

Gavan Daws. *A Dream of Islands, Voyages of Self-Discovery in the South Seas*. New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1980. Pp. xiv, 289, illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. \$14.95.

Here is historical biography at its best! Daws has provided five carefully crafted psychological portraits that are scholarly without being pedantic. The author offers a glimpse of the thorough research that underlies this book ("A Note on Sources," pp. 275-281), but it is much to his credit that the text is left uncluttered by footnotes and citations. As such, the book

will not only be widely read by academics, but should prove equally of wide appeal to the intelligent lay reader.

The five men whose life vignettes are presented span the nineteenth century: John Williams ("an entrepreneur of religion"), Herman Melville ("a common sailor who was uncommon"), Walter Murray Gibson ("a confidence man"), Robert Louis Stevenson ("literary ectomorph"), and Paul Gauguin ("a demented Mr. Hyde with a paintbrush"). For all their idiosyncracies, Daws shows that these men shared a number of common characteristics. Above all, each sailed to the Pacific in search of "self-expression, self-realization, self-justification" - each sought to "reveal himself to himself."

In a way, the men Daws sketches were misfits in their own societies who became larger than life on the Pacific stage. Each of the three artists was in revolt against the conventions of home (Stevenson perhaps least of all), Williams the missionary "had a solitary, driven, almost uncontrollable streak," and Gibson is described as "a man of considerable talent imperfectly harnessed--in fact, out of control." Each man was driven by an internal need for recognition from members of the society he rejected, but like Gauguin, each in the end "remained nailed to the cross of his culture."

Several recurrent themes come to light from Daws' accounts. All five men suffered disturbed family relationships of one sort or another, which may explain in part the difficulty each had in adjusting to his own society. Williams had a domineering mother and a not entirely satisfactory relationship with his long-suffering wife. Melville's father died when he was thirteen, a loss that forever troubled him, and he felt overshadowed by his older brother. Gibson entertained the fantasy that the parents who reared him were not his real parents and seemed unable to establish satisfactory relationships with women. Stevenson rebelled against his father and became something of a Bohemian. Gauguin, more than the others, "was incapable of caring about anyone other than himself." His father died when he was young, he had a disastrous marriage, and he was forever haunted by fears of latent bisexuality.

Each man whose life we enter in Daws' pages suffered as well from uncommon illness which, in at least two cases, led to heavy drug use. Williams endured filariasis. Melville, who remained physically healthy for most of his life, was held to be slightly mad by his close relatives, who intervened in his affairs on this account. Gibson, in the end, was ill, consumptive and under great personal stress. Stevenson fled to the Pacific in search of a healthy climate for his respiratory problems, and while the tradewinds and salt air clearly suited him, he never achieved surcease

from his bad lungs. Gauguin had a leg broken in a fight that never healed properly and in his final years was syphilitic with open lesions and failing sight. Both Stevenson and Gauguin resorted to powerful drugs--cocaine, morphine, laudanum and liquor--in an effort to find relief, and drug use may well have influenced their art: Daws notes (p. 184) that Stevenson may have written *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* while on cocaine.

A third theme encountered in the book concerns only the three artists. Melville became labelled early in his career as "the man who lived among cannibals" and Stevenson as the "light, pungent, witty" author of "children's books and romances for adults," when each desperately wanted to become known for weightier material. Neither entirely escaped this straitjacket, despite valiant efforts to break away. Daws asserts that "Melville had become aware of the savage within himself, and this was what he wanted to write about." In like manner, Gauguin fled to Tahiti to confront the savage within. In the art of both of these men "the savagery of civilization" emerges as an enduring motif--a motif underscored for each by the deleterious effects of Western society on the islanders.

The book is beautifully produced and flawlessly edited, and I find myself with only three small disagreements. First, Daws is incorrect in claiming (p. 192) that Fanny Stevenson "never did write her own book;" she is the author of *The Cruise of the "Janet Nichol" Among the South Sea Islands*, published by Scribner's in 1914. Second, reference to Ocean Island "northwest of Hawaii" (p. 155) is at best misleading; Ocean Island is the name usually applied to Banaba in Micronesia and Daws would better have used the more widely known name for the island to which he refers: Kure. Finally, in my opinion, Daws gives Langdon's hypothesis that shipwrecked Spaniards account for the "European-like" features of many Polynesians (pp. 7 and 89) more credence than it deserves.

This book about self-discovery of the savage within simultaneously chronicles in yet another way what Morehead called "the fatal impact." It is fitting, therefore, that Daws ends his *tour de force* with an old, blind Marquesan woman disappearing "into the darkness with a single word. 'Pupa,' she croaked--White Man."

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