

Book Review

New Guinea, Crossing Boundaries and History, by Clive Moore (2003), University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu [ISBN 0-8248-2485-7]

Moore's book attempts to give a 'total' history of the island of New Guinea. Though he can leave much detail of offshore parts of 'New Guinea' to Matthew Spriggs's *The Island Melanesians*, Moore necessarily makes appropriate mention of PNG's islands as well. Other than Gavin Souter's slim work *New Guinea: The Last Unknown* (1963), the only complete histories of New Guinea seem to be in Dutch and German. Moore mentions works by Haga, Wichmann and an edited *Nieuw Guinea* of 1953-1954. A Dutch scholar recently suggested to me that other collective works in the Dutch language might also qualify, especially some of the 1960s. And there is, as Moore says, the collection of documents on New Guinea history edited by R.J. Lacey in 1975. But Moore's work might be unique in English, which would be reason enough to acquire it.

Several causes help explain why it took until 2003 for the academic world and the general reader to be provided with such a study. The geographic exploration of what is now Papua New Guinea ended only with the journeys of the Leahy brothers, in the 1930s, marking the end of Europe's Great Age of Exploration. For some time the island was divided, first into three, and most recently into two. Academic study tended to follow the national interests and priorities of the European colonisers, and was usually a mere rider to the study of things and places which were of more interest to the 'centre', whether that be German, Dutch or Australian. And traditionally, with exploration coming late to the West and even later to the East, European concern for this area had just about been exhausted by the time the country was being opened up — that is, except for the hosts of anthropologists, who were professionally uninterested in history and often still are. Traditional Indonesian attitudes to *orang papua* and to all national minorities also allow little attention being given to New Guinean history from the decolonised West, despite the dedicated efforts of individuals like Aditjondro on 'minority' matters.

So there are some 'great divides' separating writing on New Guinea-as-a-whole into many parts. There is the halving of the huge island between the academics of different colonising powers, one of which has a language (Dutch) not featuring in the list of languages commonly required of academics. Then there is the narrow focus and lack of historical interest of the twentieth century anthropological world. Moore bridges as many of these gaps as he can. If he does not have one of the languages of scholarship he seems to rely on direct contacts with experts from those countries.

Of course, he also has to rely on experts in prehistory and archeology, linguistics and modern ethnology, and has read widely in those fields. It seems that he maintains extensive personal contacts with such researchers and then he picks a plausible up-to-date opinion in contested matters, which fall in their 'territory'. In prehistory there are, and will always remain, many contested matters, both broad and narrow. He even descends to matters of fine detail, such as the origin of the name Mount Hagen. Those interested in this contested point may like to know what horse Moore 'backs' here: it is Carl Lauterbach, from the Yuat river, in 1896, p.171. Which von Hagen is not mentioned, whether the patrol officer murdered not long before, or some famous figure back in Germany. Maybe we are invited to look at his source, and he gives us quite a bibliography.

Of course, in a book of 200 pages there is little place for details so fine, though some detail is periodically needed to prevent his treatment from floating along entirely on a raft of generalisations. History must constantly move from the particular to the 'explanatory' general, and back again. An error, or perhaps a typo, which I must correct is his printed statement that the name 'melanesia' comes from the Greek *melos*. This word means 'a song', the Greek word for 'black' being *melas* in the dictionaries, and in nominal compounds, *melan*.

There are very few misprints, and the book is beautifully laid out. Given the prominence of its illustrations, it could be mistaken for a coffee table book by those who don't dip into its often-dense contents. The matter is at its densest in his account of the earlier waves of migration, the linguistic situation past and present, and the motley chronicle of 'explorers' known to have visited the waters (and less often, the land) of New Guinea. But these sections are separated by more digestible and more well worked material, some of which is of immediate interest.

Because of its enormous sweep, the book probably needs such occasional proof that the writer is a serious historian, who not only has taught PNG history for a lifetime, but has also done archival research himself—in Queensland newspapers, on Queensland 'kanaka' history. He calls himself a 'novice', and no doubt he often 'transgresses' current academic boundaries. But someone needs periodically to transgress the ever-multiplying boundaries of modern professional study. Someone must synthesise, make connections, rise over 'description' to 'explanation'.

Moore has personal experience of PNG, solid academic background, and anyone writing the history of a third world country whose first European 'discovery' was 1512 and which was largely ignored for the next 400 years must rely on the specialised writing of many sorts of narrow experts, even if his general treatment ends up being a distortion of what these experts consider truth. One might say that general truths always are untrue to some of their particulars—this certainly seems to be true of history writing. One must also read monographs and original sources, and not remain content with general accounts. Moore's book can be used as a helpful guide to the sources and the monographs, but the sources are not very accessible to those of us living in

New Guinea, and for many readers Moore will probably have to replace such sources and monographs. To study PNG you still have to leave PNG.

Open questions are given a 'most likely' solution: Australian-New Guinean connections in prehistory, possible early links with China, the cause of the extinction of the old megafauna (a pan-Pacific question), and the nature of the 'phylum' of languages claimed to stretch 'trans-New Guinea', ignoring, of course, all modern borders.

His treatment is balanced in many ways. He tries not to skip too fast over those unrecorded pre-colonial millennia. He honestly faces unpopular trends, such as that of creeping Asianisation and its most modern precursor, the language of Indonesia, which he predicts cannot much longer stop its eastwards march at the border between Propinsi Papua and the Independent State of Papua New Guinea. He admits that the cultures and the individuals of this part of the world have often been seen as 'ugly', but does his best to empathise with the local peoples, and to view the history-writing invaders from the Melanesian point of view, and in the context of their period. The competence with which local groups managed their societies is an increasing, pro-Melanesian theme. In this he is paying a tribute to the ancestors of the present inhabitants, a sort of indigenised history writing.

Readers will all find some area, which is not as well treated as they may like. Missions, for instance, are given brief treatment, but are not ignored. The German experience may feature more prominently in the index than in the body text. But lack of attention to Indonesian cultures is an omission made by choice, because Moore began his academic life with studies on south-east Asian history. No doubt he had to narrow his geographic focus to write this book. There is plenty of attention given to the more important peripheral regions, such as the islands of Torres Strait and Maluku (both historically more prominent than the mainland in different modern periods).

This is a history of New Guinea and its close surrounds which refuses to treat its subject as a mere addendum to the discovery of the Great South Land (often anachronistically interpreted as meaning merely 'Australia'), to the history of British or German or Dutch or even Australian colonisation. It tries to emphasise things not given sufficient attention in previous attempts at a general history of the area, especially the importance of networks of trade and the range of leadership types actually found among supposedly 'chief-less' peoples. It is, of course, up to date on the 'discourse' of the term *race*. It shows critical empathy for its subject, the people and the peoples of New Guinea, and any better work will have to be much larger, be written by a team, and use this book of Moore's as a firm foundation and inspiration.

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