

## 8. Papua New Guinea Wantok

Margaret Reeson

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In Papua New Guinea, a *wantok* is one who shares your language and your tribal connections – a ‘one talk’. In a country of over 700 distinct languages and many dialects, it is a powerful sign of relationship to be able to communicate with another person in a language you both understand. It suggests that you will discover mutual friends and allies and find that some landscapes and places are familiar to you both. In that sense, Hank Nelson and I were *wantoks*. We both understood the language and the landscapes of that tribe of outsiders who, over many decades, travelled to Papua New Guinea from somewhere else and came to value the people and stories of that beloved, frightening, beautiful, confusing, frustrating and unforgettable land.

Hank and I did not meet in Papua New Guinea although we were both there during some of the same period. He was in Port Moresby, and I was in the Southern Highlands in the 1960s and 1970s. The mission community on the outskirts of the small mountain township of Mendi in the Southern Highlands and the isolated mission at Nipa several mountain ranges further west were remote in every way from the world of the new University of Papua New Guinea where Hank worked. The first time I heard Hank’s name was when a book he had written arrived in the little book shop my husband had established in Mendi. Later books of his were also read with interest.

Long before I had the benefit of any guidance from Hank Nelson, I had been developing a keen interest in writing and in history. The early seeds for this were sown at high school in Parramatta, New South Wales. One of my first friends there was a descendant of a family who traced their roots to the very beginnings of the colony; her tales of her family home with furniture linked to fables of convicts, officers and dramatic encounters with local Aboriginal tribes were enthralling. Living in the Parramatta area as a young person, I was aware of the evidence of the early colonial period.

Later, as a young single teacher, I arrived in Papua New Guinea in 1961, appointed to a small mission school in Mendi, in the Southern Highlands. The people of that area had seen their first white face, their first wheel and their first piece of paper only ten years earlier, and the children in that school were

the first generation to become literate. 'History' was unfolding before my eyes. It seemed important to try to record what I was seeing. That first writing effort broke the basic rule of 'write what you know' as I attempted to tell the story of culture contact through the eyes of two Highlands men. Even so, it was my first experience of the delights of exploring archives and gathering oral history from my friends Wasun and Sond. An added challenge was that we were working between languages – in English with Wasun, in which he was not fluent, and in Sond's Mendi language, in which I was not fluent. Despite everything, this book was published in 1972, and I knew that I would love to write again.

An invitation to write a series of brief chapters on 30 'great Christian lives' for an educational project in Papua New Guinea proved a new challenge. The 30 names on the list ranged from 2nd-century martyrs to 20th-century Papua New Guinean characters. As a publishing exercise it was a failure. As a private education and as an introduction to church history it was a success. Even though for most of the period of writing I was out of reach of any library (the internet was unheard of) and had to rely on the bookshelves of friends or generous acquaintances for resources, it was a time of discovering the richness of story, memory and myth over the centuries of Christianity in its various manifestations. The world of those 30 Christians was my world. Future writing would be in the context of church history.

In the years following independence in Papua New Guinea, by now with a family of school-age children, we returned to Australia in late 1978 to settle in Canberra. In time it was possible to write again. Still working outside the guidance of the academic or professional world, I wrote several more books, and they were published. Each of these enterprises taught me more about the process of writing history. Again more unwritten rules were broken. The story of a young woman who lived in the young colony of New South Wales and as a missionary wife in Tonga during the early years of the 19th century was based very closely on primary sources – original letters and diaries found in the Mitchell Library – but because I wrote it in the first person as if she were telling her own story, without providing footnotes, readers assumed that it was fiction. Another effort, an attempt to rescue someone else's manuscript about the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, demonstrated the need to be thorough in one's research before committing to one's document. In yet another of my manuscripts, following an Australian family over a century, I learned the importance of comparing the various versions of oral history against other evidence; memory can be very slippery. Maps, images, contemporary newspapers, visits to sites, old letters and other family archives were all used to build the story. A manuscript about a working woman among the homeless in Sydney taught me to observe

and listen very carefully, to read between the lines, to check and check again and, as with other documents, to spend time in places that were significant to the story rather than relying on the descriptions of others.

Enter Hank Nelson. By now I was someone without a university education who had had five books published. For most of them there had been excellent advice from an editor in preparation for publication but no direction about historical method. Through an introduction by a mutual friend, late in 1991, Hank met with me to pass on a document that had been recommended for my latest writing project. It was soon clear that Hank was someone who knew more about the theme that was now capturing my attention than perhaps anyone else. We found, as *wantoks* do, a number of areas of shared interest. We both had a strong and continuing interest in issues relating to Papua New Guinea. When Hank learned that I was beginning to explore the experience of the Methodist missionary nurses, teachers and missionary wives who had been impacted by the coming of war to the islands of New Guinea in 1942, he was immediately generous with advice. Although I was outside the academic world of ANU and had no formal call on his time and expertise, Hank took me seriously, assured me that my project was worth doing and was warmly enthusiastic about suggesting sources of vital archival documents. We met a few times during the course of writing, talking about the loss of the *Montevideo Maru* on 1 July 1942 and the effect of the long mystery of its loss on the surviving families; when the book was published in 1993, I asked Hank to launch it.

A new possibility emerged in 1992. I had always assumed that a university education was beyond my reach. With an unimpressive leaving certificate result from 1954 and my only formal qualifications a teacher's certificate after two years of training, it had seemed impossible. But now it was suggested that I should attempt a master's qualifying program at ANU with a view to doing more work about all the families from the islands of New Guinea who had been impacted by the loss of the *Montevideo Maru*, not only the mission families. This was a program that I had not known existed, and so I visited Hank to ask for advice about it. Again he was helpful and encouraging, which was very important for one who felt unsure about her capacity to work at the level required. Although he knew that I was unfamiliar with the 'correct' language in which to describe it, he assured me that I did have a grasp of the process of writing history and pointed me in the direction of the path that could lead to a master of arts. Hank always seemed such an ordinary good bloke, so human and unassuming, yet a fount of vast knowledge and wisdom. What had seemed impossible became possible under his direction. I was able to complete the master's qualifying work and began work on the master's program in 1994. To my great satisfaction my supervisors were John Knott and Hank Nelson.

So began a period of regular meetings with Hank. Having found my way to his room through the maze of the Coombs building, I would find Hank engrossed in whatever project was occupying his mind that day, slightly rushed but always welcoming. Although I was one of the few students with whom he could not have a decent talk about cricket, there was always something of mutual interest. Often we were tempted to stray briefly from the work in progress to themes of PNG politics, memories of *kiap* (patrol officers) and *didiman* (agricultural extension officers), Big Man and explorer, missionary and *raskol*. We also discovered that each of us had begun our formal education in a little one-teacher school somewhere in rural Australia around the same year. Hank's writing on prisoners of war intersected with my own, and his knowledge of the period of war in the islands of what is now known as Papua New Guinea was able to direct me to less obvious sources and steer me away from major error. Occasionally I would uncover a hidden gem in the depths of the mine of the archives and would take it to Hank with much excitement; almost always he already knew about it but would share my enthusiasm. In time the work was completed, deemed acceptable and later published by Melbourne University Press in 2000. Although I feel a sense of unease at the way I bypassed the discipline of an undergraduate experience, I am grateful for Hank's contribution to my education.

Hank had a capacity for introducing people in his circle to others who he thought would appreciate the opportunity to meet them. In this way I met some of the people working with the Australia–Japan Research Project and was invited to contribute a paper at a symposium at ANU in 2000: 'Remembering the War in New Guinea'. Through Hank, Keiko Tamura and I discovered a deep human connection as each of us had been exploring the grief and uncertainty of the families, both Australian and Japanese, whose men had been lost in that miserable time of war. It was the same story, we realised, viewed from different hemispheres but with the same profoundly wounded humanity weeping for their lost men.

The connection with Keiko Tamura was to continue. Keiko introduced me to two Japanese women who were researching the experience of foreign prisoners of war and internees held in Japan during the war years. Through a series of email exchanges about our mutual interests, it became possible to arrange to meet Yoshiko Tamura and Mayumi Komiya in Japan in 2007. After my return from this adventure, I met with Keiko Tamura and Hank to show photos and tell them the story. Together we looked at images of my exploration with Yoshiko and Mayumi of the Commonwealth War Graves cemetery in Yokohama and the harbour-side streets of that city searching for the site of the Yokohama Yacht Club, where the Australian nurses from New Guinea had been interned in 1942. Most moving was the photograph of the group seated around a table with an array of Japanese delicacies in a private home. (I was told later that it is unusual

for foreign visitors to be invited into a private home.) We were on the site of the house in Totsuka where the Australian nurses from Rabaul had been interned in the later years of war. Around the table were the daughter-in-law of the woman who had been their cook, a 93-year-old lady who remembered them well; her son, who had been given a garment knitted by an Australian nurse when he was an infant; the two researchers; some neighbours and us. Through interpreters we told stories of those years of war, sensed something of the memories of distress of our one-time enemies, shared a meal and exchanged gifts. It was a strange and wonderful encounter. To be able to recount to Hank this story of a small reconciliation was a gift. He had been the one who began the sequence of connections that led us to that moment.

At intervals in the years since I was Hank's student we have met in various settings, usually at events associated with ANU. When I began a new writing project, a joint biography of a 19th-century missionary couple who had been pioneers in New Guinea in the 1870s, unsurprisingly Hank already knew about them. There was not much about Papua New Guinea that had escaped his notice. As always, he was encouraging in what proved to be a very extended and labour-intensive piece of work and was willing to offer advice on possible sources. In 2011, when he was already facing the challenges of his illness, he agreed to meet me for a conversation about my work. Although there had been only a brief period of two years when he was under any obligation to give me his time and wisdom – and that time was now 15 years in the past – he was still generous with his time to someone outside the academic system. On that occasion he offered some practical suggestions about possibilities for finding a publisher. That conversation led directly to the eventual publication of my manuscript by ANU E Press.

A piece of advice about writing that Hank gave to many of his students was to picture our audience and write for that person. He suggested to me that I imagine that I was writing for the intelligent, busy matron of the hospital at Broome, who would be interested in my ideas but would be impatient with fancy, convoluted, tangled language. As I had never been a speaker of the impenetrable dialect of academe, that suited me. So it was that for my most recent writing project I kept three people in my mind: Helen, a widely read woman with an interest in the human story, particularly the experience of the women; Bruce, a chap working for the contemporary incarnation of the organisation about which I was writing; and Hank Nelson. Hank did not see the finished work but knew that it was to be published. I hope he would have given it a grin of approval.

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