

Book Reviews

The Sky Travellers: Journeys in New Guinea 1938–1939, by Bill Gammage. Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press (Melbourne University Press), 1998. ISBN 0-522-84827-3, xx + 292 pages, maps, photographs, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. A\$39.95, US\$39.95.

The outsiders marked out part of the Melanesian culture area, put borders around it, called it Papua New Guinea, then left the people of this newly invented country to settle their differences and run a modern state. In much the same way, historians read the documents of colonial administrations, described what governments claimed to be doing, and wrote the history of a nation coming into being. Historians—some of the best known anyway—settled for histories of policy because policy gave their stories coherence. Some shoehorned Papua New Guinea's history into preconceived theoretical frameworks.

Papua New Guinea is more complicated than that. Papua New Guineans were many peoples and, in a sense, many nations during the colonial period. What governments and patrol officers thought they were doing was one thing; what actually happened was different, so that histories of policy can be neat but largely fictional in describing the impact of the government and the encounter between villagers and Europeans. Generalizing about Papua New Guinea, as historians of policy are forced to do, is invariably misleading.

The deepest understanding of the

history of Papua New Guinea comes from examining closely an event or series of events and from recounting the details that hold wider significance, as Gammage has done in this remarkable book. His subject is the Hagen-Sepik patrol, the largest and longest patrol ever undertaken by the Australians in Papua or New Guinea, and, as Gammage argues, the “last of the great European explorations which began with Diaz 450 years before” (2). The expedition left Mount Hagen in March 1938 and returned in June 1939, traveling three thousand kilometers in between, mostly in country new to the Europeans and to the New Guinean police and carriers who accompanied them.

The Sky Travellers is truly a labor of love. Like historians of earlier generations, though not like those of our own, Gammage immersed himself in his subject, living with it for thirty years, and not writing until he was confident about almost every detail. He followed every conceivable lead, interviewed numerous people who knew about the patrol, including police, carriers, and villagers, combed archives in Australia and elsewhere, and retraced the steps of the patrol across the mountain terrain of New Guinea. By themselves, his meticulously drawn maps of where the patrol went and his superb photographs of the men who went on it and the people they met justify the publication of this book.

Two extraordinary men led the Hagen-Sepik patrol, Jim Taylor and John Black, both of whom Gammage

came to know closely over many years. He used their reports and diaries in writing this book as any historian would, but he came to those sources with the rare insight and understanding of a friend. In his hands the two men come alive as they are transformed by the experience of spending months on patrol, leading, cajoling, arguing with, and being manipulated by police and carriers. Taylor had a grand, romantic vision of New Guinea and a deep admiration for the highland peoples and their way of life, one that he thought could endure alongside that of Australian settlers. Black was more inclined to see New Guineans as savages, but the Hagen-Sepik patrol changed him. By the end of it he knew them to be human beings like any other human beings, brutal to enemies, generous to friends, sophisticated in political dealings, focused—in the end—on power.

Taylor and Black were aware and not aware of the intense politics being played out on the line as New Guinean police vied with each other for supremacy, tested to see what they could get away with, attempted to play one European off against another, and used their armed presence in new country for their own purposes. Taylor and Black were aware and not aware, too, of the extent to which peoples whom they met along the way sought to use this unexpected group of powerful foreigners in order to destroy traditional enemies, extend power over enemy lands, and change the existing balance of power in their part of New Guinea.

In a remarkable achievement of research, Gammage has also delved deeply into the lives of the New

Guineans who were on the patrol or met it. No other book on Papua New Guinea history has ever had such a long list of Papua New Guinean names in the index, nor so many pages devoted to descriptions of their lives, achievements, and disappointments. In a typically sympathetic passage in which he describes the achievements of one of the police in the field of sorcery, Gammage says of Habana “years of village apprenticeship had made him a first-class sorcerer, with prestige far beyond his European rank” (98). This is history from both sides of the fence, and it is beautifully and accessibly written.

Writing the history of Papua New Guinea is a devilishly difficult task, one beyond the capabilities and patience of most historians. The author of this history is one of the few exceptions, and his book is a major scholarly contribution that deserves the widest recognition. *The Sky Travellers* will become a classic of Pacific history.

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