

Preface

This book emerged from a workshop symposium on political life writing held at The Australian National University (ANU) in October 2012. The inspiration for the workshop came over a cup of tea we shared with Chris Chevalier in the Coombs Tea Room earlier that year where we discussed the practice of life writing and the issues and challenges that one faces while writing political biography. Chris is currently writing a life of Solomon Mamaloni. Some of the themes we explored related to life writing in general; the ambiguous place of the genre within the academy, its 'great person in history' tendencies, the relationship between writer and subject, and the big question that faces us all when we produce our manuscripts: what to leave in and out.

As we began to dig deeper we also touched on aspects of the life writing art that seemed particularly pertinent to political figures: public perception and ideology, identifying political successes and important policy initiatives, grappling with issues like corruption and age-old political science questions about political leadership and 'dirty hands'. We also explored the nature of certain source materials: Hansard, political speeches, interviews, and the divergent perspectives offered by supporters and opponents.

Some of these themes seemed to be of particular significance in a Pacific context, including patterns of colonisation and the memory of independence, issues elliptically captured by terms like 'culture' and 'tradition', the nature of 'self' presented in Pacific life writing, and the tendency for many of these texts to have been written by 'outsiders', or at least the increasingly contested nature of what that term means.

With this broad canvas in mind, we sought to bring together, for the first time, a community of scholars writing 'political lives' in the Pacific. Specifically, we wanted to explore the practice of life writing according to the people involved: the practitioners. Our aim was to reflect on the experiential side of life writing and to consider what this meant for the texts we produce. The workshop exceeded even our expectations in the quality and range of papers. This collection is the product of that discussion.

Not all of the presenters were able to write for this volume but we are nevertheless grateful for their comments and careful suggestions throughout the workshop. In keeping with the conversational nature of the proceedings, we have only very lightly edited the papers so as to preserve the familiar tone. This is, we believe, particularly important given that we hope this volume will be of use to practitioners working outside of the academy and its self-referential vernacular.

The invitation to participate in the workshop was open-ended and papers were invited that explored any or all of the themes outlined above in relation to the unique aspects of writing political life history in the Pacific region. The workshop was generously funded by the ANU School of Culture, History and Language's Research Committee and the School of International, Political and Strategic Studies' State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program. We are particularly grateful to James Holman for his assistance with logistics and to Nicholas Halter for editing the manuscript.

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