Review: O. H. K. SPATE
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Kerry Howe has attempted, in the main very successfully, to meet the acute need for a general survey of Pacific Islands history reflecting not only the increasing store of knowledge but also the increasing sophistication in its handling. This means an Islands-oriented history, breaking away from the Eurocentric stance in which Islanders were seen as mere supers in the saga of colonial expansion, but transcending also the cramping limits of what Howe has elsewhere aptly called "Monograph Myopia."[1] His book is finely presented and very readable, well proportioned (perhaps Melanesian missions get a bit more than their fair share of space), and solidly based on a wide documentation. There is an immense amount to stimulate discussion, yet even when one disagrees one must applaud the temperate way in which Howe presents his own views, the judicious arguments, the range and aptness of his illustrations. The good things in the book outweigh its few failings by far; and even where I disagree, the divergence of our views is not fundamental but rather one of degree and emphasis.

A few points of detail. Howe's Pacific scholarship seems to me all but impeccable; he is not quite so surefooted at the European end. It is surely long past time for serious writers to get rid of "Rousseau's Noble Savage" (47); the man begat enough as it were legitimate bastards to be spared having this fictitious one fathered on him. To say that "hopes for trade and new lands to rule were not entirely forgotten" in the great eighteenth-century exploring voyages (81) is a large understatement; the answer to the question "Science or Empire?" is "Empire and Science." And again it was surely not so much "Crozet's tirades" (208) as

the far more widely diffused accounts of Cook's death and La Pérouse's losses in Samoa that brought onstage the ignoble savage.

Such minor questionable points are not of great significance, But while I am in cordial sympathy with the general thrust and temper of *Where the Waves Fall,* I think that at times Howe pushes his reasoning too far. For instance, it is true that the Melanesian/Polynesian dichotomy--Big Men by achievement, Chiefs by ascription--was initially overdrawn and made too prescriptive. But it can still be a useful tool, discreetly handled. For instance, the lack of "polities" in Melanesia seems to me to help explain the high incidence and the informality of violence in the region, and hence contributed to its bad press. Howe's virtual dismissal of the concept (60-64; cf. 255) as "so general as to be not very helpful" could be described in those very words; and his dismissal is put in very prescriptive terms: "none can be classified," "they must not be termed," as Melanesian. But "Once the notion of a 'Melanesian' or a 'Polynesian' system is abandoned," what are we left with? A congeries of tribal solipsisms? The fact that the colors in the spectrum overlap does not mean that we cannot distinguish violet from red. or even blue from green, I do not see that the suggested verbal shift from a cultural to a geographic usage helps. It seems to me that in a laudable effort to get away from insufficiently discriminating system-mongering, Howe risks falling into the opposite error and so negating his own desire, so well expressed in "Monograph Myopia," of transcending an over-particularizing empiricism.

There is another, and humanly speaking a more serious, danger connected with the stress on uniqueness. It is a truism that every autonomous society is unique, and it is important that every people should have a just pride in its past; and for the pride to be just, it must include a correct estimate of its place in the world. (This does not depend on size and power: as the great Portuguese historian Alexandre Herculano said, "We are small . . . but that will not prevent the great nations respecting us if we are respectworthy.") [2] But all too often a real uniqueness is equated with an unreal superiority, and this can lead to very damaging miscalculations and/or an introspective brooding on past glories: the old Iberian disease now more than incipient in Britain.

Pacific societies can be hurt by too-ardent friends as well as by open oppressors and exploiters; I think, for instance, that in the long run the Fijians may prove to have been ill-served by those who married Old School Tie with Old Clan Tapa, seeing in Fijian society the mythical Squire's Merrie England of their nostalgic dreams. A historiography too sharply Island-oriented could lead to a perilous estimate of self-suffi-

ciency; the elements of likeness as well as of individuality must be given due weight if the human family is ever to climb out of its present disrupted state.

This does not mean that there should not be a continued emphasis on the "inside" view--there is still a good deal of retributive justice to be done to correct past chauvinistic errors, and one value of Howe's book is as a survey of the current state of the art. It does mean, however, that the local or regional historian, indigenous or not, must not stay marooned on some particular atoll or group, "regardless of the sweep of the currents which bring life to the isles"; [3] otherwise there will be new chauvinistic errors. Howe's balanced approach could be a good guide.

In this connection, however, I have an uneasy feeling that Howe may have rather overstressed Islander success in riding the waves of Euramerican incursion. It is not a question of "Fatal Impact," (although Dening's *Islands and Beaches* [4] suggests that for one group at least this might not be too strong a term. Howe's reasons for limiting his geographical scope (xiv) are in principle unexceptionable, but in practice it is perhaps unfortunate that so significant a group as the Marquesas--the first in Polynesia to experience substantial European contact--should be left out.

Howe gives many examples of the Islanders' adroitness in coping with Euramerican intrusions, secular and religious, and in manipulating the intruders to their own ends. But how much of this was initiative, how much a reactive response? Change had occurred before the intruders came, and would have continued--not necessarily always in a positive sense, as Easter Island shows--but on what scale, at what pace? Might not the missions, and the Euramerican presence in general, have been a necessary though insufficient factor? We should remember the wise words of Vidal--which are not Eurocentric, since he is speaking of his own country: "The impulse comes from without. No civilized country is altogether the creation of its own civilization. Or at any rate it can produce only a limited civilization . . . its life must be in touch with a wider sphere, which enriches it with its own substance and instils into it new ferments." [5] Granted that the fermentation is often painful, as it was indeed for Celtic and later again for Saxon Britain at contact with the "wider spheres" of Romans and Normans.

However decisive Islander action might be in local detail, where--except to a certain extent in Hawaii and Tonga--was there any lasting success, any true independence after the "Denouement" (Howe's term in each case) had begun? Howe is of course not writing a history *of* colonial rule, but his restriction "*to* colonial rule" practically precludes dis-

cussion of a question most vital to any discussion of the extent and effect of Euramerican impact on Islander societies: *What happened to the land*--and especially the good land. Had this been taken into account, it may reasonably be doubted whether the rather euphoric tone in which Howe describes Islander successes in fobbing off intruders, or using them, or playing them off against one another, could be altogether sustained. (This is not in the faintest degree discreditable; even the greater societies of Asia, never subjugated culturally, could only react, and Japan's success was in fact enforced upon her.) I think this limitation might have been recognized, whether by slight expansion of the "Denouement" sections or by a rider to the preface or epilogue.

There are a number of topics, of less scope, which might be debated. Except in New Zealand and when treating specific trades such as sandalwood and recruiting, Howe gives too little attention to environmental and economic factors for my taste. This is particularly noticeable in "Background to Hawaiian politics" (152-154). Again, granting that tales of the Charlie Savage variety are probably largely nonsense, I am not quite convinced by the downgrading of musketry: if muskets, although clumsy and unreliable, were "psychologically important," did not that very fact transcend these defects and so make them "technically effective" (259)? There seems to be an element of chicken-and-egg reasoning here; to analyze it would take us into too much detail.

What has been said in these pages is enough to show that Howe's book is rich in matter that any serious student of Pacific Islands history should ponder over; and yet this review has given a very inadequate impression of its positive qualities. Douglas Oliver's *The Pacific Islands* was a great book in its day. I am confident that *Where the Waves Fall* will prove its very worthy successor.

NOTES

1. K. R. Howe, "Pacific History in the 1980s: New Directions or Monograph Myopia?" *Pacific Studies* 3, no. 1 (1979), pp. 81-90.

2. A. Herculano, "Solemnia verba" (1850), in A. Sergio, ed., *Sôbre história e historiografia* (Lisboa, 1937), pp. 94-120 at 116.

3. O. H. K. Spate, "The Pacific as an Artefact," in N. Gunson, ed., *The Changing Pacific: Essays in Honour of H. E. Maude* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 32-45 at 34.

4. G. Dening, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesus 1774-1880* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1980).

5. P. Vidal de la Blache, *Tableau de la géogruphie de la France* (Paris, 1908), p. 17, quoted in L. Febvre, *A Geographical Introduction to History* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1932), p. 337.