CHAPTER THREE

MELANESIA
A region and a history

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In the region known as Melanesia, histories have been told in men’s and women’s houses, in song and dance, in names passed down through generations, in stories told to children about early heroes, warriors and in the origin of names for butterflies, birds and mist-shrouded peaks. These vernacular histories continue in the present. In the seventeenth century a written record of the region’s past was begun in European languages in books, ships’ logs and published journals. A notable early form this history took was the travelogue, such as the three volumes by Dampier (1697, 1699 and 1703), which were popular but never seen by the subjects being written about. The telling of history became a pictorial narrative when the camera was invented and quickly spread across the region by missionaries, scientists, officials and travellers (Corbey 2010; Quanchi 2007; Wright 2013). Historical publications, usually in the form of academic monographs chronicling the past as a set of key events and changes, mostly focus on Europeans, European interests and Empire, with indigenous histories relegated to the margins. This has changed in a recent wave of islander-centred histories (e.g. Matsuda 2012) and in greater attention to indigenous voice and epistemologies, but the history of the region presented in monographs, film, journals and exhibitions is still mostly a Euro-American preoccupation.

This chapter provides a narrative history in three phases – colonial rule, the Pacific War and decolonisation. These three phases are simultaneously crosscut by two longstanding themes in the region, the mobility and relocation of populations, and systems of trade and exchange. Mobility and relocation is constant in the region’s history, beginning with the earliest migrations from Southeast Asia into the western Pacific (see Summerhayes, this volume). In more recent times, the movement of people became more limited as communities and language groups were attached to ancestral lands and moving meant the need to forge alliances or wage war. People were sedentary, but moved within defined borders. Through trade they knew of distant lands where desired items could be obtained. This pattern of semi-permanent settlement and possession of specific lands was disrupted after colonial regimes introduced plantations and indentured labour and large numbers of young men were transported to other provinces or islands, and other colonies. A distinctive form of urbanisation also occurred throughout the region as port towns developed into capital cities (see Goddard, this volume). Trade and exchange also had been a characteristic of indigenous Melanesian societies and continued in the transformed circumstances of the
colonial era (Golson 1966; Finney 1968, 1973; Healey 1990). Trade in the form of barter and exchange, long-distance travel and personal commercial and prestige relationships was not something new to Island peoples when Europeans arrived in the region. The early European global networks were in Bird of Paradise feathers and then copra, and later logging, palm oil and mining. Toward the end of the nineteenth century cruise shipping routes opened the region to tourism (see Taylor, this volume).

It must be stressed, however, that while Europeans drew a line around the western Pacific islands, declaring them to be a region called Melanesia, events tended throughout to be local, personal and often contained within single or contiguous language groups. Sweeping surveys of this region are also difficult because it is geographically vast, stretching from the Bird’s Head of West Papua through to the islands and archipelagos running southwards from the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to New Caledonia. This survey, therefore, presents the recent, modern and contemporary histories of the region as a moving frontier in two senses: as a knowledge frontier in Western research and world discourse, and as a classic frontier tale of European exploration and colonialism followed by decolonisation, independence and nation building.

**COLONIAL RULE**

Colonial rule came late to the region, following a century of slow, irregular European exploration, trade, missions and in some areas only passing contact. This earlier era can be regarded as informal Empire, a prelude to the formal annexations of the late nineteenth century.

The first foreign rule in Melanesia occurred many centuries before Europeans formally annexed territories. Ternate, a royal state that had adopted Islam, was at the peak of its power at the end of the sixteenth century under Sultan Baabullah (1570–1583). Ternate and its neighbouring island, Tidore, maintained a sphere of influence over parts of Western New Guinea. The Sultan’s rule over the area was recognised by the Dutch in 1660 and lasted until 1824 when Ternate was incorporated into the Dutch Empire. Dutch impact was initially limited to a few ports and their immediate hinterlands, highlighting the clear distinction between informal Empire (initially a trade, mission and exploration presence) and formal Empire (claiming by annexation and ruling as a colony) that is a characteristic of the history of the region (Moore 2003; Ploeg 1995).

Exemplifying this early period of informal colonisation is the relocation between 1860 and 1904, of more than 50,000 Solomon Islanders and niVanuatu who went to Queensland to work on three-year contracts in the sugar plantations (Corris 1973; Moore 1985). This traffic was attractive to young men, with some opting to stay on for two or three terms as ‘ticket-of-leave’ workers. The rewards were measured in what could be achieved on return from Queensland by distributing wealth and stories. Nevertheless, Moore (1985) calls this ‘cultural kidnapping’ as it is unlikely the recruits would have understood the full extent of their fate under indenture. The story of labourers from Vanuatu who left their homes to work in the French colony of New Caledonia is a similar episode (Shineberg 1999). The mobility of populations within the region was paralleled by people moving in from neighbouring regions. These arrivals included the Tongans, Samoans and Fijians, arriving as pioneering
pastors with the Methodists, Church of England and the London Missionary Society (LMS) when they opened new evangelical fields in the Torres Strait Islands and Papua New Guinea (PNG) (Munro and Thornley 1996; see Barker, this volume).

**Formal colonialism**

In north-eastern PNG, formal colonial rule began later than in the Dutch East Indies, during a global scramble for colonies in the later nineteenth century. The new German nation, a mere 13 years after its unification in 1871 and backed by noisy Kolonialfreunde (colonial supporters), who formed the groups Gesellschaft für Deutsche Kolonisation in 1884 and the Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft in 1887, annexed the north-east mainland and offshore islands, initially through a chartered company in 1884, and then by state assumption of administration in 1900. Kokopo in 1899 and then Rabaul in 1910 became key towns when the capital was moved from the mainland to New Britain. A series of new port towns along the northern coast and offshore islands catered for a prosperous plantation economy (Firth 1976; Hempenstall 1978; Latukefu 1992; Waiko 1993).

In the south-east, in response to concerns expressed by the Australian colonies about German expansion, Britain annexed British New Guinea in 1884, and then transferred it to Australia at the constitution of the Commonwealth in 1901, although control was not formalised by an Act of Parliament until 1906. At the same time, the Torres Strait Islands became part of Australia, having been annexed by Queensland in 1879. British New Guinea was renamed the Australian Territory of Papua, more commonly known as Papua. The thin veneer of colonial rule found in PNG, the pervasive intrusion of copra and plantation economies (see below) and in some instances mining, followed the same pattern in the Solomon Islands and in Vanuatu (Mar 2016).

At the outbreak of the First World War, Australian troops occupied German New Guinea and Australian rule was established, taking advantage of the infrastructure, local government and plantation system created by the Germans. When Germany formally lost its Pacific colonies after the First World War, Australia was granted a League of Nations mandate over the former German New Guinea. Japan was also active in the region, motivated by a policy of ‘Southward Expansion’, with numerous scientific reports, travelogues and fiction published well before the Second World War (Iwamoto 1999; Kleeman 2003; Peattie 1988).

The British also established a protectorate over the southern Solomon Islands in 1892, agreeing to let Buka and Bougainville islands in the north be attached to German New Guinea as a source area for German labour recruiting. British impact was lightly felt in the south and truders, missions and planters were the main foreign presence. A small capital was established on Tulagi Island, comprising a few trade stores, jetties and houses for a dozen or so administration officials, with the neighbouring small islands of Guvatu and Mocambo as port, storage and wharf facilities for the companies, Levers and Burns Philp. The British Solomon Island Protectorate remained a colonial backwater until the Pacific War, and resumed this status in the post-war period. The capital was moved to Guadalcanal after the war to take advantage of Henderson airfield, built by the Japanese and then captured by the USA in 1943.
The British, with similar pressure from the Australian colonies, had also acted in neighbouring Vanuatu, but in a long series of treaties and Naval Commissions with France, neither power would step back, or take sole control. The result in 1906 was the establishment of a condominium, or joint administration. This meant niVanuatu people were schooled in either French or English, followed French or English laws, and used French or British postage. This dual system lasted until independence (Aldrich 1990, 1996; Henningham 1994).

In New Caledonia, Kanaks, the indigenous people of the main island, have engaged in a long struggle to retain their lands and identity. France had annexed the main island, the Grand Terre and the Île des Pins in 1853, adding the neighbouring three Loyalty Islands in 1864. Sandalwood trading and missions were active in the 1840s, but mining became the dominant economic concern after the discovery of nickel. Ranching and farming also developed alongside the use of New Caledonia as a penal colony for 22,000 French convicts and déportés, or political prisoners, between 1864 and 1897.

**Colonial commerce**

The institutional forms of colonialism had their counterpart in systems of trade and commercial activity. The incorporation of the region with Asia, Europe and America is most obvious in the history of exotic, tropical export items, dominated historically by the Maluku spice trade, but from early on including slaves and Bird of Paradise (*Paradisaea* sp.) feathers from West Papua and PNG. The earliest exchange network involved these birds, highly valued in Asian markets for many centuries (Kirsch 2006; Swadling 1996). Europeans became aware of the Bird of Paradise during the early modern voyages of exploration, when Magellan was presented in Maluku with several skins as presents for the King of Spain. They remained an exotic trade item, with demand peaking in the early twentieth century when a fad for feathers in headwear occurred in Europe and the USA. The demand for feathers as fashionable ornaments in ladies’ hats inspired Malay, Chinese and Australian hunters to seek their plumes. By the end of the nineteenth century, thousands of the *Paradisaea* species were being exported, with 155,000 skins sold in London alone between 1904 and 1908. A trade in ‘curiosities’ was also longstanding as visiting ships bartered for material possessions: tools and ceremonial, spiritual and decorative items to display or sell back in Europe, the USA and Australia (Barnecutt 2011; Gray 1999; Thomas 1991, 1994).

In the nineteenth century, copra became the link between the region and the world, but this was at a massive scale compared to the earlier and irregular trade in Bird of Paradise feathers that had historically linked the region with Asian middlemen and then into European trade routes. Copra now linked the Solomon Islands direct to the USA and Europe through numerous corporations such as Levers from Britain, Burns Philp from Australia and Compagnie des Messageries Maritimes from France. These big plantation and shipping companies dominated trade. Vast plantations were harvested in the region using local and imported indentured labour, and billions of coconuts headed for factories on the far side of the world, creating a network of global trade and exchange. Beckert (2015) has argued for a global Empire of cotton, centred on Liverpool and a worldwide network of raw materials, manufacturing and export of finished cotton products flowing back and forth from source regions to
European industrial centres and then back out to distant markets. A similar network existed globally which could be called the ‘Empire of Copra’. In this ‘Empire’, barrels of coconut oil, and later, bags of dried copra went from New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to factories in Europe and the USA. From there, through merchants, brokers and shipping companies, copra entered world markets, mainly for soaps and candles, and from early in the twentieth century, for use in margarine as well as feed stock, cooking oils, cosmetics and a variety of products. Copra in the Solomon Islands offered so much promise that the country was referred to as the ‘Jewel of the Pacific’ and a ‘Planter’s Paradise’ (Quanchi 2004). The European-owned plantations, covering vast swathes of flat and coastal lands and connected to a circuit of jetties and offshore anchorages, came to dominate the economic landscape in the region. For both islanders and expatriates, ‘ship day’, the arrival of a small coastal ketch or schooner, or larger steam and screw freighter, punctuated a cycle of planting, harvesting, husking, drying, packing and loading, along with the excitement of new mail, cargo, goods, staff and labourers. Plantation labour became the normal life for hundreds of thousands of islanders. Copra production for export was significant well into the twentieth century, and remains a major market (Denoon, Mein-Smith and Wyndham 2000).

The impact of colonialism

Under the Dutch, German, French, British and Australians, colonial rule existed mainly to support traders, planters and miners, protect missions and play host to visiting scientific expeditions and only nominally to nurture and protect indigenous peoples (cf. Street, this volume). Patrolling, scientific expeditions and naval visits were the manifestations of colonial rule in outlying islands and districts. Such expeditions were acknowledged and observed by Islanders and then mostly ignored. For example, the USA Sugar Expedition which investigated sugar cultivation in PNG in 1928, innovatively pioneering airplanes for surveying, was featured in National Geographic Magazine and a documentary film. However, its presence in Port Moresby was momentary, and the majority of Papuans never knew of its existence, or that their photograph was being seen worldwide (Bell 2010).

The colonial conquest of the region was largely peaceful, with some exceptions. Kituai (1998) recorded the unofficial, locally motivated violence associated with police patrolling in PNG. An instance of anticolonial resistance was the Marching Rule (Maasina Ru) movement in the Solomon Islands in 1945–1950 (Laracy 1971). Colonial powers also launched occasional punitive expeditions such as the French vessel Kersaint’s voyage arresting so-called rebels on Tanna in 1912–13 and the Australian warship HMAS Adelaide’s bombardment of Malaita in 1921 (Hempenstall and Rutherford 1984; Keesing and Corris 1980). In New Caledonia, Kanaks, swamped by 60,000 indentured labourers brought in from Asia, Europe and Vanuatu, struggled against invasion in wars of 1856–59, 1878–79 and 1917, but French military force was superior and Kanaks were sent to reservations under a strict code, the Indigénat (Native Regulations), characterised by head taxes and forced labour (Connell 1987; Douglas 1980; Muckle 2008, 2010, 2012). In the 1980s, a political stalemate over autonomy, independence or staying within the French Republic led to street violence, road blocks and assassinations known as the

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éventement (the ‘troubles’). The impasse was resolved by the signing of the Matignon Accord in 1988 and the Noumea Accord in 1998 allowing for a referendum on the fate of the territory to be held in 2018 (see Firth, this volume).

The impact of colonial rule was considerable in some sites of commercial, shipping and missionary activity, but overall very light. In certain areas of intense contact and economic activity, the arrival of Europeans introduced exploitation, coercion and loss of control over trade and resources, upsetting earlier indigenous livelihoods and exchange networks. This was particularly significant in regard to gold mining (Nelson 1977; O’Faircheallaigh 1982). PNG underwent two gold mining booms. The first, an alluvial gold rush, and the second and more significant, a move to large-scale, mechanised mining in the 1930s (see Banks, this volume). New Caledonia has been equally influenced by mining (see above; Thompson 1984). However, these developments were geographically uneven: such changes only had an effect on those living nearby, or involved as indentured labour in mining, plantations and shipment.

The name given to a passage around the eastern tip of PNG, the China Strait, exemplifies the uneven and restricted engagement of Europeans in colonial Melanesia. The region was significant only as a hazardous sea and cluster of archipelagos to navigate on the way to making a profit from the import and export trade with China. Samarai Island, overlooking China Strait, with its banks, hotels, forwarding agents, provisioning merchants and safe anchorage, quickly became PNG’s busiest port and temporarily the de facto capital of the British, then Australian colony. When PNG’s gold wealth was tapped at Bulolo on the mainland, and exports started flowing direct to Europe, Samarai lost its maritime importance on the China route (Quanchi 2006).

Likewise, the impact of administration patrolling was uneven, although patrol reports were given prominence in administration policy, and in the rhetoric of development and pacification. Schieffelin and Crittenden (1991), for example, retraced the route of the Hides expedition to the Strickland and Purari rivers in 1935 and then checked what six PNG societies could remember of the expedition in the 1970s and 1980s. Gammage (1999) retraced the famous Hagen-Sepik patrol of 1938 to similarly record what was remembered in the 1990s of the time when the 350-strong patrol passed through. A mere 50 years later, in both instances, memories were vague, or the patrols were regarded as of little significance by Papua New Guineans. Sustained impact in peacetime was primarily the work of missions (see Barker, this volume) as they introduced medical services, schools and forced communities to move their villages to the locations of the church and school.

THE PACIFIC WAR

The Pacific War broke colonial rule into three distinct periods, a quiet presence before and a gradual development phase after the war, separated by four years of trauma, turmoil and destruction in 1941–45. Colonial rule was interrupted when Japan invaded the north coast of PNG and the Solomon Islands in 1942, and then the Allies led by the USA, Australia and New Zealand, also invaded, attempting to win back territories taken by Japan. Expatriates were mostly evacuated south to Australia with a temporary administration, known as the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU) created to fill the vacuum in PNG. The sudden and
massive deployment of servicemen, technology and infrastructure had a major impact on people caught in the fighting, used as labour or who lost gardens, pigs and villages in accidental bombing or pilfering. Other people inland, on remote islands, or outside the perimeter of war were bystanders, or hardly affected. The Allies quickly established superiority and the war moved north to the Philippines and Okinawa, isolating some Japanese forces until the war ended. The impact of the war changed from being violent, destructive and tragic, to a period of hard times, short supplies and, for some, the excitement of wage labour and new opportunities.

For many islanders, it was the first time to ride in a truck, let alone an airplane or submarine, and to share food and wear boots and clothes freely passed down by GIs. Familiarity and the presence of African-American personnel, complicated indigenous attitudes to Westerners. After the Pacific War, mobility expanded, with Kiribati people migrating to the Solomon Islands under a scheme between two British colonies to relieve population pressure in the southern Kiribati atolls (Knudson 1977; Maude 1968). After Wallis (Uvea) and Futuna Islanders moved to New Caledonia to secure jobs during the nickel boom, their population around Noumea exceeded 25,000, more than on their home islands, and they became a third factor in the society and politics of New Caledonia.

After the war, the United Nations led an international move toward decolonisation (see UN resolution 1514 [XV, 1960]). The UN Charter (Chapter XI, articles 73–74) enshrined the self-determination of all peoples in international law. Likewise, the Charter established a system of ‘Trusteeships’ replacing the post-First World War Mandates of the League of Nations. Unlike the Mandate system, the UN intended the Trust territories to be governed in the interests of their eventual independence. In Melanesia, this affected the Australian (formerly German) Territory of New Guinea. In 1960, the UN issued the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, which demanded that the remaining non-self-governing territories be granted independence speedily and unconditionally. However, although the colonial powers moved to relinquish their colonies, it was often unclear how the newly created states should support themselves. The development of the Panguna mine on Bougainville represented one strategy to produce a financially viable post-colonial state in PNG (see Denoon 1997). At the same time, such massive mining infrastructure changed the relationship between core and periphery. Rather than a ‘colonial’ map, the post-war region called Melanesia became an arena for borderless, transnational and multinational commercial empires.

**DECOLONISATION**

The failure of colonial regimes to prepare territories for independence was made apparent when the changeover of bureaucrats and leaders occurred. Vanuatu, for example, was handed over with not one niVanuatu having gained a university degree. The transition period overseen by the Australians, British and French was embarrassingly brief. In the case of PNG, the country attained self-government and responsible government in 1973 and independence in 1975. Britain had already given independence to Tonga and Fiji in 1970, and Australia to Nauru in 1969. In the south-west Pacific, both Britain and Australia departed swiftly, and for some observers then and now, too early (Denoon 1997; Mar 2016). Colonial rule had come quickly to the
region at the end of the nineteenth century, between 1884 and 1906, and now the colonial period ended in 1975–1980 with a rush to decolonise.

Each of the new nations in the region – PNG (1975), Solomon Islands (1978) and Vanuatu (1980) – followed a standard pattern of establishing local councils, holding national elections, forming political parties, taking up ministerial responsibility and writing a constitution, but the timing, success and implementation were specific to each national setting (Cannadine 2001; Holland, Williams and Barringer 2010; Maddocks and Wolfers 2010). Surprisingly, given the poor preparation and short transitional time spans, each nation successfully and peacefully moved to independent status. Historians agree that probably few subjects knew the meaning of nation or citizenship but mostly unprepared young men (few women were elected, a trend still evident today) stepped up and capably took over the reins of administration, bureaucracy and parliamentary proceedings (Bresnihan and Woodward 2002). It was an exciting period, characterised by a declaration by Michael Somare, PNG’s first prime minister when he told a national magazine in Australia, ‘It’s our turn’ (Maddocks and Wolfers 2010). New citizens everywhere had to learn an anthem, salute a new flag, adapt to new money, and vote responsibly in national elections and acknowledge the authority that lay in often chaotic parliamentary decision making. The new nations struggled with democratic institutions, rebellious provinces (e.g. Western Province in the Solomon Islands, New Britain in PNG) and dealing with the world of corporate giants and multinationals keen to exploit the resources being mapped across the region. Each country took a different path, creating unique nations out of what had been clumsily imposed colonial boundaries. Later, they joined fellow new nations in the Pacific Forum and other regional entities and non-government agencies and in annoyance then created a platform for representing their own sub-regional interests, claiming back the term ‘Melanesia’ and calling themselves the Melanesian Spearhead Group (see Firth, this volume).

After independence, the social, political and economic domains in each new nation were initially businesslike and sedate as leaders and citizens learned new structures and opportunities. By the 1990s, however, commentators were labelling the region an ‘Arc of Instability’ (Dobell 2012; Fry 1997), characterised by turmoil, constant electoral upheavals, short-lived governments and a serious level of corruption and inefficiency. Economic aspirations were sometimes met spectacularly, for instance in the coffee, palm oil and mining sectors in PNG, but higher GDP, export earnings and a burst of small business and entrepreneurial activity did not translate into a general improvement in living standards, well-being, basic services or amenities for much of the population. The stark contrast between a few benefiting from prosperous cities and mining ventures and the majority struggling against rural under-development and poor governance is unfortunately an accurate summary. An alternative perspective points to vibrant dance and theatre companies, an increasing number of university graduates, noisy campaigns and activist groups across civil society, a critical media and several niche success stories in tourism and tropical products.

The new regimes had to deal with a number of internal conflicts. There was a short-lived but critical breakaway movement called the Santo Rebellion just as Vanuatu gained independence, which was quelled with the help of PNG troops. Later, PNG was embroiled in an ugly civil war in Bougainville 1989–98 and the Solomon Islands collapsed into a civil conflict in 1998–2003 (see Allen, Firth this
West Papua remained in a constant state of civil unrest from 1969 onwards, with the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (Free Papua Movement) fomenting local revolt and Indonesia being accused of genocide by international observers (Osborne 1985; Penders 2002; Saltford 2003).

In general, colonial rule from the 1820s through to the decolonisation and nation status of the late twentieth century was characterised across the region by the same set of markers – by infrastructure such as roads, bridges, hospitals and schools, by formation of political parties, electoral campaigning and parliamentary practice, and by economic campaigns such as agricultural extension, small and medium enterprise schemes, apprenticeships and technical training (often through scholarships to Australia and New Zealand).

Economic interest in Melanesia took a new turn in the late twentieth century toward extractive industries. From the 1970s, the resource sector was re-shaped as multinational and transnational corporations moved in and began wholesale forest clearing, and large-scale, open-cut mining with resultant damage to lands and waters (see Banks, this volume). The scale of this activity is considerable: New Caledonia, for example, is one of the world’s largest producers of nickel (Wacaster 2010). Logging plays a dominant role in the Solomon Islands where the industry has been the country’s biggest export earner since the 1980s. Similarly, since 2000, logs valued at more than K3.75 billion have been exported from the Sepik River region in PNG (PNG Mine Watch 2016; Waggener 2003). In this transformation, generally the profits from the exchange have been lopsided and brought little benefit to indigenous people. Even where Melanesian peoples have achieved independence, they have struggled to negotiate equitably with vast multinational corporations. The close relationship between administrations and commerce in the colonial era was transformed after independence into a dependent and accommodating marriage of convenience between newly formed governments and multinational corporations.

The colonial era is not completely over as some indigenous people are still confronted with foreign rule. In New Caledonia, the massive wealth from nickel mining is only one factor in long negotiations over possible autonomy and independence. In a contrasting case, the Torres Strait Islands remain Australian as a result of a compromise over the border with PNG at independence. Islanders have variously expressed the wish to remain Australian and for autonomy or independence at different times (see Firth, this volume).

West Papua’s fate within Indonesia is the focus of international campaigning, and also remains unresolved: West Papua remains a part of Indonesia. Immediately after the end of the Pacific War, a war of independence against the Dutch was won by Indonesia in 1949. The Dutch retained West Papua (then Nederlands-Nieuw-Guinea) and began a localisation project aimed at self-government and self-determination, starting schools and colleges, local government councils and an embryonic parliament. A migration programme, called transmigrasi, was initially started under Dutch rule. It escalated after Indonesia invaded West Papua, fought a short war against the Dutch and secured an international guarantee, known as the New York Agreement of 1963, that ensured Indonesian rule if an open and free referendum was held in 1969. This ‘Act of Free Choice’, widely regarded as fraudulent, cemented Indonesian control and government-sponsored non-Papuans flooded into West Papua. Though exact numbers are secret, a million Indonesian migrants or more reside in West Papua and
now outnumber the indigenous population. This is most noticeable in the cities of Jayapura with 260,000 and Timika with 130,000 people. A West Papuan flag, now familiar on social media as the ‘Morning Star’, was flown in the Dutch period but the path to self-determination it suggested was crushed by Indonesia’s invasion in 1961 and international approval in 1963 and 1969 (King 2004; Osborne 1985; Penders 2002; Saltford 2003; Verrier 1986).

MELANESIA IN HISTORY

Popular understanding of the region in Europe, the USA, Australia and New Zealand in the early to mid-nineteenth century was limited to missionary narratives and a few novels and travelogues. Knowledge of the region expanded rapidly at the end of the century and in the early twentieth century due to an increase in survey, naval and scientific expeditions, and the spread of illustrated newspapers, magazines, serial encyclopaedia, postcards and museum and exhibition displays of villages, so-called cannibals, double-hulled canoes, tree houses, and stilt houses over water, pot-makers and tattooed bodies. Professional photographers such as Frank Hurley, J.W. Lindt and J.W. Beattie were commissioned by missions to visit New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to record development and amateur photographers and travellers including Thomas McMahon, Martin and Osa Johnson and Merl Le Voy toured, and then sent photographs to publishers and editors. Several films were made about PNG and the Solomon Islands in the 1920s and 30s including Black Shadows (1923), Gow the Headhunter (1928) and Gow the Killer (1931), while the missions in the Solomon Islands utilised film for propaganda and church use, such as Transformed Isle (1924) and Ten Thousand Miles with the S.Y. Southern Cross (1922). The first colour feature documentary film about the Solomon Islands, In the Wake of Mendana, appeared in 1956. 5 Visiting anthropologists also took photographs and made films, but often these did not enter the public domain until much later (Geismer and Herle 2010).

After the Pacific War, documentary makers were active everywhere in the region, producing award-winning films such as Dead Birds (1963, Bailem Valley, West Papua), Trobriand Cricket (PNG, 1975) and First Contact (PNG, 1982) (Connolly 2005; Connolly and Anderson 1987). Commercial movie makers have been slow to tackle Melanesian themes or events but movies such as the Thin Red Line (1998, on the Pacific War in Guadalcanal), the television mini-series The Pacific (2011, also about the War), Rebellion/L’Ordre et la Morale (2011, on the Ouvea massacre, New Caledonia), Mr Pip (2014, on the Bougainville Crisis) and Tanna (2015, a Vanuatu romance) might herald a more nuanced popular imagination about the region. All attempts to present an ‘objective’, historical narrative of the region supported by evidence, are challenged by old myths and misconceptions that remain alive in the media, however (see Lindstrom, this volume).

Pacific Islanders and outsiders continue to use the term ‘Melanesia’ to define a geographic zone, an important economic sector in world resource trade networks, and as the third cultural segment in an ocean divided abstractly into Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia, three allegedly distinct cultural zones. The term is less frequently used
by historians, acknowledging that people within the region are distinct and fiercely protective of their socio-cultural particularity. There have been only a few indigenous historians writing about their past, the colonial period, or the post-independence era. Waiko’s (1993) ground-breaking history of PNG, the first by a Papua New Guinean author, the many essays and papers presented in a series of Waigani Seminars in Port Moresby and collections of essays on Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands at the time of independence initiated by the Institute of Pacific Studies at the regional university, the University of the South Pacific, have not been followed up. New Caledonia has a vibrant and remarkably prodigious publishing output but its histories are still mostly written by French authors in the French language. While each political unit in the region attracts a wide variety of scholarly attention, there are few histories of the region as a single polity or cultural group and few attempts are made to position it as a cohesive, unified entity. Historians are therefore still attempting discursively to unpack a single history of ‘Melanesia’.

NOTES
1 Since 2003, Indonesian New Guinea has been divided into two provinces, Papua and West Papua. It was previously a single province called West Irian, and then Irian Jaya. For the purposes of this chapter, I refer to Indonesian New Guinea in its entirety as West Papua.

2 For simplicity’s sake, I will use the contemporary designation of ‘Papua New Guinea’ to cover the various designations applied to the British, German and Australian colonial possessions from 1884 to Independence in 1975, except where it is necessary to specify the particular colonies in question.

3 For clarity, I refer to ‘Vanuatu’ rather than the colonial designation, the New Hebrides.

4 Elected members and early prime ministers were often priests or ministers, although this relationship between religion and decolonisation is only now attracting the attention of researchers.

5 A listing of films on the Solomon Islands compiled by Clive Moore, can be found at www.solomonencyclopaedia.net/biogs/E000108b.htm

REFERENCES


