

An interview with Peter Watt

Peter Watt has worked as a soldier, prawn trawler deckhand, builder's labourer, pipe layer, real estate salesman, private investigator, police sergeant and adviser to the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary. He has lived and worked with Aborigines, Islanders, Vietnamese and Papua New Guineans.

On the battlefield of World War I, Captain Jack Kelly shows compassion to Major Paul Mann when he discovers that his enemy is also from the territory of Papua. What is it about Papua that goes on to continually entice and entwine these two men?

Papua and New Guinea are places little known to the world. And what is known of the island is steeped in the mystique of a warrior culture of head hunting and cannibalism. Even today the warrior tradition persists with ongoing tribal warfare waged on a daily basis somewhere in Papua New Guinea.

But before and after World War I the place was truly a mysterious land. The central districts were completely unexplored and the prevailing attitude of the West was that it was too rugged to be inhabited. It was not until the early 1930's that a European party of the Leahy brothers went in search of gold in the inland and found it was in fact inhabited by hundreds of thousands of people. Both Jack and Paul are men more comfortable living on frontiers where their worth is measured in self-reliance and adventure. This commonality bonds the men, who have both experienced the horrors of trench warfare and seek a new world that they have some control over in forging lives for themselves, away from the constraints of western civilisation. That was very much an attitude of many who pioneered the savage island in the period I have used as the canvass to the novel.

It's ironic that these two men fought for their respective countries, only to realise that their real home was else-

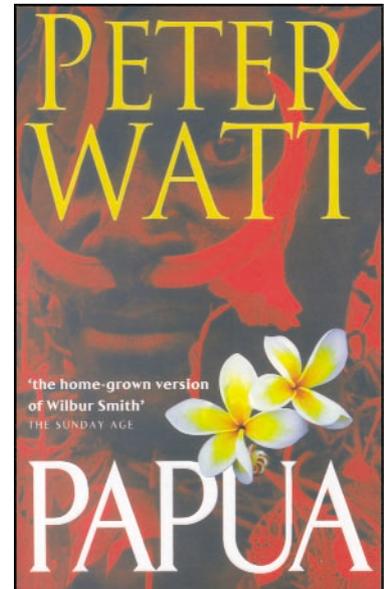
where. Had Australia and Germany become too mapped and organised for men such as Jack and Paul?

For Jack and Paul there was a need to be on the edge of a frontier, for beyond the known lay the unknown, and in a sense they were both men with an unconscious desire to be the first into unknown and uncharted territory. The real explorers of Papua were unsung heroes such as the patrol officers (known as kiaps in pidgin) who I mention in the author's notes. Needless to say many of the first

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Europeans to explore the uncharted parts of the island were missionaries, traders, prospectors, bird hunters and other ordinary people who hardly recognised what they were doing in blazing trails into the unknown and very dangerous territory of the warrior people. The fictional Jack and Paul represent such real unsung heroes.

You obviously have a personal interest in the history of Papua. Where does your fascination with the subject come from?



My first interest in the country came from the stories I heard the veterans tell about their experiences fighting in Papua New Guinea during World War II. That was back in the 1950's when I was growing up on a soldier settler farm in western New South Wales. The men were still only young and the memories still raw.

After I completed 3 years with the regular army I tried to enrol in a patrol officer's course at Middle Head in Sydney but they had closed applications and I missed out by just a couple of weeks.

But in 1990 when I had the chance to go to Papua New Guinea as a police adviser to the constabulary I did not hesitate and was rewarded with a 2 year contract working alongside the police of Papua New Guinea. I had always recognised that Papua was our own "Africa" and right on our doorstep. It had all the elements that colour African stories minus the lions and elephants. I also realised that few authors have exploited its colour and culture so I set my novel *Papua* against that canvass.

Your previous saga, which began with *Cry of the Curlew*, also had a very specific historical setting. What are the advantages of historical fiction compared to historical fact?

The study of history is rated as the most unpopular subject in secondary education. I can understand why when what is taught is usually from a political point of

view. The dates and places of treaties etc. But there is also a fascination for the past as exemplified in the tremendous amount of interest in genealogy. People have a need to find answers to the question, "Who am I?" Much of the answer lays in the past in the genes of our ancestors and how they coped with the social and technological conditions of their times. The fact that we exist today proves that whoever we were descended from had pretty tough genes. So fictionalising history provides a way to take a reader on a time machine into the past and attempt as accurately as possible to present in a very human way the technological and social conditions impacting on our ancestors' lives. I like to call this 'putting a human face on history'. I guess history has always fascinated me because it holds that wonderful question, "What if?" What if a tiny and seemingly insignificant incident held in it the ability to completely change the world as we know it today?

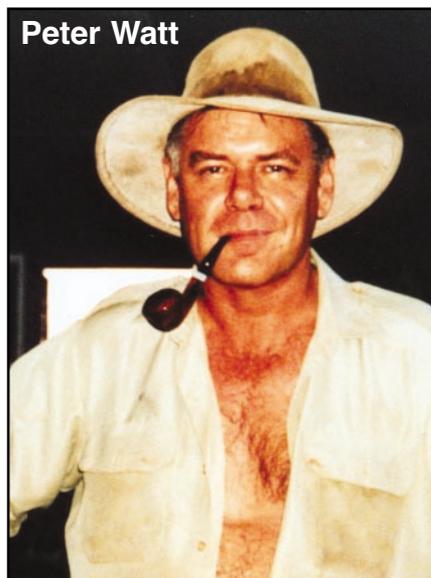
And what we are sometimes not consciously aware of is that our lives today is the history of tomorrow.

In the Curlew series, two opposing families, the Duffys and the Macintoshes, are joined by a child conceived between Michael Duffy and Fiona Macintosh. Does the idea of opposite sides meeting somewhere in the middle hold a particular significance for you, as with Jack and Paul in *Papua*?

A device in writing is the opposites device. We have a curiosity to know if people from opposite sides of a spectrum are able to find common ground. Hopefully, from reading a Peter Watt book readers might finish with the impression that despite the differences in colour, creed and culture all mankind has a basic commonality in their basic aspirations towards peace, family and a better future. Hence two men once sworn to kill each other find that when the power hungry and jingoistic movers in their respective political systems are removed from their lives, as people sharing a common planet would rather be friends than enemies. Maybe it could be said the novels use the device of common aspirations overcoming man-made constraints on free choice. But that is all getting to sound a bit deep and meaningful when the basic aim of the novels is to present a rip roaring yarn — as the English would say!

***Papua* certainly is rip roaring, moving back and forth all over the place — Papua, Australia, Germany. In ways, your life has had a similar movement to it, working as a soldier, prawn trawler, real estate salesman, private investigator, police sergeant, etc. Like Jack, are you a frontiersman — of sort — as well?**

Personally, I prefer the wide open spaces of the Outback to the crowded life living along our Coasts. I am always surprised that people imagine life near the ocean preferable to that lived inland where the sky and earth are one entity. So maybe that has spiritual overtones but that seems to be the attitude of people living in a world of limitless horizons broken



occasionally by lily covered water holes and rivers. There is something very peaceful to be found in the silence of the plains away from the tar and cement strips that mark coastal living. In a sense the Outback is our last unspoilt frontier and like my characters I guess that is where I feel most at home away from what we think of as civilisation.

Some would see the Outback as a rough and harsh environment. Do you believe it nurtures a certain kind of mateship and kinship amongst people that can't be found anywhere else?

Historically, the Outback was a place blokes predominated, although little credit is given to the women who also tamed the Outback sharing the same harsh conditions alongside their men.

But men did outnumber women, and because of the isolation and vast distances, men who worked together

depended on their workmate to help if anything went wrong. I remember when I was working in the Gulf Country of Queensland with my mate a few years back that the same dependency existed despite the so called shrinking of the frontier. We had to travel long and lonely distances between Aboriginal settlements and knew that if something went wrong we would have only ourselves and self reliance to get us out of trouble. So we shared the good and bad times as mates in the truest Aussie tradition. Although the frontier is a little shrivelled today there are plenty of examples amongst the stories related by the stockmen (called ringers in Queensland) of such reliance on a good mate to watch their back in times of peril. The same mate you shout a beer for at the nearest, isolated watering hole such as the Burketown Hotel.

Would you say that *Papua* is essentially about the same thing — two mates, looking out for each other in a rugged land?

The novel *Papua* has as a strong element the idea of mateship. Historically the men who went into the wilderness usually went in pairs or parties. But, if they went alone, a 'boss boy' often became their mate in times of trouble. Such can be seen in the exploits of the famous Errol Flynn who was also a gold prospector.

Papua is also a novel about unrequited love and a sense of adventure.

With four great novels under your belt, what are your plans for the future?

A fourth in the Macintosh/Duffy family saga has been completed. It takes the reader into the period 1899-1901 and in my opinion, the best of the family saga to date. It has the title *To Chase the Storm* and will be released October 2003.

Eden will follow *Papua* the following year 2004 and after that more books to come. They will retain in the main elements of historical, action, adventure romance. The big one for 2005 will be *Red Earth Black Sun...*but that is another story.