

***Political Life Writing in the Pacific: Reflections on the Pacific*** by Jack Corbett and Brij V. Lal (editors), 2015, ANU Press, Canberra

**Romitesh Kant**

Most of the essays in this edited collection are a compilation of insights from practitioners on their experiences when writing about the political life in the Pacific, the challenges faced and how to overcome them. The authors are from different backgrounds and their aims and intentions of writing political life differ significantly. Jack Corbett informs the reader in the introduction that this collection 'is not a theoretical treatise but rather a collection of authorial reflections from a variety of disciplinary and personal perspectives, which does not conform to a dictated template...' (p. 11). 'This is the first step in a long journey, not the last word' as many questions around power and culture, gender, class and interpretation of the elusive Pacific island values remain unclear.

Ritchie's chapter on Political Life Writing in Papua New Guinea provides an interesting insight as to why he chose to write a biography of one of PNG's independence leaders, Ebia Olewale. The intention and motivation for him was to offer the young generation a role model from the past. In his chapter, Ritchie argues that future biographers should move away from the notion of writing political biographies of leaders that is situated in 'the journey from village to the nation' theme and more focus should be devoted to a 'more nuanced and sophisticated treatment of the impact of modernity has had on PNG's leaders', of 'how leaders manipulated and were affected by the arrival of a global market place of commodities and ideas' (p. 28). This, he claims, will provide students of politics with an alternative perspective of how 'power is shared, how leaders are made not born, and how circumstances can catapult ordinary people into extraordinary situations' (p. 29).

Ceridwen Spark brings a completely different yet exciting element of film-making into the discourse of political life writing in the Pacific.

The '*Pawa Meri*' project documents biographical stories of six PNG women in six different films. Her chapter documents the challenges of selecting these six women to ensure that balance is achieved in terms of diversity of location, age and social status. The chapter also poses some pertinent questions: Who should tell a story? And for whom should they write? Spark writes about the need for the project to have local ownership. To achieve this, PNG women have co-authored and will co-direct the films. She argues that 'if *Pawa Meri* films are to reflect collaboration and mutual control, the power to command (author) must also be shared' to 'help stories to be seen through PNG eyes' (p. 55). She writes that in co-authoring these life stories, it got them to challenge and question some pre-existing beliefs, while at the same time define 'new ground through a growing sense of values and beliefs' (p. 57). The digital revolution that the region is undergoing provides a platform for publishing and disbursement of digitized political life stories. Spark also brings to the fore the questions around patriarchy and politics. If one is to write about 'political' life in the Pacific, the most obvious subject is a man. This is due to the fact that women still face significant barriers and challenges to attain political leadership and the Pacific still has embarrassingly low levels of women's participation in politics. This is not to say that women are underachievers when it comes to politics. There are women in the region who have achieved immeasurable success in 'politics without even contesting elections. These women have and are constantly challenging the prevailing social and cultural norms that impede women's political participation. In challenging these societal norms, they have opened alternative spaces for women to be vocal and be visible. These are spaces where they advocate for women's rights, for sexual and reproductive health rights, for laws that combat domestic violence's against women and girls. For these women, 'personal is political' and there is a need to capture their stories and life experiences to ensure their struggles and challenges does not go unnoticed and unacknowledged.

Brij Lal's chapter on writing about the life of Jai Ram Reddy sheds light on the importance of such works for political literacy for future generations, to ensure that leaders and their legacies do not disappear into oblivion. Lal is also mindful of the fact that Fiji is an ethnically divided country, where politics is refracted through ethnic and racial lens. He is cognizant of the reality that no Indo-Fijian leader as been acknowledged as a statesman in post-independent Fiji and his writings serve to remind people in Fiji that leaders of other ethnic groups apart from indigenous Fijians have also contributed to Fiji's socio-economic and political development deserving of recognition and acknowledgement. His motivation

to write, he states, is because 'writing matters, because preserving memories from the ravages of time and human vanity matters, and because I want to leave my imprint upon my time and place' (p. 74).

Whereas Lal's experiences of writing political biography is 'an act of revenge', to ensure that people in the land of his birth do not forget leaders and their sacrifices, Christopher Chevalier's chapter on the former Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, Solomon Mamaloni reveals how writing the biography 'has been a journey of learning and understanding about Mamaloni, the Solomon Islands and myself' and how the biography is filtered through the lenses of the writers 'own experiences and attitude' (p. 44). Chevalier also confesses how this project has opened him to a more appreciative understanding on 'colonization, Christianisation and commerce' that still affects many postcolonial nation-states.

Sethy Regenvanu's experiences of writing an autobiography was motivated by a few factors. Losing his seat in the 1995 elections and the hurt he felt and the encouragement from friends and family to document his life, as a politician was one. He also felt that he owed it to the people, and to those who shared and contributed to Vanuatu's struggle for independence to share his experiences; to record an account of the colonial situation that existed... and the engagement of our people in the process of achieving political emancipation, to free our country from colonial rule' (p. 112). While Carol Kidu's motivation to write an autobiography was a result of the grieving process after the death of her husband in 1994, written as a tribute to a man she loved. 'I wrote as a release of emotions, and wrote from an emotional and very personal perspective, a story I felt needed to be told. I wrote from the heart' (p. 121). Her political life story, that remains untold, started from a place of anger and frustration about politics and personalities, is incomplete, which she says she intends to document, albeit at a later stage.

Scarr shares how it was a matter of chance that he came to the Pacific and compiled a 2 part series on Sir Arthur Gordon and how a committee selected him to write a biography of Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna. It is after the success of the Sukuna book that he felt it was only appropriate that he author the book on Ratu Mara. Areti Metuamate's experiences on researching the life of King Tupou V of Tonga for her PhD. The scarcity of information on the King led her to interview people who were close to and had access to the king. She tackled questions around appropriateness of a non-Tongan to write about the life of a Tongan monarch. She suggests that as a non-Tongan it is easier for her to write the biography when compared to a Tongan, especially a commoner, because 'a Tongan would be restricted in so many ways with cultural barriers and protocols that a

non-Tongan would not be subject to or expected to adhere to' (p. 88).

Munro's chapter raises an important point that if an author dedicates so much of his/her time to study someone else's life there should be a connection between the author and the subject. Haley writes about the strong relationship she formed with her subject, Sane Noma, is the source of her writing and how even after his death, he informs and inspires her writing and her relationship with her daughter. She is sceptical how her work will be received in academia but this does not deter her for she believes she needs to tell his story. Clive Moore confronts the role of an editor and the challenges faced by them. He states, 'editing autobiographies of politicians and statesmen is an unusual exercise which involves maintaining integrity as an editor while encouraging the personal expression and beliefs of the autobiographer' (p. 129). He shares his experiences of times when his subject's views are at odds with his academic understanding. As an editor, he asks if modifying words to reflect the truth and facts would imply local interpretations of event (p. 137). He also brings up the challenge of deciphering and incorporating premonitions and dreams in the book, something that is foreign to his understanding.

This is an interesting collection of essays from assorted authors working in different contexts and on different subjects which provide an illuminating insight into how they are addressing issues of gender, religion, superstition, colonialism, and representation. The themes and arguments are timely and accessible to the reader. As Corbett reminds us in the introduction, 'this is the first step in a long journey, not the last word'. While this book does not attempt to answer all questions related to political life writing, it does provide the reader with useful tips on how to navigate the world of writing political biographies.

## Reviewer

**Romitesh Kant** works at the University of the South Pacific. Email: romitesh.kant@usp.ac.fj