

An ASOPA landfall

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My connection with Pacific history started about the end of 1947, when I was looking for a job. I saw an advertisement for a tutorship in Colonial History at a place called the Australian School of Pacific Administration, of which I'd never heard. The main reason I applied for the job was that it was in Sydney, and Sydney was somewhere else than Melbourne, where I had so far spent all my life.

After a few weeks I got back a scrawled note that said, as nearly as I can remember, 'Can you come up to see me about the job in Colonial History. I've booked a plane fare for you', and it was signed 'Alf Conlon'. Probably most people here know of Alf Conlon, who joined the Army when a third-year medical student, and came out of it a Colonel on General Thomas Blamey's personal staff. He had sold the idea of a research unit to Blamey, just by going up and talking to him. He was the force behind the

School of Civil Affairs, the precursor to ASOPA, which aimed at training the people going to administer what is now Papua New Guinea..... He operated behind the scenes, through informal personal contacts and through his formidable gift of the gab. People later told me I should have kept that note and framed it, because nobody could remember seeing anything actually written by Alf.

At the time, of course, I knew nothing of Alf or his history, and when I rolled up to talk to him in the library of his house I had no qualms. And he soon put me at ease anyway. I think that Alf's greatest gift was that of making one feel important. Although I was very young and very ignorant he made me feel important. He asked me what I knew about Pacific history.

I said: 'What's Pacific history?' He said he'd just been reading a very good book by Gregory Bienstock called 'The Struggle for the Pacific', and he talked a bit about it. I said: 'Oh you mean European imperialism in the Pacific.' I explained earnestly that this was just another case of imperialism in a specific area, and that what one had to teach was the nature of imperialism, and its background in the rise of industrialisation and the accumulation and export of capital. (Forgive me: I was not quite 21.) Alf just puffed on his pipe. When I got through the lecture, he took out his pipe and said: 'All right. But at least you have to teach the history of New Guinea, because these blokes are going to be part of it.' He asked me if I could move up to Sydney and start reading in their library. I said yes I could, and I came up and installed myself in one of the army huts of which the School consisted, at the tip of Middle Head, the most beautiful spot I had ever seen.....

Alf introduced us to our colleagues at ASOPA. It was an all-star cast. There was Jim McAuley, already a well-known poet, who taught Colonial Administration. Alf thought that if you were a good poet, teaching Colonial

Administration would present no problem whatsoever. (And in fact Jim taught it very well mainly from the literature about Africa, about the only thing in print then.) There were two anthropologists: Camilla Wedgwood, marvellous teacher, and Ian Hogbin.....

There was Hal Wooten who taught Law. David Fienberg (later Fenbury) taught Practical Administration. A Sydney philosophy graduate, Helen Shiels, taught a course in Clear Thinking. The Principal was John Kerr, whom I admired then for his advanced views on the future of Papua New Guinea.

There were two groups of young men to teach. Most of the bunch doing what we called the Long Course (two years) were army personnel with New Guinea experience who had already done a short course of training. They had been brought down for two years' training, after which, if all went well, they would be sent back to New Guinea as Patrol Officers. The Short Course at ASOPA consisted of rookies, who had joined the service as cadet patrol officers: they came straight to the School to do two or more months' orientation course before going up to New Guinea. After a couple of years' experience in the field, they were to be brought down to do the Long Course. The motley bunch of teachers I talked about were facing the first intake under this scheme.

The ASOPA library was very good, and was run by ex-Mitchell librarian Ida Leeson..... The only academic study of New Guinea I could find was also from America and of wartime vintage. It was Stephen Reed's 'The Making of Modern New Guinea', which came out in 1943. It saved my life. I used it and just kept a chapter ahead of the students.

I was at ASOPA for two and a half years. In August 1950 I went to America, on a Teaching Fellowship to Smith College, Massachusetts. My fare was paid by a Fulbright travel grant; I am told I was the first Australian woman to receive one.....

Years after I left ASOPA I met Alf Conlon again and he asked me what I was doing. I said that I was teaching Pacific History. He said: 'But you told me there was no such thing. And you convinced me, too.'

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