

## PNG Writing, Writing PNG

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**This is the second issue of *Meanjin on Papua New Guinea*.** The first, in 1975, was 'commemorative'—an attempt, Jim Davidson wrote in his introduction, to present PNG 'in the round, at this moment of Independence'. Twenty-eight years later, this issue is neither commemorative nor an attempt to present PNG in the round. With a double focus on PNG Writing and Writing PNG, it began with the modest hope of gathering together voices to consider the textual politics and representations of the postcolonial nation. In putting the issue together, even this small task has proved less round than we had hoped. Which might in itself say something about a subject that, far from having the smooth contours of a round, is scratched and layered, contradictory and contested. From the vantage point of a journal editor, there is a weird conundrum: there is at once a wealth of material that spreads like a web in many directions, and yet when you try to put it in some kind of order (if only for the pages of a journal) there are shadowy and persistent absences, a sense of something not quite seen.

Jim Davidson went to Papua New Guinea for his issue of *Meanjin* and came back with a raft of promises, only to find himself 'doomed to watch from a cast iron balcony as vainly as any practitioner of Cargo cult'. While celebratory, that issue recognised the complex of stresses involved in the transition from a *Territory* made up of many hundreds of traditional tribal cultures into a modern postcolonial nation. Hank Nelson's magisterial essay in this issue suggests that the way in which Australian colonial rule ended was its great failing, and already in the 1975 issue there was a dour recognition of Australia's tardiness in setting in place the infrastructure that could support not only national governance but also a national culture. 'There is urgency and innocence in almost equal proportions in PNG today,' Davidson wrote, 'so that many of the articles ... read as if the contributors were holding their breath.' Most of his contributors were white— but not for want of trying. The PNG writers who promised essays when he visited Port Moresby proved too busy or preoccupied to write. At the moment of Independence, why would they be wanting to write for an Australian literary magazine? 'We have been left to farewell ourselves,' Davidson wrote.

This issue also has fewer PNG writers than we hoped. And again it was not for want of trying. Several pieces in this issue look back to the period leading up to and through Independence as 'golden' years when the arts flourished, poetry was published, cultural institutions were funded, writers were writing, theatres were

full, and there could still be some thought of a national culture. So it was surprising to find that the 'overtaxed' and 'overburdened' condition of the educated elite was already apparent in the 1975 issue of *Meanjin*. There were several poems and two pieces of short fiction, but only one essay by a Papua New Guinean. Leo Hannet wrote 'The Case for Bougainville Secession'—and he couldn't be tracked down to revisit the case for this issue. The nearest we came was to messengers who reported that he was busy with politics.

But Leo Hannet is a presence in this issue. Director Peter Trist remembers the electrified response to the 1967 production, by the University of Papua New Guinea drama society, of his funny and anti-colonial *Em Rod bilong Kago*, the first PNG play, and the first in Tok Pisin. The university took its first intake of degree students that year and Hannet was among the talented group of students who were writing and performing. Ulli Beier, who wrote for the earlier issue of *Meanjin* though not for this one, is credited with encouraging and promoting them. He joined the English Department from Nigeria in 1967 and introduced courses in creative writing. He made the point that might seem obvious today but was a radical sentiment when he arrived at UPNG, and still needed to be reiterated in 1980 when he edited *Black Writing from New Guinea* for UQP: 'New Guinea is probably the most anthropologized country in the world, and there has been a continuous flood of books by missionaries, administrative officers and travellers. Yet the New Guineans themselves remained silent.' At UPNG he saw the chance and he encouraged it.

The powerful textual strategy of taking up an oppositional stance to Australia as the colonial power moved into a more ambivalent register when a date was set for Independence and the focus shifted to envisioning a future for a postcolonial state. It was a shift that took many talented Papua New Guineans away from imaginative writing and the politics of the text into the more powerful arena of politics and government. The colonial audience for whom they had written lost its potency, and the route to a local, voting audience was not through text, but oratory. Papua New Guineans, at every level from village to national parliament, are great orators.

For those who continued to write over the next decade, there were new theatre companies to join, the National Broadcasting Commission to write for, filmmakers to work with, but the policy of support for a national culture was slowly eroded. As William Takaku points out, the new mastas who once were writing, or at least supporting the dissenting voices, began to fear that they were now the butt of criticism and the textual joke. Past and present become contested from different perspectives when roads crumble and forests are sold to loggers, when libraries moulder and funding is withdrawn or diverted, when audiences evaporate. By the early 1980s, it wasn't so much a case of writers travelling *Ten Thousand Years in a Life Time*, as Albert Maori Kiki called his 1968 autobiography, as finding themselves caught within a complex and uncertain new subjectivity, endangered by the encounter of two conflicting systems and remade by that encounter.

This was, and remains, Russell Soaba's subject. He is the only PNG writer to appear in both issues of *Meanjin*. He alone has written across the span of these twenty-eight years. His novel *Wanpis* should be a classic of postcolonial writing. It was published by the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies in 1980, but has not been published in Australia. It tells the story of the life and death of Jimi Damebo the *lusman* mixed-race boy who smuggled the books of James Baldwin and Richard Wright into the mission school and renamed himself James St Nativeson. At university he didn't find anyone to teach him what he needed to know about writing; there were too many impositions and expectations that didn't include

him. He wasn't spurred to write by anti-colonial rage; his eye wasn't on the politics or the wealth of the future. A lost, intense young man of 'rootless dreams' driven by 'desperation, a lusman's problem', he writes words that 'other Papuans don't bother to read', is looked up occasionally by the editor of an Australian literary magazine or published 'in a literary journal somewhere which has some relevance for the underdeveloped nations'. Jimi Damebo ends up squashed on the road like a frog. "Careful there," an Australian called to the men who were pushing the coffin, "that's your nation's destiny."

There's a dispiriting story to be read between the two PNG issues of *Meanjin*, and it's told in various ways in the lines of this issue. It's a story that tracks the high hopes, or at least the high energy, of those 'golden' years to the degradation of cultural institutions today. The beautiful National Theatre Company building is empty, the libraries are depleted and there are no bookshops, no publishers, no editors. 'There may be shops that look like [bookshops]' Russell Soaba tells me, 'but these sell brochures mainly ... no fiction, poetry or drama. The reading culture is virtually non-existent and the only people who read for literary pleasure are those within university circles. Our [campus] bookshop here is a sorry sight. But you can buy Albert Wendt's *Nua Nua* for some K100, and the economic recession in PNG cannot easily allow that.' There is distribution of school texts and some provision for university texts, though these are in limited numbers, Steve Winduo says, even when requested by a lecturer. 'I buy most of my books overseas when I get out,' he says. 'We don't have the luxury of bookshops that sell writings by Australians, Indonesians or Americans.' He has been struggling to run the literary journal *Savannah Flames* using his own resources, 'as no-one is prepared to put money into publishing literary works'. Nor are there any editors for such works. His own books, published in Fiji, are not available in PNG.

Yet people *are* writing; there's imaginative energy and there's intellectual commitment to the task of finding paths through limitations that from an Australian perspective can seem crippling. For Steven Winduo there is a quality of mind in the short history of PNG writing to be built on. William Takaku is working to take drama back to the village in a pedagogic role. Regis Stella sees the task of the writer as confronting corruption and bad governance, even when it means going against the Melanesian way of not criticising elders and leaders. In his novel *Gutsini Posa* (Rough Seas), he takes a long view; if intellectuals are to rewrite the critical conscience of a democracy, it will take generations. In this *Meanjin* he makes a passionate plea for the possibility of writing becoming once again a locus for dissent and conscience. It is a vision more radical and more dangerous than the anti-colonial rhetoric of the first generation of writers. But to whom is it addressed?

For those writing in PNG, the question of audience has become critical. Stella, like others in this issue, might be writing for *Meanjin* on this occasion but they know there isn't a *dimdim* audience. Steven Winduo isn't the only one to feel a greater sense of community with writers of the Pacific than with Australian literary culture. All lament the narrowing of reading culture in PNG. Without an audience in PNG, Regis Stella's plea will lie unheeded on the page.

On first reading, Eamonn McKeown's essay on the uses of literacy in a highland village seems only to complete a gloomy picture. The villagers don't read. Even when a rumour sweeps the valley that the Vatican and the World Bank are taking over all their land and the soldiers are coming to drive them off, they don't think to check with a newspaper. Yet there is prestige attached to literacy, and these are a people with highly fictive imaginations who enjoy the drama of stories and scandals and rumours. They do mind about corruption and collapsing

infrastructure, and they want to make their wishes known. So, by another reading, this could be fertile ground.

The question of audience is also raised by several Australian contributors, who sound a note of dismay at what they see as a declining interest here in writing about PNG. When we do hear of PNG, it is usually of violence, corruption, poor governance and the 'arc of instability' on our doorstep. There's not much that projects the imaginative richness of the country, its inventiveness, its performative instincts, its humour. While this issue has been in preparation, there have been two occasions on which PNG nudged into the Australian newspapers. In March 2003 there was the Centre for Independent Studies report 'Papua New Guinea on the Brink'. At the end of June the task force to the Solomons was announced, and with this change in Canberra's Pacific policy, the question that arose in almost every commentary was whether PNG would be next.

There are many anecdotes of glazed indifference when it comes to PNG. But if you speak to Australians who have lived there, even briefly, it is a different story. They know that there is a spirit to the place that can make everything else seem somehow flat, and it doesn't take much prompting for them to talk of the way it has shaken them around, changed their perspective, even their lives. This is perhaps why, outside journalism and the academic disciplines, so much Australian writing about PNG has taken the form of memoir. There are some fine pieces in this issue that capture well the energies and fascination, as well as the challenge, of living in PNG.

As a textual response to cross-cultural experience, memoir can be problematic. Writing that comes from the experience of 'being there' raises contentious questions of speaking position and audience. Who speaks to whom, and for whom, and to what effect? When the postcolonial Australian writes of the mind that is engaged and changed by PNG, how do they represent the mind of the people among whom this change occurs? Whose story is it, and whose can it be? 'Life writing', as Peter Hempenstall has recently put it, 'is a genre where these questions bite most hard.' Inez Baranay writes in this issue about the reaction from post-colonial theorists (who haven't 'been there') to her *Rascal Rain*, a memoir of her year working in Enga Province. 'Writing the other' can get you into trouble, she discovered. A book that might be admired within autobiographical studies, for its interest in the shifts and transitions in the formation of self, caused discomfort and disapproval because the culture and the personalities she was up against were Melanesian. More often memoir has been marked by a tentativeness, a drawing back, a skirting around, which is understandable, often necessary, sometimes admirable, but it also aggravates the problem. With the best of intentions, the Australian can be cast into mid-stage, leaving the Papua New Guinean strangely out of focus in a text saturated with atmosphere, landscape, bizarre anecdote.

Trevor Shearston has until recently taken the position that he will write fiction only from the point of view of the Australian in Papua New Guinea, and not attempt to write from inside the subjectivity of Papua New Guineans. It is not an easy line to walk, to write the narratives of culture clash, colonialism and decolonisation, without trespassing on other speaking positions or, alternatively, without silencing or distorting voices and perspectives that are rarely given their own textual voice. He has walked it well and is the only Australian who has written about PNG over the same span of time that Russell Soaba has written. This *Meanjin* brings you his first leap into PNG skin—for reasons he explains in 'Memory Stone'.

Historian Hank Nelson, the sole Australian contributor to both PNG issues of *Meanjin*, has said elsewhere that in writing of the meeting of these cultures, he

tries to take a metaphoric position 'somewhere in the Coral Sea', 'explaining Papua New Guineans to Australians, Australians to Papua New Guineans, Australians to Australians, but not completing the reflections by trying to tell Papua New Guineans about Papua New Guineans'. The Coral Sea strategy has worked well for historians. Bill Gammage's *The Sky Travellers*, Amirah Inglis's *Karo* and Hank Nelson's own *Black, White and Gold* are great pieces of Australian writing as well as of PNG history.

For those forms of writing, like the novel, that take imagination and the territories of self as their subject, the question is trickier. It's not only that there are different versions of history at stake, or different textual interests, but different concepts of self, different experiences of being. Epli Hau'ofa, who taught at UPNG in its early years and has since written fiction as well as academic anthropology, now questions whether writing fiction—in which Western ideas of subjectivity are so deeply imbricated—is of any relevance at all for Oceania. He pointed out nearly thirty years ago that for Melanesians to be expected to talk about themselves, or to hear others talk out of a self-driven agency, sat uncomfortably with their very different registrations of self. If I understand Marilyn Strathern's difficult argument in *The Gender of the Gift*, Melanesian subjectivity, sociality and gender imagery can only be understood through the elaborate and fluid processes of exchange in which they operate. This is not to say, as we might say, that a self is articulated within a complex of social relations; but that it is those social relations. Simple words like *T* and 'we', the foundation words of the novel, have very different registers. This poses a complex of difficult questions for the novelist of PNG.

Looking at it from the Australian side, the Coral Sea metaphor doesn't quite work for fiction. We can't write as Papua New Guineans, or *for* Papua New Guineans, but we can engage imaginatively and intellectually with Papua New Guinea-ness. Randolph Stow has shown that it is possible to peel back the obliterating view of our own subjectivities to allow a glimpse—more than a glimpse—into a Melanesian felt experience and profoundly different ways of social being. In *Visitants*, which was begun in the early 1970s and published in 1979, he writes from Melanesian points of view, giving voice to Melanesian thought and emotion in a way that would be hard for a contemporary writer. Alert to the postcolonial, we are hedged in anxieties about how to write Papua New Guinean characters without appropriating or exoticising them, without using them as a screen for our own projections as our colonial predecessors did. It may be that this, rather than audience, is the critical issue for Australians writing PNG. The question of how to negotiate otherness has become so vexed for readers as well as writers that novelists too often stand back from it—which is to nobody's advantage, either here or there. It also leaves a curious absence or lacuna in Australian cultural life, for as writing in this issue shows, PNG is deep in the Australian imaginary as well as in our shared historical experience.

While putting this issue together, I expected not to get as much writing from PNG as I hoped. But I wasn't prepared for the raft of promises from Australian writers that didn't come in. There are not a lot of people writing about PNG outside economic journalism or the academic disciplines. I couldn't find anyone to write a review, for instance. Either they had already reviewed the book on offer, or they knew the author too well, or it was too ephemeral a task. But something else was also going on. Some academics were tempted by the prospect of writing in ways they described as 'looser' or more 'impressionistic'. Several accepted eagerly but in the doing of it stumbled on the vexed issue of representation and otherness, found it too hard, or hated what they wrote. Some younger scholars, still in the orbit of postgraduate research, felt they were not yet ready to have their words

appear in print. I was particularly sad to lose an essay on the poetics of women's voices in PNG and another on the ways in which cargo cults have been written about. An essay which came in just too late tracked the response to corruption and government pressure on journalists from *Wantok Niuspepa*. Another rethought the antecedents of modernism through the lineage of Malinowski. These absences are disappointments in the context of this particular journal, but they bring to mind an observation Hank Nelson made in correspondence, which runs counter to prognostications of a dwindling audience. At ANU, he says, seminars on PNG are becoming more rather than less well attended. Sometimes it's standing room only, he says. While the ANU seminar room is not the best place to plumb the national psyche, it may be an indication that another round of intellectual interest is building, another generation of writers and another view.

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*The quotations from Peter Hempenstall and Hank Nelson are taken from their essays in Brij V. Lal and Peter Hempenstall (eds), Pacific Lives, Pacific Places—Journal of Pacific History (2001), pp. 4 and 33 respectively. The quotations from Russell Soaba and Steven Winduo on the state of bookshops in PNG come from personal e-mails. I would like to acknowledge Evelyn Ellerman and Neil Maclean, who were co-conveners with me of the 'PNG: Then and Now' symposium at the University of Sydney in July 2002. Several pieces in this issue have been developed from papers delivered there.*