

Obituary

Wise, humane and sagacious

a tribute to Dorothy Shineberg (1927–2004)

Dorothy Shineberg (née Munro), who succumbed to cancer on 19 August 2004, was a legend among Pacific historians and an ornament to the discipline. She wrote *They Came for Sandalwood* (1967), the pioneering and probably definitive account of the nineteenth century sandalwood trade in Melanesia, and in retirement completed her long project *The People Trade*, a sharply focused study of imported Pacific Island labourers in New Caledonia. In a teaching career that spanned four decades, she developed the first stand-alone course in Pacific History and inspired successive cohorts of students. After her retirement from the Australian National University she taught briefly at USP.

Dorothy Munro was born in Melbourne, the third of five daughters. Her father died when she was still a child, leaving to her mother the daunting prospect of bringing up a large family during the depression years. Mrs Munro never considered the possibility of her family being less than self-reliant and the eldest two girls were sent out to work to enable the other three to continue their education. Dorothy Munro went to the University of Melbourne and graduated in History, during the golden age of the History Department under Professor Max Crawford. After graduation, she tutored there for a few months before going in 1948 to the Australian School of Public Administration (ASOPA) in Sydney, where patrol officers for what was then the Territory of Papua and New Guinea were trained. She subsequently went to Smith College in the United States for postgraduate training, and there wrote an MA thesis (submitted in 1952) on the British occupation of Indonesia, while she tutored for Massimo (Max) Salvadori, an Italian radical liberal whose universalist

values made a lasting impression. Much of this is recounted in an autobiographical article that was published in volume 20 of this journal.

They Came for Sandalwood is the work for which Dorothy Shineberg will be best remembered. It developed—during her term as Research Fellow in Professor J.W. Davidson’s Department of Pacific History at the Australian National University (ANU)—out of her 1965 Melbourne PhD thesis. *Sandalwood* was seminal in the development of Pacific Islands historiography. More than any other book, it was the paradigmatic statement of the so-called ‘Davidson school’ of Pacific history. *Sandalwood* was original in presenting history in a way that incorporated Melanesian perceptions, while at the same time avoiding a romanticised and idealised view of Melanesian culture. It also set a standard for close, documentary research—not always easy in the investigation of the activities of nineteenth century Pacific trade and traders. In its affirmation of Islander agency, and in the cogency of its argument, *Sandalwood* was enormously influential.

To her lasting regret, Dr Shineberg was not appointed to a permanent research position at ANU. That was the tragedy of her professional life, a tremendous disappointment to her and a loss to scholarship. She was channelled instead into undergraduate teaching, which she did remarkably well. She would have been the first to admit that she was not a flamboyant or entertaining lecturer. But what was lacking in histrionic presentation was made up for in careful preparation. Her real impact was in tutorials, in one-to-one sessions with her students, and in postgraduate supervision. Her reputation as teacher was widely bruited by her students; and her Head of Department (Manning Clark) spoke for everyone with the observation that she ‘brought grace and wisdom to the teaching of Pacific history’. She had a sure understanding of when to encourage, how to counsel and at what point to admonish. The self-reliance that her mother instilled carried over into her teaching: she expected her students to show initiative as well as enthusiasm, and she took early retirement when they started asking for a bunch of photocopied articles as a substitute for their own library research. It cannot have been said about many other lecturers that their (unmeasurable) impact in the classroom has been as influential as their (tangible) published output.

Wise, humane and sagacious, Dorothy Shineberg leaves behind positive memories, just as in life she was always positive in her outlook. She once said that she felt fortunate in having all her life known so many interesting people—without, I suspect, consciously realising that others considered themselves fortunate in knowing her. She herself was intensely interesting and very good company, noted among other things for her robust sense of humour. There were other sides to her life besides being an academic historian, including an informed appreciation of classical music. Like many academics from Melbourne she was passionate about her football (AFL of course) club (Collingwood). She was an equally ardent, and knowledgeable, follower of the Australian cricket team, although disliking the boorishness of some of the players. Not least were her concern for social justice, a product of her precarious upbringing, and her love for her family. She was described as a lioness—‘and no lioness,’ said her daughter Susan, ‘defended her cubs more fiercely’. Undemonstrative in many respects, Dorothy Shineberg had spirit, and was spirited when aroused. The illnesses of her final years left her spirit undiminished, even when she knew that the end was nigh.

At her commemorative service, a nautical analogy crossed my mind as her coffin was being lowered from sight. The coffin was, in my mind’s eye, a ship—not sinking without trace but simply going over the horizon, one day to reappear. Of course the ship will not return to its port of origin. But her writings live on and, indelible, the memories remain.

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List of Writings***By Dorothy Shineberg** (excludes book reviews)

- 1952 (as Dorothy Munro) 'The first eight months of the British occupation of Indonesia. Unpublished MA thesis, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
- 1965 'The sandalwood trade in the islands of the south-west Pacific, 1830–1865, with special reference to the problems and effects of early contact between Europeans and Melanesians. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Vic.
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*This bibliography is as comprehensive as I could make it in the time available. My gratitude goes to Justin Cargill, Victoria University Library, for his assistance in its preparation. *DM*

