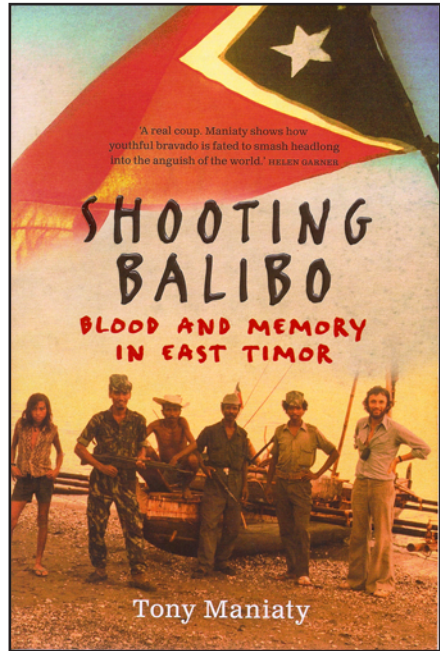

Reviews

Marcus O'Donnell is journalism co-ordinator in the School of Journalism and Creative Writing, University of Wollongong.

Following the Balibo massacre's whale

Shooting Balibo: Blood and Memory in East Timor by Tony Maniaty. Sydney: Viking, 2009, 320 pp. ISBN 9780670073580

EARLY on in Tony Maniaty's *Shooting Balibo* we come across Herman Melville, Michelangelo Antonioni and John Dos Passos. We quickly get the message that this is as much a journey of the imagination as it is a travelogue, memoir or investigation. Maniaty tells us that when he went to East Timor as an ABC reporter in 1975, just before the ill-fated journalists, his travel reading was Melville's *Moby Dick*. Here we get a sense of the young journalist's ambition, his questing commitment to follow the story, just as Ahab follows his whale.



But in retrospect it also tells us how large the 1975 events at Balibo have figured in Maniaty's life. *Shooting Balibo* narrates his recent return to Timor, as an advisor to Robert Connolly's film *Balibo* and marks the first time he has returned to the tiny island nation since he fled just before the Indonesian invasion in 1975. In a sense, the book is still about him following the whale.

Over the years Maniaty has worked as a journalist, a novelist and a filmmaker and is now an academic. In many ways this book seems like the one that he was destined to write: a memoir with a journalistic eye,

journalism with cinematic vision, history uninhibited by very personal speculations.

Lee Gutkind (2009), the guru of the creative non-fiction movement (what many journalists would call literary journalism) has recently written: ‘Creative nonfiction’s roots are in journalism but the genre also allows writers to become intimately involved in their stories. Often this interplay between the personal and the political provides deeper coverage, and a stronger connection to the reader, than traditional journalism allows.’ It is precisely this personal engagement—and a rare honesty—that allows Maniaty to take us beyond a chronological history of the events toward a deeper coverage of what they might mean.

Not surprisingly, the release of Connolly’s film has prompted new discussion about the fate of the Balibo journalists. But interestingly, the film’s release has also raised questions in the media (on the ABCs *Q&A* [2009], in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and in the journal *Eureka Street*), about what kind of obligation to history such films have and about how we tell stories that are engaging and true to history.

Both Connolly and Anthony La Paglia (who plays Roger East and was also the film’s producer) have

been clear that some key events in the film—including East and José Ramos-Horta’s central journey to Balibo—were invented devices, created to give the film an engaging narrative skeleton. But La Paglia was also clear on the ABC’s *Q&A* (2009): ‘At the end of the day, there is one truth that’s really glaring and stands out, and that is that six Australian [based, including a New Zealander] nationals were murdered, and that is official now, and in 34 years nothing has been done about it.’ This is the truth with which he wanted to keep faith.

The film was based on Jill Jolliffe’s book originally published as *Cover-up*, now re-released as *Balibo*. Jolliffe was thrown into the job of Reuter’s correspondent as one of the few remaining journalists in Timor in the weeks leading up to the invasion. Jolliffe’s subsequent investigation and book represents passionate decades of work. She attempts to answer in exhaustive detail who did what when, and who knew what when and all this is based on many interviews with East Timorese witnesses. For those who want the hard-headed history there is no better place to start.

Maniaty’s book is an investigation of a very different kind. Jolliffe begins with a chapter introducing the key characters one by one. Maniaty

wanders backwards and forwards between the 1970s and 2008 with broad brush strokes, personal asides and literary references. Jolliffe doesn't hide her own involvement in the events but in straight journalistic fashion she references herself only matter-of-factly. But Maniaty's investigation is as much a writerly investigation of his younger self as it is of the events of 1975.

In a sense, the heart of *Shooting Balibo* is Maniaty's attempt to understand not just what happened to Greg Shackleton—the leader of the Channel Seven news crew—but more importantly, who he was. This is paralleled by his discussions with Damon Gameau, the actor who plays Shackleton in the film. How does an actor research his role? How does a journalist investigate history? The journalist wants to know the facts. The actor wants to find that emotional core from which a performance might emerge.

In this instance the two approaches coincide. Maniaty is interested in more than simple facts, because the other question at the emotional heart of this search is of course a personal one: why did Maniaty leave and why did Shackleton stay? What strange mixture of caution and recklessness does a journalist require to do their job and survive? Talking to the ac-

tors, Maniaty tells them that for baby boomer journalists like himself, journalism still had 'a mystery, an aura' (p. 9). He says he hopes the film will be a paean to that now lost notion of journalism as 'a wild adventure at once carefree and committed' (p. 10); a generation of young journalists who thought they were 'bullet proof and... brilliant'.

We gradually get closer to both the author, his young alter ego and the dead journalists, notably Shackleton. We gradually get to know the facts leading up to the events in Balibo in October 1975. All unwinds skillfully as Maniaty dances across the generations, talking with the actors, dining with José Ramos-Horta, slowly allowing the fact of being back in East Timor, back in Balibo, back on those dusty roads that he traveled in 1975, back in the dining room of the Hotel Turismo (the 1975 haunt of both Australians and the Fretilin leaders) to prompt both memory and reflection.

A series of strange coincidences show the past impinging on the present. There are moments of simple insight and pleasure but this is not a book that culminates in a staggering revelation or a sudden epiphany. A slow emotional accumulation of detail, of memory, which somehow unlocks the events for both Maniaty and his readers.

Shooting Balibo is a carefully crafted story despite its meandering form. This journey back to Balibo is nowhere near as eventful as the invented journey of East Timor and Ramos-Horta that forms the central trope of Connolly's film. But Tony Maniaty's attention to simple detail, his commitment to the imaginative power of the ordinary and his ability to layer history with the force of honest emotion is what makes this narrative just as engaging and an important and original achievement.

References

- Balibo interview (2009, August 20). ABC Q&A.
- Gutkind, L. (2009). Introduction. In Gutkind, L. (Ed.), *The best creative non-fiction 3*. New York: W. W. Norton.

East Timor - the Balibo incident in perspective

by James Dunn (1995)

ACIJ, ISBN: 1 86365 192 6, \$5.95



Written 20 years after the invasion of East Timor by Indonesia, James Dunn's book provides an excellent summary of the international setting at the time of the invasion by Indonesia, the media involvement and the aftermath of the killing of five Western journalists at Balibo.

Sacred Waters: The Story of the Blue Mountains Gully Traditional Owners

by Dianne Johnson

ACIJ, ISBN: 1 920831 37 1, \$45

Winner of a 2008 NSW Premier's History Award

Sacred Waters is the story of the Aboriginal people in a unique and beautiful part of Australia - the Burratorang Valley, now profoundly changed by the flooding of the valley in the 1950s by Warragamba Dam, which provides Sydney's water supply. It is a history of the valley's Gundungurra people, and the Darug people of the lower Hawkesbury.

Their story - a Sydney story - celebrates the Upper Blue Mountains Gully people's survival in a changing world and their ongoing struggle to protect their sacred lands and waters.