Stewart Firth, *New Guinea under the Germans.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1982. Pp. xiii, 216, maps, photographs, tables, bibliography, index. $25.00.

Germany in the early 1880s was an empire without experience of empire. German missionaries and traders had been active for decades in

several parts of the world--in the western Pacific in quite a big way. Yet Bismarck's decision in 1884 to annex a number of overseas territories still took many observers by surprise. It presented the imperial government with the extraordinary problem of devising appropriate systems of cross-cultural administration. In German New Guinea, inexperience was a major factor in determining what was done (or not done) and how it was done--as with the Australians south of the border. Confusion, blunders, and poor control were to be expected.

Stewart Firth provides us with an excellent overview of German thinking and policies. His book complements that of Peter Hempenstall (*Pacific Islanders Under German Rule,* Canberra, 1978), so that we now have carefully researched accounts of German activities throughout the Pacific. It is one of the principal merits of Firth's book (as of Hempenstall's) that he does not confine himself to German policies or to the mechanics of administration. He gives major emphasis to an assessment of indigenous responses to white intrusion. A further plus is the fact that his history is mercifully free of the determinist preconceptions that have marred so many recent studies of colonial history. The Germans were not all bad. Their administration was not all bad. It was not all nasty exploitation.

The writing of both books has been made possible by the opening to researchers of the imperial archives in Potsdam. Firth has made full use of the opportunity. He has also consulted state and central archives in the Federal Republic, in addition to company and mission records. His work is founded on these primary sources, although the Germans also published a great deal on their Pacific possessions. For that reason his book, as a general history, is unlikely to be superseded for many years.

Where his account is likely to be modified fairly quickly is in the area of indigenous reaction to German pacification and economic development. Here he had to rely largely on the German archival material, which is bound to be skewed. His analysis presents a challenge to regional indigenous historians in New Guinea to correct the Western viewpoint through the techniques and resources of ethnohistory. Firth himself might well have made more extensive use of nonofficial sources, such as modern anthropological studies with a historical component; on the Talai of New Britain, for example, he makes brief reference to Salisbury's work, but ignores altogether the seminal research of A. L. and T. S. Epstein.

Firth makes no claim to originality in the principal questions he asks. His themes are the processes of German involvement, the failure of the chartered company that initially ran the colony (1884-1898), and the development of imperial policies on land, labor, finances, and relations with

the New Guineans. It is his emphasis on the last theme, on seeing the New Guineans as active participants rather than passive victims in the processes of interaction, that gives his writing a special interest. As he rightly notes, the small-scale nature of indigenous societies' meant that, as the frontier of control expanded, the Germans and their local agents became "an extra factor in local politics." While the Germans tried to use village leaders and factions to impose control, they were more often than not used by those leaders and factions to extend their own authority.

Firth raises a number of interesting questions in describing the very different responses of various peoples to German intrusion. While violent, often prolonged, resistance was common, some people welcomed the Germans from the beginning; some groups were overawed; others treated the German presence with something approaching indifference. The reasons for these responses are not always clear. It is obvious that the Tolai fought when German land acquisition became excessive; and the Bougainvilleans reacted against the methods of labor recruitment. But just why did the Manus islanders treat German punitive action against them with the casualness, almost tolerance, indicated by Firth?

His initial chapter on imperial expansion sets the tone for the whole book: it is moderate, balanced, judicious. He properly eschews the simplistic one-shot explanations that still seem to find their way into many historical texts. The process leading to annexation was multifactorial and multicausal (though Firth does quote with approval the view of Wehler that it was Bismarck's intention to whip up nationalist sentiment over imperialism in order to outflank the liberals and socialists in domestic politics, and so entrench Prussian values). New Guinea was a kind of afterthought: it had come into imperial calculations as a labor source for Samoa.

The Neu Guinea Compagnie, which administered the colony for the first fifteen years, was in every respect as disastrous as most of the other chartered companies. Firth might have clarified the fatal, basic flaw in the whole chartered company concept: woefully undercapitalized institutions with commercial personnel and objectives were expected to take new possessions through the difficult, unproductive phase of pacification before they could even begin economic activities. It was financially impossible, and it led to precipitate attempts to bring areas under control and to acquire land and labor. In New Guinea, as Firth notes, rather than introducing the New Guineans to Western notions of justice, the Compagnie adopted from the New Guineans the Melanesian practices of warfare and retribution.

The Compagnie unwisely concentrated on plantation development on the mainland, which was costly and long-term. The reason, according to Firth, was that the Germans were impressed by Java and adopted it as a model, instead of relying on immediate returns from trade with villagers (as was the established practice in the islands). I doubt that the Compagnie was sufficiently significant to warrant Firth's judgement that it represented "one of the great disasters of late nineteenth century colonialism." But it certainly set several unfortunate administrative precedents, including the arbitrary recruitment and brutal treatment of laborers, and the frequent use of ill-controlled punitive expeditions.

Firth rightly sees a change beginning with the arrival of the young Albert Hahl in 1896. He was the imperial governor from 1902 to 1914. Hahl had such an immediate effect (initially in the islands) because he recognized the crucial importance of improving and systematizing relations with the New Guineans. It is true that he saw them as economic assets (possibly dying out, and therefore dwindling assets), but he was also able to approach them as people. So, he gave major attention to what used to be called "native administration." The New Guineans were reassured over their possession of land, and they were given a formal role in government.

While there is no doubt that Hahl continued to put economic development through white plantations first--the imperial government would have tolerated nothing less--he regulated its impact on indigenous societies so as to minimize dislocation. As he told a gathering of settlers at a farewell function in 1914, "all progress depends on our relationship with the natives."

There Will probably always be arguments about Hahl. Though Firth is not unsympathetic, by relying heavily on the official dispatches rather than on Hahl's personal writings he tends toward the cynical interpretation that Hahl regarded the New Guineans as units in the task of development, even if he appreciated a need for humaneness that was deprecated by most German settlers. But it must be remembered that Hahl had to defend himself in Berlin against regular charges that he was delaying development and his dispatches must be read in that light. His autobiography reveals a man interested in indigenous peoples and cultures for their own sake, anxious to consult with them rather than fight them, concerned that they should have wider opportunities. His long service in New Guinea made the German record much better than it would otherwise have been.

It may be carping to charge a general history with a lack of a central focus. Nevertheless it can well be argued that the writing of colonial history should concentrate on the central problem (as hindsight allows us to

see it) of colonial administration: regulating the processes of acculturation. In this light, the points of intersection of the administrative culture and indigenous cultures become the prime foci. At that level Hahl appointed headmen, or *luluais,* to bridge indigenous authority and German officialdom. Firth views these men essentially as policemen, as coercive German agents. That is a longstanding Australian interpretation, but it is debatable. Hahl certainly wanted things done, and the luluais were given duties that involved them in serious role conflict; but the position also meant formal recognition by the Germans of a range of traditional prerogatives of the luluais, who were thus intended to serve a dual function.

Hahl acknowledged the luluais' difficulties, and it was for that reason after 1906 that he began promoting the formation of councils (especially among the Tolai) which brought together a number of customary polities and offered an expanded role for New Guineans, in consultation with German officials, in local decision-making. This system had a good deal in common with the embryonic Native Authorities in contemporary British dependencies, and Hahl appears to have introduced it for similar, sound reasons. It was a significant and progressive innovation, offering the prospect that the New Guineans would play an increasing part in administration and development, from their own cultural bases. Yet the councils are ignored by Firth altogether. This is puzzling.

Firth does not gloss over the brutality and callousness of the Germans; but at the same time he does not give those aspects the almost exclusive prominence to which earlier Australian studies seemed addicted. Peace and order were brought to many areas; medical services were introduced (by both government and missions); a little government education (including technical education) was promoted; a surprising amount of research was encouraged. As with other modern colonies, there were entries on both sides of the ledger. Overall, it is hard to fault the balance of Firth's study.

Allan M. Healy
University of Wollongong