

DR PHILIP CASS is editor of Pacific Journalism Review.

Peace researcher who was a global trailblazer

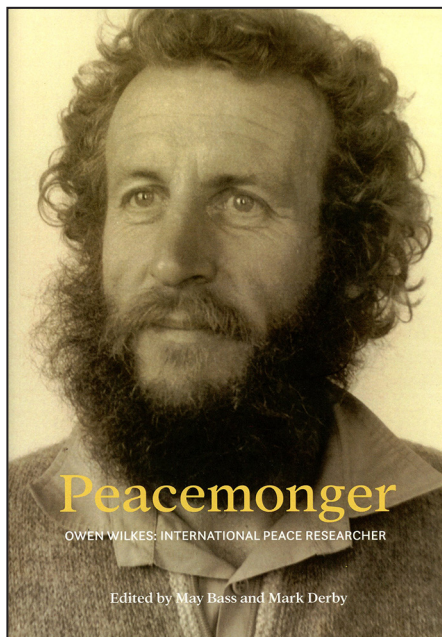
Peacemonger: Owen Wilkes: International Peace Researcher, edited by May Bass and Mark Derby. Wellington: Raekaihu Press, 2022. 196 pages. ISBN 978191153869196.

THIS volume of essays provides a committed overview of the life of the extraordinary Aotearoa New Zealand peace campaigner and co-founder of the Campaign Against Foreign Control of Aotearoa (CAFCA), Owen Wilkes.

Drawing on contributions by those who knew him and co-edited by his long-time partner, May Bass, who was for many years editor of *Peacelink*, it tells the somewhat complicated—and ultimately tragic—story of his life.

CAFCA organiser Murray Horton, who has contributed a chapter to this book, once said of him: ‘He looked like an Old Testament prophet. And his words had the same sort of impact’ (Horton, 2005).

This deep respect for Wilkes is evident in this book, which includes essays by some big names in New Zealand activism such as Maire Leadbeater, Murray Horton, David Robie, Nicky Hager and Peter Wills, and others in Scandinavia. This examination of his enormous contribution to the Peace



Movement and Nuclear-Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP) movement research is a fitting tribute to his life and work.

Born in Christchurch in 1940, he worked in the Antarctic, Australia, Papua New Guinea, Hawai'i and in Norway and Sweden. He astonished his Scandinavian hosts by skiing in shorts (he is also said to have waded across an icy river in shorts in order to get near the Russian border) and was arrested by police for taking photographs. Wilkes was also a subsistence farmer and a beekeeper who built what must have been one of New Zealand's first eco-homes near Punakaiki, West Coast (it was demolished by the local council because he built it without permission.)

Editor Mark Derby said he had never met anybody who made less distinction between their work and leisure.

Owen could take a holiday on a remote west coast beach and discover a covert government communications facility. Or face espionage charges from the Swedish government after taking photographs from the roadside during a cycling tour. The entire world kept revealing itself to him in ways both marvellous and enraging. (p. 15)

One of Wilkes' major achievements was to unearth so much material about the activities of United States agencies in the region. He was able to do this working largely with publicly available documents, being able to glean information and figures that were hiding in plain view. Scientist Peter Wills praised his 'brilliance in digging out every last iota of information and assembling it . . . to reach and prove conclusions that would not otherwise have been suspected' (p. 129).

It was this ability that contributed to him being invited to work with the International Peace Research Institute (IPR) in Oslo and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) where he pieced together state secrets by patiently combing through publicly available material and knowing when to photograph something unusual. This ability led him into serious trouble with the Norwegian and Swedish authorities.

At one stage he was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize by Canterbury University sociology professor W. E. Wilmott in recognition of his many years of 'selfless research on issues related to peace and war' (p. 7).

Wilkes was famous for his inves-

tigations into the presence of the US military in New Zealand, uncovering bases and setting out to prove that these islands were part of a secret US plan to establish a navigation system that would be used by its nuclear-armed submarines. This involved investigating the proposed Omega transmitter station in the South Island, which he believed would make New Zealand a target in a nuclear war (Falconer, 2005).

Wilkes withdrew from the Peace Movement in the late 1990s. Described by those who knew him as independent and uncompromising, he was not afraid to criticise those around him. He caused some consternation when he eventually criticised the Peace Movement and challenged those who favoured the ban on nuclear-powered US Navy ships from New Zealand harbours (p. 129).

Horton noted in an online article that in 1993 Wilkes had declared that some of Greenpeace's campaigns were 'just great, but some of them are pretty bloody stupid, I reckon. And it is only recently that they've started going screwy' (Horton, 2021).

His life ended tragically in 2005 when he committed suicide at 65, 15 years after the death of his only child, Koa, who had also taken her own life.

Activism in Australia

Wilkes was also active across the ditch, although his name was not well known outside peace and activist circles. According to Mansell (2023), from whose obituary this section is drawn,

he made an enormous contribution to the anti-nuclear and peace movements in Australia from the early 1970s to the early 1990s.

His exposure of the planned Omega station in New Zealand prompted the United States to move the project to Australia, and in the early 1970s he travelled to Melbourne where helped produce a detailed submission about Omega's role as a navigation aid for Polaris submarines to hearings of the Australian Parliamentary Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

In 1974 he took part in the so-called 'Long March' (in reality a three week bus trip) to the US Navy's nuclear submarine communication base at North West Cape in Western Australia. This effort was reflected in New Zealand the following year with a 'Resistance Ride' in the South Island.

It was in Melbourne in 1982 that Wilkes made his announcement that he no longer believed that Omega would play a role in submarine navigation, having been superseded by the Loran-C VLF system. Despite the shock his change of mind caused, he kept in touch with the Australian nuclear disarmament movement and was welcomed as an expert guest speaker at public meetings and on the radio.

In March 1986, Owen appeared as an expert witness for the Christian activists on trial in the Melbourne Magistrates Court for splashing blood on the Watsonia dish at Easter 1985. He returned to North West Cape in June 1988 and followed this with a month-long speaking tour focusing on the destabilisation of the Pacific.

In early 1990, Owen lived in Melbourne for several weeks, helping research the history of US ballistic missile testing in the Pacific.

Peacemonger has excellent end-notes, with sources and additional details. This will be extremely useful for journalists and readers of New Zealand history, society or politics. A full bibliography of Wilkes' publications is also included, which demonstrates the breadth of his interests as a peace campaigner and archeologist.

References

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