

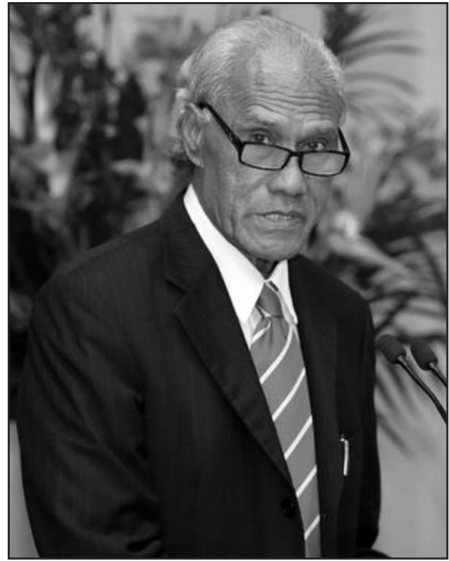
*PHILIP CASS is reviews editor of Pacific Journalism Review.*

# Tonga needs Pōhiva's message so kingdom can move forward

**T**HE LATE Tongan Prime Minister 'Akilisi Pōhiva was a clear visioned man whose message is still current, according to veteran Pacific journalist Michael Field. Field, who is writing a biography of Pōhiva, says a book about his life would be useful to the kingdom. Tongans need Pōhiva's message, he says (Field, 2020).

Since Pōhiva died aged 78 on 12 September 2019, the Democratic Party has been wracked by infighting and competing claims about his attempts to resign and the various stories about what advice he was given. Democracy and political progress appear to have largely disappeared from the Tongan political discourse under the current government. Field says developments in Tonga have come as no surprise. In the past he has warned that Pōhiva's democratic reforms could unravel and that dangerous times lie ahead for the kingdom. (Latu, 2020; Field, 2020)

Disentangling what the written records say happened and what people remember happening is not hard, Field says.



It was not harder than any of the other various projects I worked on. The advantage is that if you've been around a while as a journalist you know how to keep pulling the right strings and then knitting it together into a story. The problem with some of it is that the research can be a bit tedious; lots of wading through documents. But biography is not exceptional in that sense—you just have to get used to drinking a lot of coffee. (Field, 2020)

Field says it will be hard to pick a political biography that has inspired him or informed the way he has approached the task. He says political biography could often be influenced by how recently events have occurred. In respect of the Pōhiva biography, he says he was influenced by recent journalism and by Elizabeth Wood-Ellem's work on Queen Salote and Patricia O'Brien's work on Samoa's Taisi O.F.Nelson.

Field says he would like to do a biography of Mata'afa Iosefa, the only man in global history to have beaten Germany, Britain and the United States on the battlefield. A critical biography of the Tongan royal family would be interesting and controversial. He says he has often thought a biography of the 'common soul' of the ordinary people of the Pacific would be an intriguing project (Field, 2020).

In 2010, Field said it would be unwise for Pōhiva to become Prime Minister because he was more revolutionary than leader. In his book *Swimming with Sharks*, he said:

Sadly, I've been proven right; at 76 he has proven to be a mess. He has performed in much the same way that the inept and hopeless royal governments before him did. My sense is that many Tongans—nobles and commoners—have realised this too (cited by Cass, 2020)

However, when Pōhiva died, Field described him as 'remarkable'. Speaking to *Kaniva News* in January this year, Field said he saw 'no problem between the mess and his remarkableness'.

I stand by my original claim in 2010 that the premiership ended up as a mess. What I did not know, but know now extensively, is how disruptive the anti-democratic forces have been on Tongan governance.

'Akilisi's inability to get audiences with the king and the subsequent refusal by the king to sign the six bills has been enormously disruptive. That said, I strongly believe that 'Akilisi's finest and most useful work was as the

leader of a movement which happened to be in opposition for much of his political life.

In many ways, even before he had become Prime Minister, he had saved Tonga. I will leave the argument for why until the book's publication.

As for calling him 'remarkable,' I totally stand by that: I've known most of the Pacific leadership since 1975, and there was no one quite like him. (Cass, 2020)

While Pōhiva was a champion of democracy, he was accused by his enemies of corruption and sometimes seemed to have laid himself open to charges of behaving in erratic and not entirely democratic ways. However, Field says many leaders could be accused of being erratic for a variety of reasons. 'The first Prime Minister I worked for used to go to events without shoes and could not use a phone, but he was brilliant all the same,' the veteran journalist says. 'People who go into politics full-time are different to the rest of us' (Cass, 2020).

Field says Pōhiva's entire life was one of intense struggle in everything he did.

My sadness, as an observer and writer, is that he was among the many Pacific leaders who died in office. I never said it to 'Akilisi, but I did on other occasions to other politicians, point out the merits of retiring to enjoy life with the grandchildren, at the beach or somewhere, but Pōhiva and all the others, seem driven by their politics. (Cass, 2020)

Field's previous books include *Speight of Violence* on Fiji's 2000 coup and *Swimming with Sharks*, a collection of tales of the Pacific. His book *The Catch* investigated the scandal of the global and New Zealand fishing fleets.

He was banned from Tonga for exposing corruption in the Tongan royal family, implicating King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV who died in 2006, his successor, King George V who died in 2012 and Princess Pilolevu who was the subject of an intense legal battle with Pohiva.

## References

- Cass, P. (2020). Pōhiva saved Tonga, but kingdom faces dangerous times and reforms could unravel warns veteran journalist Michael Field. *Kaniva News*. Retrieved from <http://www.kanivatonga.nz/2020/01/pohiva-saved-tonga-but-kingdom-faces-dangerous-times-and-reforms-could-unravel-warns-veteran-journalist-michael-field/>
- Field, M. (2020). Personal communication.
- Latu, K. (2020). PM Tu'i'onetoa predicts PTOA party's 'falling apart and quarrelling' as he speaks out amid Democrats' pestering him following power struggle saga. Retrieved from <http://www.kanivatonga.nz/2020/05/pm-tuionetoa-predicts-ptoa-partys-falling-apart-and-quarrelling-as-he-speaks-out-amid-democrats-pestering-him-following-power-struggle-saga/>

# DON'T SPOIL MY BEAUTIFUL FACE

MEDIA, MAYHEM & HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE PACIFIC

DAVID ROBIE



"This is an extraordinary 'secret history' of a vast region of the world of which David Robie has been a rare expert witness. What makes this epic work so timely is that it allows us to understand the Asia-Pacific at a time of renewed cold war ambitions and dangers." – John Pilger

little island press • ISBN 978-1-877484-25-4 • [www.littleisland.co.nz](http://www.littleisland.co.nz)