

AND NOW THERE WILL BE A VOID
a tribute to J. W. Davidson

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Jim Davidson had one of the liveliest minds and most distinctive personalities in the University which he served from its Canberra beginnings in 1951. Throughout the succeeding twenty-two years he was one of my closest friends, a good comrade in many a struggle, a man who, while taking things seriously, refused to be solemn about it. And he was such a bonny fighter.

To those who knew and loved him, his most distinctive characteristics were his passionate regard for good scholarship, his deep loyalty to his friends, and his generous love for the Island peoples to whom he gave so much of his energy. His constructive work both in academic history and in the affairs of the Islands, and his creation of a Department notable for its vision and elan, gave him an outstanding position among Pacific historians. These things far outweighed that brashness which made him doubtless often a sore trial to the unco' guid and the unduly staid. His wore his failings on his sleeve and was seldom averse to trailing his coat; but in matters of delicacy, academic or human, his counsel was discreet, wise, and humane.

Jim Davidson played a very direct, and historically significant, role in the evolution of a modern polity in Western Samoa, the Cook Islands, Nauru, and American Micronesia; but always with a deep respect for the traditional bases of Island life. It is tragic that his work in Papua New Guinea should have been cut short by his death; but it was at least fitting that he should die in action amongst a people whom he loved. He had indeed a wide capacity for friendship and for leadership, and his loss will be as widely, and

deeply, felt both within and without the Pacific, as a man and as one who not only wrote Pacific history but also—in accord with his philosophy of history—was one of its makers.

The loss to the Research School of Pacific Studies is grievous, and to me personally it is bitter. Beneath his gaiety and his often caustic wit, his delight in combat for a cause, Jim had a true delicacy and sympathy of heart, and others besides myself have had reason to know that he would spare no effort to bring aid and solace to those fallen into days of darkness and misfortune. He and I shared the same beliefs, and for twenty-two years we stood side by side in most things; and now there will be a void.

Professor Spate wrote this tribute shortly after Davidson's death in April 1973. It is published here, for the first time, with his permission.



This is one of the few known photographs of Jim Davidson (left). The photo was taken in Western Samoa, some time in the early 1950s. Davidson's companion is Dick Gilson, whose history of nineteenth century Samoa, published posthumously, was completed and edited by Davidson.

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