

AN ACCIDENTAL HISTORIAN

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I became a historian by default and a Pacific Historian by chance. I was a student at Pietermaritzburg, a South African backwater, even before the satirist Tom Sharp lampooned the Afrikaaner policemen, Jingo colonists and stolid African Victims in *Riotous Assembly*. The University was essentially a teachers' college, and Literature the only discipline addressed the moral issues of apartheid. (Literature boasted the only lecturers detained after the Sharpeville massacre.) Flushed with adolescent idealism, I joined the novelist Alan Paton's non-racial Liberal Party (whose candidates lost their deposits at every election). Bonded to the Education Department, my only hope of escaping a career of segregated high schools was admission to Honours. My natural preference was Literature, but Chaucer sorted out the committed sheep from the frivolous goats, and I was offered History as a reward for my memory for texts.

That talent was also my passport to three years of thesis-writing in Cambridge, where my proudest accomplishment was to marry Pamela, an Australian biochemist who shared my curiosity about an independent Africa. Students at Makerere University in Uganda were therefore the first people to help me grapple with the technical demands and political implications of History. In the aftermath of colonialism, teaching African History to African students was an immense privilege—and an exercise in delicacy. During vacations, oral history research on the Rwanda border revealed layers of ambivalence and identities that would have maddened my professional mentors.

African students and Ugandan colleagues and informants opened my eyes to neglected dimensions of my own South African history. I taught East

African history as an expatriate and South African history as an exile. The differences are profound. The mission of African historians in the 1960s was to unearth 'useable pasts', to enable people to build humane and prosperous futures. Since the most obvious obstacle to Uganda's peace and prosperity (before Idi Amin) was a corrosive tribalism, a concerted research agenda sought the trans-ethnic solidarities buried beneath the divisive structures of colonial 'indirect rule'. We hoped that Ugandans could then create their own meanings from these building blocks. In the event, Amin's coup in 1971 triggered a generation of turmoil and civil wars which made it impossible for Ugandans to control their own destinies.

By contrast to the local research, my book *Southern Africa since 1800* (with Balam Nyeko my Ugandan successor, now an exile himself, and Bertin Webster, my Canadian boss) imposed new meanings on old evidence. There is a combative quality to its arguments and its prose, which would be unthinkable in writing about other peoples' pasts. South Africa was my problem, my past and my future. What distinguished that text from its rivals was its recognition that South Africa is part of Africa, not merely an extension of European power or a segment of the British Empire. South African officials discouraged sale of the book, thereby giving it credentials that carried it into reprints and a second edition. More significantly, it found its way into resurgent classrooms and study groups where I might not have been welcome in person.

Meanwhile Uganda was sliding into systemic violence, my contract expired, and South Africa was still no place for my kind of history, or our kind of children. By 1972, African Studies were losing their glamour in America and Britain, so I applied with mounting anxiety for all advertised jobs. We were down to our last month's salary when I was offered the Chair of History at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG). The telegram advised that I acquire a visa before resigning my present position! The offer was so exciting that I turned down a tenured lectureship in Australia; and had no cause to regret that choice, although it meant waiting almost 20 years for a tenured post.

In 1972, many otherwise sensible people—including Ali Mazrui, Tom Mboya, some Australian officials, radical scholars generally and UPNG in particular—believed that African experience would illuminate Pacific choices. In reality the protracted interactions between Africa and Europe, the

resonance of African issues in American politics, the scale and the dynamics of indigenous societies made comparisons unhelpful. At UPNG, Zedekia Ngavirue was already teaching African history and politics, Sione Latukefu had already developed Pacific history courses, so two other teaching tasks assumed priority: to build on the pioneering Papua New Guinea research of Hank Nelson, John Waiko, Bill Gammage and Rod Lacey; and to construct and offer broad views of the world in which independent Papua New Guineans were about to engage. The camaraderie of historians was generous, and fostered collaborative projects: the history of agriculture (*A Time to Plant and a Time to Uproot*, edited with Catherine Snowden, published 1981); *Oral Traditions in Melanesia* (edited with Rod Lacey, 1981); and my monograph *Public Health in Papua New Guinea, 1884–1984*, (1989).

The 1970s were the climax of contention between Marxist and Liberal scholars, but relations across the Arts Faculty were so cordial that the debate was usually courteous. That context allowed us to develop an interdisciplinary Foundation Year which presented both perspectives with rare coherence. Literature was compulsory, alongside Political Economy. The structured conflict may have baffled students accustomed to high school teaching, and it may have missed the Pacific point, but at least the lecturers understood the programme and their roles in it. That may make it unique in the annals of higher education!

UPNG students persistently raised awkward questions. They have an exceptional history of agricultural production, and they work at least as hard and cleverly as anyone else. Why then are their lives shorter, their incomes smaller, and their global voice quieter than (say) Australians? Neither Marxist nor orthodox scholarship offers satisfying explanations. *Settler Capitalism*, published in 1982, was my flawed response to that challenge (see Denoon 1995). Paradoxically, the book which most directly addresses a Papua New Guinea agenda makes least reference to Papua New Guinea. And it is that set of issues which continues to shape my research agenda.

Oskar Spate's trilogy *The Pacific since Magellan* is among the best historical literature of our times: and his chief regret is that he could not be a poet. It is also mine. I once spent a year out of academia, writing *The Great Southern Hemisphere Novel*, but it reads like an interminable academic seminar. For many years I have tried to write the life of Ulli Beier. In exile since adolescence, he has never accepted the morally neutral role of an

expatriate, and he has made more positive and purposeful contributions to African and Pacific self-awareness than any number of social scientists; but without poetry I cannot analyse or even describe that identity-work. It is no accident that Epeli Hau'ofa's insights into Island politics and economics flow more from his poetry than his expertise in kinship. During a lifetime in academia I have experienced empiricist, nationalist, racist, liberationist, Marxist, feminist and post-structural interpretations, besides some whose names are mercifully forgotten. Theoretical rigour alone does not make great teachers and writers. It certainly helps, but has no value without three qualities, which are hard to teach but vital to cultivate: imagination in asking questions, passion in researching them, and poetry in expression.

Reference

DENOON, Donald, 1995. "Settler Capitalism Unsettled", *New Zealand Journal of History*, 29(2);129-41.
