

# Papua New Guinea: A writing heritage

BY PHILIP FITZPATRICK



**IN THE YEARS leading up to Independence and for a short time afterwards literature flowered in Papua New Guinea.**

One of the reasons for this was the need felt by many Papua New Guineans to examine their place in the world in those radical times.

The question for many was: who are we and where do we want to go? Writing about it seemed a logical thing to do.

Impetus was given by the establishment of a creative writers course at the embryonic University of Papua New Guinea by the irrepressible Ulli Beier.

The first novel by a Papuan writer, Vincent Eri's *The Crocodile* came out of that course and Ulli also had a hand in Albert Maori Kiki's *Ten Thousand Years in a Lifetime* and Michael Somare's *Sana*.

Under Ulli's benign guidance a journal of Papua New Guinea literature, *Kovave*, also appeared. In the first volume prose such as Peter Lus's *My Head is as Black as the Soil of our Country*, John Kadiba's *Tax* and Kumalau Tawali's *Island Life* appeared along with John Waiko's play *The Unexpected Hawk*.

The Papua Pocket poets, a series of booklets, appeared shortly thereafter and included works like John Kasaipwalova's *Reluctant Flame*.

Some of this literature had a distinctly anti-colonialist tone. This was not instigated by Ulli Beier but he didn't discourage it either.

Some of the more virulent anti-colonialists were, in fact, colonialists themselves, the expatriate academics at the UPNG. They enjoyed nothing better than taunting and baiting the Australian administration. Mind you, there were people in the administration who needed taunting.

Ironically it was the students of these leftie firebrands who took a more balanced and conciliatory view of the march towards nationhood.

Some of the other writers active at this time, in no particular order, were, Peter Lus, Wairu Degoba, Pokwari Kale, Allan Natachee (Avaisa Pinongo), Leo Hannett, Rabbie Namaliu, Arthur Jawodimbari, Turuk Wabei, Bob Giegao, Jacob Simet, Jack Lahui, Clemens Runawery, Peter Wia Paiya, Renagi Lohia, Joseph Saruva, Herman Talingapua and Ikini Yaboyang.

This is by no means a comprehensive list. Prior to 1975 many Papua New Guinean public servants and others in sensitive positions published material anonymously or by using a pseudonym to protect themselves and their jobs.

Some of them should perhaps now stand up and be acknowledged for their contributions. It is also interesting to note the shortage of female writers, a situation still current today.

One of the more curious things that Ulli Beier did was write Papua New Guinean plays himself using the pseudonym M Lovori. He hoped that his students would read the plays and model their own work on them.

When four Papua New Guinea plays were produced in Sydney in 1970 it was ironically Beier's play, *Alive*, that was lauded by the Australian critics as the most 'authentic' while the genuine Papua New Guinean plays were labelled 'awkward' and 'moralising'.

In his introduction to *Three Short Novels from Papua New Guinea*, featuring the works of Benjamin Umba, August Kituai and Jim Baital, the editor, Mike Greicus, said:

*... while modern Papua New Guinea writing is founded on the oral literary traditions of a myriad of clan and language groups, it is as new as the emerging country itself, as vital and as exciting. That more will be heard from those writers and from this young literature there can be no doubt.*

*Kiki: Ten Thousand Years in a Lifetime* was published by FW Cheshire in 1968. The book is a little bit disjointed, especially towards the end, but its straight forward style overcomes this minor drawback and presents for the very first time an account of what was in the minds of many of the Papuan intelligentsia during this crucial period in history.

In many ways it parallels Eri's later novel in its account of someone born into a traditional society in the 1930s and inexorably pulled into the world of the white man.

Kiki describes this transition with a beguiling and candid simplicity and frequently makes the point that the old ways that formed his character were never forgotten and helped him cope in later life.

Kiki had that sort of benign intelligence which transcended and stood above the ruck and sometimes intimidated those less gifted, including the denizens of the higher echelons of the Australian administration. Joe Nombri and Sinaka Goava spring to mind as similarly gifted men.

Kiki was no saint however; he was a brawler, both metaphorically and sometimes literally. He went on to become a trade union leader and one of the founding fathers of the Pangu Pati.

In the run up to Independence he represented everything that was perceived as sinister and communist-inspired among the new Papua New Guinean elite by the administration and their bosses in Canberra.

When I came out of the bush in 1972 and went to work in Department of Lands and the Environment, for which he was Minister, it was with some trepidation that I was introduced to him. In the back of my mind were the concluding thoughts in his book about the need to curtail the arrogant kiaps.

My fears were misplaced however; he was an amiable man who just couldn't help balking at what he saw as injustice; but he never played the man, he went for the coaches instead. Sir Albert Maori Kiki died in 1993.

When Jacaranda Press published Vincent Eri's novel, *The Crocodile*, it sold out and had to be reprinted almost immediately. While most of the critics were

refreshingly non-paternalistic and supportive the reactions from Australian readers in PNG were mixed.

Some of them were still smarting from Kiki's book and didn't like being lampooned again, even gently, by a Papua New Guinean, which, as Ulli Beier pointed out, was a bit rich from people who referred to grown men as 'boys'

The novel is the story of a boy from a Papuan village who ends up as a carrier along the Bulldog-Wau Trail during World War II and who is unsuccessfully trying to come to terms with both his culture and the rapid social changes going on around him.

Eri's father worked on the trail, became ill, and died shortly after returning to his village. The book is straightforward with a simple lyricism and sometimes vivid imagery.

Looking at it again after all these years it doesn't come across as great literature but as a novel it was the first cab off the rank.

Vincent Eri didn't write any more books. When he graduated from UPNG he became a teacher and worked his way up the ladder to eventually become Director General of Education. At Independence he became PNG's first Consul General to Australia.

He entered politics in the 1980s and helped found the People's Action Party. By 1990 he was knighted and the Governor General of PNG. This was when Ted Diro was found guilty of corruption but Sir Vincent failed to dismiss him.

Eventually the Prime Minister, Rabbie Namaliu, sought to have Sir Vincent replaced but he resigned before this happened. He died in 1993, the same year as Albert Maori Kiki.

While *The Crocodile* was the first published Papua New Guinean novel you have to go back much further to find the first book written by a Papua New Guinean. As far as can be ascertained, this honour falls to the New Ireland writer Ligeremaluoga (Osea).

Originally written in the Kuanua language but translated and published in English in 1932 *The Erstwhile Savage* has been dismissed as missionary propaganda with no real literary merit.

Nevertheless, it was republished under a different title, *An Offering for a King*, in 1978 and is slated to appear again shortly in a new series produced by the UPNG.

Paulias Matane was not connected to the UPNG writers. His first book, *My Childhood in New Guinea*, was published in 1972 and like Vincent Eri, and later Russell Soaba, his writing resonates with a true Papua New Guinean authenticity.

Sir Paulias adopted the style of the novel to describe the autobiographical details of his childhood around Rabaul on New Britain. The book takes the reader from his early days in the village, through initiation, wild days as a village delinquent, the war with the Japanese and his early days as a teacher.

By writing the book like a novel he was pioneering a style that has come in for criticism in recent years, that it is impossible to separate any convenient fiction from the facts and is in some way fraudulent. On the other hand it can make an otherwise dull memoir highly readable.

In the book he outlines the principles that have informed his later steady and prodigious output.

*Reading is very important. Many of my people do not read at home because books are written by people whose background is not that of Papua New Guinea. Our people do not want to read these. True, some people want to try, but they cannot afford to buy books. I think I will try to write about this country when I leave school. The books should be small, simple, and cheap.*

No one can accuse Sir Paulias of not sticking to his plan.

In 1954 eighteen year old Michael Somare won the South Pacific Commission's Literature Bureau Competition with an essay about his favourite book, Thor Heyerdahl's *Kon-Tiki Expedition*. The following year he picked up a Forsyth Examination Prize of \$40 worth of books. Paulius Matane had also won the same prize.

Before he entered politics Michael Somare worked as a teacher, first in the schools but later in the publications section of the Education Department, where he wrote scripts for the *Listen and Learn* broadcasts on the ABC.

Because of his interest in broadcasting he was seconded to Radio Wewak with the Department of Information and Extension Services as a broadcaster and journalist.

This training and experience shows up in his 1975 book, *Sana: an autobiography of Michael Somare*. It is by far a much more polished and articulate work than anything before and, possibly, after it.

The book was written on the cusp of Papua New Guinea's leap into the vast unknown of nationhood and necessarily reflects on Somare's vision for the future. The book also sets out the things that influenced him at an early age and informed his political development.

Not least of these influences was the wisdom of his father. Sana was Michael Somare's grandfather and it was his wisdom that his son passed on to the grandson.

Central to this wisdom was what Michael's father referred to as 'Sana's peacemaking magic'. The essence of this magic was the ability to make peace with one's enemies and turn them into friends.

Michael Somare's vision involved melding the myriad cultures and interests of Papua New Guinea into something new and unique and which didn't owe its existence to what outsiders might expect or demand. For this reason he happily embraced innovation and new ideas.

It would be interesting to know how far the Michael Somare of today thinks this vision has gone and how well the people of Papua New Guinea have travelled with him. While many people currently feel let down by the government it would be interesting to know if Michael Somare, in fact, feels let down by the people.

Of all the books published in those halcyon days *Sana* is probably the most important and it bears reading again by any Papua New Guinean interested in the future of their country.

So how have writers in Papua New Guinea fared since those early days? The output has been steady but sporadic and there is generally a long time between drinks.

In 1978, for instance, Russell Soaba's idiosyncratic *Wanpis* appeared but it wasn't until 1985 that his second novel *Maiba* came out. He couldn't find a publisher for his last book *Kwamia: A Season of Harvest* and produced it himself.

Self publishing seems to be one of the few options for many writers in Papua New Guinea, which, apart from the Christian publishers, lacks a strong local industry.

It is a costly and demanding road to travel, however, and no one seriously hoping to make money out of writing ventures down it, they simply do it for the joy of the journey.

The internet with its downloadable books shows a lot of promise and this year seems to have been embraced by the reading public in Australia and elsewhere. Amazon is now selling more e-books than hard copies.

In Papua New Guinea about 125,000 people use the internet, which is 2.1% of the population. Uptake is slow at 7.4% and has actually declined over the last two years. Places like the Solomon Islands are way ahead with a growth rate of 400%.

Writers reflect what their society is thinking. Without writers and writing a country lacks soul. Writers are very important people. At last count Paulias Matane has written well over forty books, so it can be done.

I'm hoping that the first thing Michael Somare does whenever he decides to retire and after he's had a bit of a rest is pick up pen and paper (or his laptop), gathers the strands of *Sana* together, and brings it up to date.

As a self-professed fan of local cultures perhaps he can give local writers help along the road. I'm also hoping that Sir Paulias keeps writing and that Russell Soaba gets his mojo back.