



Unknown photographer
Sir Raphael West Cilento, 1923
b&w photograph
John Oxley Library
image no. 186000
Courtesy State Library of Queensland

Raphael Cilento

A LIFE IN CONTEXT

Alex Cameron-Smith, a Seymour Summer Scholar, examines the personal papers of some of the contemporaries of Sir Raphael Cilento, noted pioneer in Australian tropical medicine and public health

Biography was once a target of general scorn within the discipline of history. As some thought, historians were meant to investigate broad social, political and economic forces, not the lives of individuals. Recently, however, biography has enjoyed something of a renaissance within the discipline. For a historian writing a biography, the context of the world in which the subject lived and worked is crucial to understanding how that person's beliefs and actions were shaped by it.

The subject of my studies is Sir Raphael Cilento (1893–1985), an Australian public health official whose career in the 1920s took him from South Australia to North

Queensland, New Guinea and the wider Pacific, where he became a passionate believer in colonialism and the need for a paternalistic relationship with indigenous people. After the onset of the Depression, Cilento resigned from the Commonwealth Department of Health due to disappointment with the lack of opportunities and a strained relationship with his superior J.H.L. Cumpston, the Director-General of the Department. It was then, in 1934, that he took on the role of Director-General of Health and Medical Services in Queensland. After 11 years of being at the centre of health reform in Queensland and Australia in this post, Cilento left Australia to take up a position with the United Nations, working on issues of social welfare and for refugee relief in Germany and the Middle East.

Along with his nationalism, which saw him constantly working towards greater nationalisation of health services, Cilento always retained a passion for travel and

The Summer Scholars for 2008

This issue of *National Library of Australia News* features articles by this year's Norman McCann Summer Scholars, Sophie Loy-Wilson, E. Rebecca Sanders and Andrew Thackrah, and inaugural Seymour Summer Scholar Alex Cameron-Smith, each of whom spent six weeks at the Library during January and February.

Both scholarships enable outstanding young Australian scholars, under the age of 30, to undertake research in Australian history and literature, based on the Library's collections. In the case of the Seymour Summer Scholarship, preference is given to biographical research. This scholarship has been established following a donation from John and Heather Seymour. The Norman McCann Summer Scholarships commemorate a former National Library council member and are supported by his family.



Loui Seselja (b.1948)
(from left) Alex Cameron-Smith,
Sophie Loy-Wilson,
E. Rebecca Sanders and
Andrew Thackrah



above:
 Evan R. Stanley (d.1925)
 Market, New Guinea, c.1920
 b&w lantern slide; 8.3 x 8.3 cm
 Pictures Collection
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below:
 Detail of Papua New Guinea–
 Queensland region from post-
 World War I world map
 reproduced from *The Daily
 Telegraph Victory Atlas of the
 World* edited by Alexander Gross
 (London: Geographia Ltd,
 c.1920)

work in the tropics and around the world, a passion that saw him become part of global cooperation in health and social welfare. Underlying all of his work was the belief dominant at the time in the superiority of the white man and the importance of

national racial purity from a medical and social point of view.

Although the National Library of Australia does not hold Cilento's papers, it does have manuscript collections of national and colonial figures, which offer the opportunity to study the intellectual and political context of Cilento's work and writings. One of these figures is Edmund L. Piesse whose papers have helped to place Cilento in a paternalist tradition of thought about colonialism. In 1921, Piesse was appointed by Prime Minister William Morris Hughes to head a new Pacific Branch within the Prime Minister's Department. Initially regarded as an intelligence officer, Piesse took a keen interest in colonial policy in the Australian territories in the Pacific, gathering around himself books, articles and lectures by anthropologists, missionaries and others who were at the time very vocal in advocating colonial reform and the notion of a civilising mission. Piesse and these other writers felt that Australia had a duty to prevent cruelty to indigenous people as well as to bring them up out of what they saw as barbarity.

For these colonial reformists, the formation of the League of Nations was momentous, in particular its articulation of



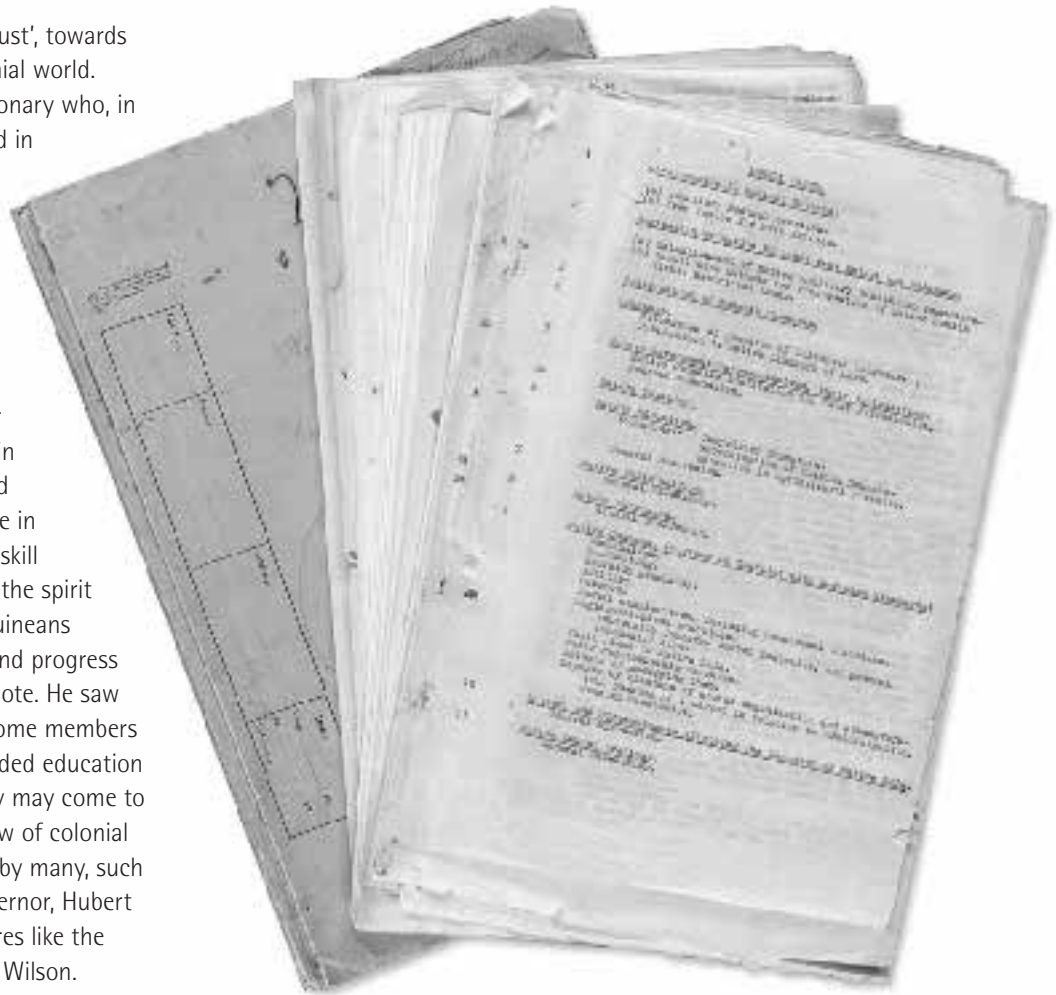
a sense of duty, or a 'sacred trust', towards indigenous people in the colonial world. John Wear Burton was a missionary who, in a 1921 Melbourne lecture (held in Piesse's papers), pleaded for a more enlightened colonialism, one that would put the interests of New Guineans before commercial exploitation. He asserted that '[we] have no right to expect profit from our enterprise' and lamented that in the past indigenous people had been 'cruelly exploited by those in whom education and superior skill should have bred chivalry and the spirit of service'. For Burton, New Guineans were children whose welfare and progress it was Australia's duty to promote. He saw the world as a family, where some members were 'merely infants', who needed education and training 'in order that they may come to full stature'. It was a broad view of colonial responsibility that was shared by many, such as the Papuan Lieutenant-Governor, Hubert Murray, and international figures like the American President, Woodrow Wilson.

This sense of responsibility pervaded Cilento's work in New Guinea, a mandated territory under the League of Nations Covenant. It was a status that made Australia a trustee, rather than sovereign, and obliged Australia to submit annual reports to the League's Permanent Mandates Commission, ban alcohol, opium and forced labour and in general pursue labour, health and education policies that were considered necessary to 'promote to the utmost the material and moral well-being, and the social progress, of the inhabitants of the Territory'.

Cilento took this paternal duty seriously. In 1925, he remonstrated with the New Guinea Administration, writing in a memo kept in the National Archives:

I now state deliberately that the Administration, with the facts established by me before it, is faced with the question of either improving the diet obligatory for the natives or of being party to the deliberate destruction of the race to whose moral and social welfare it has pledged itself.

The Library's collection has also provided surprises in revealing the voice of Cilento himself. The most exciting was to discover the proceedings of a 1927 conference of



government officials, including Cilento, and the leaders of the various Christian missions in New Guinea, in the papers of Ernest Chinnery, the Government Anthropologist in New Guinea when Cilento was the Director of Public Health. I had known about the conference through the annual report of 1926–1927 but did not know of any other record of it and had not seen it discussed or cited elsewhere. The finding aid for Chinnery's papers listed some record of the conference proceedings, but I did not expect to uncover the full proceedings.

The conference discussed issues relating to indigenous health, labour, language, customs, authority and education. It is a fascinating window into the relationship between the New Guinea Administration and the Christian missions, the role of those missions in providing medicine and health services to indigenous people and, more broadly, views about the relationship between colonisers and the colonised. With the Administration having limited funds and little influence beyond the coastal areas of the Territory, Cilento pushed to have the

Report of Missionary Conference Held at Rabaul from June 20th 1927
Papers of Ernest William Pearson Chinnery (1887–1972)
Manuscripts Collection
MS 766/5/13



above:
Evan R. Stanley (d.1925)
New Guinea, c.1920
b&w lantern slide; 8.3 x 8.3 cm
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below:
Unknown photographer
Sir Raphael Cilento, May 1963
b&w photograph
John Oxley Library, image no.
185987
Courtesy State Library of
Queensland

missions become auxiliary medical units in a more formal way. On one level this would mean the continuation of a policy of the distribution of drugs to mission stations but, on another, it would involve the missions taking up a more official role as gatherers of information on disease outbreaks in the areas government did not reach. In the past, disease outbreaks in the more remote regions had caused a great deal of anxiety, such as in 1921 when there were rumours of smallpox being brought into the Territory across the remote border with Dutch New Guinea. Cilento told the leaders of the missions that:

Every member of a community should be an eye for the Department of Public Health ... We want to have a hundred eyes, and we want an eye in every village. It is useless for a native to be a good Christian after he dies. Cleanliness is next to Godliness.

The proceedings also show Cilento's attitude to indigenous people and the role of the colonisers in remaking them, in turning them away from 'savagery'. When the conference was discussing the matter of indigenous

education, the missionaries turned to Cilento for advice on what age would be ideal for the commencement of education for the young men. Cilento replied that at 13 or 14 years of age the minds of 'native' boys were changing and being impressed by different ideas. It was therefore important to keep the young men in the mission at this age, to keep them away from old influences, because:

They are in a period of transition both mental and physical. Their mind is like a blank slate and on it you can write anything you wish.

This is an eloquent and forceful example of the determination of some in this period to wholly remake the lives and culture of indigenous people according to European ideas of savagery and civilisation.

The collections of the National Library have been valuable both for locating Cilento in the context of interwar colonialism and public health and for finding the voice of the man himself. The Library provided me with the opportunity to study Australian colonial medicine more broadly and the links between nationalism and health reform between the world wars.

ALEX CAMERON-SMITH is at the University of Sydney, in the second year of his PhD thesis on the history of colonial and international medicine through the life of Raphael Cilento. He became interested in the history of medicine after studying history and biology at university

