

2019

THE JAMES BACKHOUSE LECTURE

Animating freedom:
Accompanying Indigenous
struggles for self-determination

JASON MACLEOD



THE JAMES BACKHOUSE LECTURES

This is one of a series of annual lectures which began in 1964 when Australia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends was first established.

The lecture is named after James Backhouse, who travelled with his companion George Washington Walker throughout the Australian colonies from 1832 to 1838.

Backhouse and Walker were English Quakers who came to Australia with a particular concern for social justice. Having connections to social reform movements in the early colonies as well as in Britain, Backhouse and Walker planned to record their observations and make recommendations for positive change where needed.

Detailed observations were made of all the prisons and institutions visited by Backhouse and Walker. Their reports, submitted to local as well as British authorities, made recommendations for legislative reform. Many of the changes they initiated resulted in improvements to the health and wellbeing of convicts, Aboriginal people and the general population.

A naturalist and a botanist, James Backhouse is remembered also for his detailed accounts of native vegetation which were later published.

James Backhouse was welcomed by isolated communities and Friends throughout the colonies. He shared with all his concern for social justice and encouraged others in their faith. A number of Quaker meetings began as a result of his visit.

Australian Friends hope that these lectures, which reflect the experiences and ongoing concerns of Friends, may offer fresh insight and be a source of inspiration.

This particular lecture was delivered at The Friends' School, Hobart Tasmania, on 8th July 2019.

Jo Jordan
Presiding Clerk
July 2019



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119 Devonshire Street, Surry Hills NSW 2010
secretary@quakersaustralia.info
quakersaustralia.org.au

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About the author

Jason MacLeod has been accompanying the struggle for liberation in West Papua since 1991. An educator, organiser and researcher, Jason works with local communities, campaigns and environmental and social justice movements in Australia, Asia and Oceania. He is a Quaker and descendant of crofters from the Isle of Lewis, Scotland. He lives on Jagera and Turrbal Country and is a member of the Meanjin (Brisbane) Meeting.

Acknowledgements

I owe a collective debt to the entire Society of Friends in Australia for their faithful support over many years. Accepting the invitation to present this lecture has given me precious space to articulate my framework, something I have wanted to do for years. I also wish to thank a number of people individually. Thank you to Dawn Joyce, Sue Parritt, David Tehr, Mark McLeod, Kerry O'Regan and David Purnell from the Backhouse Lecture Committee for the invitation and to David Purnell for patiently guiding me through the process. Yearly Meeting Secretary Jacque Schultze worked tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure everything went smoothly. I also want to acknowledge David Johnson, Dale Hess, Sienke Martin, Mark Deasey, Sally O'Wheel, Susannah and Ray Brindle, Gerard Guiton, Sue Ennis and all Friends at the old Northern Suburbs and Toorak Meetings as well as Friends in Tasmania for their early support of my Leading. Without this support, and the tender way it was given at the beginning, it is possible the work would never have taken root.

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their 2018 book, *Participatory Development Practice: Using Traditional and Contemporary Frameworks*, published by Practical Action.

Of course, the ideas within this book are not mine alone. They were conceived over decades of practice, reflection, reading, dreaming, walking, and sitting idly, and during numerous conversations with people inside West Papua—many with my comrade Biwangko but also with others who are part of Pasifika’s wider network. Thank you to all of you. You have sown seeds of fire in my soul. In this regard, I would also like to mention John Rumbiak and Benny Giay. These two elders have been influential in shaping my thinking and helping nurture my own faith and praxis—both nourished by West Papua but taking root in its own soil.

At the end of the day, none of this work would have been possible without the love and support of my immediate family, especially my partner, Manon, and our two boys, Leuca and Emil, and my co-housing buddies: Kerrie, Paulo, Freya and Karlos. As my friends from the Bismark Ramu Group in Papua New Guinea say, may I ‘*do* thank you’.

Any errors or shortcomings in the text are my responsibility.

Preface

I first visited West Papua in 1991.¹ That trip changed my life. When I returned to Australia, however, I realised most people had never heard of this nation-in-waiting, even though it was only a swim and a walk away from our most northern border. I suspect this ignorance extends to a large portion of Friends. That is by design. Our imagination has been stopped, denied entry, at the border between Papua New Guinea and West Papua. Ensuring West Papua remains a secret story has been an intentional act by successive foreign governments—including the Australian Government—and their accomplices in the media. This intentional act functions to keep the island divided into two, just as it appears in colonial maps. The result is that the western half of Papua is rendered invisible. I remain shocked by the Australian people's collective ignorance.

¹ I use the placenames 'Papua' and 'West Papua' interchangeably to refer to the entire western half of the island of New Guinea, currently occupied by the government of Indonesia. I refer to the Indigenous people of West Papua as 'West Papuans' or 'Papuans', and people of Indonesian heritage as 'migrants'. At the same time, I acknowledge this distinction is not always clear and that many Indonesians are fearlessly standing up in solidarity with West Papuans. At the time of writing, the most impressive of these groups is the *Front Rakyat Indonesia untuk West Papua*, known by its acronym FRI West Papua.



Figure 1: Map of West Papua and neighbouring countries

Back then, the place that was on everyone’s lips, especially after the Dili massacre in 1991, was East Timor.² I threw myself into that struggle. Many people campaigned against the Australian oil companies Petroz and Woodside, who were cosyng up to the Indonesian dictator Suharto to exploit oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea. We organised sanctuary for Timorese threatened with deportation. We planned nonviolent actions to disrupt the arming and training of the Indonesian military.

When the Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence in 1999, I decided to renew my original commitment to accompanying West Papuans. After a period of deep reflection, I felt led to make a commitment to accompany the struggle in West Papua for thirty years. But I wanted to do it differently from how I had accompanied East Timorese. My politics needed spiritual roots. I felt called by the Spirit to take the land and people more deeply into my heart. I yearned for my solidarity to be more an expression of love that grows from relationships with people and place than merely a conduit for my politics.

Although my intention was always to support powerful nonviolent campaigns designed to disrupt and ultimately end Australian Government and corporate support for the Indonesian Government’s occupation of West

² Now Timor-Leste.

Papua, I was mindful that effective solidarity would only be possible if there were a widespread commitment to, and understanding of, nonviolent strategy inside West Papua and if the nonviolent struggle were being led by Papuans themselves. Australian Quakers saw something in this and agreed to fund my exploration, first as a Donald Groom Peace Fellow and then later with other material and personal contributions. It is something for which I am eternally grateful. Curiosity and relationships slowly grew into a collaboration that is now in its twenty-eighth year. That experience is the subject of this reflection.

I feel deeply honoured to be asked to present the 2019 Backhouse Lecture. Quakers are my faith community. It is a tradition that has given me so much. As I prepared this lecture, and the text that accompanies it, I was very mindful that I am among people with profound wisdom and knowledge. I hope I can do justice to your trust in me.

In dialogue with the Backhouse Lecture Committee, we agreed that I would deliberate on my experience of nonviolent solidarity with Indigenous people. Although I have also been immersed in solidarity with Bougainvilleans, East Timorese, Kanaks and First Nation Australians, my deepest and longest engagement has been with West Papuans. In accepting the risk to write—for writing personally about a subject charged with the tears of history is always fraught with pitfalls—I realised I am predominantly speaking to people like me, Quakers who have come from migrant backgrounds. It is my positionality as a fellow Friend, a fifth-generation migrant with mostly Scottish and English heritage and a slightly Queerish white man from a rural working-class background that has shaped these words. I am no expert. West Papuans and Indigenous peoples are the authors of, and experts on, their own lives. Nor do I feel that I have anything particularly new or insightful to say about the practice of nonviolent action or solidarity with Indigenous people.

So, what am I doing?

What follows is my attempt to think, write and speak my way into making sense of accompanying West Papuans in their struggle for self-determination. This lecture is not really about West Papua, much less about West Papuans. It is more a personal reflection on my contribution to animating freedom in the context of historical and continuing colonisation. What I say here is limited: both because it is incomplete and because it reflects just one person's personal practice. By no means should it be considered 'best', or even 'good', practice for what some refer to as 'decolonising solidarity' (Land 2015).³ Except for a few things, the parts about nonviolence and the presence of a great mystery

³ See also Pittock 1969, James and Wychel 1991, Brindle 2000, Walker 2006 and Carline 2017 – all Quakers who have also written about colonialism, solidarity and liberation by and with First Nation peoples.

that pervades all things, I am not even sure I can stand on any part of the lecture that follows with the surety and confidence that what I say is true for all times, people and places. It is simply a sketch of my own sense of the terrain at this moment and the journey that has taken me there, leavened with partial glimpses of a greater wholeness seen through the clouds.

Of course, as we Quakers say, I hope that some of my words may also speak to your condition. Mostly, I wish to invite you, the listener and especially Indigenous F/friends, to critique my practice. Collectively, Friends, we need to get better about decolonising our Society and remaking the world.

Although I like to ride my pushbike, fly my paraglider and paddle a boat, at my core I am a pedestrian: a bushwalker, trumper, vagabond rambler. Keeping with that metaphor, this lecture charts how I have sought to navigate the terrain. It contains tales of how I am creating a map, fashioning a compass to guide me, adding my small efforts to our collective labour of undoing colonialism. It is a collection of interconnected vignettes: stories and ideas from a path littered with thorns. I accepted the invitation to present the Backhouse Lecture partly because it offered me a chance to pause. It is a rest stop on an arduous walk, taken sometimes alone, often in the company of others, through dangerous territory: a long walk with an indeterminate destination. You, the audience, are receiving an early and incomplete version of something I am still working out.

Community workers call these kinds of maps ‘practice frameworks’. They are ways to organise our thinking in order to direct action (Kelly and Westoby 2018). The framework (Figure 2) I am presenting to you is a collection of the five elements: earth, air, fire, water and spirit, arranged in the shape of the Celtic cross and drawn from the Celtic tradition—wisdom that is found in many other traditions, including the Native American medicine wheel. The elements invite reflection and provide guidance on being grounded and going deeper (earth); vision—seeing far, wide and deeply (air); acting together (fire); holding relationships (water); and sensing mystery at the heart of it all (spirit). Each one is represented by a circle, a significant symbol to both Quakers and First Nation peoples. This lecture is structured around these five elements, book-ended by an Introduction that sets the scene and a conclusion that connects the framework to the state of the Society of Friends in Australia, as I see it. Each element has its own section and every section is preceded by an interlude: a short personal story that provides a starting point for reflection.



Figure 2: My framework: Animating freedom

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