

Donald Denoon with Stewart Firth, Jocelyn Linnekin, Malama Meleisea, and Karen Nero, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Islanders*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Pp. xvi, 518, index, maps. US\$79.95 cloth.

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Even before one begins to delve into the contents of this book, one is struck by the sense that its production was a monumental undertaking. To begin with, there is the matter of authorship. While each of the book's thirteen chapters is attributed primarily to one of its five editors (in one case with a co-author), more than half the chapters contain sections written by others. In all, twenty authors contributed to the making of this volume. Then there is the historical and geographical range that the book embraces: from pre-history through contact and colonialism to the present in the Pacific Islands broadly defined, including (refreshingly) New Zealand and to a limited extent

Australia. Finally, there is the “Cambridge History” imprint, conveying the sense that with the publication of this volume Pacific Islands history has achieved significant recognition among those who draw the academic map of the world.

The book’s monumental status conveys itself, then, even before one begins to read. But what of its contents? Does the book hold together, despite its huge range and multiple authorship, and does it manage to succeed as a contribution to Pacific scholarship? In general terms, the answer to these questions has to be yes. There is a wealth of information here and it is well organized and very well presented. The editors have to be applauded for upholding high standards of exposition that make every chapter accessible and useful.

In general, it is true, the book does not open up new interpretive paths. Rather, as Denoon notes in the preface, the book is meant for readers looking for an “introduction” to the people of the Pacific and with this in mind it seeks “to provide clear and reliable first words, rather than lay down last words” (p. xv). Given this goal, chapters and sections of chapters tend to fall into one of two categories: those that are accurate but rather straightforward compilations of known facts or exemplifications of known trends and those that are more ambitious, if still carefully grounded, presentations of synthetic arguments. Overall, there are rather fewer of the latter than there might be, though they are always welcome where they appear.

One of the best of the strongly argued chapters is Linnekin’s chapter on the historiography of the region. This opens the volume very successfully. It is followed by seven chapters that cover the period from prehistory to 1941 and take up settlement, precontact economic and political structures, contact, and colonialism and the changes that it wrought. The final five chapters cover from World War II to the present, looking again at changing political and economic structures and at the history of nuclear testing, changing political ideologies, and migration. All of these areas are covered in such a way that novices will get a sense of key issues in current scholarship while even those with great experience in Pacific studies are likely to learn new things.

As should already be clear, the format of this book is one that conduces to the production of many small insights, rather than to the kind of large ones that might shape Pacific studies in the future. It comes as a pleasant surprise, then, to report that this work as a whole does very much sharpen our perception of one issue that deserves to be of continuing importance in future scholarship. This issue has to do with defining the meaningful social units of Pacific history: should historians (and other scholars) take the region as a unit, or should they focus on the nation, or subnational regions, or language groups, or villages, or migratory networks? Of course, there are no

easy answers to this question. And even as contributors wrestle with it, they also alert us to the fact that a similar question—that of what social units should form the bases of Pacific island futures—is a crucial political concern of Pacific Islanders themselves. It is the way this issue plays itself out on these two levels simultaneously that makes it such a potent one. I doubt if a work of narrower scope than this one could have so successfully brought out the issue's importance.

Any effort this ambitious is bound to leave some things out, but for the most part this history is impressive in its coverage. Thus one is rarely tempted to nitpick about what is not here. It does seem worth mentioning, however, that religion is not quite given its due. This is especially clear in the account of the colonial and postcolonial periods. If we accept that Pacific colonialism constituted a three-pronged attack that advanced on economic, political, and religious fronts, then clearly the first two topics are better served here than the last. To be sure, missionaries and cargo cults are considered, but neither they nor various forms of indigenized Christianity are discussed in the kind of depth that would indicate their centrality in island lives. This centrality comes out strikingly in two sections written by Pacific Islanders, which appear late in the book. Though Ruth Saovana Spriggs and Vilsoni Hereniko are not the only Pacific Islanders who contribute, they are the only ones who clearly speak in both a personal as well as an academic voice. It is in their contributions, on women in the Bougainville civil war (Spriggs) and on cultural identities (Hereniko), that the power of church organizations in island life and the force of Christianity in island ideologies comes through most clearly. Coming near the end as they do, these pieces serve to point up that the historical chapters that lead up to them do not really prepare readers for the importance Christianity assumes in their accounts of the present.

Take that, though, as the proverbial reviewer's quibble. Overall, this work stands as a major contribution to Pacific studies and as a foundation on which to build in future work. Speaking as an anthropologist, I imagine that this book will do much to insure that students coming to the field in the future will be better versed in the general history of the region than they often have been in the past. I suspect that the same will be true in other disciplines. The content here amply fills out the monumental frame that surrounds it, and for that scholars studying the Pacific have reason to welcome this as an important work.