

## REVIEW, JESSIE'S HOUSE OF NEEDLES BY JOHN ALGATE

'Jessie's House of Needles' is the story of Jessie Williamson AO, an Australian missionary nurse who worked in the highlands of West Papua for thirty-five years, from 1966 to her retirement in 2001. John Algate's narrative is a skilful combination of narrative and excerpts from Jessie's letters to her family and supporters who were a key source of money she needed for regular and emergency supplies in an area where there were few if any government health services. The veteran Brisbane journalist also incorporated other people's recollections of Jessie and their reflections on West Papua during the time she worked there. His careful construct is a captivating and inspiring read.

### **Jessie Williamson AO**

**Born** 1938, the ninth of ten children, raised on a dairy farm in Greenvale, Victoria (Australia)

**Education** Greenvale Primary School, Essendon High School, Victoria

**Clinical Education:** Nursing (including winning the Surgical Prize) at Footscray District Hospital (Surgical Prize) now called the Western Hospital Footscray; Midwifery & Infant Welfare at the Queen Victoria Hospital; Dentistry at the Dental Hospital in Carlton.

**Work** Missionary-nurse in West Papua for thirty-five years (1966-2001) for Regions Beyond Missionary Union (called 'World Team' since 1995).

**Order of Australia** 1992, for international humanitarian work

**Died** 14 May 2014, Acute myeloid leukaemia, Alfred Hospital, Prahran, Victoria

**Jessie Williamson** was an Australian missionary nurse who faced challenge, restriction and adversity during the 35 years, from 1966 to 2001, that she worked in clinics in the cool highlands of West Papua (the Dani village of Karubaga and the Kimyal village of Korupun), and as a flying nurse in the hot swampy lands of the northern lowlands (in Taiyeve).

She administered an extraordinary range of medical services, from primary health care for women and babies, surgery for accident victims, identifying parasites, treating the goitres produced by iodine-leached soil and obstructed labours in teenage girls, as well as toothache and virulent attacks of gastro enteritis, viral meningitis, and cerebral malaria. She also introduced immunisation programs ('house of needles') for measles, mumps, rubella, whooping cough, Hong Kong flu, polio, tuberculosis, pneumonia, that flourished during the traditional 'death' month of August.

Compounding Jessie's mission to heal the bodies and convert the souls of those who became her patients, friends, and colleagues were the earthquakes, landslides and droughts brought on by the tectonic battles between the Australian and Pacific plates deep beneath her work sites.

Jessie was an inspiring medico who made thousands of gallons of soup for patients who'd crossed mountains of mossy rocks and slippery logs to get to her clinic(s); who herself walked miles to those who couldn't; whose belief in 'working yourself out of a job' meant building a network of village clinics and training an army of Dani and Kimyal medics and midwives to cater for basic needs (in the absence of government services), and to continue the work.

In his introduction to Algate's account, Don Richardson (author of *Peace Child* and *Lords of the Earth*) described Jessie as a 'godly and ingeniously heroic example of Christ-like servanthood'. A western-trained medico who believed that 'with God all things are possible'. . Who introduced

Jesus Christ to peoples whose tribal gods had long directed and controlled medical as well as religious matters. Who assisted the literacy-formation classes for Dani and Kimyal youth that helped ameliorate the strains and stress brought on this fundamental shift from tribal to traditional belief and practices. Who in 2010 stood amidst excited locals on the dirt runway in Korupun to greet boxes of Kimyal-language bibles translated and produced by Jessie's employer, Regions Beyond Missionary Union (called 'World Team' since 1995).

Like many missionary accounts, including Don Richardson's, Jessie's communiques avoided the politics of their setting. Her tenure coincided almost exactly with Indonesia's notorious New Order led by General Suharto who rode to power in 1966 on that back of a massacre (he orchestrated) of at least a million Indonesians. While there was no more Cold War tension after the liquidation of the Indonesian Communist Party, the military that had executed the killings remained. To retain her visa, Jessie needed to curtail her letters to medical, social, and christian issues. (In general, Christian churches remained a place of sanctuary in Indonesia until the referendum in East Timor in 1999). She would, however, have been well aware of the air-and-ground military assaults against Papuan highlanders during the 1977 (documented in 2013 as genocide by the Asian Centre for Human Rights) and of Dr David Hyndman's (1987) study articulating how the Indonesian military deliberately introducing pigs infected with Tania sodium as a form of biological warfare in 1971 (*The introduction of biological warfare in West Papua*).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://papuaweb.org/dlib/jr/ii/11-hyndman.pdf>. Also *Cysticercosis and Indonesian Counter-Insurgency in a Continuing Fourth World War*, Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine, December 1987, at <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/how-west-papua-was-won>