

SAVAGES NOBLE AND IGNOBLE:
The Preconceptions of Early European Voyagers in Polynesia

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Among the many notions which Europeans have held about non-European peoples that of the Noble Savage is perhaps the best known. Even students with only a bare acquaintance with history know the term and can suggest that Europeans traversed the world expecting to find one reclining beneath every palm tree. They probably also know that on closer examination Noble Savages were prone to become less noble, and to be seen as the bearers of vices which another European habit commonly ascribes to foreigners. The prevalence of these beliefs is not particularly remarkable and is probably due less to actual knowledge of the past than to the fact that people still do harbor romantic ideas about life in the state of nature, free from the sophisticated plagues of urbanization, rural squalor, government, laissez-faire, employment, unemployment, pollution, hypertension, loneliness, over-crowding and the activities of the multinational corporations. The message lies within every tourist industry poster and leaflet enticing people to forget in one or another Pacific haven.

Although it is commonly associated with the eighteenth century, and in particular with the name of Rousseau, the belief in the actual or possible existence of people living virtuously, happily and simply is one of the great continuities of European history. As Baudet has shown throughout recorded history, Europeans have nurtured an image of human perfectability which has sometimes been associated with the distant past, and at other times has been thought of as contemporary, but geographically remote.¹ By the second half of the eighteenth century, many people had been successively associated with the idea, so it was probably inevitable that the most remote peoples of all, the antipodean Pacific islanders, should have their turn. Perhaps that extreme remoteness accounts for some vestige of the idea lingering in people's perceptions of the Pacific; it has of course been helped considerably by the durability of the Polynesian reputation for friendliness and hospitality. If one were to survey popular opinion asking "the man in the street" what place he most readily associated with the term Noble Savage, the most common answer would probably be Tahiti, or Polynesia, or the Pacific islands.

¹Henri Baudet, *Paradise on Earth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965).

It is only a short step from being aware of the idea of the Noble Savage, and of its persistence in European imaginations, to using it as a device to explain various aspects of European conduct in the Pacific, and this tendency is reinforced by noticing the romantic imagery and speculations of voyagers of the eighteenth century and later. The obvious inferences to be drawn are that these ideas were widespread, and that they were closely related to behavior. The argument of this paper is that both these inferences are false.

To begin with, however, it should perhaps be pointed out--as Bernard Smith has done--that the Tahitians were not the only Pacific islanders to bear the burden of supposed perfection.² The Noble Savage could be found wherever he was sought. For example, the people of the Palau Islands in the far western Pacific enjoyed a vogue for a few years following the publication of the experiences of the survivors of the East India Company vessel *Antelope* that Captain Henry Wilson wrecked there in 1783.³ In this account, not written it should be noted by Wilson or any member of his crew, but from information given by them, the Palauans were represented as enjoying a life of plenty (what is now called subsistence affluence), governed by principles of natural justice, natural courtesy, hospitality, and honesty. Wilson had returned to Britain with the son of the local king. The young man was known as Prince Lee Boo and his premature death in Britain inspired poems by at least two minor Romantic poets and a passing reference from Coleridge.⁴ The pathetic story of Prince Lee Boo and the vision of natural perfection in the account of Wilson's experiences in the Palau Islands led one of Wilson's colleagues, John McCluer, a Captain in the East India Company, to resign in 1793 and retire to these supposed "Islands of the Blest." That McCluer should become disillusioned with savage life followed more or less inevitably; his expectations were so unrealistic one can only marvel that he stayed as long as he did: fifteen months.⁵

The Palauans did not hold their preeminence for long. They were simply forgotten when, in the 1790s new exploring expeditions, early trade relations, and missionary aspirations turned the attention of Europe once more to its favorite cult figure, the Tahitian. This association between

²Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

³George Keate, *An Account of the Pelew Islands, Situated in the Western Part of the Pacific Ocean . . .* (London: printed for Captain Wilson, 1789).

• ⁴H. N. Fairchild, *The Noble Savage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928), pp. 117, 273, 276. The two minor poets are W. L. Bowles and Joseph Cottle.

⁵J. P. Hockin, *A Supplement to the Account of the Pelew Islands* (London: printed for Captain Wilson, 1803).

developing contact and a developing romantic ideal is provocative inasmuch as it implies a causal connection between the two. On closer inspection, however, such a connection proves to be tenuous at best.

In the 1780s and 1790s thinking people in Britain (notably the Evangelicals) became concerned that the near perfect savages of Polynesia fell short of perfection in their ignorance of Christian theology and morality and that their imperfections were likely to be increased by contact with Europeans. This concern lay behind the formation in 1795 of the Missionary Society (later London Missionary Society). Even here, however, the influence of the concept of the Noble Tahitians is less than it might appear. Much of the pro-Mission propaganda was concerned generally with the lost souls of the heathen in many places. Yet some modest claim can be made for the Tahitians and their image inasmuch as they provided the inspiration to the Rev. Dr. Thomas Haweis, the Father of the Missionary Society.⁶ The Tahitians and their close cultural relations in the Marquesas and Tonga became the first objects of missionary attention. As Gunson has argued, Evangelical clergy generally were hostile to the idea of the Noble Savage,⁷ but it is true to say that the currency of the myth and the publicity which it generated for Tahiti and its neighbors was a strong contributing factor in the development of missionary enterprises.

Notwithstanding the limited influence of the Noble Savage in this most likely example, there is a tendency to interpret European actions, policies, and perceptions in terms of preconceptions and misconceptions. The "invisible baggage," in other words, is taken to be (and it often is) a powerful influence in directing behavior. Among the many items of "invisible baggage," however, the idea of the Noble Savage is much less conspicuous than has frequently been assumed.⁸ It is in fact, extremely difficult to establish that the explorers and other early visitors were fuzzy-

⁶See R. Lovett, *The History of the London Missionary Society, 1795-1895*, 2 vols. (London: Henry Frowde, 1899), I: 117-120.

⁷Niel Gunson, *Messengers of Grace* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 96.

⁸The potency of the Noble Savage has been taken for granted most recently and notably in a remark by K. R. Howe, "The Fate of the 'Savage' in Pacific Historiography," in *The New Zealand Journal of History*, 2 (1977), 138. See also W. H. Pearson, "Hawkesworth's Alterations," in *The Journal of Pacific History*, 7 (1972), 45-72. Pearson argues that the alterations made by Hawkesworth to the journals of Cook and Banks when he prepared them for publication were done for reasons other than promoting primitivism. In doing so, however, he implies that primitivism was a characteristic of the thinking of the explorers. Despite this implication, Pearson's turning attention away from primitivism is consistent with the argument of this paper.

headed Romantics whose apprehension of experience was distorted by ideas of natural perfection.

The commonly accepted candidates for such confusion are Bougainville, Banks, and Forster. Bougainville's narrative can be found to contain passages which in their mode of presentation suggest his having been influenced by the current Arcadian vogue, and by a belief that men in a state of nature (Tahitians in this case) enjoyed pleasures and freedom from tension and anxiety denied the rest of humanity. For example, he wrote of one visit ashore:

We were stopped by an islander, of a fine figure who lying under a tree, invited us to sit down by him on the grass. We accepted his offer; he then leaned towards us, and with a tender air he slowly sung a song, without doubt of the anacreontic kind, to the tune of a flute, which another Indian blew with his nose: this was a charming scene, and worthy the pencil of Boucher.⁹

Of another occasion he wrote: "The ground was spread with leaves and flowers, and their musicians sung an hymned song to the tune of their flutes. Here Venus is the goddess of hospitality . . ." ¹⁰ Bougainville, incontestably, was charmed; but it is either a simple fact or it is not, that flowers were strewn, that Tahitians sang, that the people seemed happy. Whatever their tone, these statements are statements of observation, not of expectation or interpretation. Bougainville's use of contemporary imagery is not sufficient evidence to identify him as a believer in the nobility of "savagery." To establish that the Noble Savage was a major influence with Bougainville it would be necessary to show that statements similar to those quoted constituted at least a large proportion of his descriptions of the Tahitians and, secondly, that he made similar statements about other peoples in addition to the Tahitians. Both of these conditions cannot be met. Such passages are rare in Bougainville's narrative, and these passages are to be found on the same pages as accounts of the French setting up an armed camp, of Tahitians stealing from the French, of what seemed to Bougainville to be free love and of which he was censorious, and even of clashes leading to bloodshed. At the reconciliation after the bloodshed Bougainville wrote: "The good islanders loaded me with caresses; the people applauded the reunion, and in a short time the usual crowd and the thieves returned to our quarters."¹¹ Bougainville found much of which to approve in Tahitian society, and praised what he

⁹L. A. de Bougainville, *A Voyage Round the World* . . . (London: J. Nourse, 1772), p. 222.

¹⁰Bougainville, p. 228.

¹¹Bougainville, p. 236.

liked; but he also noticed and described cruel warfare, human sacrifice, polygamy, and fickleness. These, to Bougainville, were as much characteristics of savage life as were, in the Tahitian case, open houses, the apparent absence of private property, good humour, and hospitality. That he was not indiscriminating in his observations is shown by his remarks about other peoples; the Samoans he found less gentle, and of more savage features, than the Tahitians;¹² and the Patagonians, not ordinarily nominated for nobility, he found hospitable, affectionate, robust, humane, handsome and well made.¹³ Therefore, to see Bougainville as the perpetrator of myths, as an observer who could not distinguish between what he saw and his own disposition, is to read into him defects which belong elsewhere.

According to Bernard Smith, Bougainville and Banks were enthusiasts of a similar kind; both thinking that they had sailed into the Golden Age.¹⁴ Banks's reputation among historians has perhaps declined in recent years. He seems to be remembered more for his "any blockhead can do a grand tour of Europe" remark, and less for his contributions to science. He was not, in 1768, an infatuated adolescent simply enjoying himself in exotic places. His scientific observations were notably thorough and dispassionate, as is shown by his description of the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego. He described their appearance, voices, weapons, housing, and method of government without any suggestion of favorable or unfavorable prejudices. On meeting the Tahitians, his first impressions left him "admiring a policy at least equal to any we had seen in civilizd countries, exercisd by people who have never had any advantage but mere natural instinct uninstructed by the example of any civilizd country."¹⁵

In other words, Banks expected savages to be rude and uncultivated: in a word, savage. The next day he had an experience of "some hundreds of natives who shewed a deference and respect to us which much amazd me."¹⁶ After their first clash of interest with the Tahitians, leading to the fatal shooting of a Tahitian, Banks witnessed a chief meting out justice to offenders who stole from the voyagers. Impressed, Banks called the chief Lycurgus, and his powerfully built friend, Hercules. This word play of Banks might be taken as evidence that he was steeped in the vogue of

¹²Bougainville, p. 281.

¹³Bougainville, pp. 137-142.

¹⁴Smith, p. 26.

¹⁵J. C. Beaglehole, ed., *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks, 1768-1771*, 2 vols. (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1962), I:256.

¹⁶Beaglehole, I:256.

classical learning and in the cult of the simple virtues to such an extent that he perceived an identity of moral stature between the classical heroes, and the leaders of a savage people whose good sense, decorum and judgment was thought to be instinctive.¹⁷ That Banks was thinking nothing of the kind ought to be suspected when one learns that he and his friends gave the name Ajax to one man because of his “grim countenance,” and to a fourth fellow--a big eater--the name Epicurus. Suspicion hardens into proof when one reads Banks’s journal entry a few days later: “This day we found that our friends had names and they were not a little pleased to discover that we had them likewise; for the future Lycurgus will be called Tubourai Tamaide . . .”¹⁸ The next day Hercules was discovered to be “Tootahah,” and Banks’s little joke ended. He used classical names because it was expedient to call people something; a name which seemed to match observed characteristics would be easily remembered, and that Banks chose classical names demonstrates only that there are not suitable English ones equally distinctive, that Banks had been educated in the classics, and that he was a man of wit.

Elsewhere, Banks’s observations about the Tahitians are similar to Bougainville’s. He liked some aspects of Tahitian culture and said so; he disliked others; he described them all. He was impressed with Tahitian craftsmanship in timber, stone and reeds, and compared such work favorably with that done by European artisans--implying an expectation of European superiority, not an expectation of savage perfection. He told the story of two of Cook’s marines deserting in Tahiti with no trace of Romanticism; he gave full details of thefts; and far from idealizing the Tahitians, he wrote of them when he met their neighbors on Huahine: “The people also were almost exactly like our late [friends] but rather more stupid and lazy.”¹⁹ This is not to deny Banks’s enchantment with Polynesian life, but he remained an astute observer and was not swept off his feet by the tide of Romanticism. His final judgement on them, in Latin: “O great happy if they but knew their own happiness”²⁰ when read in context is evidence only of what he saw--not of what he hoped to see, or of what he subsequently fancied.

The third traveler nominated by Howe as particularly prone to identify Pacific islanders with the Noble Savage ideal was George Forster, a

¹⁷Smith, pp. 24-25; Howe, pp. 137-39.

¹⁸Smith, pp. 265-266.

¹⁹Smith, p. 315.

²⁰Smith, p. 342.

²¹Howe, p. 318.

naturalist on Cook's second voyage.²¹ Here surely is a case of mistaken identity. George Forster's narrative is among the most temperate of all, and while there are a few passages in his long, two-volume work which could conceivably be interpreted as supporting the charge of Romanticism, they do so only if taken out of context.²² George Forster was an astute, detailed observer; he did find much in Polynesian and Melanesian life to admire, and much which was not admirable. But inasmuch as he attached any moral value to the habits and institutions and modes of life of the many peoples he met, it was to demonstrate the superiority of civilization.²³ In one place he specifically dissociates himself from Rousseau and "the superficial philosophers who re-echo his maxims."²⁴

George Forster was the younger partner in the father and son team which accompanied Cook on the *Resolution*, and it is the father Johann Reinhold Forster who seems to support the belief in primitive virtue and innocence, and sophisticated vice and decadence. But such an interpretation also would represent a misreading of his work. J. R. Forster, like his son, was too intelligent a scientist for such crude polarizing.²⁵ He was an environmental determinist, although there are indications that he believed in a state of primitive perfection, as did anyone who accepted the doctrine of the Fall. In Forster's view, the ancient civilizations represented the pinnacle of human achievement, and he had no illusions that humanity had ever escaped from fallibility to the extent of living a life of supposedly Rousseau-esque virtue. The most debased in his view were those who lived in the harshest environments--those further from the tropics: "The inhabitants of the islands in the South Sea, though unconnected with highly civilized nations, are more improved in every respect, as they live more and more distant from the poles . . ."²⁶ This is not to say that civilization is corrupt simply on the grounds of Europe's high latitudes:

. . . the happiness which European nations enjoy, and are capable of, becomes, on account of the degeneracy of a few profligate

²²George Forster, *A Voyage Round the World* . . . 2 vols. (London: B. White, 1777), 1257, 303, 368; II:350, 383.

²³Forster, II:236, 324-326, 363-364.

²⁴Forster, II:207.

²⁵His rehabilitation has been thoroughly carried out by M. E. Hoare, "Johann Reinhold Forster, the Neglected 'Philosopher' of Cook's Second Voyage (1772-1775)," in *The Journal of Pacific History*, 2 (1967), 215-224.

²⁶J. R. Forster, *Observations made during a Voyage*. . . (London: G. Robinson, 1778), pp. 286-287.

individuals, very much debased, and mixed with the miseries . . . entailed . . . by luxury and vice; if therefore the felicity of several European and Asiatic nations, seems to be inferior to that of some of the nations of the South Sea . . . it does not seem to follow, that a high degree of civilization must necessarily lessen, or destroy natural, moral, or social happiness.²⁷

Forster was an astute scientist. His theories were based on observation. He employed his observations in attempts to explain the way things were. He did not set out with a ready-made theory or fantasy which he then imposed uncritically and unintelligently on his experiences. His ethnographic accounts of many peoples encountered on the voyage are both favorable and unfavorable according to local circumstances; and for none of these people does he fancy that he has met an archetype Noble Savage. The Tahitians, however, were for him the pinnacle of savage development, and he praised them for "their delicacy of manners, true courtesy and politeness; their cheerful and open behaviour; their goodness of heart, and hospitality, their knowledge of plants, birds . . ." ²⁸

Far from wallowing in the sea of sentimentality about primitives which is commonly thought to have characterized the eighteenth century, Forster was in advance of his time, foreshadowing the social evolutionist ideas which were not fully articulated for over a century. The stages of social development he likened to the stages of individual growth, and developed analogies between infancy and animality, childhood and savagery, adolescence and barbarism, civilization and maturity; progress from one stage to another could not be accelerated, nor any stages avoided.²⁹ Forster's personal view of the attractions of savage life--even at the Tahitian pinnacle--was not that of a man seduced: "a man in his senses cannot but think himself happy that he was born in a civilized nation . . . the happiness of the savage is not so eligible, as some philosophers will make us believe, who never viewed mankind in this debased situation . . ." ³⁰ One cannot help concluding that Forster would have regarded a Noble Savage as a contradiction in terms.

These four examples: Bougainville, Banks and the two Forsters are not necessarily representative of eighteenth-century voyagers; they are, however, supposedly the giddiest of a naïve and Romantic crew, and therefore ought to be sufficient to show that, as the older Forster suggests, they

²⁷Forster, p. 287.

²⁸Forster, p. 294.

²⁹Forster, p. 303.

³⁰Forster, pp. 302-303.

were mere philosophers who never saw a savage, who wanted to ennoble him. The cult of the Noble Savage, therefore, seems to be something which has been elevated to a position of unreal importance by historians who have perhaps succumbed to the myth themselves, or at least have adopted an unduly elitist bias. Samuel Johnson's view was in fact more representative of educated opinion; he dismissed accounts of primitives with the words, "There is little entertainment in such books: one set of savages is like another."³¹

Nor should the child-savage imagery employed by Forster (and also by Lapérouse) mislead. The eighteenth century produced a cult of the child, twin to the cult of the savage, with practically interchangeable imagery and sentimentality. Yet there is little basis for the belief that the lot of children in the later eighteenth century was either especially enviable or markedly improving. Certainly their condition does not suggest a widespread belief in childish innocence and natural virtue. If savages were regarded as childlike, children were regarded as savage.

By the time that continuous European activity in the Pacific began, simplistic ideas which ennobled and glamorized primitive life were already being superseded by ideas which firmly placed the races of man on a scale of Being, a set of ideas which only awaited Darwin's model of evolution to become part of the stock-in-trade of scientific and popular thinking on race alike. Yet the assumption is commonly made that such misconceptions about the lives of non-European peoples were widespread conventions among large sections of the population, and this assumption is especially the case when dealing with European activity in the Pacific. For example, when writing of common sailors--generally illiterate, and with no obvious access to the intellectual playthings of the rich and learned--E. S. Dodge explains deserters leaving their vessels because they were captivated with "tropical islands that were nearer to paradise than any of the weary whalers could possibly imagine . . ."³² The whalerships, one might argue, were certainly as far from paradise as any weary whaler could possibly imagine, but a survey of popular attitudes towards the Pacific islanders does not support views such as that quoted. Some voyagers, of course sailed with a preconceived optimism; but even if a most generous interpretation is placed upon the evidence, references to islanders being savage and treacherous cannibals outnumber references to them as being something akin to hospitable children of nature by at least six to one.

³¹Fairchild, p. 338.

³²Ernest S. Dodge, *New England and the South Seas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 34-35.

Some of the apparently prosavage evidence is at best, ambiguous, and some such references can easily be explained away. For example, one of the first traders in the North Pacific, John Meares, was faced with mutiny after spending the winter of 1788-89 at Nootka Sound, on the northwest coast of America. Meares attributed the mutiny to the harshness of Nootka, the repulsiveness of its inhabitants and their alleged cannibalism, in contrast to Hawai'i which they had visited on the outward voyage. Meares promised his crew that they could soon sail for Hawai'i, and "the eyes of everyone sparkled at the thought."³³ Hawai'i represented warmth, good food, and women--and no fear of being eaten. Under the circumstances one could not claim this anecdote for the favorable image of Hawai'i in the popular imagination; the crew had already visited Hawai'i, and the starkness of Nootka Sound was incentive enough to visit another place--perhaps any other place. The proper significance of this ambiguous anecdote is clarified when it is compared with the reactions of another weary sailor as he approached New Zealand, which, he said, "had ever been associated in our minds with all that is barbarous and inhuman in savage life." Nevertheless, such was the weariness of a long voyage that even "barbarous and inhuman" New Zealand was "by no means an unwelcome sight."³⁴ In other words, circumstances made an unsought encounter tolerable.

Circumstances did not always improve the view of savage life. When in 1802 the *Margaret* was wrecked in the Tuamotus, the crew preferred their chances on the sea in a "crazy punt" than trust to the mercy of savages. Their employer wrote of their behavior in the proximity of islanders: "It may not be unnecessary to observe, that two out of three of these fellows were convicts; and, however courageously they had dared the laws of their country, they were now only remarkable for their pusillanimity."³⁵ Nor is this the only example of desperate castaways preferring the sea. John Twyning's narrative is a story of five days of intense hunger and thirst, of two boat's crews and a dog in one boat, a rough sea, a black squall approaching and still the Captain and some of the men opposed making for land inhabited by savages.³⁶

³³John Meares, *Voyages Made in the Years 1788 and 1789* . . . (London: Logographic Press, 1790), p. 191.

³⁴J. Oliver, *The Wreck of the Glide* (London and New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1848), p. 17.

³⁵John Turnbull, *A Voyage Round the World* (London: A. Maxwell, 1813), p. 304.

³⁶John P. Twyning, *Shipwreck and Adventures* (London: the author, 1850), pp. 41-42.

Such stories of the imagined terrors of castaways could be multiplied, and are not confined to one part of the ocean or to one group of islands.³⁷ Even Tonga--Cook's "Friendly Islands"--was looked on with dread: Mariner said that at the time of the *Port-au-Prince* massacre in 1806, he would have preferred to be a victim than a survivor.³⁸ Two decades later, sailors had a horror of Tonga's supposedly barbarous state of cannibalism, and castaways in the vicinity prayed that the missionaries would find them first.³⁹

Captain Alexander McKonachie in a survey of the commercial potential of the Pacific islands summarized what was known or believed of their inhabitants. He was writing in 1818. Of the New Caledonians, for instance, he contrasted the favorable account of Cook with the unfavorable account of D'Entrecasteau. Of Polynesia, the most likely place to find Noble Savages, he described the people as follows: New Zealanders are notorious for their warlike nature; Tongans fierce and treacherous; Samoans very fierce; Society Islanders (including Tahitians), although cheerful and hospitable when first discovered, "bore the incontestable marks of habitual sensual indulgence," but subsequent contact has robbed them of their good characteristics. The Marquesans are handsome, but fierce and intractable, and also given to "excesses of sensual indulgence"; the Hawaiians were fierce and intractable also, but not always hostile, and had improved a great deal.⁴⁰ That McKonachie was reflecting a general opinion is verified by an American sailor, Milo Calkin, who toured the Pacific in 1836. Calkin found himself practically overwhelmed by the difficulty of conveying adequately what he described as the "immense depravity and ignorance" of man in a state of nature. Nevertheless, he was able to identify the characteristics which mark the different island populations: the Marquesans, Samoans, and Tongans were warlike; the Fijians treacherous; the people of Hawaii, Society, and Cook Islands had progressed furthest and were less offensive than their brethren.⁴¹

³⁷Compare Horace Holden, *A Narrative of the Shipwreck . . .* (Boston: Russell, Shattock and Co., 1836), pp. 27, 33.

³⁸John Martin, *An Account of the Natives of the Tongan Islands* (London: John Murray, 1818), I:46-47.

³⁹Rev. Walter Lawry; "Diary, 1818-1825," ms. p. 82; Thomas W. Smith, *A Narrative of the Life . . .* (Boston: W. C. Hill, 1844), p. 191; Peter Bays, *A Narrative of the Wreck of the Minerva Whaler* (Cambridge: B. Bridges, 1831), p. 26.

⁴⁰Captain Alexander McKonachie, *A Summary view of the Statistics and Existing Commerce* (London: Richardson and Blackwood, 1818), pp. 201-223.

⁴¹Milo Calkin, *The Last Voyage of the Independence* (San Francisco: privately printed, 1953), p. 50.

From the supposedly romantic French explorers of the eighteenth century to the American sailors of the mid-nineteenth, there is not much sign of the Noble Savage. If he was not altogether extinct, then his provenance was extremely limited--probably extending no further than the salons, libraries, and drawing rooms of those philosophers and romanticizers whose ideas and information derived principally from their imaginations. The idea of the Noble Savage was real enough, but it played no part that can be identified in shaping the political, social, or economic history of the Pacific, at least before the age of official colonization. The tenacity of the idea is clearly enough seen in the advertising of the tourist industry which unequivocally appeals to people's hopes, delusions or impressions; but it is only with modern methods of travel which have brought the Pacific close to major concentrations of European populations, that one can detect any close relationship between the Noble Savage fantasy and a major historical development.

Explaining the existence of these ideas is less easy than demonstrating their limited currency. It is clear, however, that such ideas did not develop as a result of European contact with Polynesia. It also seems likely, though with less certainty, that the decline of these ideas in Europe also had little to do with events in the Pacific. The entire, intricate complex of ideas about non-European peoples involving a multiplicity of images in addition to that of the mid-eighteenth century Noble Savage, belongs unequivocally to the intellectual history of Europe, not to the social history of the Pacific; nor, it may be inferred, of Africa, Australia, Asia, or America. If the idea of the Noble Savage is to be understood and if its full significance is to be appreciated, then attention should be focused on the European intellectual climate, and in particular on ideas about race. In this respect evidence from the Pacific seems to be illuminating. For a start, attitudes to Pacific peoples were not modified by experience. In a strict sense, islanders were stereotyped in the European mind. However much personal encounter might contradict the preconceived image, the preconception prevailed with each new encounter. The whaler H. E. Harrison, for example, was delighted with the hospitality and friendliness of the Marquesans during his visit there in the 1830s, but insisted that continued vigilance was necessary because adjacent communities in the same group of islands were cannibal.⁴² Herman Melville tells us the same thing.⁴³ Wariness is, of course, consistent with prudence, but the

⁴²H. E. Harrison, "Journal of a Voyage . . . ship *Benjamin Rush*," ms. 1833-4, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand, pp. 34-35.

⁴³Herman Melville, *Typee* (New York: New American Library, 1964), pp. 38-41, 66.

persistence of the stereotype suggests that these fears are evidence less of prudence than of a pervasive and tenacious characteristic of European culture.

Even the early missionaries who expected the most of the Polynesians, did not expect to find Noble Savages. They did expect to find people who could be brought close to the Evangelical ideal of piety, a puritan morality, hard labor and sombre pleasures by being shown the way. In this sense the missionary view of the Pacific peoples was an optimistic one. At the same time, however, the missionary view was dark and pessimistic. The Polynesians, they thought, needed salvation not simply to the extent of opening their eyes to the gospel, but because they were sunk in depravity and wretchedness, debased by a culture which because it was not Gods handiwork was the work of the Devil.⁴⁴

European attitudes at both extremes were unrealistic. The optimistic fantasies of the armchair philosophers and the dark fears of the travellers equally bore little relationship to the reality of life in the Pacific. The fears were less naïve, but not less unrealistic, as is demonstrated in the attitudes of Europeans to cannibalism. This particular fear is highly revealing because it demonstrates that much of the fear and horror relates to the treatment of corporeal remains after death rather than to their treatment in life. That is why the fear is unrealistic. Cannibalism was not practiced in quite the way, nor for quite the reasons, nor as widely as Europeans commonly thought; and unless one strongly shares the belief that rising from the dead on the day of the Last Judgement depends in part at least on one's having been interred in a fully articulated condition, then what happens after one is killed by the ignoble savages is irrelevant. Yet the savages being cannibals rather than simply murderers, figures prominently in the expressed fears of European travellers.⁴⁵

What might be salvaged from this abundance of unrealism is the proposition that the conflicting opinions do not cancel each other out especially since, in this case, both poles of thought had such a strong hold on the eighteenth and nineteenth century imagination. The fact that both

⁴⁴Missionary attitudes to the Pacific islanders, particularly the Polynesians, are explored by Gunson, pp. 195-214.

⁴⁵For example, J. Shillibeer, *Narrative of the Briton's Voyage . . .* (London: Law and Whittaker, 1817), p. 38; Isaac Driver, "Log of the Ship *Clay*," ms. Pacific-Bêche-de-Mer journals, Microfilm Department of Pacific History, Australian National University; E. im Thurn and L. C. Wharton, *The Journal of William Lockerby* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1925), p. 19; R. L. Browning, "Notes on the South Sea Islands," ms. Browning Family Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

poles were produced, and nurtured, and flourished within the same cultural matrix is indicative of the complexity of European attitudes to non-European peoples. It would be misleading to dismiss them simply as “different points of view.” The existence of the idea of the Noble Savage is intimately though indirectly related to the existence of the irrational dread of cannibalism, almost in the sense that one is dependent on the other. The two attitudes seem to be another dimension of an attraction-repulsion complex which is manifested in other forms in Pacific history: in the desire of beachcombers to live in the islands, and their desire to get away again; in the loving way missionaries sought to redeem their people, and in their private remarks about depravity, degeneration, and “vile people;” in the desire of administrators to preserve, and their compulsion to eradicate indiscriminately many aspects of indigenous culture.

To link opposing attitudes or feelings in this manner is, on the face of it, contradictory. The suggestion of ambivalence is, however, compatible with the known irrational element in race relations generally. Race is one issue upon which people do frequently hold contradictory attitudes, and the contradiction often takes the form outlined above: simultaneous idealization and condemnation. To reconcile the contradictions, that is, to come to a degree of understanding which can present extremes of human experience as a unity, some consideration should be given to the role of unconscious motivation. In this shadowy and uncertain area, dark skin color is often a symbol for a range of different fears, hopes, aspirations and frustrations. The pattern which emerges in conscious belief systems and behavior depends on the interplay of the mechanisms of the mind with the experiences of childhood which provide the data for fantasy, and with more immediate, consciously apprehended experience. It becomes possible, consequently, to associate with a remote community the desires which are at present unattainable, and also anxieties which threaten one's own security. The element of admiration in envy is an example of this process. When the remote community in question is a colored one, the product of fantasy becomes elaborated with the emotive associations which color may have. Hence the psychoanalytical commonplace that “There is little doubt that for . . . the primitive strata of our own psyche, the association of darkness with badness, sexuality and mystery intensifies our feelings about differently coloured folk, and often their fascination for us.”⁴⁶

⁴⁶Frieda Fordham, “The Shadow in Jungian Psychology and Race Prejudice,” *Race*, II (1961), 68.

The implications of psychoanalysis have not escaped other historians who have been interested in attitudes to race. Baudet, for example, hinted at the ambivalence in European thought when he observed that "The improper held an inordinate fascination for the eighteenth century . . . one is inclined to believe that the exotic nakedness and sexual freedom reported by so many travelers must from the outset have fascinated a Christian Europe hemmed in by so many strict moral rules."⁴⁷ Nakedness and unchastity were two things which Europeans in the Pacific islands were most anxious to stamp out. The intensity of this aim suggests a strong emotional reaction which in turn is indicative of a violent unconscious conflict between desire and repression. Even dancing was forbidden because of its erotic connotations, and the contemporary justification that it was the work of the Devil adds further support to the identification of dogma about primitive peoples with unconscious conflicts and prohibitions.

The same complex of ideas was noticed and applied by Mannoni in *Prospero and Caliban* where he argued that civilized man identifies primitive man with his own unconscious, and therefore with the uninhibited expression of his own instincts.⁴⁸ The Noble Savage therefore represents European Man's ideal self image which he knows to be nonexistent, or perhaps unattainable. This ideal man personifies morality, lacking all the vices and passions which are the objects of repression and censure. An excellent example of such a creature is Crusoe's Man Friday--quite sexless and canine in his devotion and loyalty; another is the sprite Ariel in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. To counterbalance the impossibly-virtuous Noble Savage was the terrifying cannibal: the personification of all the repressed passions--naked, ungovernable, licentious, violent and significantly dark, both morally and physically--which all the forces of church, law, and puritan morality were allied in repressing.

The "invisible baggage" which Europeans took with them to the Pacific was therefore considerably more complex than a series of boxes variously labelled with slogans like "Noble Savage." Instead of using such relatively simple concepts, historians must explore and invoke as a unity the complex of attraction-repulsion, love-hate, and repression-nostalgia which lies at the core of European attitudes to non-European peoples.

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⁴⁷Baudet, p. 48.

⁴⁸O. Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban* (New York: Praeger, 1964), p. 99.