
BOOK REVIEW FORUM

H. E. Maude, *Slavers in Paradise. The Peruvian Labour Trade in Polynesia, 1862-1864*. Stanford: Stanford University Press; Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, The University of the South Pacific; Canberra: The Australian National University Press, 1981. Pp. xxiii, 246, 49 black and white illustrations, 12 maps, index, 9 tables. \$38.95

To call someone a slaver is a powerful accusation, drawing up images of bestial brutality, coffin cargos, and rapacious Europeans exploiting technologically simple populations for the growth of home industry or agriculture. Slavery does seem to be as old as recorded history, and were it not for the institution, most of the world's great monuments to human ingenuity would not have been built; the Golden Age of Greece might not have eventuated, and European colonialism not secured its headstart for two centuries of domination.

Harry Maude, doyen of Pacific historians, does not tell of a grand slavery enterprise, but of a small nation succumbing to temptation. His study of the Peruvian labor trade shows us how an otherwise humanistic government in Peru could permit itself to be duped and entrapped in a situation which it did not make, but did nothing to prevent.

Hidden behind the tale, though, is a chapter in colonialism only now beginning to be finely drawn by the modern historian: what capitalism did to secure the labor it required to continue the expansion of the late nineteenth century, to produce the worlds (first, second, third and fourth) we now know.

Through the work of Guttman and other American historians we know that slavery, the purchase and transport of human beings as chattels, did not cease entirely because of humanitarian pressure, but because it became too expensive. As slavery from Africa faded out, indenture became the slave system transformed. And it was cheaper.

Indenture worked by the drawing up of a contract, in the body of which specified duties for specified compensation (in wages or kind) were apparently agreed upon by the hiring agent and the laborer. Typically, indenture was handled by middlemen, who sought out the prospective laborers. Such contracts usually involved a set period of labor, transport to and from the laborer's place of residence, provision of food and clothing,

and sometimes a small wage. These contracts were then sold to individuals and companies requiring the labor.

In principle, it seemed a straightforward business arrangement. In practice, of course, these contracts often were composed in such a fashion that their implications were unclear to the (often illiterate) laborer. Cash wage was kept so low that there was little chance of a laborer buying his (or her) own contract, and work conditions were only vaguely specified.

It would have been difficult to have differentiated an auction of labor contracts (indenture) from an auction of laborers (slavery); the one difference was that while slavery was for the life of the commodity-laborer, indenture had a specified duration. The effect of this was that the holder of the contract got the labor without having to become responsible over the long term for the laborer.

While Peru will always carry the shame of its short-lived trade, many other countries have prospered through indenture, including the United States, Britain (in its colonies, such as Fiji), and Australia. Both Britain and Australia, along with Peru, had their indenture slavery using South Pacific labor in the nineteenth century.

There is no need to recapitulate the details of the Peruvian episode, as Maude can tell the interested reader that story in fine prose. I would like to consider what has been left out. To say that there are omissions is not to denigrate Maude, for he writes with the British historian's fine eye for detail and integrity for documentation. What he does not do, and this is typical of the tradition, is to do more than to interpret the basic facts. Being atheoretical in orientation, the British historian conventionally does not provide context. We know a great deal about the few months of the trade itself, which began in October 1862 and terminated, as far as Island raids were concerned, within six months.

Context can tell us why the actors in the drama we read might have performed as they did. Why, for example, did Peru not continue to use the more plentiful supply of Chinese "coolies"? Documents I have researched from the period in Peru show that even while Peruvian and other vessels headed for Polynesia, the much larger China clippers still moved to and from Cathay, bringing 600 to 700 laborers on a voyage. This trade was slowed down only slightly by British protests about Peruvian operations in their colony.

Why, to take another example, did France so strenuously oppose the trade? France has a long tradition of *Liberté, Égalité, and Fraternité*. But there was an additional reason why France, through its chargé d'affaires, de Lesseps, should wish to embarrass the Peruvian government in

1862-1863. At that time, the French were seeking to impose their self-styled Emperor Maximilian on the throne of republican Mexico and the Peruvians, along with other American republics, sided with their neighbor to the north.

Perhaps, however, my quibbles about the larger context, including the colonial one, seem unfair to the work Maude has produced for us. What he has provided, that the theoretical historians sometimes do not, are all the details about the incidents. From Maude's *Slavers*, future generations will be able to reinterpret, for the groundwork has been laid, and expertly, too.

In addition to thorough research, extending over many years, there is a detailed index, a scholarly bibliography of fifteen archives and eighty-five sources, with maps showing ship's routes, and twenty-seven pages of careful footnotes. All of this material has been digested for us into nine central tables, placed in an Appendix. Maude's work, in short, is the definitive study of this particular episode, even if it does not tell us much about why such a series of events might have taken place at that time.

There is some strong language from Maude and it is directed mainly against the Peruvians who did allow it to take place. Lima was not some barbarian capital, but the (former) jewel of the Spanish empire, rich in artwork and history. High culture flourished and Limeños (the people of Lima) maintained close and appreciative contacts with European events and trends. Their main newspaper, *El Comercio*, carried features on philosophy, as well as the news of the day. The paper itself was cautious when the trade began and became, within Peruvian society, one of the strongest opponents of the Polynesian importations.

Maude calls part of the trade's effect genocidal and the word was not lightly chosen. It is true that genocide, when we think of massacres of Jews, Armenians, and others in this century, is a deliberate campaign to eradicate a particular racial group. In that sense, the Peruvians were not genocidal in intention though ethnocide was one of its justifications. Part of the argument for the trade was to bring the fruits of European civilization, including Christianity, to Polynesia, to the detriment of the Islanders' own beliefs. Genocide, however, was the effect or near-effect of the trade and for that reason the use of this powerful word is justified.

Peruvian reaction to Maude's study will no doubt be varied: few of its citizens today would be aware that it took place. Even the term "Canaca," being the Hawaiian *kanaka* for human being, now exists in modern Peruvian only in association with brothels. "To Canaca (*canaquear*)" means to frequent Chinese brothels or to behave in a similar dis-solute manner.

Just as Australians are generally ignorant of their Queensland trade, involving Melanesians in the sugar fields of the far north, so many Peruvians today will be surprised to hear of the limits of their ancestors' actions to promulgate agriculture and other industries.

The book will be of particular interest not only to Pacific specialists but to the general reader as well. It is vintage Maude, with that fine prose style that not only informs, but is a pleasure to read. It is a fine product from a quiet Canberra garden.

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This book is Professor Maude's "intermittent labor of love" researched amidst a busy life first as a British administrator and subsequently as a scholar of Pacific history at the Australian National University. Like everything else Maude has written, this work, too, bears all the hallmarks of his scholarship which is characterized by meticulous research and elegant, evocative prose. Professor Maude clearly has a romantic fascination with the South Seas, born no doubt out of his long and deep association with it. This book as a result is replete with words and phrases that conjure in the mind the image of tranquility, peace, and abandon in which the island people lived before the intrusion of the Europeans. Indeed, Maude sees the general reader viewing his account "as the story of the most dramatic region-wide conflict between human greed and bewildered innocence ever to occur in the romantic setting of the South Seas" (p. viii).

This romantic, as opposed to "analytical," vision informs and indeed pervades the whole book which deals with the seven month period between September 1862 and April 1863 when hundreds of Polynesians were taken away by Peruvian recruiters for employment in Peru. All facets of this episode are described and documented. We are told of the numbers of people who were recruited, the islands from which they came, the mortality rate among the laborers, their repatriation, the brutalizing ordeal of shipment, and so on. The discussion of the dynamics of recruitment and shipment of the Polynesian laborers forms the core of the story. One wishes the author had told us more about the social and economic realities of the world from which the islanders had been recruited and the realities of the new environment into which they were introduced. We

would then have had a more composite and full picture of the episode. As it stands, the reader is left with a romanticized picture of the Polynesian world, an impressionistic, and at times derogatory picture of Peruvian society.

Professor Maude's moral outrage at the activities of the rapacious Peruvian recruiters is apparent, as it is also in the title of the book. To him, the elaborate process of labor recruitment, "the inspection of ships' papers and recruits' contracts was a farce," (p. 123). Nine-tenths of the Polynesian laborers "had been tricked or forced into leaving their islands and had little or no knowledge of the purport of the document, written in Spanish and occasionally also in English, which they had been told to put a mark on long after they came on board" (p. 124). In short, Polynesian labor recruitment was slave trade.

The contemporary officials and observers, Maude tells us, were all agreed that the labor traffic indeed resembled slavery; and he is content to go by their opinion. It may be worth noting that the Melanesian labor migration was also viewed in this light by many contemporary observers, especially self-interested missionaries, until critical investigations of scholars such as Peter Corris and Deryck Scarr showed it to be a more complex and two-sided affair. Indian indentured migration has also been viewed as slavery by many people, though detailed investigation of aspects of it have raised serious questions about the validity of the description. Slavery is a problematic concept as the intense debate about it in the United States clearly shows; and the use of the term can just as easily confuse and obscure as it can illuminate. But perhaps the Polynesian episode was unique, something which does not emerge clearly from the narrative, but may have emerged in a more comparative perspective.

A chronological, island-by-island account of recruitment adds color and variety to the book, and it is bound to increase its appeal in those islands from where the laborers were taken. However, such treatment unfortunately detracts from the emergence of a more complete picture of the process of recruitment and shipping of the laborers, besides being repetitive at times. It also leads to the banishment of important statistical information, central to the purpose of the book, to the end, something which at least one numerate reader found disappointing.

Professor Maude's study of a little-known episode in Polynesian history will be welcomed by scholars of Pacific history and especially by *af-ficionados* of Polynesian studies. A general student of Pacific history, however, would probably have been satisfied with a less detailed treat-

ment in the form of a long chapter included in the author's masterly collection of essays, *Of Islands and Men*.

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Slavers in Paradise is clearly a pioneering work. Its greatest importance, obviously, is for Polynesian history. But it also has value for the student of Peruvian social history, bringing out some relatively unknown factual aspects of the contract labor arrangements under which Asian workers were brought to Peru to replace the emancipated Black slaves in the mid-nineteenth century.

The importation of Chinese "coolies" under Peruvian contract labor law has been studied by scholars, but the record of the short-lived arrangement for importing workers from Polynesia for the sugar plantations and for guano mining has been little studied because of the difficulty of finding the documentation; it is a sorry record, indeed, as the author shows. Fortunately, as he brings out in chapter 18, Peruvian humanitarians, prodded especially by the French chargé d'affaires, Edmond de Lesseps, brought a quick end to the traffic, once the abuses became known, though not before thousands of Polynesians had lost their lives because of inhumane treatment and disease. The small population of Polynesia had been reduced to a catastrophic degree, particularly in Easter Island.

The United States, engaged in the Civil War, paid little attention to the abuses in the trade reported from Peru. Hawaiian officials were largely ineffective. Britain, which had important interests in Polynesia, procrastinated, not deciding until the traffic was virtually over, whether or not the islanders were entitled to British protection. Chile, although later claiming the Easter Islands, had no officials there. For this reason some of the worst abuses occurred there. The author appropriately lauds the French representatives and the French government for their active protestations which helped secure the abolition of the traffic. Edmond de Lesseps receives special praise.

Some Peruvian aspects of the study may be open to criticism, even though the author's appropriate emphasis is upon Polynesia. The opening chapter, "The Peruvian Background," for example, will raise questions by Peruvian historians. They may rightly ask why so little attention is given in this chapter to the almost overwhelming domestic and international

problems, social, economic, and political, faced by Peru at this time. They will doubtless resent the derogatory reference to the population of Peru (p. 1) as consisting of "disparate ethnic groups between which there is little in common other than a disinclination to engage in manual labour if it could be avoided." They might also have wished to see more credit given to Peruvian liberals for their abolition of Black slavery and for their struggles against Chinese contract labor, before it was reallocated in 1861.

A reviewer should not quibble over words, but in the interest of accuracy it may be appropriate to raise a question about the use of the terms *slavers* and *slave trade* in the title of the book. No one questions the right of an author to use these terms in their broad popular sense on occasion. But their use in this sense in a careful and precise historical study such as this one seems to mar rather than add to its effectiveness for the historian. The historical institution of slavery had been abolished in Peru and the slaves had left the plantations and guano islands. While some of the aspects of the recruitment and transportation of the Polynesians may have been as bad or worse than the worst of the African slave shipments, it was a different kind of social and economic abuse.

Although the author does not seem to have used computerized statistical techniques, he rates high in terms of quantification. Meager and scattered figures have been gathered from the documents and carefully collated to give a reliable idea of the number of recruits involved, the number of ships employed, the numbers landed and refused landing, and the numbers repatriated. The greatest gap in statistical information seems to be in respect to the workers who stayed on in Peru. Data here is largely lacking. But the author's ingenious calculation of the number of workers from Easter Island is worthy of special mention. Lacking any official records from Easter Island itself, he identified shipments from there by carefully calculating the sailing times of the various vessels arriving in Callao, thus deducing the origin of the shipments.

The author identified 32-33 vessels engaged in the trade, of which 27 were Peruvian, 4 Chilean, 1 Spanish, and (possibly) 1 Tasmanian. The total number of laborers recruited is calculated as 3,634, including 1,407 from Easter Island, 1,915 from other Polynesian islands and 312 from Micronesia.

The saddest aspect of the Polynesian labor recruitment is the record of repatriation, inspired though it was by the humane efforts of French and British officials and by missionaries. "Of the total of 3125 brought to Peru," writes Professor Maude (p. 164), "1216 or 39 percent, were thus retained or put on board four repatriation vessels, but only 157 or 5 percent, landed once again on a Polynesian island alive." The author uses the

term “genocide” to describe this wholesale loss of life. Sensitive Peruvians may resent the implied comparison with the Nazi holocaust, since their objective was not to wipe out a race but to provide workers. Yet the term certainly imparts a vivid sense of the tragedy in Polynesia.

The impact of the incipient Christian missionary efforts in the islands, both Catholic and Protestant, might have received more careful evaluation. While disease of the coconut palm, the islanders’ major food source, was a prime factor in favoring the recruitment, missionaries, somewhat naively, sometimes collaborated with the labor recruiters under the mistaken idea that they were helping to ward off starvation (pp. 76-77, 174-175). However, the London Missionary Society and other missionary groups helped to arouse the public opinion in Peru that brought an end to the traffic. Missionaries also helped to calm the fears and resentment of the islanders, and to reconcile them to the tragedy they had suffered.

While this is a book that may well invite controversy, it is a notable contribution, not only to Polynesian history, but also to the more complex field of comparative history.

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