

Ron Crocombe, *The South Pacific*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 2001. Pp. 790, illus., bib., index. A\$130 (about US\$85) cloth.

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Several substantial surveys of the Pacific Islands and their societies have appeared in recent years: *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Islanders* (1997), *The Pacific Islands: Environment and Society* (1999), *The Pacific Islands: An Encyclopedia* (2000), and *Oceania: An Introduction* (2002). These have all been edited, multiauthored works. Now a single scholar—one of the most senior in the field—has undertaken to “outline the main trends in the past, present, and possible futures” of Pacific Islanders (p. 7).

Professor Crocombe’s considerable qualifications for this task are attested by the publishing history of the present volume. He first wrote *The New South Pacific* in 1973, and that book underwent reprinting and revision for the next twenty years. The current version is more than double the length of its immediate predecessor (p. 8). It comprises twenty-four topical chapters, organized into sections alliteratively labeled “Parameters,” “Patterns,” “Perceptions,” “Property,” “Power,” and “Prospects,” as well as four appendixes (including very useful profiles of Pacific nations and territories) and a thirty-nine-page bibliography. One notable gap in coverage is a detailed map of the entire region.

The scope of the book, indeed its sheer weight, tends to intimidate. Add to this the author’s decades of experience throughout the area, together with his combative personality, and a reviewer is inclined to approach with some care lest an incautious comment reveal a gap in one’s own knowledge that will call forth derision from one who legitimately claims greater seniority.

Perhaps it is best to state at the outset that, like each of the books noted in the first paragraph above, *The South Pacific* makes a distinctive contribution to our knowledge of the region, one that is not easily compared to that made by any of the other works.

Professor Crocombe begins by clearing the ground with a note on geography and its terminology, pointing out the different definitions of "South Pacific," "Oceania," and the like, and permitting himself some flexibility as to how he will present his material. Then the first topical section, "Parameters," covers issues of environment, population, migration, and health. The next three chapters, organized as "Patterns," discuss language, society, and culture. "Perceptions" moves into the realm of belief systems, the arts, and communication. "Property" includes not only consideration of tenure systems, about which the author is a recognized authority, but production and commerce and the currently controversial subject of "restructuring." "Power," or politics broadly defined, is by far the longest of the topical sections; material presented here is arguably the most likely to provoke debate. The final chapter "Prospects" is explicitly a statement of the author's personal thoughts on the future of the Pacific Islands and Islanders (p. 658).

How to give a fair assessment of such a weighty volume within the word limit permitted to a reviewer? One must pick out a relatively few features, commentary on which may provide guidance to potential readers. Professor Crocombe states in his preface that each topical chapter is designed to be self-contained. This has the effect that readers working their way through the book from beginning to end will inevitably find considerable repetition, but they have been forewarned. Another notable facet of the book concerns the author's sources. They are heavily weighted toward the publications of University of the South Pacific's Institute of Pacific Studies, which is laudable in giving these useful works greater visibility. However, Professor Crocombe does not always seem critical in assessing other sources; he is as likely to cite with apparent approval scholarly works alongside all sorts of less-reliable material. Because he is so widely acquainted with Pacific Islanders in all walks of life, he freely quotes what must be personal communications, some of which call for a context in order to be properly evaluated. For example, the Solomon Islands leader Francis Bugotu made a very interesting comment on the first Pacific Arts Festival (p. 197), but no source is given nor does Bugotu appear in the bibliography.

Professor Crocombe has never been shy about offering his opinions on Pacific Islands affairs, and an experienced reader can enjoy the sense of a rousing argument. (He also freely uses exclamation points in case the reader isn't paying sufficient attention.) Those less familiar with the region may be led to accept without question such flat statements—not further elaborated

or supported with detailed evidence—as “the most authoritarian governments have been in Tonga, Marshall Islands and Fiji” (p. 219). *Caveat lector*: One might also wonder why the author occasionally takes the trouble to distance himself from what he calls “Marxist” arguments (e.g., pp. 470–471), when some readers would say that his emphasis on political economy is one of the book’s great strengths.

Other welcome aspects of the author’s approach include a clear-eyed refusal to yield to the romanticism about the Pacific that lingers even in many scholarly works. He is neither about to paint roseate pictures of Edenic “tradition” nor take for granted the benign intentions or superior insights of a current generation of Pacific Islands leaders. At the same time, he underlines dependence on outside forces created by a global economy. “Context,” in this sense of a larger picture, is a key word in his analysis.

Professor Crocombe has written the book in a most accessible style, blessedly free of academic jargon or discussions of arcane matters of interest only to specialists. While he has dedicated the book to the *mokopuna*, or grandchild generation, one can speculate that his target audience includes the students of the University of the South Pacific, which institution he served well for decades. These and other readers will find in *The South Pacific* a valuable, thought-provoking work, which belongs in all institutional libraries and on the shelves of any individual seriously interested in the region.