

**Title:** *The King of the Coral Sea*

**Subtitle:** *The Untold Story of an Australian Legend*

**Author:** Robert Louis Demayo

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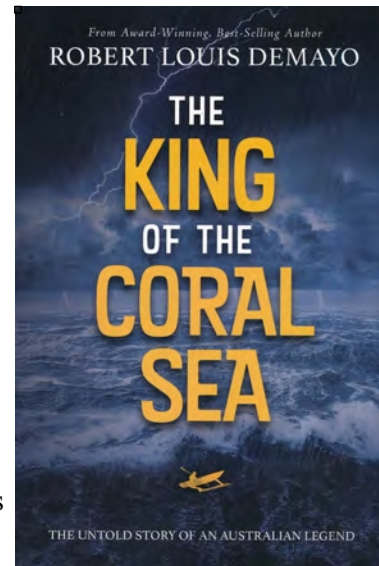
**Contents:** 300 pp, a few b&w images and very basic maps

**Cover:** softcover, also hardcover, eBook & audiobook

**ISBN:** 978-1-7365984-8-1

**Availability:** Amazon Australia

**Review:** Paul Caffyn



The ‘Australian Legend’ subtitle is, I feel, is a tad overstated as few paddlers in Australasia are today aware of Michael Fomenko’s story. Historical fiction describes the narrative, with much drawn from press clippings, an earlier book on his life, interviews with those who had met or heard of Michael and the author’s vivid imagination.

The title refers to a mission to sail a dugout canoe from near Cairns (North Queensland Coast) to what, back in the 1950s, was Dutch New Guinea. Each chapter alternates between Michael’s voyage to his 88 year-long life. I have a vague recollection of his name, when growing up in Brisbane with a few snippets in the newspapers from the ’50s, but even slightly younger Aussie paddlers like Dave Winkworth have never heard of Michael.

The Fomeko families’ escape from Russia in 1930 to the far east, then south through Manchuria to China, was perilous. The family were so fortunate to eventually arrive in Sydney. Not much detail on that journey, but Michael did well with sports at secondary school but after a rejection for the Commonwealth Games, he headed north and began working in the sugar-cane fields.

There he began planning a dugout canoe trip from near Cairns, up to Cape York – the northern tip of Queensland, across Torres Strait and west into what was Dutch New Guinea in the 50s. Interviews with yachties, who actually met and helped Michael once he was underway in his dugout, ring true but so much of the story is pure fiction, comparisons with Homer’s Odyssey, long term clashes with a big boar (Caly) and a crocodile (Poseidon).

Michael Fomenko was one of the very first hippies in Australia, only too happy to be totally on his own on the North Queensland Coast, fending for himself by fishing and collecting ‘bush tucker’. Newspaper speculation about his nomadic life led to the Queensland police, tracking him down to an outback station, cruelly placing him in handcuffs and then jail.

A few scant black and white photos show a very fit, bare-chested, bearded Michael, while one newspaper picture from 1959 shows him in his single ama dugout canoe with very basic survival kit.

Michael did achieve a long solo voyage in a dugout canoe from near Cairns to Dutch New Guinea in the 50s. He was one of Australia’s very first ‘hippies’. His last six years were spent at a Gympie old age care facility where he died in 2018 at the age of 88.

For me, there is too much made up ‘stuff’ about conversations, beasties that he encountered and dramas of paddling a dugout canoe north along the Queensland coast. But if you don’t mind historical fiction, it is an engrossing book.