

# Obituary

## JAMES WIGHTMAN DAVIDSON

Jim Davidson was the doyen of Pacific historians. His interest in a new, island-orientated approach to Pacific history grew out of his student days in New Zealand and a brief period on the centennial atlas staff in the Department of Internal Affairs.

At Victoria University College, after the great depression and before the second world war, he not only mastered the techniques of the scholar, but was infected by the prevailing spirit of free discussion of social and political questions. He rebelled against the emphasis which universities then placed on the traditional, European-centred study of Imperial history and upon the British origins of New Zealand society, and plunged into the study of its non-British elements and its race relations. He felt that his thesis work on Scandinavian settlement, for which he was awarded the Walter Frewen Lord prize, benefited from his being able to walk over farms carved out of the seventy-mile bush and talk to a few original survivors.

In 1938, he left New Zealand to take up a scholarship at St. John's College, Cambridge. His idea was to embark on doctoral research on European penetration of the South Pacific, beginning more or less with the establishment of New South Wales and ending with the proclamation of British sovereignty in New Zealand and the creation of a French protectorate in Tahiti. As the works already published on Pacific history were few and focussed on great power interests and policies, with the exception of McNab's 'source books', this was uncharted territory.

Writing to Professor F. L. W. Wood, Jim confessed that the subject had a certain appeal because it did not merely require a vast amount of labour in one place such as the Public Record Office. Moreover, it enabled him to venture 'beyond the confines of history into the hazardous regions of anthropology' with encouragement from Professor Raymond Firth. He was concerned to show:

what the anthropologist would call a changing European 'ideology of the Pacific' and its relations to the actual changes, social economic and political in the area itself, and, on the other hand, the evolution of native society . . . attempting to make clear the way in which the whole Pacific did develop very largely, as one area — to show how New Zealand remained

only the most important group of islands in the South Seas until it became a British colony; how the same sort of breakdown in tribal society which occurred in Tahiti about 1808-1821 was being brought about in part of New Zealand and in Tonga in the '30s.

To get round the 60,000-word limit, many of his findings were presented in long footnotes and appendices. This was partly why a thesis of such seminal importance in initiating new ways in Pacific history remained unpublished.

Unfit for military service, Jim was given a part-time job to study the working of the legislative council of Northern Rhodesia as part of the Nuffield colonial studies in preparation for the problems of postwar colonial reconstruction. 'The sudden change of field', he wrote to Professor Wood, was 'exceedingly stimulating and directly useful', and one of the most beneficial results was the manner in which it forced him into contact with people concerned from many angles with colonial affairs, including Margery Perham, who was directing his work, Lord Hailey and Sir Donald Cameron.

His next wartime job, in association with Professor Firth, was preparing material for the Geographical Handbook Series on the Pacific Islands produced by the Naval Intelligence Division of the British Admiralty in 1945. His 93-page history in the general volume is still a useful introduction for students.

A fellowship at St. John's and contact with Professor W. K. Hancock, whose work and views on history he greatly admired, opened up exciting prospects of combining an academic life in postwar England with officially sponsored research on the colonies but these were cut short by a visit home in 1947. Peter Fraser needed someone to report on the working of the New Zealand administration in Western Samoa and forecast what the Samoans would say to the United Nations Mission which was being sent to investigate the background to the Samoan petition for self-government and Jim was asked to go. After two months in Samoa, he realised the urgency for reform in the political field, and his analysis of the situation was largely accepted by the New Zealand Government. So began twenty-five years of direct involvement in the decolonization of Oceania and long periods in the field.

Jim's acute mind, historical understanding, skill with words and rare capacity for breaking down cultural barriers facilitated the constitution-making process and a smooth transition to self-government and/or independence in Western Samoa, the Cook Islands and Nauru. Later he acted as consultant to the Congress of Micronesia and to the Constitutional Planning Committee of Papua-New Guinea. Participant observation of island government and politics added a new dimension to his one major work, *Samoa mo Samoa*, and provided valuable material and insights for numerous papers and articles on current developments and problems.

In 1949, he was appointed to the first chair ever to be established in Pacific history at the new Australian National University. The plea he made in his inaugural lecture<sup>1</sup> for the study of 'multi-cultural situations' was well heeded by his 'most heterogeneous collection of staff and students'.<sup>2</sup> It was not enough to have a good honours degree to get a fellowship in the Department of Pacific history. Jim wanted scholars who could combine documentary research with field work, and who possessed the three cardinal virtues, which Hancock, writing about Mary Kingsley and her understanding of West Africa, said distinguished the great historian from the journeyman — attachment, justice and span.<sup>3</sup> He also set high standards of literary excellence. He was kind and generous to his students and injected some of the informality and friendliness of island life into his seminars. His occasional visits to New Zealand were a continuing source of inspiration and encouragement to a younger generation of university staff and students pioneering the development of Pacific studies.

The fruits of his Canberra years have been revealed in *Pacific Islands Portraits* and thoroughly documented by H. E. Maude.<sup>4</sup> Most of those with whom he worked were British in origin, yet he helped and encouraged many Pacific Islanders to get a university education. If the Davidson Memorial Fund can produce some future indigenous historians, this will be a most fitting tribute to the man who knew and understood Pacific history better than anyone else.

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<sup>1</sup> J. W. Davidson, *The Study of History*, Canberra, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> See H. E. Maude, 'Pacific History — Past, Present and Future' in *The Journal of Pacific History*, VI (1971).

<sup>3</sup> J. W. Davidson, 'Understanding Pacific History' in *The Feel of Truth*, ed. Peter Munz, Wellington, 1969, pp. 38-39.

<sup>4</sup> Maude, *op. cit.*