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‘Masquerading as an Historian of Australia’

*Doug Munro*¹

When Donald Wright of the University of New Brunswick wrote the ‘Foreword’ to my 2021 monograph on the Peter Ryan-Manning Clark controversy, he anticipated that:

Readers of this book may be asking, ‘Who is Doug Munro?’ and it’s a fair question. He is a New Zealander whose original specialisation was Pacific Islands history and who taught for nine years at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji.²

Donald was not wrong. Soon after reviewing my book in *Australian Book Review*, Mark McKenna found himself fielding questions as to my identity.³ Clearly, I was an unknown quantity to at least some, I suspect many, Australian historians.

Fast forward to October 2023 when I first met Patrick Mullins, who has written, among other things a splendid biography of arguably Australia’s worst prime minister, Billy McMahon. If ever a silk purse of a biography has been made out of a sow’s ear of a subject, it is this one.⁴ During our lunchtime discussion, I asked Patrick if he knew about me before being asked to review my book and, not unexpectedly, his answer was in the negative.⁵ One way or another I have written quite a bit of Australian history since 2011

¹ I am extremely grateful to the Editor-in-chief of this journal, Dr. Jatinder Mann for his useful feedback and suggestions on my reflective piece.

² Donald Wright, “Doug Munro: A Very Short Introduction,” in Doug Munro, *History Wars: The Peter Ryan – Manning Clark Controversy* (ANU Press, 2021), xvii.

³ Mark McKenna, “A Tidy Little Earner,” *Australian Book Review* 439 (January–February 2022): 13–14; Mark McKenna, e-mail to author, 5 January 2022.

⁴ Patrick Mullins, *Tiberius with a Telephone: The Life and Stories of William McMahon* (Scribe, 2018).

⁵ Patrick Mullins, ‘Tall Poppy-opping,’ *Inside Story*, 30 November 2021, <https://insidestory.org.au/tall-poppy-opping/>.

but perhaps on fringe topics. As Wright foresaw, within Australia I am probably known, to the limited extent that I am, as a historian of the Pacific Islands and the biographer-cum-historiographer of other Pacific historians.⁶ As McKenna has told me, some of his correspondents ‘asked ... if I knew you, as they hadn’t associated you with the “territory”’.⁷

I am perfectly aware that my equivocal identity is self-inflicted. But first things first. I was indeed brought up in Aotearoa New Zealand, where I returned to live in 2000 after my second stint in Fiji. But I do have Australian antecedents. By a quirk of fate, in my last year at high school my father was appointed to a teaching position at the Elder Conservatorium of Music at the University of Adelaide and in early 1967 the family relocated to South Australia. There, I enrolled at Flinders University, then in its second year of teaching. I did come to think that I would be living permanently in Australia, and for good reason. I did my Ph.D. at Macquarie University and my three children are Australian-born. I obtained Australian citizenship, identified as an Australian (until returning to Aotearoa New Zealand in 2000), and I lectured in two institutions in Queensland between 1984 and 1991. The only Australian history I wrote during that time were a couple of journal articles that emerged from my working at the Port Arthur Conservation Project in Tasmania, 1982–84.⁸ This was definitely a one-off diversion, I

⁶ E.g. Doug Munro and Brij V. Lal, eds, *Texts and Contexts: Reflections in Pacific Islands Historiography* (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2006); Doug Munro, *J.C. Beaglehole—Public Intellectual, Critical Conscience* (Steele Roberts, 2012).

⁷ Mark McKenna, e-mail to author, 18 November 2024.

⁸ Doug Munro, “From Macquarie Harbour to Port Arthur: The Founding of a Penal Settlement,” *Tasmanian Historical Research Association—Papers & Proceedings* 36, no. 3 (1989): 113–24; Graeme McIntyre and Doug Munro, “The Process of Free Settlement on Tasman Peninsula,” *Tasmanian Historical Research Association—Papers & Proceedings* 37, no. 1 (1990): 7–22.

thought to myself at the time. Rather, all I wanted to be, and to remain, was a historian of the Pacific Islands.

Yet it was Australian history that shaped my initial interest in Pacific Islands history. In my second year at Flinders I took the 'Modern Political History' course. It included a segment on 'Colonial Autocracy in New South Wales, 1788–1821' which I recall with yearning. That improbable subject held my interest into the following year when I decided that Pacific Islands history, which was being taught by David Hilliard, was my calling.⁹ Yet the two quickly became intertwined because my embryonic interest in early New South Wales centred on its commercial operations and exciting new publications – or at least I found them exciting – were coming out at this time.¹⁰ It was a historiographic growth area and I still have most of these books. What is more, the Sydney traders' operations extended into the Pacific Islands so it is hardly surprising that my initial interest in Pacific history focussed on trade and traders, which were also being serviced by an expanding literature.¹¹ I look back and feel sheepish that someone so young could even think about specialising at such an early juncture. In the event, in 1973 I submitted a Masters Qualifying thesis to the Australian National University on the

⁹ David Hilliard, *God's Gentlemen: A History of the Melanesian Mission, 1849–1942* (University of Queensland Press, 1978).

¹⁰ Margaret Steven, *Merchant Campbell, 1769–1846: A Study of Colonial Trade* (Oxford University Press, 1965); Jill Eastwood, "The Economy of New South Wales, 1788–1810," in *Essays in Economic History of Australia* (Jacaranda, 1967), ed. James Griffin, 1–23; G. J. Abbott and N. B. Nairn, eds, *Economic Growth of Australia, 1788–1821* (Jacaranda, 1967); T. G. Parsons, "Governor Macquarie and the Economic Crisis in New South Wales, 1810–1815," *New Zealand Journal of History* 2, no. 2 (1968): 178–200; D. R. Hainsworth, ed., *Builders and Adventurers: The Traders and the Emergence of the Colony 1788–1821* (Cassells, 1968).

¹¹ E.g. Dorothy Shineberg, *They Came for Sandalwood: A Study of the Sandalwood Trade in the South-west Pacific, 1830–1865* (Melbourne University Press, 1967); John M. R. Young, ed., *Australia's Pacific Frontier: Economic and Cultural Expansion into the Pacific, 1795–1885* (Cassells, 1967); H. E. Maude, *Of Islands and Men: Studies in Pacific History* (Oxford University Press, 1968), 178–283, 343–71.

Fijian sandalwood and bêche-de-mer trades; the Sydney traders were prominent in the former trade which effectively lasted from 1804 until 1814.

Then I became a postgraduate student at Macquarie University and ended up writing a Ph.D. thesis on the nineteenth century history of Tuvalu, a group of atolls and reef islands to the north of Fiji. I hastened slowly and the thesis was finally submitted in 1982, and then only because my supervisor kept faith with me, despite having good reason not to. The thesis was never published but some of the material was reworked as journal articles and book chapters.¹² The thesis was submitted when I was working at Port Arthur in a career involving considerable mobility. In 1980 I was an Assistant Lecturer at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Fiji followed by eighteen months in Adelaide at my parent's place, vainly trying to finish my thesis. Then came the two years at Port Arthur and in 1984 I was appointed to a teaching position at the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education (DDIAE) at Toowoomba (now the University of Southern Queensland). It was an awful place to work but it served its purpose in being instrumental in my appointment to Bond University in Queensland's Gold Coast in late-1989. In 1992 I was back in Fiji for the rest of the decade, this time as Head of History/Politics at USP, where I continued my specialist interest on indentured servitude in the Pacific Islands, both its history and historiography.¹³ The earlier pieces on

¹² E.g. "The Lives and Times of Resident Traders in Tuvalu: an exercise in history from below," *Pacific Studies* 10, no. 2 (1987): 73–106; "Samoan Pastors in Tuvalu, 1965–1899," in Doug Munro and Andrew Thornley, eds, *The Covenant Makers: Islanders Missionaries in the Pacific* (Pacific Theological College, and Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific, 1996), 124–57. See also: "On Being a Historian of Tuvalu: Further Thoughts on Methodology and Mindset," *History in Africa* 26 (1999): 218–36.

¹³ E.g. "Planter versus Protector: Frank Cornwall's Employment of Plantation Workers in Samoa, 1878–1881," *New Zealand Journal of History* 23, no. 2 (1989): 173–182; "The Pacific Islands Labour Trade: Approaches, Methodologies, Debates," *Slavery & Abolition* 14, no 2 (1993): 87–108.

indenture were mostly co-authored with my former Ph.D. supervisor, Stewart Firth, to whom I owe a great deal.¹⁴

In all those years I identified as a Pacific historian and was interested in Australian history only in so far as I had to be; this was largely confined to teaching courses on Australian politics and in researching the Queensland segment of the Pacific Islands labour trade.¹⁵ Pressure was brought to bear for me to change my ways when the Dean of Arts at DDIAE stated that I had agreed at my appointment interview to turn over to Australian history. It was a complete fabrication. Bluntly, it was an outright lie but symptomatic of the bullying culture at DDIAE. He refused, in 1988, to endorse my application for an Australian Research Council grant on these grounds, but I got it anyway and took the money with me to Bond University. To put not too fine a point to it, the powers that be at DDIAE were as relieved to see the back of me as I was to be leaving for the more congenial environs of the Gold Coast.

The rupture in my career came in early-2000 when I returned to Aotearoa New Zealand to live. My second three-yearly contract at USP had not been renewed and I left the place to an uncertain future.¹⁶ A signifier that my life had entered a new and different phase arrived in a package sent later that year by my longstanding friend and co-editor Jacqueline Leckie; we had both worked at USP but did not overlap. It contained a copy

¹⁴ E.g. Doug Munro and Stewart Firth, "From Company Rule to Consular Control: Gilbert Island Labourers on German Plantations in Samoa, 1867–96," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 16, no. 1 (1987): 22–44; Stewart Firth and Doug Munro, "Compagnie et Consulat: Lois germanique et emploi des travailleurs sur les plantations de Samoa, 1863–1914," *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 91 (1990): 115–34.

¹⁵ "Gilbert and Ellice Islanders on Queensland Canefields, 1894–1899," *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland* 14, no. 11 (1992): 449–65; "The Labor Trade in Melanesians to Queensland: An Historiographic Essay," *Journal of Social History* 28, no. 3 (1995): 609–27.

¹⁶ I have written about this elsewhere: "On Being an Historian in Different Academic Settings," *Pacific Journal of Education* 1, no. 1 (2017): 80.

of a just-published edited collection on Fiji in which she had a chapter, and her inscription reads, 'To remind you of your past & perhaps the future.'¹⁷ It was a lovely gesture and token of solidarity, and I certainly needed moral support because the next few years were very difficult, both financially and emotionally. In retrospect I am glad to have left USP and its mounting problems, not to mention Fiji's ongoing troubled political situation, but it hardly seemed that way at the time. Despite having two co-authored books on divergent subjects to my name,¹⁸ I never got another university job, and not though lack of trying. I made my bow to necessity by working in a superette for over a year for \$10 an hour. It paid the rent with a little left over for beer money but my wife was the real bread winner. Salvation came in 2005 when I became the New Zealand researcher for a major project on twentieth century suicide, under the direction of John Weaver of McMaster University. That helped keep the wolves off the door and resulted in a close friendship with John, plus the bonus of joint-authored articles.¹⁹ We completed the research in 2013, just before the funding ran out and on the eve of my 65th birthday. I then went into formal retirement but not retired from history.

So where does Australian history fit into all this? At USP I was not following events in Australia to the extent I that should have done. I barely heard about the Ryan-

¹⁷ Jacqueline Leckie, "Women in Post-Coup Fiji: Negotiating Work through Old and New Realities," in A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi (ed.), *Confronting Fiji's Futures* (Asia Pacific Press, 2000), 178–201. Ironically – and disgracefully – Leckie was made redundant by the University of Otago in 2016, after 27 years of loyal service to the institution.

¹⁸ Michael Goldsmith and Doug Munro, *The Accidental Missionary: Tales of Elekana* (Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Canterbury, 2002); Roman Grynberg, Doug Munro, and Michael White, *Crisis: The Collapse of the National Bank of Fiji* (Crawford House, 2002).

¹⁹ Starting with: John C. Weaver and Doug Munro, "Country Living, Country Dying: Suicide in Rural New Zealand, 1900–1950," *Journal of Social History* 42, no. 4 (2009): 933–61. Weaver's two books on suicide are: *A Sadly Troubled History: The Meanings of Suicide in the Modern Age* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2009); *Sorrows of a Century: Interpreting Suicide in New Zealand, 1900–2000* (Bridget Williams Books, 2014).

Clark controversy when it erupted in 1993 and I did not actually read Ryan's diatribes until 1999. In similar fashion, only much later did I hear about the controversy aroused by Helen Gardner's *The First Stone* (1995) on a sexual harassment case at the University of Melbourne. Much like Aotearoa New Zealand, I was losing touch. Second, even before being turfed out of USP I was moving away from indenture and into biography, particular biographical studies of Pacific historians.²⁰ They were almost invariably Australia-based historians, but I did broaden out and deal with non-Pacific historians.²¹ I also teamed up with Geoffrey Gray in writing about the appointments of senior anthropologists in Australian universities,²² and soon after became embroiled in journal articles, with a decided biographical bent, on the so-called 'new' Australian universities of the 1960s.²³ At the same time I was working on the book that became *History Wars: The Peter Ryan-Manning Clark Controversy* (2021). None of this could have been accomplished without frequent enough visits to archival repositories in Australia on smash-and-grab raids, with digital camera in hand, and I was fortunate, in circumstances of self-funded research, to be able to stay with friends and family much of this time.

The latest twist to the tale was being drawn back into indenture studies in 2013 at the behest of my close friend Brij Lal, who co-opted me as third editor with the task of

²⁰ Starting with "J. W. Davidson and Western Samoa: The Travails of a Constitutional Adviser," *Journal of Pacific History* 35, no. 2 (2000): 197–211; and culminating in *The Ivory Tower and Beyond: Participant Historians of the Pacific* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

²¹ E.g. "Michael Turnbull, G. R. Elton and the making of *The Practice of History*," *Historical Journal* 58, no. 3 (2015): 805–25; "'How illuminating it has been': Matthews, McKenna and their biographies of Manning Clark," in *Emigrants & Historians: Essays in Honour of Eric Richards*, ed. Philip Payton (Wakefield Press, 2016), 98–131, 169–75.

²² Culminating in: Geoffrey Gray, Doug Munro, and Christine Winter, *Chicanery: Senior Academic Appointments in Antipodean Anthropology, 1920–1960* (Berghahn, 2023).

²³ Most recently: "Australian Political Science in the 1960s: Establishing the Discipline of Politics at Flinders University," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 70, no. 1 (2024): 61–75.

imposing order on an unruly manuscript.²⁴ That resulted in my being embraced by members of the Indian indenture/diaspora fraternity and in resuming an interest in indenture, specifically the historiography of the Indo-Fijian experience.²⁵ There was *a lot* of reading to catch up on after some fifteen years absence from the broader field. Following Lal's death on Christmas Day (of all days) in 2021, I diverted myself by seeing his last book through the press and in writing about Lal so that his legacy continues.²⁶ That done, I am now more than ready to return to unfinished tasks in the field of Australian history.

The question has to be asked: why did I transform from a single-minded historian of the Pacific Islands into a somewhat diffuse historian of Australia who jumps from one topic to another, an example being my solitary foray into military historiography.²⁷ By now the reader might harbour the suspicion that I am all over the place and cannot stick to the one thing. That is *precisely* what I have sought to convey – unashamedly. Others can do their own thing and I will not complain, but for myself I no longer want to remain in the same groove, as I once did. Besides, the day of the generalist is not dead and it is healthy to have other research interests to fall back on. The main reason I abandoned indenture studies for a decade-and-a-half was because I felt that I was played out and

²⁴ Maurits S. Hassankhan, Brij V. Lal, and Doug Munro, eds, *Resistance and Indian Indenture Experience: Comparative Perspectives* (Manohar, 2014).

²⁵ "The Tinker-Gillion Controversy in Indo-Fijian Indenture Historiography," *Slavery & Abolition* 42, no. 2 (2021): 363–81; "K.L. Gillion and the Making of *Fiji's Indian Migrants*" (Discussion Paper 2024/4, Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University), 16pp.

²⁶ Brij V. Lal, ed., *Serendipity: Experiences of Pacific Historians* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2024); Doug Munro, "Memorial Address: Reflections on Brij V. Lal," *Indenture Papers* 3 (2023): 3–11; Doug Munro, "Brij V. Lal and K. L. Gillion: The Apprentice and the Sorcerer," *Journal of Indentureship and its Legacies* 3, no. 2 (2024): 31–52; Jon Fraenkel and Doug Munro (Guest Editors), special issue: "From Broken Waves to the Levelling Wind: Brij V. Lal and the Contemporary Politics of Fiji," *Journal of Pacific History* 59, no. 2 (2024): 117–254.

²⁷ "The Making of *Ai Matai*: A Cautionary Tale in Fijian Historiography and Publishing," *Pacific Studies* 20, no. 3 (1997): 61–79.

doubted whether I had more to offer. Another reason was because I disliked where Pacific historiography was heading in some quarters, with the increasing emphasis on identity politics. Thus, I intensified my growing interest in biography.

This did not represent a sharp break. Apart from my work on suicide, I am struck by how my various interests have segued from one to the next and yet how unpremeditated the progression has been. I exchanged Pacific history for biography but my biographical subjects were Pacific historians. I then turned to historians who had nothing to do with Pacific Islands history, mostly Australian historians, which led-on to an interest in biographies and autobiographies of historians.²⁸ Another transition, which stemmed from ‘telling academic lives,’ as I call it, involved studies of Australian university departments during the 1960s when the ‘new’ Australian universities were being established. A pattern can be discerned but its trajectory was in no way planned. Moreover, as the chain of transmission lengthened, the later work increasingly diverged in theme and content from the earlier publications. My first journal article dealing with the personal papers of a trader in Samoa bears no relationship to my more recent work on the 1960s universities.²⁹

One thing unexpectedly lead to another. For example, in 2011 or 2012 it suddenly occurred to me that the University of Adelaide Archives probably contained material on George Rudé’s appointment. He had been ‘the star scholarly acquisition’ to the University of Adelaide History department during the 1960s.³⁰ The files did exist and

²⁸ “Biographies of Historians—or, The Cliographer’s Craft,” *Australian Historical Studies* 43, no. 1 (2012): 11–27; Doug Munro and Geoffrey Gray, “Walvin, Fitzpatrick and Rickard: Three Autobiographies of Childhood and Coming of Age,” in *Clio’s Lives: Biographies and Autobiographies of Historians*, eds. Doug Munro and John G. Reid (ANU Press, 2017), 37–63.

²⁹ “The Westbrook Papers,” *Turnbull Library Record* 5 (new series), no. 2 (1972): 18–35.

³⁰ Wilfrid Prest, “How We Got from Here to There: History in a ‘Scottish University,’” in Wilfrid Prest ed., *Pasts Present: History at Australia’s Third University* (Wakefield Press, 2014), 18.

the resulting essay on Rudé led me to write about History department during its halcyon days which, in turn, was followed-up by an article on Flinders University's foundation professor of History, Oliver MacDonagh.³¹ These journal articles stemmed from spur of the moment decisions, despite the appearance of having been part of a deliberate progression. My book on the Peter Ryan-Manning Clark controversy was something of a departure; even so it chimed in with my existing interest in Australian historians and Australian universities of that era. Actually, it was intended as a journal article and then grew like topsy into a monograph.

My research has always been curiosity driven but increasingly I want to write about things that I am part of. The books on the collapse of the National Bank of Fiji and the Ryan-Clark monograph are obvious exceptions. Rather, I have known many of the historians I write about, including Oliver MacDonagh and George Rudé who, successively, were the History professors at Flinders University during my undergraduate years. My recent publications on Lal stem from him being an old and very dear friend; we first met in 1979. The 'new' Australian universities of the 1960s, which lived up to the fabled 'idea of a university', have salience because my degrees come from two of them. By contrast, to write about the corporate neo-liberal universities of today, which I keep largely at arm's length, would be distasteful in the extreme.

In other words, I am only interested in writing about what interests me, which happens to be aspects of Australian history at the moment. I do my own thing with an empirical bent. What I am *not* is an activist historian. In 2019, the reminiscences of the

³¹ "The Strange Career of George Rudé—Marxist Historian," *Journal of Historical Biography* 16 (2014): 118–69; "The House that Hugh Built: The Adelaide History Department during the Stretton Era, 1954–1966," *History of Education* 46, no. 5 (2015): 631–52; "Oliver MacDonagh: Foundation Professor of History at Flinders University," *History Australia* 15, no. 4 (2018): 638–56.

editors of the student publication, the *ANU Historical Journal*, were published and it is immediately apparent that I was the only one who did not set out to change the world.³² I am as capable as the next person for indignation about social injustice and political malfeasance, and I am more than capable of expressing strong distaste in the face of bad behaviour from biographical subjects, Peter Ryan in particular. But I am not interested in thrusting myself into the public limelight and into the forefront of battle. It is a matter of temperament: you are what you are, as the saying goes and I do not try to be what I am not. In his recently-published *Political Memoir*, Robert Manne says more than once that the buzz of the instant publication of topical pieces on matters of national importance for a wider audience carried infinitely more satisfaction than writing scholarly journal articles – in his case on British foreign policy prior to the Second World War – that would be read by next to no one.³³ The thought of being an influencer and having the opportunity to make a difference is the driving force, whereas I am happy to sit in my study and write on whatever takes my fancy, irrespective of audience and so-called ‘impact’.

I do admit to having an ability to getting distracted, which is not necessarily a bad thing. Being press ganged by Lal to help edit the collection on the Indian indentured experience had positive results, not least the creation of a new cohort of contacts and new opportunities. I am not good at saying ‘No’ to a good idea and I tend to walk through an open door if I see one, as when Clive Moore invited me to join the editorial

³² “Special: Remembering the *ANU Historical Journal*, (1964–87),” *ANU Historical Journal* II 1 (2019): 3–54.

³³ Robert Manne, *A Political Memoir: Intellectual Combat in the Cold War and the Culture Wars* (La Trobe University Press, 2024), 111–12, 148.

team of *Labour in the South Pacific*.³⁴ In the same way, the out-of-the-blue invite to co-author the book on the collapse of the National Bank of Fiji was an opportunity too good to pass over. But there are penalties, or at least potential penalties. Switching back and forth does mean that half-finished papers pile up or else take longer to write than they should, which helps explain the eight years between the decision to write the Ryan-Clark monograph in 2014 and its eventual publication in 2021. In the same way, the recent diversions and backlog have prevented me starting on a book, tentatively entitled *Telling Historians' Lives: Reflections of Auto/biographical Practice*, which will have a sizeable Australian component. It could also be that my range of interests means that people tend to know only one aspect of my work – just as the sheer span of W. K. Hancock's *oeuvre* probably resulted in his 'achievement...[being] too dispersed for lasting impact'.³⁵ That is not a bother to me. The people in my various fields are aware of my work and that is enough. In any case, I am used to flying under the radar. Finally, in no way do I consider myself a rounded historian of Australia – my interests are too specific and the temporal range too limited for that. I do not see my nebulous identity as a New Zealand-based historian of fragments of Australian history as a drawback, but it does explain the title of the present article.

Do I have any professional regrets? Yes, I wish I had written more and, moreover, on a greater variety of subjects.

³⁴ Clive Moore, Jacqueline Leckie, and Doug Munro, eds, *Labour in the South Pacific* (James Cook University, 1990).

³⁵ Jim Davidson, *A Three-Cornered Life: The Historian WK Hancock* (UNSW Press, 2010), 510.