

BOOK REVIEWS

A FINE CITY? - NIGEL ORAM AND PORT MORESBY

N.D. ORAM, *COLONIAL TOWN TO MELANESIAN CITY*.

(Australia National University Press, 1976)
K10.95, 289 pages.

When Nigel Oram came to Papua New Guinea in 1961 he had behind him a distinguished career in Africa. He had worked in six African countries and, amongst other duties, served as an urban administrative officer for the Uganda Government, taught the Kabaka of Buganda how to run town councils, and had drafted the chapters on land and population for the 1955 Royal Commission on East-Africa.

He worked in Port Moresby for 15 years, first as a research officer for the New Guinea Research Unit of the Australian National University and later as a Fellow of the University of Papua New Guinea, leaving in 1976 to go to La Trobe University in Melbourne. His previous African experience had taught him that standards and concepts from developed countries can have a positively harmful effect if applied in the totally different circumstances which obtain in developing countries. He used his African experience to good effect in Papua New Guinea.

During his years in this country he achieved a great deal. First, as an academic, he carried out research set out the results in articles, books, and lectures. He studied the history of the Motu, Koitabu and Hula peoples; social relationships in Badilli canoe settlement; the Government and Local Government administrative machinery; urbanisation, housing conditions and migrant urban settlements; land questions and village courts. His writings were authoritative and his lectures attracted large audiences. On one occasion villagers came from miles around Port Moresby to hear him lecture about the history of the Motu and Koitabu - much of his audience came in order to gather ammunition for conflicting land claims.

During his years in Papua New Guinea he showed himself to be an eminently practical man, concerned to use his knowledge to improve where possible the nature of the community wherein he lived. He served as advisor to public bodies, became a member of Port Moresby City Council, owned a houseboat at Badilli canoe settlement and learned to speak three local languages. In 1972, at a time when most of the town planning and housing "experts" in the country were still attempting, with a complete lack of success, to apply Australian housing and planning concepts, he realised that the only practical solution to the Territory's urban housing problem was planned "self-help" housing. The proposals for an urban self-help housing policy which he set out in the 1972 Madang Urban Study (Prepared by Russell D. Taylor and Partners for the Director of Lands) have now been reiterated in the 1978 Government Committee of

Review on Housing. He was amongst the first in Papua New Guinea to realise that in urban squatter communities the normal trend is towards housing improvement - not housing deterioration.

Oram's book about Port Moresby was published just after he left Papua New Guinea. It has now become essential reading for anyone concerned with the history, administrative structure and problems of this city. It contains an enormous amount of information about almost every facet of life in Port Moresby ranging from the number of yams grown at Laloki in 1930 to the population forecasts for 1986. He dispassionately records what must have been somewhat hilarious occasions, such as when three City Councillors "voted against levying a rate and all constructive proposals because they were disappointed at not being sent on a tour of Australia". Times have changed since then and local government councillors have found more interesting things to examine in study tours of the Phillipines.

The book is conveniently divided into two sections. Chapters one through six examine the history of the city, and chapters seven to twelve cover population, social organisation, race relations, housing and administration. Both parts contain a wealth of detail about personalities, events, and statistics which make the book particularly valuable for people who already have a working knowledge of the country and the city. Anybody who does not know Port Moresby could be well advised to obtain a street map of the city to refer to whilst reading the book.

The first six chapters provide a detailed guide to the historical growth of the city until 1974, the year before Independence. This is a fascinating study for there can be very few other urban centres in the world in which exist such a complex set of relationships between different groups and communities. The small mission station beside the Motuan village of Hanuabada grew into the colonial town which in turn changed into the National Capital. But this National Capital has never absorbed many of its component parts - Port Moresby is essentially a confederacy.

The old villages which the city has now surrounded have just as strong individual identities now as they had before the first Europeans arrived. The people living in Tatana urban village periodically engage in fights between clans in the village, but should the police threaten to intervene, the feuding factions will jointly blockade the causeway which links the village to the main urban area. The parochial chauvinism of these urban villages is shown in their churches. Kila Kila urban village has just completed a vast neo-gothic church and Vabukori and Pari urban villages not to be outdone, now plan to build even bigger edifices. The churches have a very important social role in Port Moresby, providing focal points around which communities can identify themselves - even for some people who could hardly be called practicing Christians.

The Australian colonial administration of Port Moresby shows in a poor light in Oram's systematic examination of the City's growth. The Administration frequently did not realise the nature of the changes that were occurring as the town grew into a city, and more to the point, rarely anticipated what was likely to happen in subsequent years. The book contains many detailed references highlighting the lack of realistic housing policies, land policies, and policies to deal with squatters. The normal Australian response to any problem was to set up a committee - a bureaucratic reaction which has been all too readily copied in independent Papua New Guinea.

The book ends with specific proposals for the reorganisation of urban administration, giving maximum authority to the individual wards of the city. Most cities of the world contain communities with strong ethnic characteristics (for example the Greek and Lebanese areas of Sydney) but there can be few cities which contain so many distinct communities, many of them very strongly entrenched and powerful, as in Port Moresby. Some of the squatter areas of the city have now achieved a homogeneity akin to the urban villages. For instance, the squatters at Koki have shut the gates to their settlement in the face of the police and several other squatter communities have erected their own churches. The urban squatters originating from Goilala district of the Central Province have established a network of communities throughout the city linked by a system of Sing-Sings held to celebrate festivals such as Christmas or to signify the patching up of quarrels. The Goilala squatter communities of Port Moresby identify with each other and with their home district rather than with the city. But although there are many different communities in this city they are not generally mutually antipathetic and some are composed of tribally diverse groups. In the "Six-Mile" area of Port Moresby, squatters originally from Popondetta, Koiari country, Goilala, Chimbu, Finschhafen, and Lae have all come together to form a joint committee to settle any problems which arise in their proximate settlements.

Since 1971 Port Moresby has been governed by a City Council. From its inception this council has had somewhat uneasy relations with the central government, interspersed with periodic public quarrels. As a member of this Council, Oram had no illusions that Municipal Government is necessarily good government. The most notable achievement of the Council has been the introduction of the very successful local markets in 1971. The greatest fault of the City Council prior to the 1978 council elections has been its partiality to Papuans and its thinly veiled hostility towards non-Papuans. For instance most of the urban villages (by definition Papuan) and some Papuan squatter communities have now got Council financed clinics and community halls. In contrast, the City Council has agitated for the "clearance" of the Chimbu squatters from Gordon's Ridge squatter area and has successfully blocked proposals to provide communal water taps for the 300 Chimbis living behind the "Six-Mile" rubbish dump. The Goilala squatters which Oram says are at the bottom of the social ladder, appear to be climbing slowly. They have now got piped-in water supplies in all their settlements and have been able to unofficially lease land for market gardening from the Koitabu and Motu customary owners. In 1977 Goilala squatters persuaded the City Council to provide access roads into many of their urban settlements.

Accepting that the life of Port Moresby is in its component communities, Oram proposes that this distinctive feature of the city should be recognised and that many facets of community control, basic administration, police, and justice should be delegated to the ward level. The problem here is that there are many more local communities in Port Moresby than there are wards. The ward organisation of Port Moresby City Council does not correspond to the extremely complex network of informal committees of squatters, urban villagers, and other residents which already exists. To weld this plethora of existing committees and informal associations into a workable City Council ward structure would be a formidable undertaking.

While the degree of detail in the book is valuable for scholars and people who already have a good working knowledge of the city, it could make for rather heavy going for the casual reader or for people

anxious to learn about Port Moresby who have never visited the city. There are eight maps and diagrams which illustrate facets of the city's development, except that the very distinctive topography of the city is never shown on a map. Map 4 (p.90) shows how often wishful thinking is substituted for planning in Papua New Guinea, for it shows the road to the Goilala district of the Central Province to be constructed in 1975, whereas there seems little prospect of this important feeder road being constructed before 1984. It would have helped for easy comprehension of the textual references if all the place names mentioned in the text could have been readily identifiable on maps. For instance, Koki, which is an important Port Moresby landmark and is repeatedly referred to, is not indicated on any map.

Oram realises that urbanisation in developing countries is quite inevitable and that those who propose solutions to Port Moresby's problems must begin by accepting the city as it is with all its faults. The extent to which government, councils, planners, and administrators can influence the future is very strictly limited in a free society. Planning and administration must take place within known political, demographic, and financial parameters. By simple measures such as providing everyone with drinking water and a place to build his own house a great deal can be done to help Port Moresby's citizens to help themselves. By 1990 there will be a quarter of a million people living here. There is no need to despair at this prospect.

This book is not light reading. It has been written by a man with exhaustive knowledge of his subject and that knowledge has been carefully and accurately put into print. It will stand as the standard text about Port Moresby for many years.

--- H.C. NORWOOD.