

# 23

## ANU made me, but which ANU is mine?<sup>1</sup>

My Australian National University  
extinguished lecture

Now all my teachers are dead except silence

— W.S. Merwin<sup>2</sup>

*Valedictory lecture delivered at The Australian National University on 2 February 2016. The title is not entirely original. Eugene Kamenka, the ANU historian of ideas, called his farewell lecture two decades ago 'Australia made me, but which Australia is mine?' My immeasurable thanks, again, to Doug Munro for reading a draft of this lecture and offering many helpful comments. I am also grateful to Nic Halter, who chaired the lecture and whose conversations helped shape my thoughts. Ganesh Chand critiqued the paper with insight. My colleague Clive Moore shared with me his own experience of retirement and the changing culture of the academy.<sup>3</sup>*

---

1 Originally appeared in *Pacific Journal of Education* 1(1) (2017): 89–110.

2 W.S. Merwin, 'A scale in May', in *The Second Four Books of Poems by W.S. Merwin* (Port Townsend, WA; Copper Canyon Press, 1993).

3 See also Clive Moore, 'A glass still full: Retirement and the historian', *Pacific Journal of Education* 1(1) (2017): 57–71.

Once upon a time, a generation or so ago, professors appointed to chairs were expected, as matter of course, to give an inaugural lecture before their peers and the wider community. Professors were supposed to profess and a key element was via an inaugural lecture. They were expected to outline their field of research, their scholarly interests and the direction in which they intended to take teaching and research in their departments and how they wished to reconfigure their disciplines.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, the lectures were serious, even solemn, occasions. Professors were scholars of prestige and influence within and beyond the academy. They had something to say, as Manning Clark might put it. Their decisions decided the destinies and destinations of those under their charge. The culture of patronage was alive and well and powerful. But those days are long gone, and the times have changed. ‘God Professors’ are now mythical figures of ancient history and objects sometimes of some puzzled bemusement among the younger generation.

These days, it is grant-dispensing bodies, such as the Australian Research Council, and not heads of departments who decide the fate of scholars. Routinely, the ability to attract large grants now matters in university appointments and promotions. It is an important part of the ‘selection criteria’. ‘Being clubbable’, as ANU Foundation Professor of Law Geoffrey Sawyer thought should be considered in making appointments, is today a blessed memory.<sup>5</sup> And the current intellectual climate is fractured, its assumptions and understandings contested. Authority and consensus in matters of scholarship, once widely understood and shared, have been displaced by notions of tentativeness and partiality and the ultimate unknowability of the world around us. Relativism rules the day. Affirming standards in matters of historical judgement will appear elitist and antiquarian.

So, instead of an agenda-setting inaugural lecture, I will content myself with an ‘extinguished’ lecture as I prepare to retire from the academy after nearly 40 years, 25 of them spent at The Australian National University. My focus is not what I would do—too late for that now—but what I have done and how I got to where I eventually did. The academic world I entered in 1977 is not the world I left behind when I retired at the end of 2015. They

---

<sup>4</sup> I am thinking here of James Wightman Davidson’s famous agenda-setting inaugural lecture, *Problems of Pacific History: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered in Canberra, 23 November 1954* (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1955).

<sup>5</sup> S.G. Foster and Margaret M. Varghese, *The Making of the Australian National University, 1946–1996* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), p. 105.

are in fact chalk and cheese. The sunny confidence we had in our ability to make a difference, to make the world a better place, our unshakeable faith in the nobility of our profession and its place in the broader cultural life of the community, have been shaken by the incessant demands of modern academic life and its relentless culture of accountability and demand for ‘relevance’. The intellectual and cultural climate has changed, but so, too, has the technology of acquiring knowledge. The transition from the prehistoric age of the ‘selectric’ typewriter and the liquid whitener to the mystifying and ever changing offerings of the computer has not been easy and is the cause, dare I say it, of much private grief and frustration. The world has indeed ‘become stranger, the pattern more complicated’,<sup>6</sup> to use the words of T.S. Eliot (of whom I suspect the present generation would have no idea, but who was a cultural icon in our time. I still vividly remember listening to Eliot reading his *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* on a scratchy gramophone in the final year of high school, courtesy of our English teacher—now professor—Subramani).<sup>7</sup>

It is easy, on an occasion such as this, for ageing academics to grind old axes, gripe about how the world has changed for the worse, about how universities are not what they once were or how they should be. I will not disappoint you. I will do all this in a contained, moderate fashion, accepting the Naipaulian dictum that the world is what it is: ‘men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it’.<sup>8</sup> What I would like to do is to provide, if I can, glimpses of times and circumstances that formed and deformed me and my generation, and to see how and why things have changed, for better or for worse. I want to bear truthful witness to my time and place, but I also fear that some might find this piece a depressing dirge, mourning for a time that has passed and will never return. My hope, though, is that at least some colleagues of my generation will find in my footsteps echoes of their own, a testimony to their experience in the academy as well.

Let me begin with a brief account of my background to provide some context to what follows. I was born in a rural, sugarcane-growing village in Vanua Levu, Fiji’s second largest island, in a family of six boys and two girls, son of unlettered parents eking a meagre existence on a 10-

6 T.S. Eliot, *East Coker*, 1969, is available freely in several places and in various poetry anthologies. This quote is from memory.

7 T.S. Eliot, *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915), available from: [www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock) (accessed 26 May 2019).

8 V.S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River* (London: Alfred A Knopf, 1979), p. 1.

acre leased farm. Large families and leased land were the two staples of the Indo-Fijian community in the postwar years. Large families for reliable labour supply and as a bulwark against the depredations of the outside world, a hedge against old age and infirmity. Land was leased because we could never really own the land on which we depended for our livelihood. We were tenants, literally and metaphorically, and so we have remained. It was understood, though never expressly stated, that there would be no future on the farm for all of us and that we would have to do well at school to find employment elsewhere.

We did. Primary education was put on a firmer footing in the 1940s as a result of reforms recommended by the New Zealand educationist F.B. Stephens. School-age children were expected, as a matter of course, to complete at least some years of primary schooling. We took to schools like duck to water, partly, I suspect, to escape the boredom and routine of life at home. I still have with me books I read in primary school over half a century ago. After eight years at the Tabia Sanatan Dharam Primary School (founded in 1945), I attended Labasa Secondary, now Labasa College, the island's premier secondary school, established in 1954. We were the last cohort of Fiji students to receive a 'colonial' education, sitting the New Zealand Certificate and New Zealand University Entrance exams, which had a couple of years earlier succeeded the Empire-wide Cambridge Junior and Senior Certificate exams. There was nothing about Fiji or the Pacific in what we studied at school. Our primary reference points were England, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. So, in our history class, we studied the Russian revolution, causes of World War I, the rise of Nazism and fascism, the unification of Italy and Germany, the Victorian gold rushes and the history of the Liberal Party in New Zealand. In English, we studied the classic works of English literature (Dickens, the Brontë sisters, D.H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, William Golding and Shakespeare). In geography, there was a bit on the industrial revolution and much more on the agricultural developments in Australia and New Zealand. We memorised the names of big mountains and rivers and cities. We were mesmerised by pictures of huge grain harvesters on endless brown plains. I can still recall exam questions about the irrigation problems in Renmark (South Australia) and the population problems of the Cook Islands, then a New Zealand territory. Some mistook Renmark for Denmark, and we had no idea about the Cook Islands. I still vividly recall a friend in Brisbane telling me about his Senior Cambridge English paper in the mid-1960s. There was a question on the 'Phenomenon of

the Beatles'. He proceeded to write a long essay on the 'Phenomenon of the Beetles' then plaguing the country's coconut industry. And he still passed!

I have no problem with such a curriculum, but it has come in for criticism by postcolonial scholars, such as Edward Said, who have suggested that the colonising of the mind was an integral and insidious part of the broader imperial project of conquest and subjugation.<sup>9</sup> It might have been, but that for us was not the point, I now realise. That broadening experience of learning about other pasts and other places enlivened our lives and lessened our sense of isolation. We came from a limited, unwritten world just a generation out of indenture; we had no vocabulary or narrative of our own to speak of; we had no books at home except some religious texts that were invariably more revered than actually read. Our colonial education gave us indispensable tools to understand our world, to read and write. It widened our horizon and the value of that, for us living in prehistoric villages on the outer fringes of poverty, was immeasurable. A curiosity about the world that came from that early exposure has remained with me, along with a deep sense of the essential interconnectedness of humanity across barriers of class and colour. Nothing human is alien to me. I still smart at the words 'who cares' in discussions of problems in remote parts of the world. And books and reading—the magic of the printed word, the craftsmanship of good prose, an elegant turn of phrase—retain for me a magic that has lasted a lifetime.<sup>10</sup>

After high school came university. The critical factor here was the opening of the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Suva in 1968. It marked a turning point in modern Fijian and Pacific Islands history.<sup>11</sup> Until then, a select number of students, bright, wealthy or well connected, went to universities in Australia and New Zealand and returned with tertiary qualifications. For the overwhelming majority of students in Fiji, tertiary education was simply beyond reach financially. The opening of the university changed that for good for bright students from poor

9 See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978); and *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Chatto and Eindus, 1994).

10 Recounted in Brij V. Lal, *Mr Tulsi's Store: A Fijian Journey* (Canberra: Pandanus Books: 2001), pp. 59–80.

11 See Brij V. Lal, 'Laucala Bay', in *Pacific Places, Pacific Histories: Essays in Honor of Robert C Kiste*, ed. Brij V. Lal (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), pp. 237–58.

homes. Fiji would not be the same again.<sup>12</sup> The timing was right as well. The Pacific Islands were decolonising, and there was an urgent need for massive numbers of trained people to staff the bureaucracy of the newly independent states. Most of us went to university on government scholarships; me to train for a career as a high school teacher of English and history. Midstream into my education, good grades and the kindly interest of some teachers ensured that there were other plans in store for me.

The education we received at the USP was deliberately instrumentalist in content and orientation as signalled in the names of the foundation schools that constituted the university: School of Education, School of Social and Economic Development and School of Natural Resources. We were expected to be cogs, well-trained cogs, to be sure, but cogs nonetheless, in the wheels of national development programs. Most were. What we learnt at university was sufficient for the purposes of local employment, but not nearly enough to equip us for academic careers. Knowledge of the intellectual traditions and protocols of our disciplines had to be acquired privately, haphazardly, and many gaps remained. The situation has not changed much. Indeed, all the anecdotal evidence suggests that the education might have regressed as coups and ensuing convulsions have severely corrupted the culture of learning. This is one of the sad, hidden costs of Fiji's recent turbulent history.<sup>13</sup> Bright students now prefer degrees in subjects such as accounting, information technology, medicine and nursing, which might improve their chances of emigration. That is the ultimate prize everyone is looking for. The humanities have little cache. The absence of role models does not help. The best and brightest of Fiji have gone or are actively preparing to leave.

At university, we met students from other parts of the country and from across the region for the first time. A 'USP Mafia', as we were sometimes dubbed, was born and dispatched across our island region, often to occupy positions of power and influence in other countries. Our horizons expanded, and the friendships forged in those early undergraduate years

---

12 For accounts of the early institutional history of the university, see Ron Crocombe and Malama Meleisea (eds), *Pacific Universities: Achievements, Problems and Prospects* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1988), pp. 35–188.

13 The Vice-Chancellor of a university in Fiji recently informed me that his library would discard books, including hundreds we (Padma and I) had donated from our personal library, to enlarge the space for digital learning. Students, he said, don't read books these days, nor, it seems, do many academics either.

have remained. We all shared the sense that something new and exciting was afoot as our newly minted nation states embarked on the path of independence. We all felt we had a role to play in shaping the destiny of our people.<sup>14</sup> We debated the nature and purpose of development, the kind of leaders we needed, we denounced neo-colonialism and the excesses of capitalism, we advocated the need for an egalitarian, classless society. It seems so naïve in hindsight, but the desire to contribute was real, palpable at the time. History could be made, and our generation was the one to do it. We were at the right time, at the right place. We fancied ourselves as the architects of our nation's future. In hindsight, such forlorn hope.

It was with this partially formed and, in truth, naïve intellectual mindset, full of parochial details about this and that, and without an overarching framework (class analysis, for instance) to give it some coherence and structure, that I arrived at the ANU in August 1977 via a master's degree at the University of British Columbia.<sup>15</sup> I remember that day well. It was cold, bone-chillingly cold, as I made my way from Bruce Hall (where I would stay for six months) to the Coombs Building. That hexagonal building, a maze really, was as formidable a place as I have ever encountered anywhere in the world.<sup>16</sup> In the building I encountered fellow graduate students—we were called research scholars then—at various stages of research and writing, confidentially talking about the latest trend in historiography, discussing the ideas of E.P. Thompson, Hayden White and Michael Foucault. Poststructuralism, postcolonialism and post other such 'isms' were the exciting buzz words of those days. Not to be familiar with them was to risk being seen as a bit of a simpleton. I realised early on that I had a lot of private reading to do just to keep up. I survived, but there were many terrifying moments of doubt and despair and desperation along the way. Three years later, having completed my dissertation, I left Canberra, to return permanently in 1990.

---

14 See the essays in Sione Tupounoua, Ron Crocombe and Claire Slatter (eds), *Pacific Way: Social Issues in National Development* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1976).

15 With a thesis on the early history of East Indians in British Columbia.

16 See Brij V. Lal and Allison Ley (eds), *The Coombs: A House of Memories*, with a foreword by William C. Clarke (Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, 2006).

Canberra, when I arrived in the late 1970s, was a small town, which retained the trappings of a bush town and was slowly emerging from the long dark shadow of the White Australia Policy. Monoculturalism was writ large everywhere, in faces and places, with signs of the occasional ethnic restaurants and Indian spice shops in the outer desultory suburbs. For more variety and volume, we were advised to go to Queanbeyan, about 10 kilometres across the border in New South Wales. That town, we were told, was more representative of real Australia than Canberra (pot-holed roads, unkempt streets, the aimless wandering of unemployed youth), but the comparison was not reassuring. We hardly ventured out. My main preoccupation was getting my dissertation done in time. Canberra, in 1990, was a different place, robustly multicultural and outward looking. People of colour no longer stood out in a crowd. Multicultural festivals were an exuberant part of the city's cultural life. People making polite conversation at parties no longer expressed curiosity about our relatively fluent command of English or about where we came from. In short, advances in travel and technology between the 1970s and 1990s had ensured that we were no longer the strangers we once seemed to be. The openness and tolerance of Canberra, its embracing of diversity, are for me one of the more remarkable, and happily irreversible, transformations in Australian society in recent decades. This is what made Canberra such a happy home for us.

The ANU was no stranger to us. It was the world's leading centre for Pacific scholarship to which we had been perfunctorily introduced in our Pacific courses at the USP. We had all read issues of *The Journal of Pacific History* and other publications from the ANU. We debated the 'three Fiji' thesis of E.K. Fisk's *The Political Economy of Independent Fiji*.<sup>17</sup> And some of us had glimpsed O.H.K. Spate's magisterial 1959 report on the economic problems and prospects of the Fijian people.<sup>18</sup> So, ANU was vaguely familiar as a formidable place of fine scholarship, but it had never occurred to us, certainly not to me, that some of us might actually go there for graduate work, still less teach there. The route by which I came to the ANU 30 years ago has bemused my students for whom the whole story seems improbable, almost bizarre. Nothing quite like my experience occurs, or could possibly be allowed to occur today.

---

17 E.K. Fisk, *The Political Economy of Independent Fiji* (Canberra: The Australian National University Press, 1970), and unmistakable with the photo of a Fijian tapa cloth on the cover.

18 Published by the Government of Fiji as Legislative Council Paper 13/1959.

During the course of my master's research I had come across Charles Price's book *Great White Walls are Built*,<sup>19</sup> on restrictions on Asian immigration in the white settler dominions, and I thought I could expand the book's scope by focusing on the experience of Indian migrants. Accordingly, I wrote to Price at the ANU. He never replied. I later discovered that he did not think I had enough background in demography for the subject, but, impressed with my proposal, he forwarded it to the then director of the Research School of Pacific Studies (as it then was), Wang Gungwu. He too liked what he saw but his field was Chinese history. He therefore forwarded my application to the Vice-Chancellor, the distinguished South Asianist Anthony Low, who had no expertise in Indian immigration. Nevertheless, he took me on, sight unseen, and that is how I landed an ANU research scholarship.<sup>20</sup> That was how things were done then, none of the extensive committee screening process, none of the extensive paperwork required, complete with fully footnoted thesis proposal. All that Anthony required was evidence of the ability to do independent research, and my master's thesis provided that. My experience was not unique. The late Ahmed Ali, Fiji historian and politician, once told me that a chance conversation with Jim Davidson in Suva about constitutional developments in Fiji (he was then the secretary of the Alliance Party) secured him an ANU scholarship. Jim had intermittently been advising groups on constitutional matters since 1959.

Another fundamental difference with the present was that you were admitted to the graduate program only through an internationally competitive scholarship program. The fee-paying system did not exist then. In fact, we were given a research scholar allowance as well as subsidised housing. ANU was elitist, fiercely, unapologetically elitist, and prided itself on attracting the world's best (at least in theory), students and staff, and although it was not formally stated, it was well known that only in the most exceptional of circumstances would scholarships be awarded to students over 30. An early doctorate, it was felt, would result in a long and productive research and teaching career. That hope was not misplaced. Australia in the 1960s and 1970s was a place of expanding tertiary education, and jobs were there for those who wanted them. Now, the possession of a doctorate is nothing more than a licence to hunt, and

---

19 C.A. Price, *The Great White Walls are Built: Restrictive Immigration to North America and Australasia, 1836–1888* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1974).

20 Brij V. Lal, 'A *girmitiya* "sepoy"', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 39(1) (2016): 244–50, doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2016.1124229.

job prospects are grim. A secure, lifelong academic career is not taken for granted, nor is it an entirely attractive prospect financially or job-satisfaction wise.

We hear a lot these days about course work for graduate students. There are seminars and workshops run by educational consultants on how to supervise—who themselves most likely have never supervised a single graduate student. One occasionally hears of threats of legal action by dissatisfied students for inadequate or unsatisfactory supervision, and it does sometimes happen. Fee-paying students want big bang for their bucks. A lot of ‘massaging’ goes on. Things were different for us. There was, for instance, no course work component to our doctoral degree. That was the American way of doing things. In the Australasian system, the undergraduate degree was solid, and a good honours degree was enough to get admission to the graduate program. It was assumed that the fundamentals of the discipline had already been acquired and that students would be intelligent and resourceful enough to pick up on their own whatever else was needed along the way. The main game was the completion of the research thesis, which, it was expected, would meet the highest standards of contemporary scholarship, as the phrase went. And it was expected that, in due course, the thesis would find life as a substantial published book. Most did. But I can now see the value of compulsory graduate seminars in theory and methodology when students come ill-prepared for advanced, independent research, and not only from the Pacific Islands but many from Australian universities as well. Assistance is expected, and given in a variety of ways, including help with the English language and the art of composition for foreign students.

We had no sense of entitlement, and were forever grateful for the small mercies that came our way. We simply made do with what we had. We were told at the outset that a request for an extension beyond three years was frowned upon and given very grudgingly. We would spend the first year preparing a thesis proposal and do any required additional reading on our topic, one year in the field (including learning a foreign language if that was required) and the last year writing up the thesis. I still remember vividly asking Ken Gillion, one of my supervisors, what I should read, where I should begin. He gently told me to go to the library, read everything I could on my subject and, if at the end of six months, I was not on top of the literature, I should ask myself what I was doing here! That advice, well-meant, was panic-inducing in one learning the basic alphabets of advanced, independent research.

The ANU is not now the university it was 30 years ago. Australia's counterpart to Oxford and Cambridge, it was modelled on the Johns Hopkins Institute of Advanced Studies.<sup>21</sup> The undergraduate component was added in 1960, a decade after it was founded, with the merger of the Institute and the Canberra University College, previously a constituent college of the University of Melbourne. Still, for the most part, and despite the two original campuses being contiguous, the two were quite separate entities, with different rhythms and responsibilities, one primarily undergraduate and the other postgraduate. A glass curtain separated the two, the relations strained by misperceptions, mischief and stereotypes. The denizens of the Institute thought rather well of themselves as privileged, chosen, citizens of the International Republic of Letters. Those in the School of General Studies primarily taught undergraduates and took the profession of teaching seriously. They were often disdainful of the Institute dwellers as drones who led a pampered life, some not publishing much at all. During my first six years as an academic at the ANU I held a joint appointment with the faculties and the Institute and observed the tension between the two from close quarters. These were real. But now the boundaries have disappeared with the creation of the college system that has integrated the two parts of the university, though not altogether satisfactorily.

The ANU, or at least the Institute, had a distinct and perhaps even an enviable place in the Australian university system: *primus inter pares*. Until the late 1950s and '60s, many Australian universities, and especially the pre-World War II ones, were geared primarily for undergraduate teaching.<sup>22</sup> For postgraduate training, many smaller ones sent their students to the ANU—certainly Pacific history. It took on the role once occupied by premier English universities, principally Oxford and Cambridge. The United States was then not on the radar of students aiming for postgraduate education. Among the few who journeyed across the Pacific were Greg Dening and Jill Kerr Conway (Harvard), Paul Bourke (Wisconsin), Peter Denis (Duke) and Dorothy Shineberg (Smith College). By the same token, very few American graduate students or academics came Down Under. Australia was not an attractive destination

---

21 Foster and Varghese, *The Making of the Australian National University* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), pp. 5–7. The Johns Hopkins University, founded in Baltimore in 1876, emphasised research and postgraduate training over undergraduate teaching.

22 Clive Moore reminds me that the more established universities, and even newer ones such as James Cook University, had healthy postgraduate programs in European, Australian and regional histories.

for academic employment, though that situation has changed in recent decades. And now all Australian universities have some graduate programs as an integral part of their offerings. Federal grants for higher education are more widely and evenly distributed. The federal Block Grant that sustained ANU's privileged place has shrunk, and ANU academics now compete for research funds with their counterparts from other universities. ANU still regularly ranks among the top Australian universities but that cosy sense of unquestioned preeminence has long gone, to the delight of its rivals.

Given the purposes for which it was founded, the ANU spared little effort or expense in attracting the very best scholars in the various disciplines—people of genuinely distinguished international eminence. In my own field, there was Jim Davidson, a New Zealander who was at Cambridge when appointed as the world's first professor of Pacific history on the recommendation of Raymond Firth, one of the new university's academic advisors.<sup>23</sup> Davidson played a crucial role defining the new field of Pacific history, giving it purpose and identity, detaching it from its parent field of European expansion to a more island-centred focus. His influence was profound. Harry Maude came to the university after a career in the British Colonial Service in the Pacific and at the South Pacific Commission. There he wrote his classic *Of Islands and Men*, comprised of meticulously researched and carefully crafted papers.<sup>24</sup> Oskar Spate came to the university as the Foundation Professor of Geography from the London School of Economics and, after retirement in 1972 as the Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies, joined the Pacific history department to write his magisterial trilogy on Pacific exploration.<sup>25</sup> His most important work though, as he himself said, was his 1959 Fiji report.<sup>26</sup> There were other luminaries in the Coombs building whose presence gave the university its gravitas and greatness: Jack Golson in prehistory, R.G. Ward in human geography, Derek Freeman in anthropology, Stephen

23 Raymond Firth, 'The founding of the Research School of Pacific Studies', *The Journal of Pacific History* 31(1) (1996): 3–7. For follow-up, see Donald Denoon, 'Pacific Island history at the Australian National University: Place and the people', *The Journal of Pacific History* 31(2) (1996): 202–14, doi.org/10.1080/00223349608572818.

24 H.E. Maude, *Of Islands and Men: Studies in Pacific History* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1968).

25 O.H.K. Spate, *The Pacific since Magellan*, 3 vols (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1979, 1983, 1988).

26 Spate's autobiographical account of his academic journey is in *On the Margins of History: From the Punjab to Fiji* (Canberra: National Centre for Development Studies, Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University, 1991).

Wurm in linguistics, to name just a few. Now, they are forgotten names.<sup>27</sup> A later cohort in history included Gavan Daws, Hank Nelson, Deryck Scarr, Donald Denoon, Dorothy Shineberg, Niel Gunson and the ever-enterprising Robert Langdon, who led the Pacific Manuscripts Research Bureau (which I chaired for 20 years between 1993 and 2013). These are all names to conjure with; giants on whose shoulders we proudly stood. Among many of my younger colleagues, there is no consciousness of the past of the place, and no desire to know it either. Institutional memory is shallow and tattered and this, for me, is the cause for great sadness.

After three years as a PhD scholar at the ANU, I left in 1980, first for Fiji for a couple of years and then for nearly a decade at the University of Hawai'i. After teaching the department's bread-and-butter 'World Civilizations' course for several years, I wrote to Gavan Daws, chair of the department of Pacific and Southeast Asian History at the ANU, to see if they had a fellowship to enable me to complete a book on the history of twentieth-century Fiji.<sup>28</sup> They indeed had, giving me a fully funded fellowship and paying the travel expenses of my family as well. I doubt there was any advertisement for the fellowship. The department knew my record and that, for them, was enough. The book I wrote, *Broken Waves: A History of the Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century*, was published by the University of Hawai'i Press in 1992, and it is still in print. I had delivered what I had promised. And that opened the doors to other opportunities that, in the course of time, saw me relocate from Honolulu to Canberra.

The world of the 1990s is in many ways as different to the world I will be leaving as the 1970s were from the 1990s. I have already spoken about the sense of community. It was real. All research scholars were housed in university townhouses concentrated in certain locations in Canberra: academic ghettos we jovially called them. The shared experience of raising young families, of exploring a new country, of communal socialising, generated camaraderie and friendships that transcended barriers and boundaries and fostered friendships that lasted. All that is a vanishing memory. We were welcomed warmly when we returned in 1990; perhaps with the knowledge that we might become long-term residents.

---

27 The one exception might be Freeman, the subject of Peter Hempenstall's recent book, *Truth's Fool: Derek Freeman and the War with Anthropology* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017). Freeman is largely remembered for his longstanding debate on Samoa with Margaret Mead, the iconic American anthropologist and writer.

28 I have briefly discussed my Hawai'i experience in *Mr. Tulsi's Store* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2001), pp. 111–25.

Hank Nelson spent countless hours introducing me to Australian literature, history and popular and sporting culture.<sup>29</sup> Cricket was our mutual passion. He read my papers and gently corrected my prose with pencilled comments in the margin, a reminder to me of his time as a high school teacher; the same concern, the same compassion for someone whose command of the language was less than perfect. I can still hear him saying: ‘Shorter sentences, mate, shorter sentences’. And, ‘avoid however: a lazy writer’s word’. Bill Gammage introduced our family to the Australian bush and much else besides. Through them, we met other like-minded friends. And Ken Inglis taught me by example about the nobility of historical craftsmanship. There were other colleagues from afar who put aside their own work to read mine. Foremost among them would have to be Doug Munro.<sup>30</sup> It is difficult to express how grateful I have felt for this kind of generous comradeship.

In the Coombs building, the Tea Room was the one indispensable social centre for everyone, academics, research scholars and visitors alike. It was the one place on the campus where the mighty and the minions mingled freely. Every day at 10:30 am and 3:30 pm, people got together for morning and afternoon tea. The topic of conversation could range from the footy results of the previous weekend and recent cricket scores to international and national politics to a discussion of research projects. As students, we picked up an enormous amount of information and insights (as well as gossip) from our senior scholars. If your work sparked their interest, they might arrange for a longer conversation over a lunch at University House. Otherwise, just participating in the rites and rituals of the academy in action in all its trivia and seriousness was enough bonus in itself. But now, the Tea Room has been closed down. It lies empty and forlorn, haunted by memories of conversations of yesterday. I can still hear the animated discussions that went on years ago. A sadness comes upon me every time I pass the place on my way to and from my office.

If Coombs Tea Room was an integral feature of our lives, so was the department. Our life and work was organised by and around the department. It gave our lives a sense of purpose and cohesiveness. By the 1990s, the age of the God Professors was long over. Now, senior academics

29 I have recalled this in ‘Hank of Coombs’, in *The Boy from Boort: Remembering Hank Nelson*, ed. Bill Gammage, Brij V. Lal and Gavan Daws (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), pp. 75–88, doi.org/10.22459/BFB.07.2014.

30 Doug Munro and Jack Corbett (eds), *Bearing Witness: Essays in Honour of Brij V. Lal* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2017), doi.org/10.22459/BW.07.2017.

(reluctantly) took turns running the department, helped along by fiscal autonomy and a long-serving and dedicated staff. Our ‘boss’ in the Division of Pacific and Asian History was Dorothy Macintosh, a 20-year veteran who knew all the skeletons hidden in the cupboards, every secret that there was to know, but who was the very epitome of rectitude. She would gracefully forgive our occasional lapses in attention to detail and set the course straight with a gentle reprimand. She was protective and caring. We all felt a sense of shared interest in and loyalty to a real living community. But all that, too, is in the past now. The department now is a virtual entity, bereft of soul and companionship, like so much else. Our newer faculty, burdened by the pressure to perform constantly, have neither the time nor the energy or inclination to foster a sense of community. Many are here for a brief period and sooner rather than later will look for opportunities elsewhere. Technology has also played its part in gradually corroding the old spirit. There was a time when people came to their offices to do their work. Much of the academic work was done on campus. This fostered greater contact and interaction. But now with the advent of computers, the internet and the email, the need to travel to the office—and pay a heavy parking fee—is reduced. People increasingly work at home and come to campus to print or to attend seminars.

Along with the erosion of the sense of a cohesive community has gone a more relaxed atmosphere in the workplace. Academics then, as now, were serious people, many world leaders in their fields, but they also found time to have fun. The security afforded by the tenure system was certainly a crucial factor. You did not have to live from one grant to another. ANU Vice-Chancellor Ian Young’s exhortation that academics should not only do first-rate research but also earn money for their university would sound somewhat offensive to the academics of the earlier generation, but it is a reality of academic life now. It wasn’t so once. Freed of the tyranny of the grant cycle, academics ‘enjoyed’ life. Time was taken off to watch an absorbing day of test cricket. During the cricket season, we would walk in and out of Donald Denoon’s office at all times of the day listening to the cricket commentary on his radio. For years, Hank Nelson and I would watch the first session of the first test on the television I had persuaded Hank to buy when he was the convenor so that we could watch world-breaking news in real time while still at work. The only breaking news we ever watched was the test match. No one minded our self-indulgence because everyone knew that we would burn the midnight lamp to complete our work.

People had fun of a more literary type as well. In the mid-1990s, I discovered quite by accident that several of my colleagues were writing creatively on the side. Tessa Morris-Suzuki wrote children's stories and poems.<sup>31</sup> Donald Denoon amusingly boasted that he had two unpublished novels to his credit; he has gone on to publish a couple since his retirement.<sup>32</sup> Mark Elvin, our professor of Chinese history, published three volumes of fantasy under his middle names John Mark Dutton.<sup>33</sup> Hank Nelson published literary pieces in the *Meanjin*. And I dabbled in some creative writing myself, which I called 'faction'. Seeing all the creativity flowing around me, I created a folder in the departmental room for colleagues to place their creative pieces in. They did, and the word spread. With that material I, in due course, started a literary journal, *Conversation*, published by Pandanus Books. Poetry, short fiction, nonfiction, photographs, memoir all found their way into its pages. It lasted for five years, establishing itself as a welcome and attractive vehicle for creative writers in the Canberra region. It brought a kindred creative community together. All that is a distant memory now. I am sure other narratives, other memories, are being created as I speak but I have no idea what they are.

It is beyond doubt that there has been a shrinkage in the quotient of loyalty people now owe to their place of work. Universities are no exception. 'Institutions do not owe you loyalty', is a phrase commonly heard in our corridors; and that sentiment is reciprocated in ample measure. There was a time when I was proud and possessive about my university. I was proud of the great minds that had worked here: Manning Clark, Nugget Coombs, Oskar Spate, among many others. ANU is the place where I would work out my professional career; it would not, for me, act as a springboard for more lucrative employment elsewhere. But that feeling is part of a vanished past. I once felt a part of a living community; now I am merely an employee, on a contract, to be dispensed with when there is a financial crisis or when I am no longer needed; made redundant. Occasionally we have been called 'service providers' for the student clientele. In view of all this, it is perfectly understandable why the younger academics are mobile, on the lookout for better opportunities elsewhere. The university asks for loyalty and dedication, but is not prepared to reciprocate.

---

31 Tessa Morris-Suzuki's book of poems is *Peeling Apples* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005).

32 Including *Afterlife: A Divine Comedy* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2004).

33 I have two of these, *St Giles's Fair* (Canberra: Samara Press, 2000), and *Tiger's Island* (Canberra: Samara Press, 2000).

One service the Department of Pacific and Asian History at ANU did provide, but which has now been abandoned, was to hold annual workshops on aspects of the discipline. These were shoestring affairs but colleagues appreciated the opportunity of regular gatherings to exchange ideas and notes about research projects. From these gatherings came many edited volumes on various aspects of Pacific history.<sup>34</sup> The Department of Pacific and Asian History also acted as a generous host to colleagues visiting the ANU for various periods of time, providing facilities, free of charge, for research and writing.<sup>35</sup> In this way, it acted as a social hub of the discipline, fostering networks of camaraderie and collegiality across the globe. All that has gone, perhaps inevitably, as funds have shrunk and other Pacific centres of learning have emerged in recent decades.

Let me now turn to the culture of learning and scholarship in the contemporary academy. There is now an entirely legitimate demand that scholars should do research and publish regularly in the highest-ranked journals and by prestige publishers. These things are of material significance in appointments and promotions. Quality is judged by where research is published, as distinct from the content. The rigid application of the assessment formula is an imposition from the more quantifiable social sciences. This mechanical evaluation of scholarship is something I find distasteful to the point of being loathsome. We in the humanities don't measure our productivity on a yearly basis. But it is here to stay. I have paid my dues and published in the required places, but from the outset I decided that I would also publish to get read, not only to get ahead.

My first book, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians*, was published as a 150-page monograph by the Journal of Pacific History in 1983. It was widely and favourably noticed in reviews across the world and is now regarded as a foundational text in Indian indenture historiography.<sup>36</sup> I went places as a result of it. Today, it won't take me far because it is

---

34 For instance, Brij V. Lal (ed.), *Pacific Islands History: Journeys and Transformations* (Canberra: Journal of Pacific History, 1992); Donald Denoon (ed.), *Emerging from Empire: Decolonization in the Pacific* (Canberra: Division of Pacific and Asian History, The Australian National University, 1997); Brij V. Lal and Hank Nelson (eds), *Lines Across the Sea: Colonial Inheritance and the Post-Colonial Pacific* (Brisbane: Pacific History Association, 1995); and Brij V. Lal and Vicki Luker (eds), *Telling Pacific Lives: Prisms of Process* (Canberra, ANU E Press, 2008), doi.org/10.22459/TPL.06.2008.

35 Including many who were postgraduates of other universities: Doug Munro (Macquarie), Clive Moore (James Cook), Peter Hemenstall and Stewart Firth (Oxford). The department, in a very real sense, was a broad church.

36 Clem Seecharan, *Finding Myself: Essays on Race, Politics and Culture* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2015), pp. 114–40.

not published by a prestige publisher. My *Mr Tulsi's Store*, published by Pandanus Books, now defunct, was voted one of the Ten Notable Books of Asia and the Pacific by the San Francisco-based Kiriya Prize in 2002 and was also an ACT Notable Book of the Year, but it wasn't published by a well-known commercial publisher. Nor was my *Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey through Indenture in Fiji*. Don't get me wrong. I have paid my dues and doffed my hat to the right gods, but, over time, I have been more concerned to make my work accessible to the people about whom I write. I am no longer concerned with the validation and approval of the academe. For that reason, too, I publish my work through an open-access press to reach the widest audience possible at the least expense. The ethical responsibility to 'give something' back has grown on me over time. I escaped censure because of my track record and seniority.

Throughout my working life, I stood at a remove from the preoccupation within the discipline about arcane theoretical issues. My work has benefited from an awareness of postcolonial theory, but theory informs rather than overwhelms my work. As someone once said jocularly to me, theory is like your underwear. It supports the system but it is bad form to display it publicly. To put it another way, I create my own text, the product of my individual imagination, rather than aspire to become a footnote in someone else's, or an academic groupie. My advice to my graduate students has been to be bold and imaginative and adventurous, and dare to be original. It may appear to be a daunting thought, but the alternatives are not worth considering. Life is too short to play the second fiddle.

'A lot of history is concealed autobiography,' distinguished Australian historian Ken Inglis has suggested. That rings true to me. It has been my good fortune to have worked on topics close to my heart: the history and politics of Fiji and the history and culture of the Indian diaspora, particularly in Fiji. For me a subject comes to life when head and heart come together. Abstract, theoretical concerns do not appeal to my imagination. I thrill to the particularities of the human experience. I live within my history and not above or beyond it, and I write accordingly. Oskar Spate's sage advice is what I have followed:

The impartiality which evades responsibility by saying nothing, the partiality which masks its bias by presenting slanted facts with an air of cold objectivity—these are a thousand times more dangerous than an open declaration of where one stands; then at least those who disagree can take one's measure with confidence: 'that is why he said this'. The important points are that inference

must be based on evidence, as carefully verifiable as possible; and the choice must be made on the evidence and not from pre-conceived ideas.<sup>37</sup>

That, I hope, is the approach that has informed my work. History, for me, is about the illumination of problems, contemporary and past, and not simply a detached study of a discreet period of time. I am well aware that the past has an integrity of its own and it must be evaluated on its own terms, but my interest lies centrally in understanding the historical roots of the contemporary world and the influences that shaped it. I recognise the teleological tendencies and reductive capacity of this approach, but these difficulties are surmountable.

The discipline of history has been the engine of much of my work. I began my career as a quantitative historian, using the computer to analyse a massive amount of emigration data from 45,000 emigration passes. For my doctoral dissertation I continued that work in a milder form in my investigation of the indenture experience in Fiji.<sup>38</sup> Quantification provided a useful base data and it answered the 'what' questions of history, answering in the case of my early research the annual volume of migration to Fiji, the precise demographic data on the emigrants (their age, sex, marital status, the districts of origin and registration, the rejection rate between the time of recruitment and the time of embarkation, the mortality in the depots and on the voyage out). In later work, I used statistics to examine such questions as suicide among Indian immigrants, the gender dimension of plantation work and resistance and accommodation. Quantification yielded valuable results, in enabling me to see the shape and dimensions of an historical problem. From the very beginning, though, I was aware that quantification could answer only some questions and not others; questions related to the inner promptings of human motivation: why people behaved the way they did. Statistics could reveal the extent of mortality, for instance, but not the experience of dying. For that, I turned early on to the qualitative data, such as folksongs and oral narratives in various genres. The combination of the two approaches I found immensely rewarding.

---

37 O.H.K. Spate, 'Thirty years ago: A view of the Fijian political scene: Confidential report to the British Colonial Office', *The Journal of Pacific History* 25(1) (1990): 103–24, doi.org/10.1080/00223349008572628.

38 Brij V. Lal, 'Leaves of the banyan tree: Origins and background of Fiji's North Indian Migrants', 2 vols, PhD thesis (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1981). See also my 'Indian indenture historiography: A note on problems, sources and methods', *Pacific Studies* 6(2) (1983): 33–50.

Like most academics, I have continued to research and publish my amply referenced and properly researched work using the usual paraphernalia of academic presentation. These have included, among other things, biographies of Fiji leaders, studies of elections and surveys of political developments in Fiji. But from the mid-1990s, my interest extended beyond academic writing. This was in response to changes, fundamental changes, I was witnessing all around me as we toured throughout Fiji during our constitution review exercise. Nonrenewal of 30-year leases under the *Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act* was fragmenting Fiji's long-settled agricultural community of Indo-Fijian tenants. That was where I grew up, but that world was disappearing before my eyes. It was a world that our indentured grandparents and parents built from bits and pieces of a remembered past as they sought to give structure and coherence to their chaotic lives. They built schools and temples and mosques, established a routine of rites and rituals to celebrate life and mourn its passing. Vanua Levu, my home island, was emptying; young men and women were seeking better futures in the urban areas of Viti Levu. They hoped eventually to move from there to some place overseas. And displaced farmers were clogging the squalid squatter settlements fringing the major urban centres in south-eastern Viti Levu where now between 15–20 per cent of Fiji's total population lives—with very dim hopes of a bright future. In time, the squatter settlements may come to be seen as the first essential step in a much longer journey of disruption and rupture.

There is nothing written about this massive transformation taking place in contemporary Fiji beyond a few anecdotal pieces in the local dailies. University research on the subject is scanty at best. I wanted to retrieve whatever I could from the debris of our remembered past, but that is easier said than done. In my old world, memory was not properly archived, and documentary records did not exist. All I had were the failing recollections of a passing generation who could provide me with a link to our beginnings as a community. I had little to go on except conversation with older folk. During each visit to my village and other similarly situated settlements, I collected whatever information I could get: about how schools and mosques and temples were built, how village disputes were resolved, how marriage negotiations were conducted, and breaches of the marital code were dealt with, and how the old ways eventually paved ways to the new when roads and radio came. From these curious intermittent jottings over

time came an archive of information and anecdotes, which provided the material for my three books of creative nonfiction or faction, as I have called it: *Mr Tulsi's Store*, *On the Other Side of Midnight* and *Turnings*.<sup>39</sup>

My aim in faction writing is not necessarily to capture the factual accuracy of a particular experience, which would be impossible anyway. It is, rather, to capture its emotional truth, the spirit of the experience. You use your personal experience as a lens to refract the larger collective experience. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Of all my books, these works of faction have evoked the greatest responses from unknown people right across the world. In my footsteps, they hear the echoes of their own. This kind of writing is not easy for someone who had been trained to use verifiable evidence in the social sciences, but it is immensely rewarding to capture the voices and faces of people beyond the range of official statistics, unwritten and unremarked, but whose everyday deeds keep the engine of life going. It enables me to bear witness to my—our—time and place and that, for me, is enough.

Finally, I am extremely grateful to the quirk of fate that brought me to the ANU. It has allowed me to follow my bent. It is from here that I spoke up for the values of democracy, the rule of law and the protocols and practices of constitutionalism, secure in the knowledge that my university would stand by me and the values I espoused. It allowed me to follow my instincts and imagination to explore research questions that I, and not some funding agency, wanted to explore. 'Curiosity-driven research' it is sometimes called. It has honoured my contributions and encouraged me on. It has given me and my family the company of men and women who have enriched our lives beyond measure. I could not in good conscience ask for more. But the world now is a different place to the one I entered a generation ago. It has 'become stranger, the pattern more complicated', to use again the words of T.S. Eliot. And I have become remnant in my own time. I trust I have 'done state some service',<sup>40</sup> as Oskar Spate used to say, or left a deposit of lime, as (from memory) Marshall Sahlins has said, that might nourish someone else's efforts. We all live with the certainty that in time—and hopefully not too soon—we will all become part of faded conversations, a minor footnote in someone else's text.

39 *Mr. Tulsi's Store* (2001) was published by Pandanus Books, Canberra; *The Other Side of Midnight* (2005) by the National Book Trust, New Delhi; and *Turnings* (2008) by the Fiji Institute of Applied Studies, Lautoka.

40 Oskar Spate, 'The salad days', in *The Coombs: A House of Memories*, ed. Lal and Ley, pp. 23–34, at p. 33.

When I wrote an earlier version of this chapter for oral delivery, I called it my 'Extinguished lecture' rather than my 'Valedictory lecture'. It seemed to be then, and perhaps even was, a clever play on words. It also turned out to be prophetic, an epitaph to a place and a moment in time. What I was not to know at the time was that the School of Culture, History and Language, of which I had long been a member, and which I had headed for a while, would face serious restructuring to the point of becoming unrecognisable; the noble dream of Pacific history shattered before our eyes and that, too, in a place where the discipline was founded and nurtured for over half a century.<sup>41</sup> Good colleagues would face retrenchment, others deployed elsewhere in the university and some seeking greener pastures beyond Canberra. To see something built over many long years, with a proud and honourable legacy, dismantled with the stroke of a pen was a deeply saddening experience. I felt lucky to be getting out when I did. My colleagues viewed the timing of my departure with envy. Now, it is time to move on. Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* has taken on a grimmer meaning.

---

41 The Department of Pacific and Asian History at ANU now has a single Pacific historian. But the teaching of Pacific history has declined significantly in Australian universities, sometimes in favour of more 'relevant' applied social sciences for which scholarships are relatively easy to get.

This text is taken from *Levelling Wind: Remembering Fiji*, by Brij V. Lal,  
published 2019 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,  
Canberra, Australia.