Roger M. Keesing and Peter Corris, *Lightning Meets the West Wind; The Malaita Massacre.* Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980. Pp. xv, 219, maps, illustrations, index. $28.00.

A band of Melanesian Kwaio Warriors armed with clubs, axes, ‘spears and obsolete Victorian firearms rebelled against the British Empire at Sinalagu Harbor on Malaita Island in the southwestern Pacific in October 1927. Inspired and directed by a local war leader named Basiana, they killed the British Solomon Islands Protectorate government’s District Officer for Malaita (a colonial civil servant named William Robert Bell), his English cadet assistant, and thirteen of their Melanesian police constables and servants. Basiana was an influential clan elder--then in his mature adult prime--a successful and feared hired killer (the bounty hunter was a formally recognized leadership role in Malaitan societies), and a respected military commander. He conceived, planned, organized, and led the attack; and he used his eloquence and guile to induce his sometimes reluctant relatives and neighbors to carry out his hostile intentions. Bell was a hardy and athletic Australian stockman and rancher, a Boer War veteran who had earned a battlefield commission in South Africa, a self-educated accountant and islands trader, and a firm administrator with a fondness for the frontier conditions prevailing in the South Pacific. During the twelve years he governed Malaita and served as its magistrate, he diligently exercised British authority with a surprising degree of understanding of and sympathy for His Majesty’s Melanesian subjects. He had almost single-handedly pacified the island, using his courage, vigor, self-discipline, self-confidence, and bravado to suppress chronic feuding and warfare, arrest and punish violators, impound firearms, and collect taxes. Basiana himself struck the blow that killed Bell.

In the five months that followed the uprising, a British punitive expedition composed of a naval landing party from an Australian cruiser, a

booze-swilling militia of local white colonial expatriates, and a substantial volunteer force of northern Malaita tribesmen (eager for traditional vengeance and armed adventure) retaliated by hunting down and killing at least fifty-five of the Kwaio people. Dozens more died from the exposure, famine, and the cultural or spiritual deprivation that ensued. They arrested over two-hundred Kwaio men as suspected co-conspirators, and six (including Basiana) were eventually convicted of murder and hanged or imprisoned.

Forty years later (when the authors and the reviewer were separately doing ethnographic or ethnohistorical fieldwork in Malaita) the events of 1927-28 had become part of Solomon Islands mythology. Throughout the Solomons, both Melanesians and white expatriates remembered the "Malaita Massacre" as the most salient incident of the colonial era. There were folktales and legends about Bell and Basiana, and classic oral epics celebrated their confrontation and its consequences. Both Basiana and Bell had acquired larger-than-life dimensions; and Bell in particular was remembered in an unexpectedly favorable light in stories stressing his strength, courage, resolution, vitality, virility, fairness and wisdom. Yesterday's enemies had mellowed with age.

Anthropologist Roger Keesing and historian Peter Corris have pooled their talents and social scientific methods to write a book about the confrontation between Basiana and Bell, between Melanesia and European civilization, that culminated in the battle at Sinalagu. Like all literary and social scientific endeavors, this book has both strong and weak points; but on the whole, its virtues outweigh its defects.

Their methodological collaboration is interesting and promising. The dual approach to a single set of circumstances and events yields more insights than either discipline could provide alone. As an historian, Corris had access to (and knew how to use) the archives, correspondence files, official memoranda, and personal journals pertaining to the subject. He supplemented these sources by interviewing survivors, both white and Melanesian. As an anthropologist, Keesing could draw upon his ethnographic familiarity with the Kwaio people and their vernacular language. He supplemented this knowledge through personal acquaintances with survivors, eyewitnesses, and heirs of the principals. The result is superb ethnohistory that presents a balanced account of what happened back then, expressing the issues and the perspectives of both sides involved in the controversy.

Their book renders the particularly valuable service of presenting the Kwaio view of the incident: that the attack on District Officer Bell was a political act of rebellion or revolt, a last-ditch defiant (but nationalistic)

defense of the Kwaio way of life, rather than simply an isolated barbarous attack against British colonial rule. Keesing and Corris also examine the complexity of motives on both sides. Bell and the government wanted to collect taxes, confiscate firearms, and uphold a somewhat racist British authority, to be sure. But they also sought pacification, civil order, and justice, Similarly, Basiana and his cohorts fought to protect Kwaio customs and independence, but their proto-nationalist altruism was alloyed with elements of ambition and vengeance that grew from purely local and internal Kwaio roots. Bell quarreled with both his white administrative superiors and the Malaitans whom he governed; and he sought to increase his own influence and status, while he carried out British policy and dispensed justice. Basiana resented British rule and struggled with his Kwaio rivals; and he sought to enhance his own traditional status and reputation while he led the opposition to British imperial encroachment. The essential, noble but flawed human nature of both sides comes out clearly.

Finally, the subject matter itself (the "showdown" between strong men) and the literary craft of the authors create a tragic drama. In the Keesing and Corris book, both the Kwaio people and the British Administration move toward confrontation and disaster with the inexorable, inevitable sense of destiny that has marked classical tragedy since the days of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The motives were complex and mixed, misunderstandings were manifold and repeated, and the principals feared but respected each other; but neither side could avoid the collision of cultures and polities, and too many worthy or innocent people suffered and died. Fate had its way.

The most serious shortcomings of the Keesing and Corris book are its tendency toward cryptic (or even hermetic) allusions and its sometimes elliptical or disjointed presentation of cultural data. For a cardinal example, the names and nicknames of the protagonists, certain Malaita metaphors, and the title of the book itself all mean something but only to a specialist who is familiar with the cultures and languages of Malaita. Basiana is a variant of *basi,* a common Malaitan word for the bow and arrow (a traditional pre-contact weapon) or an archer. Bell (or more precisely the derivative form *belo*) is used in Solomon Islands pidgin; and it connotes for obvious reasons churches and schools, which are post-contact institutions attributable to missionary influences. District Officer Bell, the local exemplar and forceful agent of western civilization, the man who came from the British headquarters of Tulagi and Auki (lying to the west of the Kwaio territory), earned the Malaita nickname *Koburu;* which is the Malaitan name for the northwestern storm wind that periodically brings thunderstorms, lightning, heavy rains and high winds to Malaita. And the

rifles (the proximate cause of the struggle between Bell and Basiana) are called *kwanga,* the general Malaitan term for thunder and lightning. Keesing and Corris, however, do not discuss this highly significant play upon words or its relevance to the title they chose for their book until quite late in the story. The association of Bell with the west wind is finally mentioned on page 92, and the metaphor identifying rifles with lightning finally appears on page 117. The public that will read this book is probably sophisticated enough to follow such linguistic or literary reasoning; and if the authors had shared this information sooner, the audience might appreciate their cleverness more.

Likewise, much of the ethnographic data requires readers to read between the lines because it tacitly assumes that they already have some knowledge of the peoples and cultures of Melanesia in general and of the Solomon Islands in particular. A more concise and better organized presentation of Kwaio culture, religious beliefs, and social organization (one precisely aimed at explicating the events of 1927-28) would have helped readers comprehend and interpret Kwaio motivations and actions better. As it is, facts about Kwaio actions are not readily apparent. Then, too, the plethora of Kwaio personal and place names is confusing. Perhaps more or better maps, genealogies, and cast of' characters lists would have helped. These, however, are trivial symptoms of disorganization; and they probably result from the practical difficulties inherent in coordinating the efforts and outputs of two different co-authors, who live and work in different places.

Finally, the ubiquitous condescension toward the British colonial administration may be overly general and unduly harsh. No doubt many British officials were petty, lazy, insensitive, and poorly informed bureaucrats who had risen to their levels of incompetence in the Colonial Civil Service of the British Empire. But not all of them were tyrannical fools, and even the authoritarian and foolish ones probably had some merits and good intentions. There must have been some, who (like Bell himself) were knowledgeable about the area and its people and interested in their wellbeing. It is simply too easy (and probably unfair) to condemn the entire Colonial Civil Service.

In conclusion, although the Keesing and Corris book is manifestly a useful contribution to our knowledge about the ethnohistory of Melanesia, its latent contribution to our understanding of human life and human nature is perhaps even more significant. Readers obviously will learn something about events that happened in the Solomon Islands during the colonial era, about racial and cultural relationships there, about how colonialism works, and about a conquered people's reaction to it. But

those who read the book and think about it can also gain more profound and general wisdom, for it presents important messages about humanity and about how these are incorporated and transmitted in the medium of myth. It is unfortunate that *Lightning Meets the West Wind* has been written for (and will be read mostly by) social scientists specializing in Oceania, rather than by those of a more humanistic and philosophical bent.

Beyond its ethnographic and historical facades, this book is about the human mind and heart, heroism and destiny, and how the human legacy is bequeathed to subsequent generations. The futile rebellion of Basiana and the Kwaio against the superior force of the British Empire, their "mixed bag" of noble and dubious motives (public and private, traditional and modem, pragmatic and idealistic, consequential and trivial), and the focusing of their attack upon the one official person (Bell) who had otherwise done so much to earn their respect and gratitude, all recall Pascal's musings about the heart having its reasons that the mind cannot know. The practical success of men like Bell, who once upon a time seized and governed imperial domains, and the subsequent failure of more sophisticated and powerful imperialist forces to retain the colonial franchises that they inherited, give rise to speculations about Spengler's concepts of the will in the rise and decline of nations, and about Carlyle's beliefs concerning the roles of great persons in making history. And ultimately, this book is about myth: its origins, its growth, and its reasons for being. Bell and Basiana were mere men.. Their motives were mixed and ambivalent, their actions were dubious and ambiguous, their careers were in the last analysis failures, their confrontation was ineffective (in the sense that no one profited from it), and their deaths were sordid. But the two of them have become heroic figures in a genuine Solomon Islands myth; and the myth expresses certain eternal absolutes about ways of life in conflict, about cultural changes, and about the life and death of particular human heritages. The meta-truth of the myth is more "real" and more "true" than the literal historical facts themselves are.

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