

## First Contact

**Bob Connolly + Robin Anderson**

Viking Penguin 1987

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A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 1993 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

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In the early thirties the last remaining large populations in the world came into contact with Western civilization. *First Contact* tells the story of the "discovery" of the New Guinea highlands by Australian gold prospectors, and in particular Michael Leahy and his brothers.

The early chapters of *First Contact* provide the background to the story. They include a brief description of the highlands and the highlanders, a very brief history of the European presence in Papua and New Guinea and an account of Leahy's early life. The bulk of the book is about the events of 1933, when Leahy led a series of prospecting expeditions into the highlands and initiated the first contacts between highlanders and Europeans. The account is based on his diaries and later writings and on interviews with people still alive who witnessed the events — highlanders, white Australians, and their carriers from coastal groups — and is illustrated with numerous photos taken at the time. (There is a film based on Leahy's film footage, also called *First Contact*, which is apparently an ethnographic classic.) What is brought out most starkly is the sheer gulf between the two cultures and the massive failures of understanding on both sides.

The later chapters move away from narrative and give a broad overview of the processes of change unleashed by the contact. In particular they describe the forces that would irrevocably alter highland culture: the missionaries undermining the peoples' spiritual beliefs; the district officers enforcing their own conception of law and order and in the process destroying the existing system (which they largely failed to understand at all); and the gold prospectors destroying the economy with plane loads of kina shells and the concept of a cash economy where one accumulates wealth in order to accumulate more rather than in order to give it away. *First Contact* concludes with a brief history of the highlands

(and the Leahys) down to independence in 1975.

While *First Contact* does contain a lot of ethnographic information, it is not primarily an ethnographic study; anthropologists will want more scholarly sources. For the layman, however, it is an easy approach to a very different culture. The authors do a good job of getting the reader to see things from the point of view of the highlanders (although they are understanding of the racism of the Europeans and their consequent abuses of power). The puritan Lutheran missionaries tried to stop the highlanders spending so much time singing and dancing while the Seventh Day Adventists wanted them to eat goat instead of pig!

*First Contact* is an enthralling account of the collision of two very different cultures. It is as readable and almost as gripping as a novel (the almost biographical focus on Michael Leahy helps here) and, as one of the best popular works of anthropology I have read, I feel that it deserves a wide audience. It is particularly recommended to Australians who aren't aware that Australia had its own share in the worldwide colonial enterprise externally as well as internally — and the parallels with contact with the Australian Aborigines are themselves interesting.

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