

Preface

*Make bare the poor dead secrets of the heart
Strip the stark-naked soul*

Swinburne

The great poet's words, of an era long gone, speak to continuing biographical conventions and aspirations. Even those who believe that life writing, as a genre, is more easily handled than other forms of historical and creative writing concede the complexities and uncertainties involved in constructing a life—whether another's or one's own. This volume of essays is an exploration of the way in which scholars from different disciplines, standpoints and theoretical orientations attempt to write life stories in the Pacific. It is the product of a conference organised by the Division of Pacific and Asian History at The Australian National University in December 2005.

The aim of the conference was to explore ways in which Pacific lives are read and constructed through a variety of media—films, fiction, 'faction', history—under four overarching themes. The first, *Framing Lives*, sought to explore various ways of constructing a life—from a classic western perspective of birth, formation, experiences and death of an individual to other ways, for example, life as secondary to a longer genealogical entity, life as a symbol of collective experience, individual lives captured and fragmented in a mosaic of others, lives made meaningful by their implication in a particular historical or cultural web, the underlying values and world views that inform one or another approach to framing a life. The second theme, the *Stuff of Life*, looked at materials, methods and collaborative arrangements with which the biographer, autobiographer and recorder work, their objectives, constraints, inspirations, challenges and tricks. The third section, *Story Lines*, focused on formats and genres such as edited diaries, collections of writings, voice recordings, genres of biography, autobiography, truth and fiction (verse, dance, novels) and the varieties and different advantages of narrative shapes that crystallise the telling of a life. The final section, *Telling Lives/Changing Lives*, focused on biography/autobiography and the consciousness of identity, history, purpose, lives as witness and windows, telling lives as change for those involved in the tale, the telling, the listening. The overall aim was to bring out both the generic or universal challenges of 'telling lives' as well as to highlight the particular tendencies and trends in the Pacific.

Yet these four themes, which seemed analytically promising at the outset, proved in practice difficult to disentangle from the presentations at the workshop. Instead, another pattern of difference began to emerge, anchored in apparent contrasts between the literate and oral cultures of the Pacific. On the one hand were 'life tellers' operating with what could be called Western concepts of the

individual, time and history—or at least with people or texts which harmonised with these. For the subjects of these life stories and their tellers, literacy was a crucial element of their existence that in fundamental ways could be taken for granted. On the other hand were ‘life tellers’ dealing with people and evidence influenced by a different matrix: by traditional Pacific cultures which are oral. Here personhood is defined largely by relations with kin, alive and dead—Western concepts of the individual, together with the consciousness of the self on which ‘biography’ and ‘autobiography’ in important Western senses depend, are alien and, some would argue, inconceivable. In these cultures, time is imagined, ultimately, as cyclical rather than linear; and the past is palpably immanent in the present. Niel Gunson’s comprehensive keynote address to the workshop, which as chapter one serves as an introduction to this volume as a whole, adumbrates this cultural divide. Though it can be overstated and several of the ‘lives told’ here, and their tellers, in different ways bridge or question it, nevertheless this divide remains fundamental to the collection and poses particular challenges for those ‘tellers’ who work across it.

Anthropologists Deborah Van Heekeren, Michael Goddard and Wolfgang Kempf, more searchingly than any other contributors, explicitly address the cultural foundations of biography and autobiography. They deal with lives rooted in traditional Pacific cultures or with lives lived, and represented, in the midst of great cultural change, including a shift towards literacy. Each of these authors poses a difficult question.

Deborah Van Heekeren meditates upon the stories which the Vula’a people of coastal Papua New Guinea tell of a fabled warrior, Kila Wari, who lived between 1820 and 1860. She asks: why do the Vula’a tell these stories? The question is all the more arresting because the informant who pressed her to record stories about Kila Wari—and indeed wanted a film to be made of Kila Wari’s life—appears to reject so much that his ancestor, Kila Wari, embodies. Whereas Kila Wari was a great killer of men and a pagan, his descendant is a fulltime Christian evangelist. Deborah concludes that these stories serve two purposes: first, they establish relationships between the tellers and Kila Wari that can advantage the tellers in local disputes over land and politics; second, these stories preserve and provide access to a pre-Christian Vula’a existence. Kila Wari’s stories do not constitute biography in the sense indicated by Swinburne—‘making bare the poor dead secrets’ of the subject’s inner heart: rather, they constitute identity for their tellers and have an important collective function in protecting, through the tales of Kila Wari, a traditional worldview and way of life.

Michael Goddard reflects on the autobiographical writings of Bobby Gaigo, from the village of Tatana in PNG’s capital, Port Moresby. Bobby Gaigo’s autobiographical writings, unlike the majority of Melanesian ‘autobiographies’,

were written entirely by himself, without a European collaborator or mentor. For Goddard, the question is: how did Bobby Gaigo develop the autobiographical self-consciousness necessary for such writing? Goddard argues that in the traditional culture from which Gaigo sprang, the concepts of 'self' and 'history' that are necessary preconditions for autobiography were nonexistent. To support this argument, Goddard describes traditional concepts of self and time among Bobby Gaigo's people and draws analogies from other Melanesian cultures. Goddard also finds supporting evidence in certain so-called 'autobiographies' which have resulted from collaboration between a Melanesian 'teller' and a European mentor-cum-editor. These particular 'autobiographies', on scrutiny, reveal how the teller's concepts of personhood and time were often radically at odds with those of his or her collaborator. Goddard notes the thesis that among the traditional cultures of the Pacific, 'autobiographical consciousness' has been fostered by Islanders' interaction with Christianity and capitalism, which promotes concepts of the 'individual'. However, he rejects this thesis in the case of Bobby Gaigo. Instead, he proposes that Gaigo's long participation in land-claims for his people against the colonial administration led to an appreciation of the value Europeans placed on documentary evidence and history in the Western sense. Gaigo thereby developed the 'autobiographical self-consciousness' from which to write 'The Story of Myself'.

Finally, Wolfgang Kempf writes from his experience as a collaborator-cum-editor, co-constructing the life story of John Kikang, a man from PNG's Madang hinterland. John Kikang was of an earlier generation than Bobby Gaigo's, but like him grew up in a traditional oral society, though with less formal schooling. As a youth, Kikang left home to work for the whites, participating in the colonial economy and engaging with Christianity. On returning to his home village, Kikang was an energetic promoter of agricultural projects and Roman Catholicism, working closely with administrators and missionaries.

Kempf's question is: how best can he put John Kikang's life on paper? He uses John Kikang's own writings: a journal and a 'holy book', both unsettling and thought-provoking texts; and recordings of John Kikang's narratives and conversations with his collaborator. Kempf has thought about the processes by which Kikang tried to make sense of the world and change his corner of it. He also respects Kikang's projections of himself as a mediator between his 'backward' home and the spiritual and material realms of the whites. Further, Kempf sees commonalities in the processes—characterised by Kempf as 'mimetic'—by which he, as collaborator, tries to understand and reproduce Kikang's writings and narratives and by which Kikang understands and represents his own life. Kempf's resolve to honour these processes result in plans for a 'life story' that will graphically distinguish the different materials used, Kikang's and Kempf's

respective efforts, and the dynamics of co-creation. It will look unlike 'biography' or 'autobiography' in the conventional Western format.

Several other chapters can be savoured within the problematic suggested by contrasts between traditional/oral and Western (alternatively modern)/literate approaches to the telling of Pacific lives. Thus in his efforts to write a biography of Tosiwo Nakayama, David Hanlon is keenly sensitive to the cultural differences between biographer and biographee, including Nakayama's fundamental ambivalence about texts. Pauline MacKenzie Aucoin is left with unanswered and perhaps unanswerable questions of what to do with the life story imparted to her by a Fijian village woman, one day as they sewed together and the rain fell. Though Michael Goldsmith, in his survey of Tuvaluan life stories, challenges schematic contrasts between 'traditional' and 'Western' concepts of the self (and reader take note: treat the dichotomies drawn in this preface with suspicion!), in the chapter that follows his, the autobiographical reflections of Tuvalu-born Alaima Talu at one level record a painful process of individuation through which she separated from her parents, their wishes and their church.

Christina Houen's contribution on Heian Japanese women's life writing may appear out of place in a collection on the Pacific. But it is the methodology rather than the subject matter that is of interest. Houen is concerned with the way *The Tale of Genji* speaks pleasurably to a certain kind of woman of which Houen presents herself as an exemplar. 'It is a mirror to my own life', she remarks. The genres which Heian women developed, in poetic diary and prose romance, with their themes of loss, longing, exclusion, separation, loneliness and repressed desire for emotional security and artistic freedom, find resonance in her own life. Alaima Talu, too, reads other attempts at life writing—by Mahatma Gandhi, Sidney Poitier and Sheila Graham—for inspiration and guidance before writing down her own life. Aucoin is a similarly autobiographical contributor, in that she dramatises the ethical issues posed to her—as a woman and an anthropologist—by the question whether and how to interpret the story told to her. Lucy de Bruce embeds her family history in a kind of autobiographical essay—the kind that postulates the author as typical of a social category. The *kailoma* story (and her own) is that of moving from silent invisibility to articulate visibility through self-narration.

The contributions by historians Wood-Ellem, Munro and Lal are about the process of research and discovery, chance encounters with revealing bits of information, about the role of contingency in scholarship: a stray letter here and a piece of paper there which throw interesting light on the subject, such as Lord Dening's letter to Lal about A.D. Patel's critical arbitration into Fiji's sugar industry and Davidson's letter to his musical friend about sleeping with him. The contributions by Hanlon and Moore and, to some extent, Wood-Ellem are about biographical projects aligned with the project of nation-building in

situations where centrifugal dynamics render the task perilous. Hanlon notes and accepts Tosiwo Nakayama's stated motives and intentions. Moore is more explicit: he intends his dictionary as an impetus towards nationhood in the Solomon Islands.

There are many similarities in the way historians and anthropologists approach the task of life writing, but there are important differences as well. Historians sometimes seem less interested in questions about the role of culture in the formation of ideas, attitudes and values in the life of the individuals about whom they are writing. Whereas anthropologists tend to expose western models of life telling, historians generally work within their broad strictures. They often focus on the unique particularities of a lived life. The concerns of most historian-biographers in this volume are the explication and illumination of individual lives caught in a particular set of specific historical, cultural and political circumstances. The telling of these lives can indeed throw light on the complexities of circumstances and larger patterns of change. In telling the life of Walter Edward Gudgeon in the Cook Islands, Graeme Whimp aims to use biography for insights into the multifaceted, labile and ambivalent dynamics of the colonial world—characteristics that several scholars of recent decades have stressed against visions of a monolithic and omnipotent 'colonialism'. Similarly, Christine Weir, musing on the possibilities of writing a life of John Wear Burton, foreshadows a project that would reveal little of the inner or private man, but much about the intellectual, political and religious milieu of a liberal Christian committed to 'native development' through the work of governments, international organisations and Christian missions.

Telling the life of another person is often necessarily an obtrusive act. The teller or writer is taken into confidence, and allowed to enter spaces of a life unseen by others. The act of writing or recording is never neutral or innocent. A subtle mutual manipulation is an integral part of the process, as several contributors remind us. David Hanlon's experience of interviewing Toshio Nakayama will be familiar to many biographers. He talks to the first President of the Federated States of Micronesia at the end of a distinguished career, his life slowly coming to an end on the island of Oahu. Hanlon's interviews reveal many hitherto hidden aspects of Nakayama's life, but many remain shrouded in mystery about which Nakayama is not forthcoming. 'To be honest', says Hanlon, 'I think Nakayama was also careful, selective and even evasive at times in these interviews'. How the biographer finds his or her way through the deliberately hidden tracts of a private life becomes a challenge that will be recognised by many.

Several contributions allude to the complexities of telling or recording lives in cross-cultural situations. But the difficulties are not cross-cultural alone. Similar problems arise when story tellers attempt to uncover lives largely absent

from the records, from family ephemera and memorabilia, or when there is a reluctance to tell the story. How does one write about a past where memory is not properly archived, when verifiable facts are bare? Official archives may hold little promise of revealing much to the aspiring life teller, but fortunately, as Hank Nelson reminds us, there are other rich sources to exploit, most notably memoirs. Papua New Guinea has been particularly lucky in this regard. Once, writing memoirs was largely male domain, recording achievements and savouring satisfaction of a job well done, whether in the field of missions or plantations or ordinary life. But in recent years, women have published their own accounts of their time. Often these are not about moments of grandeur: 'they are the memories of nights spent on pitching small boats, clinging to small children, chucking up over the side, and accepting the impossibility of using the only toilet, a bucket...or trying to explain to a 16-year-old son why he could not ride a motor bike exuberantly in front of a group of Highlanders who once would have been entertained but were now enraged because this was an arrogant display of what they did not have and could not do in their own country'. Such finely-grained detailed accounts of everyday life, unnoticed by officials and unrecorded in official archives, provide historical story tellers a valuable mine of material.

Telling lives, focusing on the specific and the particular, can act as valuable corrective to 'generalisations and stereotypes spawned by older, positivist historical schools of thought and more recent theory-based postcolonial approaches', writes Andrew Robson. His own account of William Pritchard destroys the conventional wisdom about Pritchard's role in mid-19th century Fijian politics as an imperialistic, unfeeling meddler in the islands' affairs. Lal's account of Fiji leader A.D. Patel in mid-20th century shows him as a man ahead of his times, reviled by his critics in public but respected in private, who made significant if at the time unheralded contribution to Fiji politics, especially in its march to independence. Geoffrey Gray in his contribution rescues the government anthropologist E.P. Chinnery from the confusion and misunderstanding about the influences which shaped his work in Papua.

'Luck and serendipity are just as crucial, although good researchers will often make their own luck', Doug Munro writes. '[B]umpy rides are frequently enough the biographer's lot, something I wish that I had known earlier because it might have given a measure of grim comfort'. Lal shares that sentiment although he did not encounter as many setbacks as Munro in his researches into the lives of A.D. Patel. He was however worried about writing a book without seeing the enormous archives in London. He was relieved when he did consult the London archives several years after he had published his book, that the story he had told was substantially supported. David Hanlon searches in archival and oral testimony for clues into the life and motivation of Tosio Nakayama believing

that his life ‘offers a critical focal lens through which to examine a host of key themes that link Micronesia to the larger Pacific region and beyond’.

Clive Moore is the only contributor to this volume who takes the challenge of life writing to a national scale in creating a dictionary of biography as well as a historical encyclopaedia of events for the Solomon Islands. This is a mammoth task requiring meticulous planning and coordination, involving scores of contributors from all walks of life, many of whom may not have written biographical entries before. The emphasis in such projects is not on a carefully nuanced account, properly contextualised and documented. Its purpose, rather, is more utilitarian: to make basic, reliable, information about individuals and institutions accessible to the larger public and which could in the process contribute to the creation of a national identity. The task in the Pacific is not easy where documentation on individual lives outside official circles is sparse and where, in some cases, there may be actual resistance to making such information available. Moore’s project has counterparts in other parts of the Pacific, notably Papua New Guinea and Fiji, but lack of financial resources and local expertise—in contrast to the national dictionary of projects in Australia and New Zealand—have prevented them from reaching fruition.

Among historians at the workshop, animated discussion took place about the purpose of the historical enterprise and the role of biographical writing in it. All the old arguments were rehearsed, but no conclusion reached. Later, Doug Munro sent Lal an excerpt of a piece written by the Australian historian Geoffrey Serle. It captures the way many historians conceive of history. ‘After the fundamentals of truth-seeking and honesty, the first requirement for history is that it should be literature’, Serle wrote.¹ ‘My main purpose in writing general history is to tell a story (a ‘true’ story) and to reflect, however inadequately, the nobility and grandeur and the squalor and misery involved in man’s striving. The great secondary task of the scholar is to communicate.’ He noted the advances the profession had made in developing the techniques of scholarship, regretting the loss of the ‘mass reading public there was for history in the nineteenth century’. In particular, he regretted that historians had ‘banished the individual to some remote limbo and forgotten how to tell a story’. The need to ‘preserve the story, to retain the biographical element, to write for a literate public’: these are as much a part of our discipline, as urgent a concern now as they were in the past.

To end, we return to the beginning. ‘Telling Lives’ is an intricate and contested exercise. As several of our contributors remind us, entering the life world of another person is problematic even at the best of times. Some matters always remain beyond the reach of reason and rational research. The problem is especially fraught in cross-cultural and non-literate contexts where notions of time, space, history, myth, the role and obligations of individuals in society

differ greatly and where, moreover, historical memory is not archived. How, in these situations, do we construct lives? This volume shows that the answer varies enormously depending on the teller's discipline as well as the subject's circumstance and context. If 'making bare the poor dead secrets of the heart' is the task, it is not easy, never was.

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B.V.L. and V.L.

ENDNOTES

¹ See Geoffrey Serle, 'Recreating an Era: Victoria in the '50s and '80s,' in David Duffy, Grant Harman and Keith Swan (eds), *Historians at Work: investigating and recreating the past* (Sydney 1973), 52-54.