These two recent books are both memoirs of Australians in New Guinea, but the contrast between them could hardly be more stark.

_Making ‘Black Harvest’_ is filmmaker Bob Connolly’s tribute to his late wife and colleague Robin Anderson. In the spirit of all their work together – superb documentary films which have won awards and touched audiences around the world – it presents its subject, in all its complicated ambiguity, with economy and grace.

In 1990 Connolly and Anderson returned to the highlands of Papua New Guinea where they had made two previous films, ‘First Contact’ and ‘Joe Leahy’s Neighbours’. They wanted to follow up the story of Joe Leahy, the son of a pioneer Australian and a highland woman who had become a rich man with a coffee plantation, and his joint venture with his tribal neighbours near Mount Hagen.

Their story is full of hair-raising adventures but its power is in the characters and the remorseless logic of the deepening chaos as traditional warriors, engaged in payback between tribes, obtain more and more lethal weapons. Always conscious of how equivocal and dangerous their own situation was, Connolly is never content with stereotypes and these men become as memorable as any of literature’s great fictional creations.

Born around 1929, Beverley Rybarz grew up in Adelaide in a charmed world. Her thoughts from an early age seemed (at least in retrospect) to be firmly centred on sex.
Commenting on the effect she had on her boyfriends, she exclaims, ‘We had it made. Why did the feminists change it all?’ This is just one of many gnomic utterances. What did feminists change? I’m not aware that they managed to abolish sexual desire.

In 1951, Beverley went to Lae with her first husband, but met another man, Stan Rybarz, a Polish engineer who soon made millions from developing infrastructure in New Guinea. *The Bridge Builder* is ostensibly about Stan, but he is a caricature, a violent, hard-drinking, sexy foreigner, in the end dispensable like her other love interests. Her solipsism reaches its zenith when Rybarz light-heartedly relates an overweight neighbour’s rape by her ‘garden boi’, and a little later, making no connection, describes her own rape hours after giving birth. ‘Rape is always vile,’ she writes – except when it happens to someone else, it seems: then it might be comical.

There is no nuance to Rybarz’s account of pre-independence New Guinea. Australia was bringing prosperity and enlightenment to a benighted country. Meanwhile, ‘as emigres we were encouraged to employ indigenous people in our homes,’ and the ‘bois’ were forbidden alcohol for their own ‘protection’. ‘We had enough trouble with the whites drinking in the heat!’ she explains. *The Bridge Builder* has a facile charm, but that doesn’t disguise its complete lack of mature reflection.