

2. The Boy from Boort

Bill Gammage

Bill Gammage is a historian of Australia and PNG who worked with Hank in Port Moresby and Canberra.

15 February 2012. Seventy years since Singapore fell and 15,000 Australians became prisoners. Hank has told their story, rescuing their memory from oblivion. Now he lay still, eyes closed, Jan and I talking by his bed. Suddenly he was looking at me. 'What are *you* doing here?' I was taken aback. Not by what he said, but I wasn't expecting him to speak. It cost him a lot. I recovered and said I was just coming to see if there were any cakes or chocolates lying around, and Hank closed his eyes.

He was born in Boort on the edge of the Victorian Mallee and grew up on a farm nearby. Farm ways and values shaped his life. He didn't drink, smoke or swear and seemed to hurry only when he played sport: cricket, Aussie rules, tennis, basketball, squash. He stood up for a fair go, worked hard, never whinged, was always helping someone. But he wasn't meant to be a farmer. He was a younger brother when farmers got bigger or got out, and he kept his head in a book. About 20 years back Boort park had a 'geep', a goat-sheep cross. Hank was a teacher-writer-farmer cross, the farmer last, so no one was surprised when he took off for Melbourne University in 1956.

In Hank's time most of the few country kids who went to uni took on what they did best in at school and trained to be teachers. Hank graduated BA 1958, DipEd 1959, BEd 1962 and MEd 1966. From 1960 he taught for three years at Numurkah High, one year at Rosanna High and two years at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). Early in 1966 he turned up for work at RMIT. 'What are you doing here?' someone asked, meaning something very different from Hank's last words to me. He was expected in Port Moresby, to tutor at the Administrative College (Adcol). No one had told him, but he and Jan packed up quickly and arrived in Moresby in March 1966.

I met him there. I'd just heard that someone was to help me teach the University of Papua New Guinea's first preliminary year history course. It turned out to be Hank. No one had told him or me until just before, but at Hank's suggestion we at once settled on a course much better than the one I'd begun. I would continue with a history of European global expansion; Hank would teach

PNG history. We crossed over for tutorials, and we double-marked everything, amazing each other at how close our marks were: if not the same, within a mark or two on a scale of 100.

His was a stupendous task. The few books available were on PNG's colonial administration, but Hank was determined to talk about Papua New Guineans, so he set about searching the only records accessible: reports, statistics, laws, regulations. He built pictures of Papuan lives under the *gavamani* – house servants, plantation and goldfield labourers, carriers, boat crews, mission helpers, police, village officials, villagers – and compared these with New Guinean lives in the *taim bilong masta*. He got students to say what their people did in those days, contrasting what should have happened with what did, comparing one district with another, steadily bringing local knowledge and perspectives into a history. He had begun that extraordinary journey which made PNG history a discipline, and ensured that it would focus forever on the experiences of its people. As a result that history shifted in emphasis from governors to governed more quickly than in any other colonial possession anywhere – in a country of over 800 languages, with few published sources, no small achievement.

The university was 'housed' in show pavilions, tin and paper mostly. No library, no study rooms, no services. Each morning a bus brought 53 men and four women and marooned them all day. One student was from Samoa, the others from PNG, mostly sons or daughters of village officials, police, clerks or mission workers. Unless the driver was drunk, the bus brought out a lunch of 'unpalatable grease', as one student put it, at the same time as the sanitary truck, and it collected the students after lectures. Hank and I formed a common front in defence of student needs. Hank had an Adcol house converted to a library and study centre, and his dark blue Volkswagen 28-826, though not ideal for ferrying a basketball team, was perennially zipping about on errands of relief and mercy.

'I went to Papua New Guinea', Hank wrote later, 'as it was one of the few (only?) places overseas where I could get my fares paid and be given a house on arrival'. That didn't last. From his first days in Moresby he was deeply interested in the country and its people. Almost daily he attended hearings into the 'wage case', on whether PNG public servants should be paid a local or Australian wage. He followed meetings of the Bully Beef Club at Adcol, where PNG public service trainees debated their country's future. He played and coached basketball for Aduni (a combined Adcol/UPNG team), supported Aduni's Aussie rules team, wrote his MEd thesis on Victoria's missions to Aborigines, and contributed more articles than anyone else on PNG affairs and future to local and Australian journals and newspapers. 'About twenty articles for *Nation*, Sydney', he tossed in at the end of his CV. Those articles are the most detailed analysis of what was happening in PNG in those volatile years.

Hank transferred to the UPNG's history department in 1968. Already he was the world authority on PNG history. He wrote and taught the subject's first course anywhere at any level, and co-wrote its first two texts for secondary and lower tertiary level (1968 and 1973). His courses stood out across the university as being 'local', and he kept up a steady flow of media articles. As the best commentator on PNG, Hank was asked by Penguin Books to write a book on it. It was published in 1972 as *Papua New Guinea: Black Unity or Black Chaos*, though the subtitle was not Hank's and he did not like it.

By then he had begun a PhD on gold prospectors, miners and mine labourers in New Guinea and Papua before World War II. In November 1972 this led him, me and Elton Brash up the Lakekamu River – up the creek, as we put it. Hank wanted to see Bulldog Landing, the start of a miners' track to the Wau goldfields, and later of a wartime track. We flew to Terapo Mission on the Tauri River and met our Moveave boatmen, Tasislis (driver) and Sepi (log lookout), with a boat and a 20hp outboard. A channel took us to the Lakekamu. We camped upriver near Papa hamlet and next day pushed on for Bulldog. Unfortunately it was in Anga (Kukukuku) country, and even in 1972 coastal people weren't keen on going there. When Tasislis learnt that's where we were headed, the boat slowed, and a few hours later Tasislis said pleasantly, 'We're running out of fuel'. It took us a while to take the hint, but it began raining, so about an hour short of Bulldog we turned back and camped by the river at Halao, near an Anga house. The boatmen thought this a bad idea, especially since the house was full of bows and arrows. No Anga raiders turned up that night, but we gave the mossies a good feed and next day went on downriver. I did a bit of panning on a sandbank, got a speck, then we skimmed along with remarkable speed. For many miles the river wound through a no man's land, but near the coast houses began speckling the banks. At Urulau we yarned with two New Ireland schoolteachers, man and wife; near Papa we called to see Gabriel Ehava, MM, soldier, cooperative movement founder and former MHA, but he wasn't home; at dusk we reached Moveave Co-op sawmill and talked to two wartime carriers, and next day went back to Moresby. Terrific trip.

Straight after it Hank moved to ANU and part-time continued his UPNG PhD. As always libraries, archives, stories and numbers were his strengths, but going to sites took him beyond paper. In Moresby I kept track of his research via intermittent queries. 'Hank here. Find someone from Orokaiva and ask if so and so is alive'. 'Listen digger, were any of these blokes in the AIF?' Yes, quite a few, including Claud Castleton, prospector, who won a VC at Pozieres. 'Listen wacker, I need to see some places around Milne Bay. See what you can do'. In June 1974 five of us flew to Samarai, got a boat to Kwato, where Hank interviewed Papuan ex-alluvial miners, and flew on to Misima, where Alby Munt was washing and buying gold. Alby showed us his sluices and took us round pre-war workings

all over the island, including a light rail track through an impressively deep cutting, a small version of Hellfire Pass on the Burma railway. Then we broke bush down an old mine road to Bwagoia, the jungle clutching. Hank and I talked there to Kenneth Kaiw, BEM, a pre-war administration clerk. When the Australians left in 1942 in case the Japs came, Kenneth kept census and other records up to date, insisted the school continue and paid the teachers, watched for downed pilots, and kept the administration going even during a murderous anti-government uprising. A quiet, brave man.

To Woodlark, where Kulumadau was a big goldfield before the war. Guasopa airstrip was one of Woodlark's many wartime bomber strips and was still all tar seal and Marsden matting spread by the Yanks. But within a hundred yards we were walking along the most beautiful beach I've ever seen: a long curve of white castor-sugar sand, a matching necklace of green islets edging a deep blue lagoon, a coral reef beyond, overhanging coconut palms, elegantly carved oceangoing canoes (*waga*) drawn up in the shade. We stayed in the rest house at Wabununa, where Fred and Nancy Damon were on fieldwork. Village men took us inland to some rock carvings they said were made by people before their ancestors came. That night I asked if they had stories of the first white men who came (as far as we knew) – the French missionaries in 1847–53. They laughed, and one dug the air with his hands and exclaimed, 'Travailler comme ça'. He spoke no French, showing vividly what oral history can do. Hank found pre-war mine workers still chasing colour, though not nearly as busily as the Misima men, and I bought a rough axe-head, not yet polished, from Suloga just west, the most famous quarry in eastern Papua. I gave it to Hank, and he kept it all his life.

To Goodenough, the Gosiagos' home. With them hard work is a matter of pride, so they were easily the most popular mine workers in the Eastern Division. On the north coast Hank interviewed men still proud of the work they did and the money they made. We reckoned they'd come in very handy on a wheat harvest.

As often with good historians, Hank got too much stuff, so he left the big New Guinea fields and wrote his thesis just on Papua. It was published as *Black, White and Gold* in 1977, with all Hank's hallmarks. It is a model of clear, direct writing: short sentences, active voice, few adjectives. It makes brilliant use of statistics, and of what reports did and didn't say. It is rich in Papuan names. You see the ground and hear the people, ordinary people, mostly men, in extraordinary times. It was the first detailed history of any PNG industry. In 1996 Hank used our gold circuit again when he edited the *War Diaries of Eddie Allan Stanton*, a Trobriands coastwatcher.

Hank remained the leading teacher, writer and commentator on PNG matters. From 1973 hardly a book, radio program, press comment or serious article on

PNG was done without consulting him, and many hundreds of academics, journalists, students, politicians and public servants benefited from his counsel. He established eminence in significant ways. He spoke and wrote common sense, easily attracting interested lay audiences. Academics paid by the public, he believed, should make sure the public benefits by it. He lived by this, and it led him to some significant pioneering in using film, TV, radio, sound archive and oral history to bring good stories based on high-quality research to many more people than ever hear or see academic work.

He knew film's power. He once told a seminar that whereas about 30,000 people had bought my book on Australians in the Great War, over 100 million had seen Peter Weir's *Gallipoli*. No teacher, he argued, should neglect film. He co-produced, codirected and narrated *Angels of War* (1981), about Papua's Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels on the Kokoda Track in 1942. It is still among the best of many good documentaries on PNG subjects. He then helped make *Man Without Pigs* (1989), a documentary on the return to his Mambare village of one of PNG's first doctoral graduates, John Waiko. Both films won important awards, nationally and internationally.

In radio Hank worked brilliantly with Tim Bowden. They co-wrote and Hank narrated the 24-part series *Taim Bilong Masta* (1981) on the Australian colonial experience in PNG. Hank's narration wove a story through hundreds of interviews. At a time when few Australians realised that they were colonial masters, the series told them more about their northern neighbour than anything else did. The ABC still broadcasts it.

Hank and Tim next collaborated to produce the 16-part ABC series *P.O.W.: Australians under Nippon* (1985), on the experience of Australian prisoners of the Japanese in 1942–45. They talked to dozens of survivors. One was Don Moore, from out Hank's way, a fine artist who sent Hank a stream of drawings of life, though not death, in Changi and on the Burma road. Another was Curley Heckendorf, whom each year I carted wheat and chopped thistles for. At the risk of death, Curley helped 'crutch' a wireless part into Changi. A third was Colin Brien, son of a Narrandera policeman, who survived a 'murder attempt' at Singapore in 1942, when the Japs blindfolded him, set him on the edge of a grave, chopped a sword deep into his neck and left him for dead. It was hours before he came to, and days before he got his hands free and could clean out the maggots, but he survived. His mates hid him for the rest of the war, in case the Japs tried again. Such stories are scarifying listening, shocking many who heard them, but they did valuable service to the prisoners and their country.

Both series revived a dormant public interest. Nothing like them had been attempted before, and until them neither Kokoda nor Changi was much remembered in Australia. Enriched by companion books Hank wrote, now they are among the best-known experiences of Australians in World War II. They

obliged Hank to become historical consultant to numerous documentaries on PNG or the Pacific War, and from 1992 to write detailed notes at unit level to guide interviewers for the Australian War Memorial's WWII sound archive. From 1995 he assembled Australians, Japanese and Papua New Guineans to create a multi-perspective AWM website on the war in PNG, suitable for anyone over 12. Try doing that.

Still the books came. For what became *With Its Hat about Its Ears* (1989), on bush schools, in August 1986 Hank and I went chasing schools and ex-pupils on Yorke Peninsula, South Australia. We found the remains of schools like Katunga Hill and Ninnes, and at Kimba we saw former bush schools brought in as classrooms. We put up at a Kimba motel on the night the local footy team won the grand final. When we broke camp next morning, no one was about. No breakfast and no one to pay for our room. We tried a few doors, had a look round Kimba and came back. Not a sound. Hank left his address under a door, and we headed for Darke Peak. We worked out where the school there had been, but it'd been moved to Kimba, so we went on to Port Lincoln to talk to people. When Hank got back to Canberra, he had to badger the motel to get them to say how much we owed. Kimba could've been Boort.

Victoria too recycled classrooms. The one at Chinkapook went north to Manangatang. 'The Chinkie people have lost their school', Hank said. 'Can we get it back for them?' 'They'd only move it again'. Practical man, Hank, but whenever I go through Chinkie I shout out helpfully to say where their school is. At least the Chinkie classroom survived: near Lockhart in the Riverina I showed Hank Fargunyah school ruins – a few pepper trees, a post-and-rail fence, a hitching post, a patch of playground worn bare. Most even of that has gone now.

In *Chased by the Sun* (2002), on Australians in Bomber Command, Hank told the stories, among others, of two remarkable pilots, Arthur Doubleday and Bill Brill. Arthur came from west of Ganmain, Bill from Derrain North, 20 miles further west. They were farm boys. Hank and I had a look at their country – flat to undulating red loam to clay, grey box and pine, top wheat country. We knew a bit about wheat, and Arthur and Bill knew a lot about it. Before the war they worked with four-bushel bags, whereas post-war ours were only three. But with horse teams they took a lot longer to get to the silos, so had more of a breather. Arthur first, then Bill, went to bush schools, then to Yanco Agricultural High School, as I did for a year. We went through Matong, Grong Grong and Narrandera to the school, built around Sam McCaughey's mansion with its magnificent stained glass windows from Ireland. A lifetime earlier Sam sat one night with his workers around a cosy fire. A man struck a match, lit his pipe and asked, 'How did you come to make so much money, Mr McCaughey?' 'Not by sitting round a fire lighting matches', Sam said. Hank loved the story.

From Yanco, Arthur and Bill went back to the wheat, but when war came, both families had to decide who would stay to run the farm and who would go to the war. Arthur and Bill would go, and in November 1940 they met on the train to Sydney, enlisted in the Air Force together, and went back to Narrandera for elementary flying training at 8 EFTS, on Tiger Moths. They knew the country better than the map did, and on navigation tests one would get out of the Moth and say to the other getting in, 'They're cropping the middle paddock' or some such. Both passed. After training in Canada they joined Bomber Command in England, when surviving a tour of 30 ops was not common, and lucky. They learnt to hold back coming home across the Dutch coast so less experienced pilots, anxious to get clear, crossed it first and drew the German flak, letting those behind dodge it. They watched out for each other. As they neared home, one would flick open the wireless: 'You OK, cobber?' 'Yep'. 'The flying farmers of Riverina', Hank called them. By 1945 both were Wing Commanders: Arthur DSO, DFC, MID; Bill DSO, DFC and bar.

In the 2008 Queen's Birthday Honours Hank got his own gong: an AM for outstanding service as a teacher and commentator on PNG. A tribute said in part,

Hank established PNG history as discipline ... He shifted its focus from its administrators to its people ... He is a pivotal and inspiring innovator, an early exponent in bringing university work into the public arena via film and radio, a model in applying the highest research standards to illuminate experiences of Australians and Papua New Guineans in peace and war. Few academics parallel his range, diversity, and service, let alone to the people of two countries, Papua New Guinea and Australia.

The gong came just in time. Late in 2009 he emailed:

Subject: Health report. Or lack of

Bill,

The Sydney visit was not disastrous but not an occasion of joy unconfined. There has been a moderate growth in the melanoma tumours in the lungs. It was pointed out to me that while these might not have any impact on me at the moment they would eventually kill me. I had grasped this possibility. The bloke at the Melanoma Unit said it was time to use chemotherapy. There was no urgency, but soon...

The Montevideo Maru film, shown last night on the Foxtel History Channel, was fairly good. I had taken a lot of errors out of the script but there were still a few statements that were slick or nearly right. But fast-moving and engaging. There was the usual lifting of film from Parer near Salamaua and dropped into the fight for Rabaul.

And that's the way it was and is.

Hank.

Those cruel tumours grew. By 2011 Hank was pretty crook, and at two morning teas in his honour could easily have just got stuck into the cakes – he never stood back from anything sweet. Instead he gave two memorable talks. The first began, 'I trust there is no relationship between my gradual disengagement from this unit and its obvious flourishing'. He gave statistics to prove that flourishing, then listed ways in which scholars might help PNG, under the headings Corruption, Compensation to Land Owners, PNG and Democracy, Governments by Competing Groups, and Autobiographies. His talk was a typically brilliant expression of practical concern for the wellbeing of the people of PNG. At the second morning tea he spoke almost entirely on how much he and everyone owed to the school and department secretaries and office staff, a gentle reminder to listening boffins to give them the respect they deserve.

It's not easy to realise that a great mate is a great man, especially when that mate was deceptively unpretentious and egalitarian. But Hank was a great man. Few people achieve as much as he did, and fewer manage to keep their heads below the parapet so well. He was not one for public parade, but his influence was immense among the many students and staff he helped, or who heard his talks, read his books, heard him on radio or saw his films. He taught many who became PNG's leaders, offering them a view of the ways that theirs was one country. This contributed significantly to the goodwill between PNG and Australia at independence in 1975. He was a prolific and wide-ranging writer, a teacher with a touch of genius, an expert who easily reached far beyond academia. Not for him any postmodernist navel gazing. He was a superb administrator, on the side of students, careful with budgets and reports, setting no-nonsense agendas, never tempted from research and writing into more than acting in senior administrative jobs.

He remained the boy from Boort. The bush gave him perspectives few professionals have, and even rarer, he kept those perspectives. He had a rain gauge in his yard. He loved to yarn about crops, prices, fallowing, new wheat varieties coming in, water conservation. By then we could often tell what the other was thinking, leading Jan to dub us Mutt and Jeff, after two comic strip dills. That was in private. 'It pains me to say it', I once wrote under the heading *Plodder greases Queen*, 'but he probably deserves his AM'. His country voice responded, 'Haven't you anything better to do with your time?' And a favourite moment: about 1986 we were on ABC radio, live to air, Hank and our host in Canberra, me in Adelaide. We talked a bit, then were asked what we thought of some aspect. Hank spoke, then our host said, 'Bill?' I said something like, 'Well that's what you'd expect Hank to say. He's been on that line for years. You'd

think he would've learnt something after all this time'. Hank came straight back: 'Bill's a careful lad, but he used to play rugby. We need to be tolerant'. To and fro we went, Mutt and Jeff. About when I regretted that Hank couldn't run a chook raffle, our host decided that we were drifting off course, got a touch panicky, and stopped us. Pity. Hank told me later that someone said to him, 'I didn't know you and Bill hated each other'. 'Yes', Hank said. 'Sad, isn't it? And I have to work with him'. Well mate, no more.

This text taken from *The Boy from Boort: Remembering Hank Nelson*, Edited by Bill Gammage, Brij V. Lal, Gavan Daws, published 2014 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.