
BOOK REVIEW FORUM

K. R. Howe, *Where the Waves Fall. A New South Sea Islands History from First Settlement to Colonial Rule*. Pacific Islands Monograph Series, No. 2. Pacific Islands Studies Program, Center for Pacific and Asian Studies. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984. Pp. 403, illustrated, index. \$29.95.

Review: MALAMA MELEISEA
UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC

Howe's book is a welcome addition to the small number of general works in Pacific history. It is also a worthy successor to Oliver's *The Pacific Islands*, which has served students and teachers of Pacific history so long and well. Howe presents a fine synthesis of "the new Pacific history," which owes so much to the late Professor J. W. Davidson and the products of the School of Pacific and South East Asian History in the Research School of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University. I count myself fortunate to have been at the University of Papua New Guinea between 1972 and 1975 and a student of historians such as Sione Latukefu, Ken Inglis, Bill Gammage, Edgar Waters, Donald Denoon, Rod Lacey, Stewart Firth, and Hank Nelson. We not only benefited from the new historiography but learned to think about new sources of evidence from oral tradition and prehistory.

Howe summarizes many of the subjects, ideas, and new interpretations that made Pacific history an exciting subject for Pacific island students, perhaps for the first time. The old orthodox chronology of Pacific

history presented events in terms of the actions of successive groups of Europeans: the explorers, the beachcombers, the missionaries, the traders and planters, and finally the colonial officials. Islanders were victims, change was "fatal." The new Pacific history has tried to reinterpret this reconstruction of the past with greater emphasis on interaction between islanders and outsiders. The greatest contribution to the decolonization of Pacific history has been made by prehistorians working on sources of evidence other than the written word, with its inevitable Eurocentric bias. Thus Howe's history does not begin in the sixteenth century with European explorers but in 50,000 B.P. with the earliest evidence of human settlement south of Sunda.

Howe examines four themes: the settlement of the Pacific islands and the nature of precontact island societies; the motives and historical forces that motivated European exploration, trade, and conquest; the nineteenth-century centralized monarchies that developed (or conversely failed to develop) in Polynesia as a result of the dynamics of early islander-outsider interaction; and the relatively late Nevanangelization and exploitation of the western Pacific islands of Melanesia. He concludes with an essay on the new historiography of the Pacific islands, tracing the processes of thought in scholarly circles through which Pacific islanders were removed from the role of passive victims to participating actors in the historical events of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Although scholarly, readable, and accessible to nonspecialists, Howe's book leaves plenty of room for debate. Take the argument, for example, that there were indigenous structural forces in the political systems of Tahiti, Hawai'i, and Tonga lacking in those of New Zealand, Samoa, and Fiji, which allowed centralized monarchies to develop in the former but not the latter. This argument owes much to the evolutionary theorizing of Goldman (1970) and, to a lesser extent, Sahlins (1958). In both these works there is much misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the political institutions of early nineteenth-century Samoa. Howe might have considered the historically convincing argument by Freeman (1966) that pre-Christian Samoa possessed a highly stratified system of rank and political authority, despite the political autonomy of the *nu'u* in everyday matters. Howe recognizes and points out the pitfalls of the ethnographic present in past descriptions of island societies (44), but then fails to consider the probability that the political systems of Polynesia fluctuated between periods in which power was highly centralized and periods of decentralization, rivalry, and dispersed political authority, depending on dynastic complica-

tions, fortunes of war, economic conditions, religious movements, and so on.

The notion that the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political systems of Polynesia as they were variously described, represented culminations of hundreds, even thousands of years of unidirectional evolution, is long overdue for reexamination and criticism. To imply that lack of stratification in Samoa, for example, inhibited the development of an indigenous centralized state when conditions presented themselves as they had done in Hawai'i, Tahiti, and Tonga seems to me to be founded both on an incorrect understanding of Samoan politics and false analogy. There were unique forces at work in all these island nations, In the case of Samoa, great power and settler rivalry, as much as the rivalry between the two most powerful Samoan ruling families and their supporting territories, impeded the creation of a stable centralized government. To underestimate the force of settler intriguing and international wrangling on Samoan affairs in order to give priority of explanation to indigenous political structures is taking the argument a great deal too far, as I suspect Howe has also done in his chapters on New Zealand and Fiji. The new historiography is in danger of promoting a new orthodoxy if it tries to diminish the tragic consequences of land grabbing, king-making, and gunboat diplomacy by Europeans in destroying the political capacities of islanders to respond on equal terms. To conclude as Howe does that the Samoans simply lacked the capacity to unite and that the three powers, in the face of this intransigence "had little option but to formally take over the country" (254), carving up the Samoan nation between them in the process, uncritically reiterates an orthodox criticism long overdue for questioning.

But uncontroversial books are dull and Howe's arguments, whether one accepts them or not, will make his book all the more useful in teaching Pacific history. We are already using it at the University of the South Pacific. Howe's succinct summary of the major findings of linguists and prehistorians and many other complex studies is invaluable.

REFERENCES

- Freeman, Derek. 1966. Anthropological Theorising and Historical Scholarship: A Reply to M. Ember. *American Anthropologist* 68:168-171.
- Goldman, Irving. 1970. *Ancient Polynesian Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sahlins, Marshall. 1958. *Social Stratification in Polynesia*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.