

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

'Jessie's House of Needles' is the story of Jessie Williamson AO, a highly trained missionary-nurse from Melbourne who worked in the highlands of West Papua for thirty-five years, from 1966 to her retirement in 2001. John Algate's careful construct of her biography is a skilful combination of his own research and 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.

**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 degree at Footscray District Hospital (now called Western Hospital); Midwifery & Infant Welfare at Queen Victoria Hospital; Dentistry at Dental Hospital in Carlton.

**Work** Missionary-nurse in West Papua (1966-2001) for Regions Beyond Missionary Union.

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

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

Jessie faced challenges, restrictions and adversities while working in very basic medical 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, obstructed labours in teenage girls, as well as toothache and virulent attacks of gastro enteritis, viral meningitis, and cerebral malaria. She introduced immunisation programs ('house of needles') for measles, mumps, rubella, whooping cough, Hong Kong flu, tuberculosis, polio, and pneumonia, that were needed especially during August, the traditional 'death' month.

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. The inspired and inspiring medico made thousands of gallons of soup for patients who'd crossed mountains of mossy rocks and slippery logs to get to her clinic(s), and herself walked miles to those who couldn't. She was committed to 'working yourself out of a job' which meant—in the absence of government services—building a network of village clinics and training an army of Dani and Kimyal medics and midwives to cater for the people's basic needs. She introduced Jesus Christ to peoples whose tribal gods had long directed and controlled medical as well as religious matters, and assisted the literacy classes for Dani and Kimyal youth that helped to ameliorate the strains and stress brought on by this fundamental shift from tribal to traditional belief and practices. In 2010 she returned to Korupun and stood with excited locals on the dirt runway to greet boxes of Kimyal-language bibles produced by Regions Beyond Missionary Union ('World Team' since 1995).

In his introduction to Algate's account, Don Richardson (the well-known missionary who worked with the Sami people in West Papua, and 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.'

Like many missionary accounts, including Richardson's, Jessie's communiques didn't include the unavoidable 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 the back of a massacre (he orchestrated) of at least a million Indonesians. While Cold War tension reduced after this 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 time of East Timor's referendum in 1999). She would, however, have been well aware of the atrocious air-and-ground assaults against Papuan highlanders in 1977-78, and of Dr David Hyndman's (1987) study articulating how the Indonesian military introduced 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>