

The New Guinea Diaries: remembering PNG's first anthropologist

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When thinking about research in Papua New Guinea, many people picture an anthropologist in khaki shirt and shorts, hanging out with the locals in a mosquito-infested swamp. Names like Margaret Mead and Bronislaw Malinowski – touchstones of the anthropological canon – might come to mind. Some of these anthropologists have been controversial. There's the story – told in Sean Dorney's insightful [book](#) – of PNG's then US ambassador and recent Governor General, Sir Paulus Matane, stalking Margaret Mead's funeral in 1978 enraged over her depictions of his country-men and women. Not all of these esteemed anthropologists liked their participants. [Malinowski's diary](#) was far from flattering about the Trobriand Islanders he hung out with. Despite this, all are well known for contributing to our understanding about Papua New Guinean cultural, social and economic life.

However, over 140 years since his first adventure to PNG, few know about the first anthropologist to work in the country, Nicholas Miklouho-Maclay.

Miklouho-Maclay, a biologist by training, ended up on the north-eastern coast of what was then New Guinea (now the Maclay Coast in Madang Province) in September 1871. Stepping off a Russian corvette, the *Vitiaz*, with the intention of staying until the ship returned months later, he was taking a gamble. At the time New Guinea, unlike most of the Pacific, was not colonised, and many believed the inhabitants to be savage head-hunters and cannibals. The Russian was to become the first scientist to live with and study native Papuans, who had never before seen a white person.



Back then Charles Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* was growing in popularity among academics and explorers. Some interpretations of Darwin's theory helped justify the belief that Europeans were biologically superior to indigenous peoples – an argument that supported colonialism and slavery. Miklouho-Maclay, a committed humanist, wasn't convinced. In the [New Guinea Diaries 1871 – 1883](#), he describes his attempts to live with and study Papuans in line with his humanist philosophy.

The diaries provide a fascinating insight into the trials and tribulations of a man trying to bridge the cultural divide. There are pages and pages devoted to describing the effects that malaria and other diseases had on him and his two companions. Early on he is fired upon by local bowmen and met with warriors brandishing spears, but, distrusting his impulses amid hostilities, he refused to carry a firearm. The diaries describe the friendships he made with locals, who called him *Tamo Russ* and believed that he had descended from the moon.

The diaries also feature drawings that depict locals, including his friend and main informant, Tui, and everyday Papuan life.

After leaving New Guinea, Miklouho-Maclay eventually made his way to Australia, arriving in July 1878. Here

he made several expeditions to study tribal Aborigines, noting that they were skilled in fire making (a skill that the Papuans he lived with lacked) but did not possess the Papuan understanding of bows and arrows (although skilled at other highly effective weapons). Moving to Sydney he was received by Sir Henry Parkes, Premier of New South Wales, and became a local celebrity. From Sydney, Miklouho-Maclay campaigned against the destructive nature of European expansion and development in New Guinea – including the practice of [blackbirding](#). The anthropologist approached a number of colonial powers and attempted to broker a deal for a New Guinean protectorate, but failed. The Dutch, Germans and British soon moved in. The German *Neu Guinea Kompanie* drew upon Miklouho-Maclay's research – without his knowing – to help them colonise the Maclay Coast and beyond.

His research also reached the eyes of some of Russia's greatest minds. Leo Tolstoy wrote to Miklouho-Maclay in 1886, proclaiming:

You were the first to demonstrate beyond question by your experience that man is man everywhere, that is, a kind, sociable being with whom communication can and should be established through kindness and truth, not guns and spirits ... your experience of contacting the primitive peoples will make an epoch in the science for which I serve, i.e. the science, which teaches how human beings should live with one another.

Tolstoy was to go on to edit an early version of the diaries.

Miklouho-Maclay was not without his contradictions. He defended the rights of indigenous people yet dissected his Polynesian servant, Boy, after he died of disease, because he wanted the brain for scientific study.

Leaving Australia in 1887, the explorer died in his Russian homeland a year later, before his work was published. Although his Australian wife burnt a lot of his field notes on his instructions, the diaries survived and over time millions of copies were sold across Eastern Europe. The Soviets turned Miklouho-Maclay into a Stalinist hero for propaganda purposes; for them he was a symbol of how the Soviet Union dealt with indigenous people more humanely than the West. But in Australia few have heard of this Russian humanist, the diaries only appeared in English after they were published by a PNG publisher in 1975.

In Miklouho-Maclay's time, many Australians believed New Guinea to be full of inhuman cannibals and head hunters. Today, PNG is somewhat similarly positioned within the Australian imaginary. Many describe the place as a '[hell hole](#)', full of *raskols*. Parts of PNG have also become an Australian warehouse for persecuted refugees, denying asylum seekers their dignity and putting their lives at [risk](#). Those who fail to see beyond media stereotypes of PNG, as well as those who argue for a hard line against refugees, would do well to read the diaries. Even with his contradictions, Miklouho-Maclay's belief in our shared humanity is as relevant today as it was in the late 19th century.

A fascinating Radio National podcast on Miklouho-Maclay is available [here](#). For those in Sydney, the University of Sydney's [Macleay Museum](#) (named after the Macleays, a prominent family in colonial Sydney) has a section devoted to Miklouho-Maclay.

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