

Chapter 11

On Being a Participant Biographer: The Search for J.W. Davidson

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Books do not write themselves, unfortunately. There is always a behind-the-scenes story of research, writing and getting published that is sometimes more interesting than the story related in the book itself. This is especially the case with biography. What might seem the straightforward task of writing the life of an individual is often fraught with difficulty; and the biographical enterprise has engendered some particularly bitter disputes. For every encourager, there can be an ill-wisher. Friends and family can be obstructive. Unwilling prospective subjects of a biography have been known to take pre-emptive legal action; John Le Carré, for example, has deterred two would-be biographers by such means.¹ Literary estates can nip a project in the bud by refusing access to personal papers and denial of quotation rights.² Such obstruction is serious, precisely because biographies have to be ‘produced’ and a precondition of that production is more often than not access to archival sources. My own work towards a biography of J.W. Davidson has not landed me in court. But it has taken me to archival repositories in the search for anything and everything on Davidson as well as in locating documents in private possession and in securing access to personal papers that were decreed off limits to me (but not to others). It is all part and parcel of the business of ‘producing’ biography and a tale worth telling.

Jim Davidson (1915-1973) was the New Zealand expatriate and Cambridge don who became Professor of Pacific History at The Australian National University. He emerged as the founding father of modern Pacific Islands historiography as well as constitutional adviser to a succession of Island territories in the throes of decolonisation. Far from being a run-of-the mill academic in his ivory tower, Davidson prided himself on being unconventional, notably for his promotion of ‘participant history’ and his advocacy of the advantages of personal experience.³ As well as writing history, he helped to make it, and he combined the two in his major book, *Samoa mo Samoa*, large parts of which detail his role in the making of the independent state of Western Samoa.⁴ All things considered, Davidson is an attractive biographical subject. He was significant and influential within his profession. He was a man of affairs as well as a scholar. He was

controversial and there are certain mysteries about his life. He had a singular and complex personality in which the elements were strangely mixed—patrician yet egalitarian; gentle yet abrasive; the soul of discretion when confidences were involved yet outrageously indiscrete when it suited him; respectful of authority figures in other cultures yet disparaging of those in his own; and apt to be an outright pain to strait-laced colleagues to the extent that they were apt to doubt his seriousness of purpose.⁵

I knew Jim Davidson in the last years of his life and now find myself writing his biography. If someone said that biographers choose their subject by selecting and idealising a hero figure, I could respond with mock-dismissiveness that this is a very Freudian interpretation. But Freud did hold that view,⁶ and in my case it happens to be true because Jim Davidson meant a great deal to me personally and he had an influence on the course of my life. Also, I feel a sense of connection with the person about whom I am writing, and not simply because I once knew him as a person. We were both brought up in Wellington, where I have returned to live. As well as archival research, I was then able to engage in ‘optical research’ the term coined by a biographer of Mary Queen of Scots who ‘visited every conceivable castle, quagmire, byre or whatever associated with the Queen in three countries’.⁷ There was a time when I daily walked past the house where Davidson was born and the church in which he was baptised (both in Upland Road). There was the occasion, in the manner of Richard Holmes’ *Footsteps*, when I traced his daily trek from the family home in Tinakore Road, via the Botanical Gardens, to the (then) Victoria University College. There was the occasion when I went to see that same house to discover that it had been demolished for freeway development. The feelings of loss and emptiness on that afternoon are part and parcel of the biographer’s journey, where the thrills and spills intermesh.

I did not initially intend to commit myself to a book-length biography but, rather, an ‘intellectual biography’ in article form: an assessment of Davidson the Pacific historian—the type of Pacific history he promoted and practised, notably his advocacy of ‘participant history’; the formative influences; his academic legacy. Davidson’s published corpus provided the basis for the investigation, but was not sufficient in itself.⁸ It is impossible to deconstruct adequately a historian’s writings on the basis of the writings alone. Detailed biographical material is also required; and I needed to consult personal papers. It seemed simple and straightforward enough. But I was to find, as most biographers do, that there were surprises in store, not all of them agreeable.

I cannot recall the moment I decided upon this course of research. A distant influence was the impact of a couple of superb books on the American historical profession, which showed what could be achieved through the use of historians’ personal papers.⁹ The immediate impetus was probably writing a couple of

journal articles on Pacific Islands historiography in the early 1990s in which the Davidson legacy was mentioned.¹⁰ In July 1994, at the Pacific History Association Conference at Tarawa, I spoke about planned research on Davidson with David Hanlon of the University of Hawai'i; and David remarked that I was well qualified, having known Davidson personally and been his student. But any such intentions were relegated to the backburner because I was midway through other research. Also, I was then working at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, remote from both archival sources and people whom I could interview about Davidson.

The project began in September 1996 on a fortnight visit to Canberra during a mid-semester break from teaching to consult the Davidson Papers. There are two sets of Davidson Papers, the main body at the National Library of Australia and a smaller miscellaneous collection at the ANU Archives. I understood that both collections were on open access but the smaller collection was restricted, and continued to be so for a further three years.¹¹ The fact that Davidson died without issue, and had no literary executor, contributed to the difficulties concerning access and the reproduction of archives. Finally, I gained access. I discovered there was nothing untoward or of a sensitive nature in those papers, and they proved valuable in answering a number of questions about Davidson's academic life, including the completion of *Samoa mo Samoa*.¹²

Most of my time during that fortnight in Canberra was spent consulting the National Library of Australia's collection of Davidson Papers. That larger collection is disorganised. Davidson himself was never particularly careful in keeping his papers in much order, and when he died suddenly in 1973 his muddled papers were transferred to the National Library and have never been properly sorted. There were 63 archival boxes of papers, according to the finder aid, and the single largest category comprised a miscellany of official printed papers relating to Davidson's constitutional advising. The first three boxes contained scattered correspondence from the 1950s and I concentrated on these, making handwritten notes because there was seemingly no one able to grant permission to photocopy. The note-taking was time consuming and the information fragmentary and inconclusive. There were plenty of leads but few 'answers' to my questions. But I did manage to purchase a recent official history of The Australian National University by Stephen Foster and Margaret Varghese, who were accused by an admiring reviewer of being 'in serious danger of giving commissioned history a good name'.¹³ Although the authors made a couple of factual errors about Davidson, they provide a remarkably frank and engaging account of the ANU's first 50 years. Both in terms of specific information and background material, Foster and Varghese saved me an enormous amount of legwork.

My next archival foray was the visit, in December 1996, to St John's College, Cambridge, where Davidson was a PhD student (1938-1942) and Fellow (1944-1951) and for which he maintained a lifelong affection. Through the good offices of Malcolm Underwood, the College Archivist, I consulted what he could find. The bulk of these records were in the Tutorial File, containing the records kept on Davidson by his tutors. There was also a smaller bundle of papers, on the cover of which was written 'Found while cleaning up'—a chilling reminder that archives can be at risk even in well-appointed institutions. There was not as much material as I had expected—nothing, for example, on Davidson relinquishing his fellowship upon being appointed to a professorship at ANU or the arrangements regarding affiliation during his 1956 study leave. But the records I saw were in more concentrated form than I had hitherto encountered; and I was fascinated to see resonances of the Davidson I knew as an older man jumping out at me from the pages: a love of travel; leaving things to the last minute; always having a plausible excuse for a seemingly habitual pattern of not having done something quite on time; and an equal facility at knowing how to work the system. Again, I came across a secondary source that was important to my work, although in a different way to the ANU official history. The book in question was Bryan Palmer's memoir of the English historian E.P. Thompson (1924-1993), famous for *The Making of the English Working Class* and notable for his wholehearted involvement in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.¹⁴ In its attempts to connect Thompson's personality to his writing, and sympathetically written by someone who knew Thompson, whose activism informed his scholarship, Palmer's book suggested how I might approach my work on Davidson.

But I still did not have enough material for an intellectual biography, even in article form, and I was still immersed in other projects. As part of a long-delayed study leave, in 1997, I consulted some of the papers of H.E. Maude (1906-2006), who had been Davidson's loyal lieutenant at ANU. I had toyed with the idea of doing a full-scale biography of Harry Maude, but Susan Woodburn, the librarian in charge of the Special Collection at the Barr Smith Library, University of Adelaide, where the Maude Papers were housed, had beaten me to it.¹⁵ I told Susan that I had abandoned any intention of a biography but would still like to write a historiographic paper about Harry Maude, whom I had known since 1972. Also, I was working on Davidson and would it be possible to see relevant material among the Maude Papers? Susan was completely unfazed at the prospect of a potential rival and facilitated my research. It is difficult to suggest anyone else to be as obliging in the circumstances. And Harry Maude, despite initial unease, gave permission to consult his papers, with the exception of the general correspondence. It was a win-win situation. Over the next few years, Susan and I enjoyed a rewarding professional relationship as we shared our findings and gave each other every assistance.¹⁶

Still, my work on Davidson was proceeding slowly. From Fiji, I could make only occasional visits to archival sources in Australia and New Zealand. There was also the distraction of my other research commitments. But I did begin what has become a large correspondence with former friends and associates of Davidson. I got away to Canberra again in September 1997 during a week-long mid-semester break from teaching. It wasn't nearly enough time to make an impact on National Library's collection of Davidson Papers, but I did on this occasion locate material among the papers of the Australian historian Brian Fitzpatrick, on whose behalf Davidson unsuccessfully attempted to secure an academic position.¹⁷ Events then started to take another trajectory. Shortly after returning to Fiji I wrote to the social anthropologist Sir Raymond Firth (1901-2002), who had worked with Davidson during the Second World War in the Naval Intelligence Division¹⁸ and who, as one of the ANU's Academic Advisers in the late-1940s, had recommended Davidson for the position of Professor of Pacific History. He responded enthusiastically, but voiced concern when I later mentioned that the scope of my work was limited to an intellectual biography. He wrote back:

You say you are only 'incidentally' concerned with Jim's constitutional advising. Indeed to deal fully with it would need a big book. But I do hope you can give it fair space, since it was an integral part of his intellectual life. It was a fusion of the scholar and the man of affairs, concerned directly with people, which I think he loved and which let him express himself most fully. I should stress that it also allowed him a sense of power, of the kind which [the social anthropologist] Audrey Richards once described in quite another context as 'Let me just plan your life for you!'

The 'sense of power' to which Firth refers is apposite—not power for its own sake but the opportunity to be centrally involved in the process of decolonisation and not simply to comment from the sidelines.

At that point I started to consider writing a full-scale biography. Not only did Davidson lead a varied and eventful life but it was evident that his reputation was on the wane, as a shadowy and not very relevant ancestral figure. A comparable example is that of W.K. Hancock who is making a comeback on the basis of publications on his life and work.¹⁹ Yet in his time, Davidson had clout and was well known: he pioneered the study of Pacific history as a specialisation in its own right; his department trained nearly all the practitioners; and he founded *The Journal of Pacific History*, which influenced the research agenda. These in themselves would probably not justify Davidson being the subject of a full-scale biography; and it is noticeable that historians usually only rate chapter-length biographical treatment. While there is no firm pattern, usually historians who combine public affairs with academic work, or at least have a

multi-faceted career, are more likely to attract a biographer²⁰—and Davidson's constitutional advising, not to mention his advocacy of participant history, put him in this category.

I was mulling over this possible change of plan in December 1998 during a two-month tenure as a Visiting Scholar within the newly created Centre for the Contemporary Pacific, to work both on Davidson and on a book on the collapse of the National Bank of Fiji.²¹ My time was spent interviewing former associates of Davidson, and to my astonishment I discovered that his younger sister Ruth was alive and still living in the house that Jim had built for her in the Canberra suburb of Garran. I had not seen her in over 25 years. A feeble and immobile old lady in her early-80s, we instantly recognised each other. Although eager to help, she tired easily in interviews. She then brought out some memorabilia (photo albums, offprints of early publications), including a marvellous photograph of Davidson in his early 20s walking along a city street in Wellington. Taken in the days when street photographers were plying their trade, the photograph was quintessential Davidson—the tall, gangly, uncoordinated figure accentuated by an ill-fitting suit, and the sunny smile. She also agreed that I could photocopy archival material authored by her brother, which would save hours of transcribing at a later stage. I went away heartened by Ruth's endorsement of my work and kept in touch until her death in 2000.²² I interviewed numerous other people in Canberra. On the archival front I started consulting material from the ANU Archives, notably Davidson's personal file. The major story to emerge from this was the sheer difficulty that Davidson had in persuading the ANU for extended leaves-of-absence to engage as the Samoans' constitutional adviser between 1959 and 1961. This was new and subsequent enquiries revealed that Davidson was largely successful in keeping this facet of his constitutional advising under wraps. Fortunately, Davidson was sufficiently senior for his ANU personal file to have been retained. Those of many junior and middle-ranking academics have been culled.

At the end of my Visiting Fellowship, in late-January 1999, I encountered a rather unexpected difficulty when I presented a seminar on Davidson. Members of the audience included people who were opposed to my work on Davidson and I am under no illusions that I was not considered a fit and proper person for the task, despite Ruth Davidson's support. I am uncertain what went on behind the scenes directly afterwards but about an hour later I was more or less warned off. This reaction was at odds with my notion of cooperative collegiality; and fellow biographers will attest that I routinely pass on relevant material from my own researches. It was an unpleasant experience, and in such contrast to the support I was receiving from complete strangers, who were enthusiastic about my project. I readily recall the unaffected delight of Ian Fairbairn over the telephone, whose PhD thesis was supervised by Davidson.²³ I was later to

learn that bumpy rides are the biographer's frequent lot, something I wish I had known earlier because it might have given a measure of grim comfort.²⁴ Matters have since been smoothed over, but I felt aggrieved for months afterwards.

Back in Fiji, and again remote from archival sources, I continued tracking down and corresponding with Davidson's former associates. Locating informants has certain similarities to locating archival sources: systematic searching is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Luck and serendipity are just as crucial, although good researchers often make their own luck. My single most important stroke of good fortune was mentioning my biography-in-progress in a footnote to an article published in the journal *History in Africa*.²⁵ My footnote caught the eye of a student of Davidson's at Cambridge during the late 1940s, Paul Hair (1926-2001), who went on to become a history professor at the University of Liverpool. He in turn put me on to another of Davidson's Cambridge undergraduate students, George Shepperson, who had likewise gone on to a full professorship. Their written reminiscences, which attested to Davidson's pivotal role in channelling them into academic life, were so compelling that I cobbled them together, with my own commentary, and published the resulting manuscript—again in *History in Africa*.²⁶ As well as having high regard for Davidson's intellect, both Hair and Shepperson had a profound affection for their old teacher. Although Davidson was an indifferent lecturer, he had the ability to inspire and enthuse on a one-to-one basis, and above all to instil the self-confidence in a student to realise his potential. I was aware of these qualities, including the poor lecturing style, but had no idea that they had resulted in the 'making' of two distinguished Africanists.

Even when things go wrong, luck and lady fortune still find time to smile on you. I put a notice in the 1999 issue of *The Eagle* (the magazine of St John's College, Cambridge), asking former students and associates of Davidson to contact me. Disastrously, I gave an incorrect e-mail address. Even then, another former Cambridge student of Davidson, Michael Wolff (Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst) managed to track me down. He too owed a great deal to Davidson, who had helped him through severe personal difficulties. Wolff had even written a poem for Davidson ('I Have Sat at the Feet of Gamaliel'), composed directly after their first meeting, but had lost the copy. From these former students, I obtained much helpful information. But I was nevertheless uncomfortably aware that my overall knowledge of Davidson's years at Cambridge was thin.

During 1999, my last year in Fiji, I made further short visits to Wellington and Canberra. On the former occasion, I obtained material in private hands—from Colin Aikman (1919-2002), who had served as a Constitutional Adviser with Davidson in both Western Samoa and the Cook Islands, and from Mary Boyd, herself a historian of Western Samoa. This information helped in the writing of

a paper on Davidson's covered-up difficulties getting leave from ANU to be involved in Western Samoa's final stages of decolonisation.²⁷ On the visit to Canberra, I learned that I had been awarded Harold White Fellowship at the National Library of Australia, tenable during 2000, to continue working on Davidson. I took up my Fellowship in November and experienced over the next three months the nearest thing to heaven on earth. I had many privileges, and I enjoyed enormous support from Graeme Powell and his staff in the Manuscripts Section. In return I was asked to present a staff seminar at an early stage of my fellowship, a formal lecture towards the end, and to make the most of my opportunities.

I consulted the papers of several of Davidson's former colleagues, and at last I had the time and leisure to thoroughly go through those 63 archival boxes of Davidson Papers. Because they were, organisationally, such a dog's breakfast, I never knew what I would find next, and I found things I never expected to be there. The original copy of Michael Wolff's poem 'I Have Sat at the Feet of Gamaliel' materialised after all these years (and is reproduced at the end of this chapter). George Shepperson had told me that Davidson supported his application for a lectureship at Edinburgh, and Davidson's referee's report also turned up. Such was the clutter that it was generally pointless to go looking for something among the Davidson Papers. During those heady days of discovery, I was tripping over one unexpected find after another, not daring to wonder what serendipitous delights the next archival box might have in store.

The real treasure of the collection is a story in itself. Back in early 1999, I asked Ruth Davidson if she had any correspondence from her brother. Ruth said that Davidson was a dutiful son who wrote long, regular letters from Cambridge to his family in New Zealand, and that these had been deposited in the National Library. I couldn't tell Ruth that she had to be mistaken, for neither the National Library's on-line catalogue nor its finder aid to the Davidson Papers indicated the presence of any such letters. Before taking up my fellowship, I raised the matter with Graeme Powell. Back came the astonishing reply that there were indeed such letters, some 250 between 1938 and 1942. The reason I had not known about these additions to the Davidson Papers was because the original finder's aid had not been updated. Another surprise was in store. I had only asked Graeme whether letters existed between 1938 and 1942 (the years of Davidson's PhD candidature), and he had replied in the affirmative. Upon arrival, I discovered that the letters went up to 1956 on a regular basis, with a few more until the early 1960s. They occupied three archival boxes. Davidson's mother had kept all his letters. Upon her death they had passed into Ruth's keeping and from there, unheralded, to the National Library of Australia. Because I had Ruth's written permission to have copies made of archival material created by Jim, I was able to photocopy the whole lot, free of charge. Unhappily, the other side

of the correspondence is almost entirely lacking because Davidson seldom kept personal letters.

Davidson's long letters home provide a running commentary of his life and cover a wide range of subjects. He assumed that his mother shared and understood his academic interests. This regular supply of information over 18 years, from his departure as a postgraduate student through to first seven years at ANU, has been invaluable, especially for the 1940s. That decade had been something of a blank. Now there was an abundance of the very material I so badly needed. Also, it finally made possible my initial, more limited, objective of an 'intellectual biography'. With these letters as my main source, I have been able to trace the various strands of Davidson's academic outlook to their origins. This was the subject of my Harold White Fellow Lecture in late January 2001, on 'The Prehistory of J.W. Davidson', where I argued that the real Jim Davidson and the elements that made up his thinking were intact before his arrival at ANU.²⁸

Davidson's letters contain no major surprises; they reveal nothing that would fundamentally alter my view of a person whom I got to know reasonably well in the last years of his life. Rather, the letters provide detailed basic information. At several points they confirm exactly what I remember Davidson telling me—for example, his distress that his father died before the two had patched up their differences and his intense disappointment at the failure of his first attempt at election to a Fellowship at St John's College. Other things that Davidson told me in the early 1970s have also been confirmed from the written record, notably his negative views on the office of Director for ANU's Research Schools and the reasons for Oskar Spate joining the (then) Department of Pacific History after relinquishing the role of Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies.²⁹ That confirms that Davidson's honesty and memory are not matters over which to exercise undue skepticism. He was not above representing an event in a false light (the letter to his mother about the termination of his residency at 'Gungahlin' in 1951 being a case in point³⁰) but he avoided telling deliberate and outright untruths and his account of events is remarkably precise both in expression and in accuracy.

One aspect of Davidson's life that is absent from the letters home concerns his broader artistic interests (music, painting, literature, theatre). These were mentioned but summarily. The actual mainsprings of Davidson's artistic tastes go unrevealed in his letters to his mother. I was not much interested in such higher matters when I knew Davidson, so they were seldom topics for discussion—although he once berated my willful ignorance of contemporary fiction. My indifference was unfortunate for the future biographer because Davidson's broader artistic interests and aesthetic senses were integral to his personality, and I much regretted that my eventual biography was likely to be

lacking a whole dimension. The salvation was one of those events that every biographer can only dream come true.

In 2004 I was trying to locate members of the Natusch family, a name that crops up in Davidson's correspondence, who might be able to help me to find out more about Davidson's earlier life. It was suggested that I contact Sheila Natusch in Wellington, who referred me to Guy Natusch in Napier. It turned out that he had gone to Hereworth School in Havelock North (Hawkes Bay) with Davidson in the 1920s and had fond memories of the slightly older boy. Guy mentioned my name to Caroline Greenwood of Kahuranaki Station, some half hour's drive from Havelock North, and shortly afterwards I received a voice mail message from Caroline. She had located 41 letters from Jim Davidson to her uncle Miles Greenwood as well as his diary of a bicycle tour of Ireland with Davidson in 1939. That not only cleared up the identity of the mysterious 'Miles' who regularly crops up in Davidson's letters home. It also transpired that Miles, and his English wife Cecilia ('Pipps' to family and close friends), shared Davidson's artistic interests and these were a recurring subject in his letters to them. During the late-1930s to mid-1940s, Miles Greenwood was a drama student at the Old Vic in London. Realizing that he was never going to get lead parts on English stages, Miles returned to farming in Hawkes Bay and painting water colours in his spare time. Caroline told me that the only way he could face weeding a row of lettuces was to imagine that they were heads in a theatre audience. The letters themselves were survivors of several boxes of papers that Miles destroyed shortly before his death in the early 1990s. I easily persuaded Caroline to deposit the letters in the National Library of Australia. Sadly, Pipps, who was very fond of Davidson and who could have told me much about him, passed away only in 2002.³¹

Soon after reading the letters to Greenwood, I consulted Davidson's letters to the composer Douglas Lilburn (1915-2001). They were students together at Waitaki Boys' High School and their studies in England overlapped. Again, Davidson reveals much about his broader artistic interests; and he unexpectedly dropped a concrete clue about his sexuality. The general feeling at ANU was that Davidson, who never married, was a closet homosexual in inclination if not in practice; but I had been unable to establish—and not through lack of trying—whether or not this was the case. The topic frequently arose during interviews and conversations, but I had no concrete evidence. Davidson loved youth and he was definitely homoerotic. I also suspect that he was bisexual. But I got fed up with people insisting, with no evidence, that he 'had to be gay'. In Davidson's time, homosexuality was a criminal offence and one that incurred tremendous social disapproval. So it is highly unlikely, if Davidson indeed had homosexual tendencies, that he would have advertised them or left a paper trail.³² Yet the matter is important to establish, if possible, because it could have been an influence on his creativity.

There is a clue in a letter to Lilburn, who himself was gay. Lilburn's and Davidson's fathers died in successive years (1940 and 1941, respectively). Four months after George Davidson's death, Jim Davidson wrote to Lilburn: 'You will know how I felt on getting the news of Dad's death. You have know[n] more than I have of such sorrows. It was bad—I got over things by going to bed with you: it reduced the tension. Thank you for your sympathy'.³³ When I read this letter, I had a strange feeling of anti-climax that I cannot explain. I should have been shouting 'Eureka!', but was seized by no such impulse. What did amaze me was the letter being sent in the same envelope along with another letter to Davidson's sister Ruth. The letter for Lilburn was duly forwarded and in a fresh envelope and addressed in Mrs Davidson's handwriting to 'Mr. D. Lilburn'. It seems an extraordinarily careless slip on Davidson's part to send a letter of that nature which might be read by third parties, no less his mother and sister. Did Mabel Davidson read the letter before passing it on? If so, did she choose to ignore it? Or did she miss the incriminating part? That is a possibility: the part just quoted begins on the bottom of the last page of the letter and continues around the margins of the first page. There is no way of knowing what Mabel Davidson might or might not have read. But that letter does provide something concrete on Davidson's sexuality, although how much to read into a single statement is problematic. What makes this letter even more problematic is that events could not have unfolded the way they are recounted—because Lilburn was already back in New Zealand at the time of George Davidson's death in February 1941 and Davidson was still in England.³⁴ I simply do not know what to make of such a mistake on Davidson's part, because it is so out of character.

A biography of a recently deceased individual does not rely on archival evidence alone. There is also the question of how to obtain and use interviews from living witnesses, and in this particular case how far I should rely on my own memory of events.³⁵ Discussion of these matters will have to await another occasion, but I will say now that people who disliked Davidson are generally reluctant to talk. In the meanwhile, I trust that I have conveyed a sense of what it can be like for a biographer to conduct archival research. In some respects, it is a very different type of research to 'straight' history—especially in the need to develop a different mind set, one that is not easy to define but palpable none the less. But there are eternal, one of them being following up every clue. I am horrified at the prospect of incomplete research resulting in 'some unforgivably elementary error to be picked up and waved around by the reviewer in triumph'.³⁶ At the same time, I am not prepared to accept responsibility for mistakes or omissions resulting from being denied access to archival material. There have been some dispiriting moments to be sure, but the highs far outweigh the lows. All the same, a biographer's archival adventures can be bizarre. In order to find out how Daniel Defoe got out of gaol, Paula Backscheider consulted the hitherto unexamined records of the King's Bench Courts, which were rolled

tightly and in a filthy condition; she emerged from the archives each day looking like a coalminer.³⁷ I have had no experiences of that nature, and neither have I completed my biography of Jim Davidson. In my various papers on Davidson, I have fulfilled the original objective of an intellectual biography;³⁸ and it is fortunate that I started when I did because in excess of 20 of the people with whom I corresponded or interviewed have since died.³⁹ So bear with me and one day my biography of the late, great Jim Davidson will appear.

[Untitled]

I have sat at the feet of Gamaliel,
I have learned in one brief hour
What one soul means to another,
What water means to the flower.

I have marked, with a panting of wonder,
How purely a man can see
Through form and shape and deception
What a friend is meant to be.

And then, lost in the depths of my thinking
And crossed without power of thought,
I have felt in my heart that now never
My fight shall alone be fought.

I have seen with unwanted perception
The morrow is weak and small;
That now and what now is passing
Is ever and always all.

With gratitude,
Michael Wolff
(republished with the author's permission)

ENDNOTES

¹ This is a modified version of a paper originally published in the October 2004 issue of *Archifacts* (Journal of the Archives and Records Association of New Zealand). I am grateful to Dr Kevin Molloy, the editor of *Archifacts*, for permission to republish. The revisions benefited from comments by Graeme Whimp.

Carl Rollyson, *A Higher Form of Cannibalism? Adventures in the Art and Politics of Biography* (Chicago 2005), 27-28, 72.

² Ian Hamilton, *Keepers of the Flame: literary estates and the rise of biography* (London 1992); Michael Millgate, *Testamentary Acts: Browning, Tennyson, James, Hardy* (Oxford 1992).

³ J.W. Davidson, 'Understanding Pacific history: the participant as historian', in Peter Munz (ed.), *The Feel of Truth* (Wellington 1969), 25-40; Niel Gunson, 'An introduction to Pacific history', in Brij V. Lal (ed.), *Pacific Islands History: journeys and transformations* (Canberra 1992), 4-6.

⁴ J.W. Davidson, *Samoa mo Samoa: the emergence of the independent state of Western Samoa* (Melbourne 1967).

⁵ O.H.K. Spate, 'And now there will be a void: an appreciation of J.W. Davidson, 1915-1973', *Journal of Pacific Studies*, 20 (1996), 21-22.

- ⁶ See Peter Hempenstall, *The Meddlesome Priest: a life of Ernest Burgmann* (Sydney 1993), xii.
- ⁷ Antonia Fraser, 'Optical research', in Mark Bostridge (ed.), *Lives for Sale: biographers' tales* (London 2004), 113.
- ⁸ Honore Forster, 'Bibliography—James Wightman Davidson', *Journal of Pacific History*, 28:2 (1993), 278-81 is reasonably comprehensive.
- ⁹ August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915-1980* (Urbana/Chicago 1986); Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: the 'objectivity' question and the American historical profession* (Chicago/London 1988).
- ¹⁰ Doug Munro, 'Who "owns" Pacific history? Reflections on the insider/outside dichotomy', *Journal of Pacific History*, 29:2 (1994), 232-37; 'Pacific Islands history in the vernacular: practical and ethical considerations', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 29:1 (1995), 83-96. Both articles were submitted for publication in 1993.
- ¹¹ Sir Isaiah Berlin's biographer eloquently rebuked All Souls College, Oxford, for denying him access to their records relating to his subject: 'It is regrettable that a community of scholars who depend for their work on accepted conventions of access to archival material should deny a biographer access to papers on a fellow who was a credit to their institution for over 60 years'. Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: a life* (London 2000), 304.
- ¹² Without the latter material I would have been severely hampered in writing 'Disentangling Samoan history: the contributions of Gilson and Davidson', in Doug Munro and Brij V. Lal (eds), *Texts and Contexts: reflections in Pacific Islands historiography* (Honolulu 2006), 225-37.
- ¹³ S.G. Foster and Margaret M. Varghese, *The Making of the Australian National University, 1946-1996* (Sydney 1996). The reviewer is Eric Richards (Professor of History at Flinders University), *The Australian*, 2 Oct. 1996, 31.
- ¹⁴ Bryan D. Palmer, *E.P. Thompson: objections and oppositions* (London/New York, 1994).
- ¹⁵ Susan Woodburn, *Journeys through Pacific History: a guide to the Pacific Islands library and papers of H.E. and H.C. Maude* (Adelaide 1995).
- ¹⁶ Susan Woodburn, *Where Our Hearts Still Lie: a life of Harry and Honor Maude in the Pacific Islands* (Adelaide 2003). See my review in the *Journal of Pacific History*, 40:1 (2005), 124-5.
- ¹⁷ Fitzpatrick's biographer does not bring out that Davidson was Fitzpatrick's strongest supporter in his quest for an academic position. Don Watson, *Brian Fitzpatrick: a radical life* (Sydney 1979), 273. This has been rectified by Stuart Macintyre, 'The radical and the mystic: Brian Fitzpatrick, Manning Clark and Australian history', in Stuart Macintyre and Sheila Fitzpatrick (eds), *Against the Grain: Brian Fitzpatrick and Manning Clark in Australian history and politics* (Melbourne 2007), 12-36. Fitzpatrick's children went on to become distinguished professors of history—Sheila at the University of Chicago and David at Trinity College, Dublin.
- ¹⁸ R. Gerard Ward, 'Davidson's contribution to the "Admiralty Handbooks"', *Journal of Pacific History*, 29: 2 (1996), 238-40; Hugh Clout and Cyril Gosme, 'The naval intelligence handbooks: a monument to geographical writing', *Progress in Human Geography*, 27:2 (2003), 153-73.
- ¹⁹ D.A. Low (ed.), *Keith Hancock: the legacies of an historian* (Melbourne 2001).
- ²⁰ E.g., Carole Fink, *Marc Bloch: a life in history* (Cambridge 1989); David Cannadine, *G.M. Trevelyan: a life in history* (London 1992); Fay Anderson, *An Historian's Life: Max Crawford and the politics of academic freedom* (Melbourne 2005); David S. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter: an intellectual biography* (Chicago 2006); Tim Beaglehole, *A Life of J.C. Beaglehole: New Zealand scholar* (Wellington 2006).
- ²¹ Roman Grynberg, Doug Munro and Michael White, *Crisis: the collapse of the National Bank of Fiji* (Adelaide 2002).
- ²² But there was an unhappy sequel. In July 2000, I received an email from the caregiver who tended Ruth during her last months when, unbeknown to me, she had been moved to a nursing home. Ruth had passed away in early March and the caregiver, who found my letters and Christmas card to Ruth, had been trying to locate me ever since. I enquired about the memorabilia, and especially the photograph. It transpired that Ruth was unable to take many of her belongings to the smaller quarters of the nursing home and the memorabilia had been 'disposed of'. See the obituary in *Reflections* [Quarterly Journal of the NSW Branch of the National Trust], October-January (2001), 37.
- ²³ Published as *The National Income of Western Samoa* (Melbourne 1973).
- ²⁴ My experiences pale by comparison with the treatment dished out by Sonia Orwell to her late husband's prospective biographers. Gordon Bowker, 'Nuts about St Cyps: lessons and quarrels in the lives of George Orwell', *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 Sept. 2006, 13-15.

²⁵ Doug Munro, 'The Vaitupu Company revisited: reflections and second thoughts on methodology and mindset', *History in Africa*, 24 (1997), 235 note 10.

²⁶ George Shepperson, P.E.H. Hair and Doug Munro, 'J.W. Davidson at Cambridge University: some student evaluations', *History in Africa* (2000), 215-27. Davidson's work at Cambridge, especially his key role in mounting the famous Expansion of Europe course, is recounted in Ronald Hyam, 'The study of Imperial and Commonwealth History at Cambridge, 1881-1981: founding fathers and pioneer research students', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 29:3 (2001), 81-84, 98-99.

²⁷ Doug Munro, 'J.W. Davidson and Western Samoa: university politics and the travails of a constitutional adviser', *Journal of Pacific History*, 35: 2 (2000), 195-211.

²⁸ The revised version of the lecture is intended as the opening chapter to a book of biographical essays on Pacific historians which I am working on.

²⁹ O.H.K. Spate, 'The history of a history: reflections on the ending of a Pacific voyage', *Journal of Pacific History*, 13: 1 (1988), 5-6.

³⁰ Davidson to his mother, 14 Sept. 1951, Davidson Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 5105, Box 66; Foster and Varghese, *The Making of the Australian National University*, 149-50.

³¹ It also turned out that my father, a professional singer, has fond memories of the vibrant Pippis. As Secretary of the British Music Society (Hastings Branch), she was able to give my father much-needed recital work in the 1950s. She was also the regional representative for the New Zealand Opera Company, which my father founded, and facilitated the Company's touring throughout the Hawkes Bay area. Doug Munro, 'The early years of the New Zealand Opera Company, 1954-1957', *History Now*, 11:1-2 (2005), 19-23.

³² The evidential difficulties are illustrated in other ways by Davidson's friend, Eric McCormick (the biographer of Omai, among other books), who hid his sexual preferences in the face of societal prejudice and legal repression and 'came out' in a more tolerant climate. McCormick's later insistence that his homosexuality must no longer be concealed created problems for the editor of his autobiography. First, McCormick's scattered autobiographical writings, which were written in the age of intolerance, contain few explicit references to his sexuality. Second, while McCormick was eventually frank about his own sexuality, 'he felt he had no licence to be so about his partners, many of whom later married and had children'. E.H. McCormick, *An Absurd Ambition: autobiographical writings*, ed. Dennis McEldowney (Auckland 1996), x-xi.

³³ Davidson to Lilburn, 5 Jun. 1941, Papers of Douglas Lilburn, Wellington, Alexander Turnbull Library, MS-Papers-2483-052.

³⁴ The matter is also discussed in Philip Norman, *Douglas Lilburn: his life and work* (Christchurch 2006), 80, 429 note 34.

³⁵ An illuminating account of a biographer's excursions into oral history is Andrew Roberts, 'La-Di-Da', in Bostridge, *Lives for Sale*, 124-33.

³⁶ Michael King, *Tread Softly For You Tread On My Life* (Auckland 2001), 43. An exemplary example of the primacy of research over 'style' is Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: a life* (London 1980). Crick once said, 'Damn the ring of truth, give me the footnotes'.

³⁷ Paula Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography* (Oxford 1999), xvi-xvii.

³⁸ My publications on Davidson, in addition to those already itemised are: 'Davidson, James Wightman, 1915-1973', in *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, vol. 5 (Auckland and Wellington 2000), 135-6; 'J.W. Davidson: the making of a participant historian', in Brij V. Lal and Peter Hemenway (eds), *Pacific Lives, Pacific Places: bursting boundaries in Pacific history* (Canberra 2001), 98-116; 'Becoming an expatriate: J.W. Davidson and the brain drain', *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, 2-3 (2003-2004), 19-43; 'J.W. Davidson's Contribution to New Zealand Historiography', Treaty of Waitangi Research Unit Occasional Paper, no. 9 (Wellington 2005), 49; 'J.W. Davidson and W.K. Hancock: patronage, preferment, privilege', under consideration for publication.

³⁹ This bears comparison with the biography of the New Zealand Prime Minister, Peter Fraser, who sent Davidson on his first tour of duty in Western Samoa in 1947. See Michael Bassett with Michael King, *Tomorrow Comes the Song: a life of Peter Fraser* (Auckland 2000), 11-12. Sir Alister McIntosh (the long-serving permanent head of the Prime Minister's Department, who suggested to Fraser in 1947 that Davidson go to Western Samoa) intended to write Fraser's biography as a retirement project, but by then his health was not up to the task. He enlisted Michael King's collaboration in the late 1970s but a few years later King suffered a lengthy illness and the project went into abeyance. In 1996, Michael Bassett was asked to take over and the biography was duly published in 2000. The book took a while to complete but the early start did mean that King was able to interview at length not only McIntosh

(one of the few people in whom Fraser confided), but Fraser's surviving contemporaries and members of the family. Most of these interviews would not have been possible by the time Bassett entered the picture. Moreover, the almost complete absence of personal papers meant that these interviews were crucial to the eventual biography. In like fashion, starting work on Davidson when I did has resulted in oral testimony and written reminiscences that are no longer available.