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Photojournalism —a welcome celebration and challenge

Conflict, Custom and Conscience: Photojournalism and the Pacific Media Centre 2007-2017, edited by Jim Marbrook, Del Abcede, Natalie Robertson and David Robie. Auckland: Pacific Media Centre. 178 pages. ISBN 978-1-927184-45-5.

At an event marking 10 years of the Pacific Media Centre in Auckland in November 2017, Radio New Zealand journalist Johnny Blades said New Zealand’s role in establishing a ceasefire in Bougainville in 1998—and paving the way for a subsequent peace agreement—was an achievement New Zealanders should be proud of.

‘We should be shouting about it from the rooftops,’ he said.

But sadly, he added, too few people seemed to know much about it these days.

The same could be said about a lot of what goes on elsewhere in the South Pacific.

So much of New Zealanders’ overseas news comes from US and UK-based sources that significant events in countries much closer to home, except Australia, are mostly out of sight and out of mind, even for New Zealanders interested in the rest of the world.

In a long piece from Bougainville published in *New Zealand Geographic* in 2000, reporter Mark Scott reminded readers more people were killed in the civil war than died in Northern Ireland’s much more heavily reported ‘Troubles’.

‘It would be like a quarter of a million new Zealanders dying in a civil war that lasted more than twice as long as WWII,’ he wrote.

Sports events, moments of crisis and disasters like ferry sinkings and cyclones may make the news. But other important Pacific events are barely recorded, let alone interpreted. The same is true for depictions of everyday life—unless they intersect with tourism and travel.

‘Situations abound where editors and news directors fail to provide coverage or analysis of issues and thus creating

blind spots for their audience. Marginalisation by mainstream news media in New Zealand of the West Papua human rights crisis is an obvious example of this,' Auckland University of Technology's Professor David Robie writes in *Conflict, Custom and Conscience* (p. 12).

Many of the other images in this photojournalism collection are reminders of other examples of the same thing.

One of the most striking pictures is Llane Munau's photo of women marching behind an anti-mining banner in Bougainville in June 2017.

'Their protest is ostensibly unseen by the rest of the world ... and part of a wider movement to stop any production on the Panguna copper mine,' co-editor Jim Marbrook writes (p. 4).

It reminds us this was the backdrop to the conflict in which an estimated 10,000 people died. Few New Zealanders would be aware of plans to reopen the mine had also reopened divisions there.

David Robie's images of turbulent times in New Caledonia in the 1980s (pp. 68-69, 72) remind me of occasional news reports of conflict and 'the Kanak' in the news when I was a kid, but I had no visual image in mind of the place or the people.

In Karen Abplanap's *Metro* feature 'Blood Money' (pp. 46-47), the images and text combine to great effect. Their publication helped to prompt the NZ Super Fund to confront the ethics of its investments.

This impressive collection from AUT's Pacific Media Centre features photojournalists who—on the face of it appear to have little in common,

but Jim Marbrook is right to say their works have 'a shared sense of social conscience' (p. 6).

The images in *Conflict, Custom and Conscience* also remind us that New Zealand is 'Pacific Islands' too.

Devastating portraits of the environmental scars of Panguna mine in Bougainville and Cap Bocage in New Caledonia may look unfamiliar to New Zealand eyes, but they segue into Natalie Robertson's pictures of post-Rena trauma on the Bay of Plenty coast (pp. 40-43).

Pictures of familiar fauna slicked with oil and hordes of workers in white hazchem suits scraping the sand are—in a way—as alarming and affecting as pictures of armed fighters on the streets in less peaceful Pacific places.

Russia-born Vlad Sokhin's Warm Waters project documents the impacts of global warming and the 'existential threat to low lying nations'. They are a vivid portrayal of an issue which is urgent for those facing it, even if those further afield are ignorant or indifferent.

In his chapter about Pacific photojournalism, co-editor and contributor Jim Marbrook rightly says the images show 'the power of a long term commitment to the Pacific' (pp. 4-7).

Marbrook also says the citizen journalist has 'changed the way that photographs are captured, edited and distributed and has also changed the terrain in which the photojournalist works'.

The media has changed too. Where images were once scarce in news pub-

lications, now almost every story has at least one.

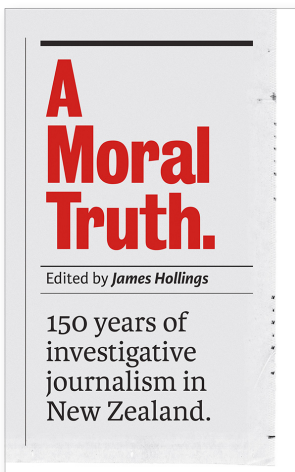
Images are used repeatedly online to illustrate stories, even if they are of little relevance. Stock images from photography libraries are used again and again with little thought.

But the images in this book respect the moments—and the people—they capture.

‘In a modest way, this volume can be seen as not only a celebration of photojournalism but also be as a signal for increased commitment to photojournalism in the next decade,’ Jim Marbrook writes in his chapter.

It is certainly the former.

And hopefully, the latter too.



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