me as 'Mike Davis, Leader of the Nabua Home Scholars'—'Home Scholars' being a term by which those who had dropped out of school and returned to the village labelled themselves. Unfortunately I have lost the envelope, but at the time I delighted in receiving it. And I have been closely involved in that community ever since.

In a variety of ways I hope that I have been able to contribute constructively to the lives of a number of Pacific individuals and communities. Perhaps I am now a footnote to a footnote in some Pacific histories. My personal history, then, is entwined in small ways with the histories of several corners of the Pacific.

But in the longer view, the history of my culture is irrevocably linked to Pacific history. Regardless of whether any of us—Islander or expatriate—likes it or not, British colonial history and the European expansion have intersected with Pacific Islands history in hugely complex ways over the last few centuries. In this sense, modern Pacific history is also a part of my history: my collective ancestors, as it were, were responsible for the expansion of Europe; my grandfather migrated to Australia in the nineteenth century. Thus I cannot consider a large portion of British history without consideration of Pacific history.

By the same reasoning, 'native' Pacific Islanders, if they wish to understand the colonial period and its aftermath—their own world today—must embrace European history and make it their own as well, with their own freedom to interpret it as they wish: European squabbles, European empires, the Industrial Revolution, the history of ideas, science and technology. The strands of European, Asian, native American and Pacific history meshed together during the phase of European expansion, and need to be understood together. All histories now belong to all of us if we are to understand our world. All our histories are entangled ('a tangled forest',

Nicholas Thomas 1989:86);[5] as Ton Otto commented, 'local history has become part of world history' (1993:1).

And the longer I live in the Pacific, the more its history becomes mine as I try to understand today's sociological and ethnographic issues. Teaching Anthropology and Sociology at UPNG and USP, I find I need a perspective that takes account of both Pacific and European colonial history. Problems of rising crime, poverty, urban drift, corruption; the analysis of Melanesian millenarian movements and Islander initiatives all require the dual historical perspective. I need to look at 'traditional' Pacific societies, and at the multitude of changes wrought by the encounter with Europe, and during the decades since political independence.

Some questions sent me back to British and European social history in an attempt to understand the transitions that had taken place in Europe, and that might provide insights on the Pacific: Robert Bartlett's *The Making of Europe* (1994), for example, and J.A. Sharpe's *Crime in Early Modern England* (1984). In 1987, Christopher Hill's *The English Revolution,1640* (1985), helped me understand some aspects of events surrounding the military coups in Fiji: his was a complex story to tell, but among other things he showed how the rights of the traditional English aristocracy and landowning classes to rule in their own way began to conflict with the aspirations and interests of a rising class of independent, small landowners and educated, urban merchants and artisans who were no longer dependent on the aristocracy. There were echoes of this in ethnic Fijian society and the events leading up to the coups (Monsell-Davis, 1987).

Among other books, *The Highland Clearances* by John Prebble (1969), showed how Scottish chiefs converted their kin into tenants, and made me look more closely at the activities of certain Island Chiefs; and Jeremy Seabrooks's *In the Cities of the South* (1996) demonstrated the way personal experience of a certain period of English cities illuminated urban issues in the Third World. Conversely, of course, and importantly, an understanding of European encounters with the Pacific is necessary for a comprehension of European intellectual and scientific history of the last two centuries (Smith 1960).

How does one conclude a personal narrative that has not yet reached its conclusion? I had several intentions when embarking on this short voyage. It seemed to me that there is something sterile (although it generates

journal articles!) in this debate about who owns, or has the right to speak about what. Academic and emotional debate sometimes misses the reality, which, in this case, is that our personal, public, national and global histories intersect, overlap and illuminate each other in a thousand different ways. Different voices contain different perspectives that together enhance our understandings. It is imperative that Pacific Island voices be heard, and that they take a leading role, but they should not be the only voices.

Another concern is that the momentum of current initiatives for a greater emphasis on Pacific Studies in the USP curriculum (Naidu 1997) should be carried forward. We must avoid the dangers of parochialism, but students need a thorough grounding in the histories and ethnographies of their own societies if they are to understand Oceania today (see Wesley-Smith 1995).

In this context, it seems to me ironic that in some teaching at USP, for those who espouse the importance of historical materialism, Pacific history begins only with the arrival of the first European explorers in Oceania. Unquestionably, Island societies have been profoundly changed by the expansion of Europe, but it is not possible to understand fully the changes—and the roles played by all participants—unless we also examine, as far as is possible, the structures and histories of pre-colonial island societies.[6]

To ignore these in our research and teaching is to present a skewed perspective to our students, and further implies to them that there is 'nothing of value from the "age of darkness" that might be brought to bear on the problems of the modern world' (Macnaught 1982:129–131). In this we are doing a disservice to our students, for there was a vast amount of value in pre-European Oceania, and the schizophrenia that, for some, divides Pacific History into a time of darkness—before the arrival of Christian missionaries—and a time of light—brought by those worthies—needs to be addressed by a dispassionate (although political) examination of the pre-European past.[7]

The present, after all, is a product of the collision of European and Oceanic histories, and the future will be a product of that continuing entanglement. The tools with which we grapple with the present and shape the future can surely only be improved by a deeper understanding of all our pasts and our relation to them. If we can face the past with confidence, then too, we can build the future.

Notes

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1. Although the self-governing dominions of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Newfoundland became founder members of the British Commonwealth of Nations in 1926, the remaining colonies and protectorates (all of which lacked a majority white population) continued as part of the 'Empire'—at least until Indian independence in 1947.

2. In regular circulation, when I was a boy, were coins from as early as Victoria's reign, and occasionally I encountered coins from the reign of George IV (died 1830). Not until decimalisation in the 1960s were these coins, with their reminders of Empire, removed from general circulation.

3. I did not realise until much later that Elkins's *Slavery* was a highly controversial book that provoked intense debate for a decade. See Lane 1971; Meier and Rudwick 1985, pp. 140–42, 243–60.

4. The variety of viewpoints is represented by Trask 1991; Keesing 1992; Munro 1994; Reilly 1996; Ballara (in this issue); Burt 1997.

5. I've lifted the notion of entanglement from Nicholas Thomas, although he did not use it in the sense that I employ here.

6. Vincent has noted the 'problematic' that 'political economy did not analyse the structure and history of non-Western communities penetrated by capitalism, and that it appeared unwilling to incorporate culture into its analyses'. 'At issue', she writes, 'is the historical tension between ethnographic particularism (local knowledge) and universalising social theory' (1996:435).

7. Europeans first entered Oceania 500 years ago. By contrast, ancestors of today's islanders have been here for at least as long as 50,000 years. In some parts of the Highlands of New Guinea, the first encounters with Europeans took place less than 50 years ago.

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