

Reviews

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A riveting media chronicle of giving voice to the voiceless

Don't Spoil My Beautiful Face: Media, Mayhem and Human Rights in the Pacific, by David Robie. Foreword by Kalafi Moala. Auckland: Little Island Press in association with the Pacific Media Centre. 2014, 362 pp. ISBN 978-1877484-25-4

MOST journalists work to earn a decent living. Some join the profession to rub shoulders with the rich and famous, benefitting from close proximity to the powers that be. David Robie, the doyen of journalism in the South Pacific region, has pursued a different type of journalism, as this book attests.

An exceptional individual, apart from being an award-winning journalist, a prolific author and a committed



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journalism educator, Robie has set new standards of journalism practice and politics in a part of the globe which receives scant coverage in the international media.

During the early 1990s, as associate editor of the London-based and now defunct Gemini News Service, a 'Third World-oriented' news features service, this reviewer had the privilege to work with Robie, who regularly contributed thoughtful, well-researched but never preachy articles and commentaries from the South Pacific region, which were circulated among the agency's more than 100 newspapers around the world.

As this book demonstrates in ample measure, Robie has an extraordinary talent for news stories and a commitment for giving voice to the voiceless. Part of this is the family legacy: being a great-great-grandson of a distinguished and progressive Scottish journalist, James Robie, who was, in the 1860s, the editor and later owner of the *Caledonian Mercury* in Edinburgh. This 'ink in the veins' family history may have something to do with his progressive and radical tendencies.

Robie has had a distinguished and varied journalistic career. As chief subeditor of Australia's *Sunday Observer*, a large-circulation newspaper, which campaigned 'vigorously against Australian involvement in the Vietnam War', Robie had to decide whether to publish photographs of the My Lai massacre in March 1968, which claimed the lives of up to 500 unarmed Vietnamese civilians (p. 19). The newspaper, of which Robie rose to become the editor, published the photographs in December 1969 and later made them available to the Australian Federal Parliament to encourage opposition to the war.

This attitude was cultivated by virtue of exposure to journalism under difficult political-economic situations, including working in the 1970s for the Johannesburg-based

Rand Daily Mail, South Africa's largest English-language newspaper, as well as features editor of Kenya's *Daily Nation*, a newspaper founded with an anti-colonial editorial stance.

Robie's experience as a journalist during the mid-1970s in Paris for the international news agency Agence France-Presse was a formative influence in his international work, particularly igniting his interest in the French involvement in South Pacific affairs, which he pursued with great rigour, as this book recounts. As Robie notes, his stay in Paris also included interactions with such groups as Reporters Sans Frontières, and with whom he has worked for more than two decades, including setting up the Pacific Media Watch research and monitoring project.

Returning to New Zealand in 1979, he became foreign editor of *The Auckland Star*, a 'crusading newspaper', eventually setting up his own independent Pacific news agency, which has done admirable work in terms of providing information and independent analysis from the region to global media networks.

The book under review is divided into six parts: Part 1 focuses on Robie's Africa experiences, including a fascinating piece about his mammoth undertaking of a trans-continental road trip, while Part 2 examines what

he describes as ‘colonial legacy conflicts’. Here such areas as the illegally occupied Indonesian colonies of East Timor and West Papua are discussed along with the 1984 Kanak revolt against French rule in New Caledonia. Part 3 of the book deals with indigenous struggles, which includes an interesting piece that Robie wrote for *New Zealand Listener* about the aboriginal rights of Canada’s Lubicon Cree Indians. Another excellent entry here concerns the United States government patent on the human cell of an indigenous man from a remote area of Papua New Guinea. Robie’s 1989 book *Blood on their Banner* remains a seminal account of the struggle of indigenous people around the Pacific.

Part 4 of the book looks at ‘forgotten wars’, including stories about the militants of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) in Papua New Guinea, fighting against well-entrenched mining interests. Robie was one of the international journalists who covered this decade-long conflict, evoking the sense of dread in an atmosphere he describes as ‘surreal and ghostly’ (p. 195).

His coverage helped bring the conflict into international spotlight. Robie has also covered conflict in the Philippines during the Aquino presidency: included in the book is his excellent piece about ‘the Ramboys’, a shadowy clique



David Robie at the Malacañang presidential palace in Manila, Philippines, while on a human rights assignment.

of military officers, first published in *Sunday* magazine.

Covering such controversial stories is not without problems, as any war reporter will vouch. Robie recalls the story he wrote for a leading New Zealand newspaper in November 1991 about the killing of 270 people by Indonesian authorities in Dili. As he notes:

It was accepted and laid out as an op-ed page article. However, the evening before publication, in early December, I was advised by the features editor the

article would not run. He was embarrassed and very apologetic and said as a freelancer I would be paid a 'kill' fee for not publishing—a rather obscene term in the context. Clearly there had been political pressure for the article to be quietly dropped. (p. 229)

In pursuing such journalism, Robie also incurred the wrath of the authorities: the book recounts how, while he was reporting on the violence between France and Kanak activists in New Caledonia and the massacre of Kanak activists in 1987, he was harassed by French secret service agents and arrested at gunpoint by the military in New Caledonia (p. 97).

Part 5 of the book contains its most interesting material: about the *Rainbow Warrior*, including a John Miller picture of a bearded Robie chatting to a crew member on board the Greenpeace ship in New Zealand on 9 July 1985, the night before the bombing, carried out by French secret agents. He wrote a case study about the two-decade long censorship battle over video courtroom images of two French agents pleading guilty to manslaughter, which was published in *Australian Journalism Review* in 2007.

In retrospect, the most significant legacy of the *Rainbow Warrior* affair (see Robie, 2005) was bringing to international attention opposition to nuclear testing in the Pacific and giving a boost

to the global environmental movement.

The final part of the book is on media education, an area in which Robie has been involved for a long time as a trainer, educator and Professor of journalism. The chapter includes an extract from his address at the inaugural conference 'Navigating the Future' of the Auckland-based Pacific Islands Media Association.

Overall, this is a riveting read and a comprehensive chronicle of history of the small island nations of the Pacific. Volumes such as this should be widely read and discussed around the globe since the issues it raises about human rights, indigenous communities, censorship and exploitation of the environment remain hugely important and indeed growing in significance in our neoliberal era.

References

- Robie, D. (1989). *Blood on their Banner: Nationalist struggles in the South Pacific*. London, UK: Zed Books.
- Robie, D. (2005). *Eyes of Fire: The last voyage of the Rainbow Warrior* [Memorial edition]. Auckland, NZ: Asia-Pacific Network.