

# Preface

This book celebrates the life and work of Hank Nelson – scholar, teacher, communicator, mentor, writer and iconic figure of the Australian academy in the late 20th century. Besides being the premier historian of Papua New Guinea, Hank wrote memorably about the Australian experience of the Second World War and about Australian one-teacher schools. He communicated his research through books, scholarly articles, newspapers and magazines, radio and film. He was a gifted teacher of undergraduate and graduate students, whose work he supervised with care and patient understanding. While he was a distinguished member of the Australian academy, he always stood at a remove from its internal preoccupations and debates. First and foremost, Hank was a scholar who was keen to communicate with the broadest possible audience in the ordinary language of intelligent discourse.

Born in 1937 in Boort at the edge of the Mallee country of north-western Victoria, he was named Hyland Neil. In the family, he was known as Neil. He became Hank at high school. There was a boy who called everyone ‘Hank’, as in the American ‘Hey, Joe’. Somehow the name stuck to Neil Nelson. When he started to write and publish, he decided to be Hank in print as well as in everyday life, and that was who he was for the rest of his days.

Hank attended the University of Melbourne and taught high school before joining the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 1964. Two years later, he went to Port Moresby to teach at the Administrative College. In 1968, he transferred to the recently established University of Papua New Guinea, where he pioneered research and teaching in PNG’s history, virtually establishing it as a discipline. In 1973, he joined the Research School of Social Sciences of The Australian National University, later moving to the Department of Pacific and Southeast Asian History in the Research School of Pacific Studies. He remained at ANU for the next 40 years, becoming a kindly and enduring presence in the lives of all he came into contact with. Hank died in Canberra in February 2012.

The book is divided into three parts. The first contains reflections on aspects of Hank’s life and work by his colleagues and students, and by his older brother, John, and his son, Michael. Some of the pieces are slightly reworked versions of eulogies given at Hank’s memorial service at the University House at ANU; the rest were written especially for this volume. Each contributor has written about Hank in their own voice – the way they saw him and the way he interacted with them. The tributes could be multiplied and were, at the memorial, in newspapers and online on the ‘Outrigger’ blog. It is interesting that the picture in the round is so consistent – with Hank there was no ‘Rashomon effect’. Hank was always one and the same person: what you saw was what you got. The second part

contains essays by Hank, selected to reflect the range of his work as a teacher, observer and writer of memoirs. Some pieces are slightly edited for length and clarity. More of Hank's work is widely available online and in print. A full list of his publications is in the third part, the bibliography at the end of the book.

We are grateful to many people who have helped us put this volume together. Our first thanks go to Jan Nelson, Hank's wife, who gave us advice and papers whenever asked and otherwise tolerated and encouraged us. Brett Baker prepared the manuscript and images for publication. Vicki Luker, Jan Gammage, Nic Halter and Tamai Heaton assisted us in various ways, from looking for photographs and references to typing portions of the manuscript. Nicole Haley, convenor of the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, of which Hank was the chair until shortly before his death, provided generous financial assistance to defray the cost of publication. We thank the Pacific Editorial Board and especially its chair, Stewart Firth, for their encouragement, and Beth Battrick of ANU Press for shepherding the manuscript through publication. Most of all, we thank our contributors for their enthusiastic support and timely contributions. Their love for Hank showed through. They have done him proud.

Bill Gammage

Brij V. Lal

Gavan Daws

#### NOTE

An appreciation of Hank is in Ian Howie-Willis, 'Hyland Neil ("Hank") Nelson (21 October 1937 – 17 February 2012)', *Journal of Pacific History* 47:2 (2012), pp. 227–32. See also Gavan Daws, 'Hank', *Outrigger: Blog of the [ANU] Pacific Institute*, 6 March 2012.

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