

T. Walter Herbert, Jr., *Marquesan Encounters: Melville and the Meaning of Civilization*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980. Pp. 237. \$15.00.

Marquesan Encounters is a powerful and provocative examination of the confrontations of three different nineteenth century Americans with the culture of the Marquesan Islands. These confrontations challenged each American's sense of identity, forcing him to reevaluate his own culture's definition of civilization and, ultimately, to reaffirm his values.

T. Walter Herbert, Jr. focuses upon three classic American types prevalent in the Pacific: the imperialist, the missionary, and the romantic. Captain David Porter of the U.S. Navy, whose squadron sailed into Taiohae Bay during the War of 1812 and who claimed the islands for the U.S. government, was perhaps the first (but certainly not the last) American to seek to enhance his nation's power and prestige through territorial acquisition. The Reverend William Alexander, leader of the ill-fated Protestant mission to the islands in the 1830s spread the Word of Christ rather than that of his nation's government. And then there was Herman Melville, sometime sailor and beachcomber, who jumped ship while his vessel was anchored off Nukeheua Island in 1843; he later turned his island adventures into the novel *Typee*.

Fortunately, Melville was not the only one to leave a written record of his experiences. Porter published a description of his voyage and military exploits, and Alexander's reactions are preserved in his correspondence and in reports to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign

Missions. (Herbert also uses Charles Stewart's *A Visit to the South Seas* to supplement his discussion of the missionary perspective on the Marquesans.) The importance of these varied chronicles, Herbert argues, is the light they cast on social boundaries and on the interaction of cultures. Porter, Alexander, and Melville, for instance, all arrived in the islands with certain preconceptions about the host culture and especially about what constituted the civilized person and the savage. Yet civilization meant something different to each man, Herbert asserts. For Captain Porter, civilization "was that state of society in which superior practical achievements are displayed"; it could be achieved by simply mobilizing "human capabilities" to realize the "higher standards of achievement" (pp. 78-79). Things were not quite so simple for the missionaries, who did not share Porter's allegiance to the Enlightenment perspective. They came to the Pacific as "self-confessed emissaries of light and order" and dreamed of establishing a city upon a hill from which God would work his civilizing magic upon the benighted souls of the heathen (pp. 25-26). The romantic Melville offered still another viewpoint, "the vantage of a man viewing the peculiarities of both cultures from a tenuous position somewhat outside both" (p. 157). As such, his sense of what it was to be civilized did not lie within a "general design" (p. 158); unlike Porter and Alexander, Melville questioned whether civilization was in fact morally superior to savagery.

These varied perspectives shaped the way each man assessed his own actions and those of the Marquesans, shaping too the manner in which each justified his behavior on the islands. When their perceptions were challenged or confounded by events--as when the Marquesans failed to respond as predicted to the messages of the Enlightenment or of Calvinism--they usually fell back upon their original preconceptions, no matter how at odds with reality these might be. Herbert skillfully unravels these psychological tensions, and in this *Marquesan Encounters* provides a nice companion piece to Greg Dening's *Islands and Beaches*.

Melville is clearly the hero of this story, a man who sought not to advance civilization but to expose its barbarity. He found, as time passed, that the very concept of civilization was "coming to pieces in his hands" (p. 156). This disintegration, Herbert argues, led Melville to seek to alter America's sense of cultural superiority. *Typee* was thus a kind of missionary tract designed in part to stimulate a "moral reconstruction" (p. 181), a goal that twentieth century cultural relativists might applaud. But there is danger in such applause, for it drowns out discordant notes. One ought to remember, after all, that Melville came to the islands as a seaman, a role illustrative of broader American penetration and exploitation

of the Pacific (just as Tommo's sexual liaison with Fayaway in *Typee* put such things on a personal level). And Melville left the Marquesans with his (white) skin intact: not for him the full-body tattoos that would have indicated his rejection of "civilization." Nor, finally, was he any more immune to visions of American specialness and mission than were Porter and Alexander, as this passionate declaration from *White Jacket* reveals: "We Americans are the peculiar, Chosen people--the Israel of our times; we bear the ark of the Liberties of the World. . . . God has given us, for a future inheritance, the broad domains of the political pagans, that shall yet come and lie down under the shade of our ark." Herman Melville may have exposed some of the tensions within the nineteenth century concept of civilization, but he could not transcend them.

In *Marquesan Encounters*, Herbert boldly attempts an interdisciplinary analysis of the Americans' vivid reactions to Marquesan life. With varying degrees of success, he draws upon the insights of cultural anthropology, history, literary criticism, theology, and other scholarly disciplines. The cross-fertilization might have been more effective, however, had Herbert's prose not bordered on the opaque. His reliance upon the jargon of social science and structuralism often obscures the thrust of his argument and tends to reinforce the "territorial impulses" among scholars that Herbert would like to diminish. Interdisciplinary scholarship, in short ought to be intelligible to those in disparate disciplines. Still, this is a fascinating account of how some nineteenth century Americans who ventured into the Pacific were there forced to come to terms with their most deeply held beliefs and ideals.

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