

I First Met Martha Macintyre Twice: Or How I Became an Anthropologist

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I first met Martha Macintyre twice. The first of my first meetings occurred in 2002 or 2003. I was then a program manager working at Australian Volunteers International (AVI), and we had invited Martha to give an address to the cohort of volunteers departing for placements in the Pacific. I think the venue was International House, one of the residential colleges of the University of Melbourne.

Martha was challenging and authoritative. We had invited her to give the volunteers a briefing in cultural sensitivity that would equip them for work in the Pacific. However, as so often happens, the development industry's assumptions about 'culture' did not quite map on to the anthropologist's ideas. I clearly remember Martha's injunction to volunteers to learn the local language well enough that they could articulate the theory of evolution to their new Pacific friends and explain why they were atheists. Having been a volunteer who learned the language (in Kiribati), but who had also internalised the volunteer agency's received wisdom—which involved skirting awkwardly around other people's religiosity and trying to fit in as best we could without rocking the boat—I found this advice a little disturbing. And, I must say, also refreshing.

However, I've never followed it, having been, in my time, on both sides of circular debates about the truth of religion. I'm also not sure that Martha has either, although in her apparently uncited (until now) article 'On equivocal ethnography', she does write movingly about the affinity she had with her close friend John Wesley, a Papua New Guinean

of modernist leanings whom she described as ‘the only self-confessed atheist on Tubetube’ (Macintyre, 1997, p. 12). However, I have taken Martha’s advice as an injunction not to allow a paternalistic respect for perceived cultural differences to presume an absence of curiosity and intellect among the people we work with in the Pacific.

The second time I first met Martha was the real first time. I say ‘real first’ because it was the beginning of the relationship that I now have with her. It was 2004. After severe cuts to the volunteer program, I had accepted a redundancy from the aforementioned position. On the day after this job had ended, I made an uncharacteristic visit to the Queen Victoria Market. There, by chance, I bumped into Simon Foale (another contributor to this volume) and began berating him for not having told me that he was coming to Melbourne (he was then working at The Australian National University in Canberra). Simon and I had met in 1999 in Gizo, Solomon Islands, where he had been a technical adviser to the environmental non-government organisation World Wildlife Fund (Foale, 2001). I had recruited an outstanding volunteer to work with him there—the late Vicki Kalgovas, a thoughtful, warm and generous woman who loved Solomon Islands. I learned much about Solomon Islands from her and Simon and their wonderful colleague and friend Jully Makini (whose poetry Martha quotes in a chapter on human rights [Macintyre, 2000]).

Simon was meeting Martha for lunch. He and I sat outside the Victoria Market food hall and talked through why I’d left AVI. ‘Are you going to do a PhD?’ he asked. I replied, ‘I’d do one if I had a topic’. At this point, the tale turns apocalyptic—I remember the crowd stopping still and a ball of light approaching us. A voice spoke, as if from the heavens, ‘I’ve got plenty of topics’. It was, of course, Martha and I was surprised that she recognised me after only one brief previous meeting.

She did, of course, have plenty of topics. This encounter shaped the next 15 years of my life as I snuck in the back door of anthropology. Martha and Mary Patterson had succeeded in applying for an Australian Research Council grant—‘Managing modernity: Capitalism, globalisation and governance in Melanesia’ (Patterson & Macintyre, 2011)—and they employed me as a research assistant with the role of looking into fast money schemes in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Solomon Islands. Under this project, I made my first visit to PNG (in 2005), collecting court records and newspaper reports and following up leads that Martha had already teased out. I had been expecting this to be a somewhat sensitive

and secretive topic (scams are, after all, illegal), but was astonished to find that fast money schemes were something that everyone wanted to talk about. I put this down to Martha's ability to find the everyday concerns of contemporary Melanesians intellectually interesting and her commitment to taking them seriously and seeing how they reflect broader structures of power.

For me, the rest is history. The fast money schemes aspect of the project became my PhD (supervised by Martha, Mary Patterson and Benedicta Rousseau), a book (Cox, 2018) and, altogether, a strange, rather 'scummy' induction to PNG and anthropology. Thank you, Martha, for these remarkable opportunities and for the great expansion of my mind that has occurred under your guidance and with your love and friendship.

References

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