

It is a rare luxury to have two quite similar books to review together—not as an opportunity for point scoring between them, but rather for judging how Pacific histories are written.

Fraenkel’s book is important and timeless, being the first to record a step-by-step chronology of the events behind and during the catastrophic political, economic, and social collapse of Solomon Islands. In 1998, Solomon Islands was proceeding steadily, if slowly, toward a delayed nationhood. Then, unexpectedly, a feud between two neighboring island peoples—some traditional landholders on Guadalcanal and some immigrant groups from Malaita, with grievances and injustices on both sides—degenerated into a low-intensity civil war. This was called, rather curiously, “ethnic tension.”

The already fragile government could not cope, so core infrastructure and social services collapsed, especially after Malaitan factions within the police force raided the Police armory and joined in the looting and fighting. The capital, Honiara, became a Malaitan-dominated enclave where armed militants plundered the city and the state. In the Guadalcanal countryside, groups of unemployed youths, “raskols,” banded together into loose groups of private militia rampaging destructively while no one knew who, if anyone, was in charge. As the lawlessness and looting spread to encircle Honiara, 20,000 plantation workers and impoverished townspeople fled to Malaita as refugees.

At the very same time that the main faction leaders were categorically denying any personal responsibility or culpability, they were also demanding that the beleaguered government intervene, especially to pay pseudo-traditional (ie, cash) compensation to calm both sides. Their greed and their looting of the state, often abetted by venal politicians, made the collapse inevitable. However, it took a long time for the regional powers in the Pacific, especially Australia, to accept that the Solomons could no longer cope alone and could not recover without armed intervention from outside.

As Fraenkel noted, his book “provides a [chronological] account of the crisis from 1998 to 2003. . . . It relies on those documentary resources that are available from scanty local and international newspaper reports, government press releases, rebel newsletters . . . [though] such sources are inevitably prone to error, both of interpretation and omission. Plausibly, reconstruction is best left to the historians. . . . Diplomatic sources after all only become available 30 years after the event” (12).

The value of Fraenkel’s book is its first comprehensive chronology of those troubled years during which all
parties, including the faction leaders, the government, and the media, were deluged with disinformation, rumors, and counter-rumors. Throughout the crisis, there was a grave lack of reliable information about the objectives of the key players, the intentions behind the rhetoric, and what was actually going on. The reality was that on the ground, even in Honiara, most people could not read or write, were prey to the rhetoric and rumors, and were very frightened. But in attempting to cover such cataclysmic events historically as they unfolded in an essentially oral society, the record captured in the media and in other documentary sources was not enough. All too often the media reported rhetoric that hid rather than clarified the issues involved. There were huge gaps when developments were simply not understood, not recorded, or not commented on by the media. A good history will be one that somehow covers these gaps as well.

The upshot is that that Fraenkel’s book, the first trawl through the local and international media sources, while creditable and invaluable as a pioneer work, leaves one highly dissatisfied with the “foreign-ness” of it all—or, put differently, frustrated with the almost complete lack of indigenous voices. One longs to hear through first-hand interviews what any leading player believed he was trying to do then, and what now, with the benefit of hindsight, he believes actually happened on the ground. What was the divergence between rhetoric and results? Can an account really be judged as history, or even as a historical record, without the local people themselves being center stage? Whose history is it?


But it would be a mistake to imply that Moore’s book duplicates that by Fraenkel. Moore has a much deeper knowledge of the Solomons, since 1974, and writes more commentary on events and their context as he sees them. Again there are few interviews, and a heavy reliance on print and media sources, but Moore’s analysis is deeper.

Moore is particularly good at conveying the international context in which these events need to be seen. An Australian himself, Moore pulls no punches in condemning the extraordinary changes in the Australian government’s responses. He quotes Prime Minister John Howard’s speech in the Australian Parliament in April 2000 when he declined the appeal of Solomons Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa’alu to intervene. Moore notes this as a major misjudgment of the seriousness of the situation. He is also critical of the Australian evacuation of their nationals following the coup in June 2000, which was indeed
a self-fulfilling prophecy leading only to a further decline in local and business confidence as well as in law and order. Moore sees the peace-monitoring Operation Helpem Fren in July 2003 as a long overdue reversal of Australian policy following directly from the aftermath of 9/11 and from the October 2002 bombing of Australian tourists in Bali. Moore concludes his book with the arrival in Honiara on 24 July 2003 of the Australian-led intervention force, RAMSI (Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands), tasked to restore law and order and to begin to rehabilitate the shattered economy and broken society. He barely mentions, though, that the exhausted people of Honiara gave the Australians, and the New Zealanders, a rapturous welcome.

Moore’s work is scholarly, thoughtful, perceptive, and thoroughly worth buying. But again there must be a reservation about endorsing it for, like Fraenkel, Moore remains essentially an outsider looking in. The indigenous history, or rather the indigenous histories, of the crisis in the Happy Isles, have yet to be published.

However, as Moore notes in his acknowledgments, from 1999 onward an extraordinary network of Solomon Islanders overseas began and maintained an e-mail chat group called Iu-Mi-Nao, which translates into something rather like “It’s Up To Us To Do It! And Now!” Over the next few years, students, academics, former diplomats, and many others debated on the Internet the latest reports of day-to-day occurrences, media and other freedoms, and how best to redress and reform the nation. By using the Net, these émigré patriots abroad sought from all sides to understand and share their indigenous perceptions of what was happening among their largely illiterate and often voiceless wantoks (literally, “one talk”; relative or language group) at home. Thus, through e-mail, there was indigenous discussion throughout, even though mostly from a distance. It is very much to be hoped that these vigorous indigenous commentaries, a modern equivalent of “coconut radio” (gossip), has been preserved somehow, somewhere. With further in-depth interviewing of the real participants while they are still alive, the accumulated postings of that e-mail chat group could yet provide something more like a view from the inside.

Meanwhile these two expatriate chronologies by Jon Fraenkel and Clive Moore, whether good histories, bad histories, or indeed “real” histories, are certainly the best published so far. They are indispensable summaries tracing how the Solomons fell so unexpectedly and so quickly from being a struggling near-nation to becoming a failed state.

RHYS RICHARDS
Wellington, New Zealand


“The Unseen City” that is the focus of this collection of essays is the part of Port Moresby that remains out of