

## **Two Pacific Projects: the Legacies of Ron Crocombe and Paul de Deckker**

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This article outlines the legacies of two social scientists who encountered, embraced, and made what would prove life-long commitments to the study of Pacific society: Ronald Gordon Crocombe and Paul de Deckker. Both had connections with New Zealand universities and influenced the ways in which the Pacific is presented in New Zealand social sciences today. The two men had some things in common: they were born beyond the island Pacific but lived in the region for most of their adult lives; both were driven by a passion for, and fascination with, Pacific societies; both were committed to the development of social sciences in Pacific universities; both were driven by a determination to have the Pacific better understood beyond its boundaries. Yet, in other ways, their respective ‘Pacific projects’ had very different styles and trajectories which were shaped by their social and educational backgrounds, circumstances, and their perceptions of how the Pacific might be known and who should know it. This article is not two obituaries: it is a commemoration of two lives committed to the development of Pacific social science and the intellectual legacies to which we are all heirs.

### **Two Paths to the Pacific**

Ron Crocombe was born in rural New Zealand in October, 1929. He grew up in Piopio in the King Country before studying at Otahuhu College in Auckland. He was awarded a BA at VUW with a major in anthropology and a minor in economics, and his PhD at ANU in Canberra in 1961. His earliest exposure to the Pacific was as an employee of the Cooks Islands Administration and the New Zealand Department of Island Territories between December 1950 and July 1958. He was based in Auckland in 1950-51; the Cook Islands Administration 1951-54; in Wellington in 1955-57 as New Zealand Adviser on the South Pacific Commission, and finally as Resident Agent on Atiu in the Cook Islands in 1957-58. In the Cooks, he married Marjorie Tua’inekore Hosking who became his lifelong partner and research associate. They had four children who have made the Pacific their home.

Ron went to the Australian National University in Canberra in 1958, and from there to the Cook Islands, Samoa, and Tonga to do fieldwork on land tenure policies with short visits to Tokelau, Niue and Fiji. After completing his PhD in 1961, Ron became a Research Officer in the New Guinea Research Unit (1962-65) in which position he studied and oversaw research on land tenure and productivity in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. He became the Director of that unit in 1965 and brought together a complex and innovative multidisciplinary research, teaching, consultancy and publication programme involving people from a range of social sciences. From PNG, Ron moved to Fiji to become the founding Professor of Pacific Studies and the founding Director of the Institute for Pacific Studies at the University of the South Pacific. By this time, Ron had already been in and around the Pacific for 20 years, but it was at the USP that he completed the large body of scholarly work for which he would become best known.

Paul De Deckker was born in Brussels in March 1950 to a Belgian father and Irish mother and became a French citizen. He married a French biochemist, Francine, and had two children Katherine and Thomas, both of whom have made the Pacific home. Paul had a broad education: he graduated *Certificat d'histoire de l'Art* from the Musée du Louvre (1973); *Certificate in Religious Science* and *Masters Degree in History* from *Université du Paris VII* (1974); a *Doctorat d'Ethnologie* from *Université du Paris VII* (1975) and a *Doctorate in Social Sciences (History)* from *Université Libre de Bruxelles* with *Great Distinction* (1982). His first academic appointment was as *Professor of Social Sciences* at *l'École de Santé Publique*, at Libreville in Gabon (1974-1975), and that encounter with the consequences of colonialism awakened his fascination with colonialism and economic history, and shaped his academic interests from that point. Paul, Francine and their children arrived in Auckland in 1976 to take up a lecturing position in *Sociology* at the *University of Auckland*, and to pursue his interest in colonial history in the Pacific with a study of the activities and aspirations of the Belgian explorer, ethnologist and consul Jacques-Antoine Moerenhout (1797-1879), and of the early relations between the Tahitian monarchy and the British government. In Auckland, Paul taught a number of historical and theoretical sociology courses, but his intellectual and political interest in the Pacific was developing and it was clear that to pursue these he would have to find another appointment.

The family returned to Paris in 1983, where Paul held a joint appointment between l'Institut des Langues Orietales and l'Université du Paris VII, until 1988 when he was seconded by the French scientific research organization, CNRS, to the then Université Française du Pacifique. He was based in Papeete Tahiti for 2 years. There he came to the attention of the veteran Tahitian politician, Gaston Flosse, who sought Paul's advice on a range of regional matters and later sought to recruit him to his personal staff. In this position, Paul travelled with Flosse to many regional meetings and gained an insight into the complexity of Polynesian and regional politics. It was enough of an insight for him, as he commented later, to realize that he preferred the academic life from which he felt free to be frank about politicians and politics. The joint appointment with University of Bordeaux II allowed him to spend more time in the Pacific, but in 1992 he was appointed Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Université Française du Pacifique in Noumea and was finally able to relocate to the Pacific where he remained for the rest of his life. In this position and later, as President of what had become the University of New Caledonia, he would make his most significant contribution to the social science of the Pacific.

### **Professional Footprints**

Professor Ron Crocombe joined the University of the South Pacific as its founding Professor of Pacific Studies in 1969, a position established to define, focus and guide teaching and research in sociology, anthropology, history, land tenure and reform, local government, politics, and regionalism at the University of the South Pacific. As he had done earlier in PNG, he set about creating and developing a multidisciplinary teaching, research and publishing programme through which many regional students would pass.

There he also set about addressing the imbalance in power to 'define' the Pacific, which was at that time, dominated by scholars from Australia and New Zealand. He did this by persuading many students from the region who went to USP to train social scientists to write about their own societies, histories and politics. To ensure that this new wave of Pacific scholarship was published, he set up the Institute of Pacific Studies at USP and secured funds for research and publication and then persuaded, mentored and encouraged many shy and diffident authors to write about their research. He then edited their manuscripts for publication. Some 1700 items by Pacific scholars were published by the IPS during Ron's time at its helm and,

between 1975 and 1992, he edited or co-edited some 165 books in the in the IPS Monograph Series. This produced a new corpus of Pacific scholarship written for the first time by scholars raised and trained within the region and shifted the intellectual centre of gravity in a fundamental way.

After retirement in 1989, Ron Crocombe returned to his home in the Cook Islands but remained a fellow and Emeritus Professor of Pacific Studies at University of the South Pacific. His encyclopaedic knowledge of the Pacific was in great demand and from the his home in the Cooks he pursued an extraordinarily busy professional life as advisor and consultant to a range of international organisations including the Asian Development Bank; the Commonwealth Secretariat, London; the Commonwealth Foundation, London; Kagoshima University's Research Centre for the Pacific; the East West Center, Honolulu; the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC; the United Nations Development Programme; the Pacific Forum, Suva; the Pacific Community, Noumea; the Prime Minister of Mauritius and was a research fellow and lecturer at many universities throughout the region. In fact, he was in transit from Tonga to his home in the Cook Islands when he died suddenly in Auckland on June 18, 2009. Ron never stopped studying and writing: there was always another project on his horizon.

He was, as Professor Peter Larmour so aptly noted in an obituary for Ron, 'an exemplary public intellectual, unafraid to speak truth to power, local and international. Ron was trusted for his unsparing but unsentimental commitment to the interests of the people of the region'.

Paul de Deckker was appointed Director of Université Française du Pacifique's, New Caledonia Centre, and held the position when the autonomous Université de la Nouvelle Calédonie came into existence in 1999. As Head of Doctoral Training, he found scope for his personal research interests but, more importantly, a chance to train local postgraduates for the Pacific research project. In 1992, Paul established *Space, Time and Society in the Pacific* and in 1996, *Societies and Cultures in the Pacific Islands: mutations and dynamics*. Paul was concerned about two matters which he found in New Caledonia: a disappointingly few number of indigenous Kanak graduate students in the social sciences and the preoccupation with the francophone Pacific. He addressed the first of these by setting about increasing the numbers of Kanak students but, despite pleas

to, and some support from Kanak leaders, he was eventually forced to admit that Kanak students were being recruited to the commerce and science faculties and were being offered secure, well-paid positions in the Kanak-governed Northern Province. He continued to offer advice to Kanaky's leaders and to provide research for the political autonomy movement. When he was appointed President of the Université de la Nouvelle Calédonie in 2005, and with more political leverage, he renewed his attempts to recruit and train more Kanak social scientists.

He addressed the second issue by recruiting teachers from the Anglophone Pacific to teach in his postgraduate programme in the belief that there was much to be learned from the comparative study of colonialism in the Pacific. This initiative was not always popular but he recruited colleagues from the University of Auckland and the Australian National University to teach *Space, Time and Society in the Pacific*, and *Societies and Cultures in the Pacific Islands: mutations and dynamics* and underscored his determination to broaden his students' appreciation of the Pacific by asking them to teach in English. This produced challenges both for his students and for his colleagues. As one who worked, initially with some misgivings, in this programme, I came eventually to see the value of the vision as students' expectations of the teachers and teachers' understandings of the students developed each year.

Paul, like Ron, was a prolific publisher in his own right and established a productive relationship with the French publishing house *L'Harmattan*. Like Ron's, Paul's work covered an incredibly broad spectrum from his work on historical biography to often controversial commentary on comparative colonialism and contemporary politics in New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia.

But, like Ron, he was determined that the new scholarship found its way to wider audience and spent significant amounts of time and energy seeking funds in Paris, Brussels and Australia to fund publications which he believed spoke to a wider audience about issues within the region. Like Ron, he gave generously of his time to edit work to ensure that Pacific scholarship was as good as any, serving on the editorial board of the journal *La Nouvelle Revue du Pacifique-The New Pacific Revue*, which was published by the Pacific Centre at the Research School of Asian and Pacific Studies at the ANU, which brought together the work of a range of francophone and anglophone

scholars on such topics as *'Identities in the Pacific'*, *'Pacific Island States Today'*, and *'Contemporary Pacific History'*.

### **Intellectual Footprints**

Arguably the greatest legacy which Ron Crocombe left the Pacific was his accessible, scholarly writings which stretched from his first work on the Cook Islands in 1958 to his last on the Pacific region some 50 years later. His publication list runs to 30 pages (<http://www.usp.ac.fj/index.php?id=7219&type=98>) and covers an unusually broad range of subjects. Ron's earliest work was *Land Tenure in the Pacific Islands* (Oxford University Press, 1963) which, given the complexity of the subject, was a tour de force and the first of some 20 books which he would publish in his lifetime. These included works on a number of subjects from his encyclopaedic general text *The Pacific Islands* which went into its 7<sup>th</sup> edition and 13<sup>th</sup> printing in 2008, to specialist works such as *Security in Small Pacific States*. Ron's scholarly work was marked by an abiding interest in the region's history and its significance for the present, it was also marked by a focus on contemporary affairs and the region's future.

In all of his work Ron wrote of the influence of external forces on the region. From his earliest days Ron was equally critical of the Australian, New Zealand, French and US colonial administrations in the Pacific. His last, and at 644-pages his largest work, *Asia in the Pacific Islands: Replacing the West* (USP, 2007) continued that trend of tracking colonial impact in the Pacific. That work was the first major study of the growing impact of East Asian nations in the Pacific region. But Ron, ever the analyst, was equally critical of post-colonial leadership and administration and was as critical of their failure to deliver to their people as he was of colonial administrations. As early as 1969, in a work on Cook Island politics, he discussed the social foundations of corruption in the Cook Islands with the same clarity which he had brought to discussions of colonial powers' pursuit of their self interest.

Ron also wrote a number of important works on his adopted home, the Cook Islands, often with his wife and research partner, Marjorie Tua'inekore Crocombe, who was for a time the Director of the newly established Centre for Pacific Studies at the University of Auckland. The last and arguably most important of these was their definitive *Cook Islands Culture* (USP, 2002). Though this body of Cook Island work was somewhat smaller, it was extremely important. Given the relatively small numbers of Cook Island

social scientists who were publishing material on the Cooks, these works were particularly significant and will stand as an enduring legacy to the people of the Cooks. As with his Pacific work, the Cook Islands work covered historical material such as the writing of the *White Ron* was critical of colonial powers' machinations in the Pacific, he, and Marjie, were equally critical of the of newly autonomous Pacific governments, including that of the Cook Islands which he wrote about in his 1969 work on *Cook Island Politics* when political self interest denied the people the possibility of development.

Another living legacy is the many regional students passed through the diverse range of courses and research programmes which Ron developed and offered at USP. A number went on to academic careers around and beyond the Pacific, and many more became leaders in their emerging nations: as politicians, planners, and administrators and in private industry. Many freely acknowledge their debt to Ron who was a demanding but committed and generous supervisor, and mentor. Ron quietly went out of his way to help his graduates find scholarships and work using his extensive personal and professional network in ways which only became apparent long after the event, as many former students noted.

Paul de Deckker's contributions to Pacific scholarship came from his own prolific writing and from the editing of collections which brought together the work of specialists on some disparate topics as the role of custom to land tenure reform in the Pacific. His early work focused on the political machinations of colonial powers in the Pacific. His first historical work, on the Belgian Consul to Tahiti, *Jacques-Antoine Moerenhout: Consul et Ethnologue* (1981), led indirectly to his second, on the activities of the British Consul George Pritchard in Tahiti, *The Aggressions of the French at Tahiti and other Islands of the Pacific* (1983). Paul, like Ron, remained committed throughout life to his belief in the importance of history in understanding the contemporary Pacific which is evident in his formal historical work.

But he too engaged with the contemporary issues and published on such topics as the relations between formal law and customary law; the challenges of incorporating custom in French territorial law; the challenges of autonomous and independence movements for administration in the French Pacific; the risks and challenges of creation of multi-ethnic cities and of

unresolved social and economic inequalities. In commenting on these matters he often found himself in a difficult situation: he was too radical for French political and scholarly tastes and insufficiently radical for Anglophone scholars. But, within French territories, where small numbers of influential civil servants and private sector figures exercise considerable influence over the civil service and, indirectly, the university, open criticism can often be politically counter-productive. When he was unable to criticise politicians openly, because of their willingness to exercise their very considerable power in the territory, he published the information in columns written under a pseudonym in the local press much to the politicians' annoyance and Paul's glee.

Later in life, he like, Ron started to write with his wife, Francine, who was also committed to the Pacific, and between them they edited and published an impressive body of work together in both French and English. This commitment extended to translating the work of anglophone authors whom he believed had something to say to francophone scholars and politicians.

Paul was unable to influence the large number of indigenous scholars that Ron was able to. They simply did not pass through his classes. However, he did have an important indirect influence on French policy: many of those that took his classes, and were exposed to his subtle critiques of colonialism, were senior administrators and the spouses of senior figures in the French territorial administration. They left those classes with a very much more critical view of the Pacific world, and of their role in it, than they had when they entered.

In 2010, Paul's long time colleagues, Jean-Yves Faberon and Armand Hage, edited a festschrift entitled, *Mondes Océaniens: Études en l'honneur de Paul de Deckker*, in which they summarise his contribution in the following terms:

'Paul de Deckker, anthropologue, universitaire et politique, a été un grand connaisseur des mondes océaniques. Le Pacifique, il y a vécu, il l'a vécu et il a contribué à sa vie et à la connaissance que nous en avons: ses écrits à son sujet sont innombrables. Après sa disparition prématurée, ses amis, collègues et disciples ont voulu se rassembler en un ouvrage fidèle à Paul de Deckker par le pluralisme de ses approches et l'unité de son objet : ces sociétés du Pacifique Sud, plurielles et passionnées. Ces études océaniques



cultivent les champs des évolutions politiques et institutionnelles comme de l'histoire et de la géographie, des lettres comme des sciences de la nature. Elles comprennent aussi des témoignages personnels à l'égard de cet homme inoubliable'

As I write this (in June 2010), a very large group of writers, teachers, scholars and friends is preparing to gather in Rarotonga to present papers to commemorate Ron Crocombe's long and productive professional life and to share with one another the many ways in which he changed their lives. This gathering too will produce a festschrift which will celebrate his life more adequately than this brief summary can.

### **Conclusion**

Ron Crocombe and Paul de Deckker entered the Pacific some 28 years apart and died in the Pacific in the same year. They took different paths to the Pacific, embraced it in different ways, taught and researched it in different ways and influenced different audiences. But both leave enduring intellectual legacies and both have influenced the ways the Pacific is known. Those who were privileged to know and work with them, and who benefited from their advice, will understand the significance of the Maori proverb, *kua hinga nga totara nunui ki te wao nui a Taane*: great totara have fallen in the great forest of the god Taane. The trees have fallen, but like all trees which fall when they have spread their seedlings, they have produced and now shelter a new generation of scholars and students who will in their turn revisit the Pacific.