Reflections on the adventures of Frank Mount

A review by Kevin Peoples of Frank Mount’s book Wrestling with Asia: A Memoir

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In February 1967, Bob Santamaria invited out to dinner a twenty-four year old named Frank Mount from East Coburg. He put a proposition to the young man that could not be refused by ‘a city rat and a political animal with a voracious appetite for knowledge and a love for action in the world’. “Travel around South-East Asia”, said Santamaria, “report back to me privately on how we can help our anti-communist friends there, promote the idea of my Pacific Community, write articles for News Weekly (Santamaria’s paper) and, if you wish, write articles for any other publication”.

Frank’s right-wing credentials were exemplary. He was a member of Santamaria’s anti-communist movement, the National Civic Council (NCC), which he describes as a ‘liberal democratic’ organisation. He was a member of the Victorian State Executive of the Democratic Labor Party (DLP), and had founded the DLP Club at the University of Melbourne in 1962. He was the National Secretary of the Defend Australia Committee and a member of the Peace for Freedom organisation, all Santamaria fronts in support of the war in Vietnam. He was also the National President of the ‘Wheat for India Campaign’ (1964-5). This campaign pressed Australian governments to shift the export of Australian wheat from China to India. Santamaria was a family friend, and he and Mount were ‘political mates’.

So young Frank became a spy. Santamaria’s man in South-East Asia. Not your vacuum-cleaner-type ‘spy’ – the one who invented networks for MI6 in Graham Greene’s Our Man in Havana. Frank was no James Wormold. He was more your Bond, James Bond, with an eye for ‘pretty girls’, ‘nubile Khmer maidens’, and ‘lissome girls in their pastel-coloured Ao Dais, long white gloves and dainty parasols...’. Frank enjoyed the good life. His dad was a well-known Melbourne caterer. He appreciated good food and good red wine. He met his wife, Eileen, at the Windsor Hotel. On the first page of his revealing memoir, Frank says, ‘I was James Bond before he was thought of’.

Mount is interesting, and his revelations in Wrestling with Asia: A Memoir are extraordinary. To say that
his confidence and self-belief rival Santamaria’s is no exaggeration. Mount tells the story of standing in Santamaria’s office sometime in the early 1960s. He must have been just 20. They look at a huge map of the world, and discuss regional and global strategic and security matters affecting Australia and the regional balance of power. Commenting on the discussion and with all the wisdom of youth and a revelatory tone, Frank writes ‘I realized then that he (Santamaria) had a good geo-strategic mind and a sound grasp of matters concerning Europe, the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf and East and South-East Asia’. Santamaria had been contemplating such matters when Frank was wearing short pants.

And besides, Frank was not listening. Santamaria had been arguing for what he called a Pacific Community of anti-communist nations since 1955. Never for a moment did Santamaria think, as Mount writes, that the way to deal with China ‘was to bring it into the community of nations through some sort of regional mechanism’. He never supped with the devil. In his memoir, Santamaria argued that the aim of the Pacific Community was ‘the containment of China’. Between 1959 and 1961, I was trying to convince Catholic farmers in Santamaria’s National Catholic Rural Movement that recognition and trade with Red China were very bad things. Communism had to be contained, and the sea lanes of communication for trade between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, which ran through the Indonesian waterways and the South China Sea, had to be kept open. China was to be isolated and Indonesia courted.

When Frank arrived in Saigon in June 1967, his first task was to make real Santamaria’s idea of a Pacific Community. The vehicle would be a Pacific Institute, led, coordinated, and chaired from Melbourne by Santamaria. Frank would make it happen on the ground and act as its executive director. If possible, he was to organise a Pacific Institute conference annually with representatives from South Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. At the first conference in 1967, the Pacific Institute was launched as an ‘operational body’ which would aim to exchange information initially, and then ‘move as rapidly as possible’ to formulate policies on specific issues, ‘on the basis of which national centres will seek to influence the policies of their respective countries’. The same permeation model had worked well for Santamaria in Australia. Frank organised conferences from 1967 to 1976.

Unlike Graham Greene’s character, Frank quickly developed real networks with real people who had serious influence throughout parts of Southeast Asia. This was particularly the case in political circles in South Vietnam. One such example was Tran Van Lam, a former Ambassador to Australia and Foreign Minister in President Thieu’s government. Lam signed the 1973 Peace Treaty in Paris on behalf of South Vietnam, and was a member of Santamaria’s Pacific Institute.

Santamaria also wanted Frank to work with their contacts in South Vietnam and establish a broad-based political party to give credibility and support to President Thieu. The party would provide the base for Thieu should the South win the war. So young Frank helped establish the Nhan-Xa Party as part of the Pacific Institute’s policy of building ‘liberal democracy’ in the Pacific region. It was a grandiloquent aim for those sponsoring the idea. Santamaria never demonstrated ‘liberal’ or ‘democratic’, ideals in Australia and his chance of success with the South Vietnamese government was zilch.

The new Nhan-Xa party attracted General Tran Thien Khiem, Prime Minister of South Vietnam in September 1969, who was involved with the coup and assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963. Khiem became an active party member along with Lam. Ngo Khac Tinh, a cousin of President Thieu, also became an active member. At times, Santamaria dealt directly with Tinh, who became a cabinet minister in the Thieu government.

Santamaria channeled money from Australia to help finance the Nhan-Xa Party. The money came in part from the Catholic Project Compassion funds, which were meant for general charitable purposes, not the financing of political parties. Santamaria wrote to his close friend, Brigadier Ted Serong in Vietnam, and gave him a draft copy of a letter to use in writing to Archbishop Knox in Melbourne. Acting on the advice of Bishop Bernard Stewart from the Sandhurst Diocese in Bendigo, Santamaria tells Serong to ask Knox for
financial support for his work in Vietnam. Santamaria tells Serong that Knox ‘should have the disposal of considerable funds as a result of Project Compassion’. Santamaria advises Serong not to mention to Knox that the money may end up with the Nhan-Xa political party. Santamaria also channeled money via Frank to Bishop Nguyen Van Thuan, a nephew of the late President Ngo Dinh Diem. The bishop passed some of this money to his anti-communist friends in the Nhan-Xa Party. The Movement and the DLP had transmogrified to Saigon.

When Frank landed in Saigon in June 1967, Lam and an Australian major, sent by Serong, were there to welcome him. Serong was by that time a CIA operative. He looked after Frank, introduced him to his MI6 colleague, Colonel Monty Rodulfo, and set him up in a room above the unofficial office of the Phoenix Program, which Serong had created and which he ran as part of the Pacification Program. Serong was to become the director of Santamaria’s Pacific Institute in Vietnam. Living in the same block as Frank were two assassins Serong had hired. Frank did not warm to them. Concerning one of the killers, Serong told Frank that ‘he had never known anyone who could kill as efficiently with his bare hands’; the other, said Serong, ‘preferred a knife or a garrote’.

The role of Phoenix was twofold: to destroy Vietcong Infrastructure in the villages by identifying and killing its key cadres, and collecting intelligence. There were grave and criminal excesses. Innocent people were tortured in the most despicable manner. William Colby, CIA’s chief in Vietnam, acknowledged that from 1968-71, Phoenix killed 20,587 Vietnamese civilians. The New York Times independently estimated the figure as closer to 60,000. Frank was to hear Serong say many times, ‘We are in a gutter war and in a gutter war you have to be prepared to get down in the gutter’. Serong was in the gutter. Frank relates a story of Serong, Santamaria, and himself dancing and singing on a table in ‘a laid-back Hong Kong Italian restaurant’ following one of their three Pacific Institute Conferences held in Hong Kong.

Frank Mount’s success was due in no small part to his personality and natural ability. But his link with Santamaria gave him access to two important networks – bishops and priests within the Catholic Church, especially the Jesuits, and in particular the Dutch Jesuit, Fr Joop Beek, in Indonesia, and the USA and Australian Intelligence communities. Beek trained a network of anti-communist operatives in Indonesia who infiltrated the government and military and made Beek one of the best informed individuals in Indonesia. Santamaria had close links with the intelligence community, who were willing to share information with him and his ‘emissary’, Frank Mount. Richard Hughes, Melbourne-born foreign correspondent and the inspiration for Ian Fleming’s Dikko Henderson in You Only Live Twice and John Le Carré’s Old Craw in The Honourable Schoolboy, was famous for his long and expensive lunches. When Frank turned up at one such luncheon, paid for by MI6, Hughes stood, raised his goblet of red wine and proposed a toast, much to the discomfort of some sitting at the table, to ‘the arrival of the emissary from Dr Santamaria in Melbourne’.

Mount’s book is filled with the most amazing stories – not just in Vietnam and Indonesia, but also throughout South-East Asia and in Australia itself. Frank is one of those people who can walk into any group and look as if they belong. At Government House in Melbourne, where selected VIPs had gathered following the funeral for Prime Minister Harold Holt in 1967, Mount, with no invitation, brazenly walked
through the door past security and noticed Malcolm Fraser talking to his friend the Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew. Walking straight up to them, he introduced himself to the surprised men, then made his way over to meet the President of the United States. The only thing that stopped Lyndon Baines Johnson from meeting the young man from East Coburg was the wall of people blocking him.

There is something about Frank. He seems to know everyone who is anyone. Perhaps there is a bit of the James Wormald about him. He tells us he discusses philosophy, theology and literature with some of his important contacts. There is little written here that excites the mind in those directions. He spends time in Tasmania with James McAuley, poet and Santamaria supporter. He wonders why McAuley invited him for the Easter weekend, and surmises it may have been to introduce him to his 19-year-old daughter. But no, McAuley simply wants to talk, man to man, over a drink, to unburden his soul to Frank. People like unburdening themselves to Frank. The man is a magnet. Vincent Buckley, another poet, kisses him behind the ear and whispers, ‘I’m really a Grouper, Frank’. Even Santamaria would ‘confide’ in him about personal matters ‘over a few drinks’ while the two men flew to yet another Pacific Institute Conference.

With Saigon about to fall, a South Vietnamese female singer, whom Frank has ‘flirted with on happier occasions’, whispers in his ear as she croons Kris Kristofferson’s song, *For the Good Times*, and kisses him ‘lightly on the cheek’. ‘I have rarely been so moved’ says Frank. Frank had a habit of ‘hitting it off’ with everyone he met.

Yet Frank was his own man. He tells a story of answering the telephone in Santamaria’s office when everyone, including Santamaria, was on summer holidays. Harold Holt has just drowned. Frank answers the phone and, naturally, recognises the voice of Richard Krygier from the Australian Association for Cultural Freedom, an organisation funded by the CIA. Krygier tells Frank that Santamaria must use his best influence to ensure the Liberals select John Gorton as the next Prime Minister. Frank thanks Krygier and immediately decides he will not pass on the message. Frank favours Paul Hasluck. Shortly afterwards, Frank takes other calls, all looking for Santamaria. One was an eminent Sydney journalist; others were cabinet ministers and various Liberal powerbrokers. Frank was impressed ‘with how many highly-placed people thought Bob might be able to sway the day and decide the next Prime Minister of Australia’.

And Frank can look after himself. When the Imperial Hotel in Bangkok caught fire in 1971, only four out of approximately 160 guests survived. Frank was one of the four. He scaled down drainpipes from the fifth floor, and comments that if he had ‘a wife or a girlfriend’ with him he wouldn’t have made it’. This man makes my time working for Santamaria’s National Catholic Rural Movement look like a Sunday afternoon baking scones with the Birchip ladies of the Country Women’s Association.

Despite all the work and the adventures, it is clear that anti-communism was a dark, narrow tunnel from which to view the world. Frank’s book is a shocking indictment of anti-communism. As a moral standard, it was appalling. History was distorted. Murders and torture were rationalised. Glib, superficial answers replaced serious analysis. Lies replaced truth. Anti-communism was self-sufficient, capable of providing answers to the most complex problems anytime, anywhere. Monolithic communism never existed, except in the minds of the anti-communist ideologues. Anti-imperialism, self-determination, nationalism, cultural and historical traditions never impinged on a simplistic worldview driven by a paranoid fear of communism. Anti-communism killed something decent in the human spirit. Compassion and empathy for the suffering was lost. I could find nothing in this book redolent of the horror and nightmare that was Vietnam.

Anti-communism provided its adherents with certainties. Easy answers were quickly found within its ideological paradigm. The end justified the means. The PKI (Indonesian Communist Party) ‘would have brought the nuclear armed Russian navy with its SLBMs (submarine-launched ballistic missiles) to every port in Indonesia...Where would this have left Australia?’ Complex and ambiguous concepts such as ‘liberal’, ‘democracy’, ‘marxism’, ‘communism’ and ‘conservative’ become meaningless here. The East Timor
leftist independence movement, Fretilin, was ‘pro-communist’ and ‘pro-Soviet’. The Second Vatican Council (1963-5) in Rome was ‘rather conservative’. Liberation theologians working for the poor in Latin America were probably funded by the Soviet Union. The papal encyclicals, *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), are explained away as anti-communist tracts. This form of anti-communism gives new meanings to the Christian notion of social justice.

The importance of the book is not, then, in its judgements about political events in South-East Asia. This is a book from the Right, and its judgements are predictable. The importance of the book is in its revelations of the influence and power of Santamaria. Those who thought Santamaria’s influence was confined to Australia must think again. I was amazed at some of the details in this book. I am amazed that Harry Tjan, a member of Santamaria’s Pacific Institute who also happened to advise Indonesia’s President Soeharto, sought Santamaria’s advice on what he should say to Soeharto regarding Portuguese Timor. Similarly, I am surprised when another member of Santamaria’s Pacific Institute, Jusuf Wanandi, who also happened to be an assistant to General Ali Murtopo, asked Frank to prepare a brief for Soeharto’s visit to Australia in 1972. Frank provided a brief, and included Santamaria’s briefing paper which he had given to NCC leaders. Why should I be surprised, then, when William McMahon, Prime Minister of Australia, pulls up in a black car outside Santamaria’s home and delivers him top secret documents? Later, Frank reads them and returns them via Sir Wilfred Kent-Hughes!

The postscript to all this is that Frank and Santamaria eventually went their separate ways. Evidently, there was much on which the two men disagreed. Frank ignored their differences for the greater good of defeating communism. According to Frank, students in Year 11 knew more about economics than Santamaria. This embarrassed him. But the real issue for Frank was that Santamaria was ‘not always a man of his word’. One point that surprised me about Santamaria was his reply to Frank following the defeat of the DLP senators in 1974 and the end of the Vietnam War. Santamaria, it seems, lost interest in South-East Asia. When Frank asked him why, Santamaria replied, ‘What’s in it for me?’. On numerous other occasions, Frank put projects to him, but received the same reply, ‘What’s in it for me’? I didn’t think he was like that.
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Kevin Peoples

1 Kevin Peoples is the author of Santamaria’s Salesman: The National Catholic Rural Movement 1959-1961 (Melbourne John Garratt Publishing 2012)
2 Frank Mount, Wrestling with Asia: A Memoir (Ballan: Connor Court 2012) p3
3 ibid p17
4 ibid p4
5 ibid pp227, 198, 317
6 ibid p3
7 ibid p6
9 Mount pp7, 54
10 B A Santamaria, Santamaria A Memoir (Oxford Melbourne 1997) p232
11 Mount p137
12 Morgan, Your Most Obedient Servant p269
13 Mount p21
15 Jeff Sparrow, Australia’s Vietnam-style killing program in Afghanistan 12 May 2009, see jeff.sparrow.net
16 Mount p80
17 ibid p323
18 ibid p158
19 ibid p144
20 ibid p345
21 ibid p149
22 ibid p115
23 ibid p272
24 ibid p155
25 ibid p335
26 ibid p254
27 ibid p271
28 ibid p347