

Bougainville: Australia's

Secret War

Kristian Lasslett

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Mr Pip, a recent film set during the 1990s Bougainville war, deals with the disorienting impact of sudden trauma and the struggle survivors endure to break the subsequent bondage of grief. This searching narrative is channelled through the character of Mr Watts, a British expatriate played by Hugh Laurie, who has assumed the improvised role of village schoolteacher in rural Bougainville.

Here Mr Watts develops a friendship with a young Bougainvillean student, Matilda, played by the extraordinary Xzannjah Matsi. Both have endured personal loss; together they find solace in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*.

The stage for this cathartic friendship is the very real Bougainville conflict, a war that shook the island—which forms part of Papua New Guinea's easternmost border—for a decade, leaving in its wake a death toll of between 10,000 and 20,000 people.

In a region famed for its physical beauty and cultural majesty, the conflict was an unimaginable tragedy. And it was punctuated by war crimes that even today are only faintly acknowledged in the historical annals.

The associated trauma continues to loom large for Bougainville's people. But for those who organised these war crimes it is something of a footnote: no one—not a soul—has ever been held to account.

Mr Pip is a visceral reminder of the impunity enjoyed by the conflict's architects. And the film makes no pretence about the horrors of war or the immense suffering endured by those caught in the middle. Nor does it overlook the profound courage of the Bougainvilleans who faced these horrors and their unyielding capacity to survive under the most inhospitable of conditions.

But what many people outside Bougainville watching *Mr Pip* would not notice—yet it is subtly present in each frame—is the role of the Australian government, who primed the military violence that, in turn, presaged horrific war crimes. These crimes are recreated in *Mr Pip* with unflinching realism. Indeed, while it is fictionalised account, the film mirrors the conflict's lived brutality: each crime audiences bear witness to actually happened, on a systematic basis.

In the film's prologue the scene is set. We learn that Bougainville is at war after traditional landowners forcefully closed a large copper mine owned by Anglo-Australian giant Rio Tinto. Later in the film we survey the scars left by the mine on the land and its people.

The mine itself was a wholly Australian invention. It was developed by the Australian colonial administration during the 1960s, in collaboration with Australian miner Conzinc Rio Tinto. When locals resisted the alienation of their land and the

destruction of the environment, they were met with police riot squads. At one stage the colonial administration even contemplated deploying the military—wiser heads prevailed in the end.

The protests continued throughout the mine's life. Initially they centred on the distribution of mine 'benefits'—the lion's share went to the Papua New Guinea government and the major shareholder, Rio Tinto. However, as the mine's seismic social, environmental and economic effects began to seriously erode the cultural, customary and spiritual life of the land's custodians, protest turned into expropriation. In late 1988 landowner leaders turned to dynamite as their preferred tool to evict the mine's operator, Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL), which is a subsidiary of Rio Tinto.

Mr Pip takes place in the early 1990s. By then many villages around the mine had been levelled by Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) soldiers, and police mobile squads. Initially the Papua New Guinea government had balked at the prospect of deploying force against landowners, such is their status in Melanesia. When advised that the government planned to 'appease' the landowners, BCL's chairman threatened to withdraw Conzinc Rio Tinto's investments from Papua New Guinea, which would have bankrupted the nation.

The Australian government heaped on the pressure too. A senior diplomat stationed in Australia's Papua New Guinea high commission recalls, 'we were certainly pushing them ... to get more troops over there and that sort of thing. Ben Sabumei was the [Papua New Guinea Defence] Minister, and I used to see him all the time saying, "get your people over there".'

When Papua New Guinea's security forces arrived, landowner leaders in the mine-affected region organised an armed resistance force dubbed the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA). They called on their Bougainvillean compatriots to support a campaign of secession. The BRA leadership believed this was the only remaining political route through which social justice for marginalised rural communities could be achieved.

It is during this tumultuous phase in Bougainville's history that we find Matilda, a highly intelligent

young student, trying to make sense of the events unfolding around her. On the surface, Matilda’s home is the quintessential Melanesian village. But lying behind this scenic appearance is a collective anxiety that looms large over the community.

We learn that, when the war began in 1989, Matilda’s father left Bougainville for Australia to find work. Matilda’s mother, Dolores—a brave, deeply religious woman—endlessly promises her pining daughter that they will take the next boat to reunite with her father. But a military blockade has been placed around Bougainville. Matilda realises there will be no more boats.

The blockade referenced in *Mr Pip* was indeed universal: nothing was allowed into Bougainville, not even medicines. And it was brutally enforced by PNGDF soldiers aboard Australian-supplied patrol boats and aircraft. They operated under shoot-to-kill orders.

Sadly, many Bougainvilleans died making the dangerous ocean crossing to the neighbouring Solomon Islands. Worse still, many thousands perished needlessly during the blockade years from treatable illnesses, medical conditions, injuries and emergency complications. These deaths were a wholly planned enterprise, a vital part of the offensive architecture employed to bring communities to heel.

A Papua New Guinea Department of Defence planning document compiled in early 1990 predicted that the significant suffering produced by the blockade would turn the north and south of Bougainville—more distant from the mine and the harms it generated—against central Bougainville, creating a civil-war situation. This, they hoped, would give the PNGDF a military edge over the rebel forces.

When this war crime—an indiscriminate form of collective punishment—was devised in early 1990, it was with the support of the Australian government. Following an April 1990 meeting with Australia’s then foreign minister, Gareth Evans, the head of Rio Tinto’s Papua New Guinea operations wrote, ‘Evans says ... the de facto blockade of Bougainville is having an effect and will become a full blockade if peace talks do not commence shortly. Australia is fully committed to Bougainville remaining part of PNG.’

The strategic logic underpinning Australian support is summarised by a senior diplomat from the period: ‘the [Papua New Guinea] government was in spite of itself on the right course, which was to deny goodies. They [Bougainville] were well off, comparatively speaking. And the way to bring them to heel, was frankly to cut off the tap, to ensure that they would pay for not having the mine to operate, that they would pay for their defiance if you will!’

BCL’s chairman was equally candid in his support for the blockade. According to Papua New Guinea’s former prime minister Sir Michael Somare, the chairman quipped, ‘let’s starve the bastards out’. And it was the military hardware supplied by the Australian government—patrol boats, helicopters and aircraft—that became the blockade’s teeth.

After the first few traumatic months of the blockade, where starvation was a real possibility, people on Bougainville began cultivating gardens to meet the shortfall, which itself was a dangerous enterprise with heavily armed helicopters hovering overhead. The problem then became women suffering complications during childbirth, babies without inoculations, diabetics without insulin, children suffering gastroenteritis—so many afflictions that could have been treated turned fatal.

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However, in *Mr Pip* it is perhaps the looming violence of the PNGDF that casts the biggest shadow over Matilda and her village. When Iroquois helicopters teeming with soldiers fly overhead a collective hysteria grips Matilda’s community; her people run for cover.

The helicopters were supplied by the Australian government in 1989, specifically for use on Bougainville, with the ironic and face-saving stipulation that they were not to be used as weapons—ironic because Australia was also the military’s principal arms supplier. Straight away the helicopters were converted into gunships that were used to terrorise villages.

An Australian Defence Force soldier seconded to the PNGDF recalls the indiscriminate horror that these helicopters rained upon villages: ‘Offensive fire was regularly directed from the helicopters at suspected targets, including villages. Soldiers fired machine guns attached by rope, and grenades from grenade launchers (M203/M79) or simply dropped grenades into villages. The conditions [of use] were violated and the Australian government was shown evidence of such instances, but little was done to enforce the prohibitions—something which the PNGDF quickly realised.’

At *Mr Pip*’s dramatic crescendo the helicopters land and soldiers round up Matilda’s village. The company is headed by a belligerent commander whose temperament echoes the real-life Colonel Leo Nui. Nui made considerable international waves in 1991 following his infamous television interview with the ABC’s Deborah Snow. With the cameras rolling he admitted to Snow that his soldiers had executed civilians, then dumped their corpses into the ocean from Australian helicopters.

This very public confession incensed Canberra. A Papua New Guinea minister from the period recalls, ‘I got dirty

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phone calls from the Australian government. I don't know why he had to tell the ABC; he didn't have to tell them. I mean, I thought it was a good media-relations exercise; I approved them to go. I guess I didn't pull aside Nuia and say, listen, these are the things you don't say'.

In *Mr Pip* the unit commander shows the same indifference to humanity as he torments Matilda's village. Mr Watts, Matilda's unlikely mentor, implores the irate commander to spare the village. He is executed for this defiance. Extrajudicial executions were common occurrences during the conflict.

Following Mr Watts' slaying, the commander asks, 'Who saw the white man die?'. Matilda's mother, Dolores, replies, 'I did. He was a good man; I am here as God's witness'. For this dignified act of resistance she is dragged off, pack raped and then executed. The commander advises Matilda to look away. Soldiers chop her mother's defiled body into pieces with machetes. Each dull thud sends a ripple across Matilda's face.

Many real-life Matildas witnessed these kinds of atrocities. And they live with these memories, heavy on young shoulders. But Dolores' act of bearing witness to the murder of Mr Watts reminds us of our collective responsibility to bear witness to the criminality of our governments. Ordinary Australians cannot be blamed for the covert crimes committed in their name by the Hawke-Keating government, but they can, even today, bear witness to these crimes and condemn Australia's involvement in this forgotten war.

There are many reasons why this collective burden falls to the Australian people. It was the Australian government who gave these war criminals the means to commit their atrocities.

The testimony of senior Australian government officials involved in planning and resourcing the war bears this out. An Australian Defence Force officer deeply enmeshed in the counterinsurgency operation provides a disarmingly frank assessment of Australia's support: 'I mean the logistic support that we supplied to the PNGDF during that time was very large and significant; without our support they couldn't have done what they did'.

He continues, 'We'd be training them at training camps, we'd be supplying them with weapons, we'd be supplying them with uniforms, everything. And then we'd say these companies are now fit to be used, let's send them now to Bougainville. We'd even fly them to Bougainville for God's sake, so we would facilitate everything'. A defence department colleague adds, 'Anything [armaments] they had a good case for, we were very sympathetic to providing'.

Worse still, those Australian Defence Force officers seconded to the PNGDF and police knew of the gross human-rights abuses occurring on Bougainville and relayed the facts to Canberra. Yet Australia's politicians frequently pleaded ignorance before the press. 'The reality is, the ADF, we had people in positions in both the constabulary and the PNGDF, so we knew very well what was going on', recalls an Australian Defence Force officer.

'Let's not be too cute or naive about it', he explains, 'that's the reality about life. So we had good knowledge about what was going on ... And there is no doubt in my mind that at times there were issues that were so sticky and so difficult that had they become public at the time they would have caused enormous difficulties for our government'.

Indeed, so ensconced was Australia in the counterinsurgency that Australian soldiers became directly involved in planning offensive operations after the PNGDF suffered a resounding defeat during early 1990. So as PNGDF soldiers employed rape as a weapon of war and indiscriminately executed civilians—of which *Mr Pip* is an unflinching reminder—they were there because Australia

provided the hardware, the guidance and the arms.

After her mother is raped, tortured and executed, young Matilda is bowed with grief. In a kind of trance, she wanders into the mine pit, the ugly scar which has been the source of so much suffering for her people. She is consumed by the rapids of the Jaba river, a once pristine waterway spoiled by many million tonnes of tailings vomited by the mine over the years. Matilda is sucked out into Empress Augusta Bay, rescued by local men and shepherded away to Australia to be reunited with her father.

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Matilda is a fictional character, but there are many like her on Bougainville today: courageous, eloquent young people who endured so much, and yet through the love of their village and family they remain proud custodians of a culture that resisted its evisceration in the face of a brutal military campaign underwritten by Australia. Tears are still shed, though, many tears. They signify remembrance for those now gone—the mothers, fathers, sons and daughters—and an enduring determination to achieve justice for the crimes inflicted on Bougainville.

Regrettably, Australia is the hidden hand that decimated this emerging island nation. The Australian government's impunity has been buttressed by the deafening silence that has greeted the extraordinary empirical evidence that has come to light over the past several years.

But, like so many on Bougainville, Australians have also lost something, even if it is not comparable. They have been denied access to an episode in history acted out in their name.

Time will eventually catch up with the organisations that conspired in the tragic events of the 1990s, for the real-life Matildas keep this lived history in their hearts. They will in years to come draw on a profound inner strength that comes from Bougainville's proud tradition of resistance to find justice against the odds.

Whether Australians will join them in this journey is a question that remains open. Indeed, in a sense *Mr Pip* echoes the path Australia must tread as a nation. It must make peace with its own past, no matter how confronting or traumatic. As long as the history of this conflict is denied, the healing power of peace and friendship between island neighbours will be impossible. **a**

Endnotes

Mr Pip (2012, dir. Andrew Adamson), based on Lloyd Jones' novel *Mister Pip*.

Quotations in this article are taken from the author's book *State Crime on the Margins of Empire*.