
EDITOR'S FORUM

PACIFIC ISLANDS HISTORY IN THE 1980s: NEW DIRECTIONS OR MONOGRAPH MYOPIA?

by Kerry R. Howe

The modern study of Pacific islands history has made a significant contribution to our knowledge of the area, particularly of the period of culture contact in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, it has to a considerable extent lost sight of basic directions, such as some of those outlined by its principal founding father--the late J. W. Davidson. Today, historians of the Pacific islands seem to be heading rapidly towards a state of monograph myopia. We are finding out more and more about less and less. Relatively little consideration seems to be given to any overall purpose or direction.

This paper will attempt to explain how this state of affairs has come about, and will suggest some new directions. Some of the issues which will be raised are not of course unique to Pacific islands history. They can have a relevance to many other branches of historical study.

Until the early 1950s, the history of Pacific islands, if it were studied at all, was an adjunct of imperial history. The islands were important to historians only in so far as they could be placed within the context of European imperialism. These historians were concerned with European initiatives and motives in the Pacific--particularly those of explorers, evangelists, administrators. The Pacific islanders, their cultures and their general way of life, were largely irrelevant in this imperial context. Nor was culture contact studied for its own sake but only in so far as it might highlight the activities of imperial agents.

The decolonization of Pacific islands history was begun in the 1940s by J. W. Davidson. In the 1950s and 60s he further developed his views laying a basis for our modern studies.¹ In brief, Davidson pointed out the serious limitations of using imperial oriented history when attempting to understand events on Pacific islands. He suggested that instead of looking at these islands from distant European capitals, the historian should place

*This is a version of a paper presented to the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association, Honolulu, August, 1979.

¹J. W. Davidson "European Penetration of the South Pacific, 1779-1842," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1942; *The Study of Pacific History: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at Canberra on 25 November 1954* (Canberra: Australia National University 1955); "Problems of Pacific History," *Journal of Pacific History*, 1 (1966), 5-21.

himself or herself literally and figuratively on an island and look outwards. The islands themselves were to be the focal point. Events there were to be interpreted not as they reflected imperial concerns, but as they affected the lives of the local inhabitants. This change in perspective had two main consequences for the historian. First, imperial history had, in Davidson's words, to "give way to the history of European expansion"² in the Pacific and that meant looking at many influences other than the predominant concerns of the imperial historian. It was not sufficient to concentrate on explorers, missionaries and government agents. Thus the lowly beachcomber, an impoverished sandalwood trader, a ragged whaling crew in search of rest and recreation might be as significant, both in terms of their activities and/or observations, as any top-hatted evangelist or ostrich-plumed governor. Davidson likened European penetration to a series of waves, each one breaking, as he put it "upon the coral ringed shores of the South Seas, each one overtaken by the next before its energy is quite spent."³

The second main consequence of his new perspective has meant appreciating that Europeans in the Pacific were influenced by local conditions and especially by the indigenous societies. Pacific islands history had thus to be seen in terms of cultural interaction which necessarily meant studying both sides. Thus the islanders were brought into the picture. Their communities were now credited with a history of their own and one worthy of serious academic study. Modern historians of the Pacific islands have subsequently concentrated on the social, economic, political and intellectual changes experienced by island societies as a result of their ever increasing interaction with Europeans and western influences generally.

Davidson's basic theoretical contribution was to advance a new conceptual framework from that of the imperial historians. But he was not so arrogant as to believe that Pacific islands history should be in any sense unique or autonomous. He stressed that historians of the islands, like all historians, should base their "empirical studies upon certain generalizations. . . . the testing and rectification of these generalizations is, or should be, one of the objects of all worthwhile empirical research. Pacific history must be seen in relation to this general background as well as in its internal complexities."⁴

The offering and testing of such generalizations required a good deal of detailed research. Staff and students in Davidson's Department of Pacific History, established in the 1950s at the Australian National Univer-

²Davidson, "Problems of Pacific History," pp. 8-9.

³Davidson, "European Penetration of the South Pacific," p. 313.

⁴Davidson, "Problems of Pacific History," p. 10.

sity, have been responsible for a significant amount of this research, especially since the mid-1960s when the intake of Ph.D. students was increased. And over the past ten years or so other universities in Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific and the United States have been contributing to the growing stockpile of information.⁵

Part of the problem, as I see it, is that researchers have been so diligently ferreting out and publishing their detailed findings that a good many of them have lost any basic sense of direction. They have become too immersed in the internal complexities to see the general background. Pacific islands history is a breeding ground for more and more highly specialized articles, monographs, and symposia. As I said initially, we are finding out more and more about less and less. Few writers seem able to pull back from the microcosm to consider the implications, if any, for a broader or macrocosmic view of islands' history.

The defense of this current trend can be put simply: that generalizations must wait until the fine details are uncovered; that it is still too soon for the synoptic view; that the subject should not be made to run before it can walk. Such an argument was certainly valid in the 1950s and 60s, but in view of all the published and unpublished research that has now emerged this case is no longer so convincing.

In the introduction to his magnificent survey of Pacific prehistory, Peter Bellwood has this to say to those who argue that with the prehistory, as with the history, of the Pacific islands, it is too soon to move from the particular to the more general: "to those who would see this book as premature, I would only say that I am certainly not going to wait another twenty years in the hope that all will suddenly be made clear. This is defeatism."⁶ Indeed it can even be suggested that this defeatism can also be an excuse for an unwillingness to push the intellectual frontiers of the subject into more demanding areas.

But there are, I believe, a number of other reasons why the modern historian will continue to concentrate almost solely on documenting minutia. Some of these reasons are particular to Pacific islands history, others are more basic problems relating to historical study generally.

Because the Pacific islands and their indigenous communities are so small the historian is likely to adopt a pin point focus in order to see the participants at all. Moreover the use of hitherto out of the way private and public archival collections, and the recording of oral traditions have

⁵The most comprehensive bibliography of current publications appears annually in *The Journal of Pacific History*.

⁶Peter Bellwood, *Man's Conquest of the Pacific: The Prehistory of Southeast Asia and Oceania* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 23.

made it possible for the historians to view their subjects under a microscope. The vast amount of material constantly being made readily available through, for example, the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau, makes such study, if not an easy task, at least a manageable one. Historians of the islands are not as yet treading on each other's toes in the scramble to corner a topic. For the foreseeable future each researcher can probably find his or her own little region or aspect, with documents aplenty, and can happily fill in four by six file cards, and produce scholarly articles and monographs. Of course this can be of great advantage. As Davidson has said: "The student of a political or religious movement in Samoa or Fiji. . . can, so far as the records allow, study the activities of every leading member. In this way, the guesswork in history is reduced to a minimum."⁷ Yet if this is a strength of Pacific islands history, it can also be a weakness if this approach continues unaltered and unchecked. There is always the danger of not being able to see the wood for the trees. Or, to use Oskar Spate's more eloquent metaphor: historians "may on occasion not see the Ocean for the Islands, may be content to be marooned in the tight but so safe confines of their little atoll of knowledge, regardless of the sweep of the currents which bring life to the isles."⁸ Pacific historians can perhaps be accused of intellectual complacency; that they are doing what can be done, and generally doing it well, but are they not also in danger of adopting an unthinking, empiricist approach? Greg Denning has expressed such a view:

If we applied the standards expected of social history in the United States, Britain and the continent and the standards expected of cross-cultural histories elsewhere in the world, then we would have to say that the Pacific is an historically under-developed area. The empiricism that dominates most Pacific study is at the root of the problem. Research dominated by a narrow geographical area, an institution, a period. History is what happens or what the sources let know what happens within those limitations. No problem, no theory, no methodology takes the researcher outside those confines.⁹

In the hands of so many Pacific historians, detailed information, often painstakingly gathered, becomes the thing itself, its own *raison d'être*. Seldom is it used to test and modify generalizations.

⁷Davidson, "Problems of Pacific History," pp. 12-13.

⁸O. H. K. Spate, "The Pacific as an Artefact," *The Changing Pacific: Essays in Honour of H. E. Maude*, ed. Niel Gunson (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 34.

⁹Gregory Denning in a review in *New Zealand Journal of History*, 1, No. 12 (1978), 82.

The pursuit of information for information's sake is of course compounded, perhaps largely caused, by thesis research. A good deal of recently published Pacific islands history is based on doctoral dissertations. And to quote Oskar Spate again: "the insular Pacific is so splendidly splittable into Ph.D. topics that it is a very fine training ground in the mechanics; but where do we go from here?"¹⁰

Ph.D. oriented research raises questions which concern, or should concern, all historians no matter what their particular field might be. Peter Munz has expressed the dilemma in vivid terms: "a successful Ph.D. candidate is far from being a qualified historian, He is nothing but a detective inspector and should seek employment at the local police station."¹¹

The broader philosophical considerations of the seemingly endless supply of factual historical detail deserve at least a mention, if only to put some of the problems of Pacific islands history within a wider context. Munz continues:

Unless we can relate the fact that Caesar crossed the Rubicon to a wider series of events and that series to a very wide perspective of Rome and its importance, there is no point whatsoever in solving the question whether he did or not.¹²

This is, of course, not the place to take the argument further except to say that we must be more concerned, as Pacific historians, with where we are going, and why. I suspect that most of us *do* a particular topic because it is there. How many aspiring Ph.D. dissertation writers have been sat down in front of a map of the Pacific and had the historically unknown regions pointed out to them, and then been sent off to look at the relevant archival material?

I think we could take some lessons from Pacific prehistorians. They frequently undertake the most detailed, sophisticated and specialized research. In its published form it is often unreadable to anyone other than another prehistorian. Yet many prehistorians have an overall purpose. They not only know where they want to go, but why. Their objectives are relatively straight forward: where did the islanders originate, how did their various cultures develop in the Pacific, what form did these take by the time of European contact? Thus prehistorians like Peter Bellwood, Janet Davidson, Roger Green, and Jack Golson, to name but a few, are able to take the detailed information, see its general implications, and mold it

¹⁰Spate, "The Pacific as an Artefact," p. 42.

¹¹Peter Munz, *The Shapes of Time: A New Look at the Philosophy of History* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1977), p. 247.

¹²Munz, p. 248.

together into a scheme or overview which the layman can understand. It is worth speculating about what could have happened if the empirical methods of modern Pacific islands history had been applied to problems of prehistory. These methods might, for example, have produced a vast amount of information about Lapita pottery, what it looks like, where it is found, how old it is. That is, they would have stressed its intrinsic value and local significance. But because these methods are not geared to an overall objective or objectives, as is the case in the work of prehistorians, they would probably fail to reveal the wider implications of Lapita ware, namely that it provides major clues about the cultural ancestry of Polynesians.

Thus, the historian of the Pacific islands needs to rise about the level of grappling with internal complexities and consider some, or a series of, basic objectives. If detailed findings cannot contribute to some sort of overview; if they cannot add to, or subtract from, *accepted* generalizations, then we must begin to question whether the effort had been truly worthwhile.

Unfortunately such a proposition is often scoffed at by these historians. Some are horrified at the thought of popularizing their subject, believing instead that the ultimate achievement is 100 footnotes per article or chapter. Most popular books about Pacific islands history are rightly disdained by the academics, but how many of them have bothered to write for the layman or even for undergraduate students? As long as academics continue to write for an increasingly smaller, more specialized audience, they have only themselves to blame if the only people writing about the Pacific for a wider audience are journalists, feature writers, amateur enthusiasts. To quote again Peter Bellwood justifying his overview of Pacific prehistory:

My experience in teaching undergraduate courses . . . indicates to me the need for this book, which has no comparable predecessor. And if the man in the street still puts his faith (as many do) in astronauts or a white master race hot-footing it to the four corners of the earth, then the academic ivory tower needs to take some steps at least to preserve its credibility.¹³

Modern Pacific islands history is in danger of becoming a rather pleasant, self-indulgent backwater. What, then, might be done to let in a few fresh currents to set us drifting in *some* directions?

First of all, the detailed research *must* continue. In this paper I have not been critical of information gathering itself. Rather I have been criti-

¹³Bellwood, *Man's Conquest of the Pacific*, p. 23.

cal of the fact that this is, in many cases, *all* that is being done. If Pacific islands history remains just an exercise in empiricist research at a micro-level, no matter how many new topics may be discovered, then it will make no progress. But if such research is used as a basis for new approaches then we will again be on the move.

I can see six practical directions historians might consider. None of them are particularly original, but most of them have virtually been ignored. First, more effort needs to be placed on writing the histories of specific islands and groups. Hawaii is perhaps best served in this regard, followed by New Guinea, Samoa, Fiji and Tonga. But what about all the other islands and island groups? Of course there have been many detailed studies of selected aspects of these islands' histories. But while it might be *island oriented*, much of it has been based upon a short period, a narrow theme, or upon some western institution--a mission, a trading concern or a colonial government. Few historians have followed Davidson's scheme of analyzing waves of Europeans coming ashore. Take the case of the Solomons: there are numerous articles and an excellent monograph on the labor trade; there is a study of the Catholic missionaries; another on the Protestant missionaries; there is a study of the island of Bougainville; and there are scores of articles touching on a wide range of subjects. But who has published a history of the Solomon Islands? The same case could be made for a great many other parts of the Pacific.

Secondly, we need one or several short or concise histories of the Pacific islands. These could be written right now largely on the basis of existing publications and recent unpublished theses. The great value of such a book would not, of course, lie in any claim to comprehensiveness (no book can). But it would lie in its overview. It would, if properly done, distance the reader from the nitty-gritty of specialized research. It would delineate patterns and try to reveal the more general implications of current detailed findings. In short, it would give the synoptic view. It would take what parts we now have and try to fit them into a whole, and the whole would be so much more than just the sum of its parts. For, in advancing some sort of synthesis, hitherto insignificant information can take on an unforeseen importance. On the other hand, matters which by themselves might have seemed of some significance might suddenly appear of little consequence. An overview provides a new frame of reference, or a new yardstick against which all sorts of information can be measured and tested. Furthermore, such an overview would have an identity of its own, which again would be much more than the sum total of its constituent parts--just as a car is more than the pieces of metal and nuts and bolts from which it is made.

Why one short history of the islands--Douglas Oliver's *The Pacific Islands*--should have stood alone for almost thirty years never ceases to amaze me. This fact seems proof enough of the charge that historians of the Pacific islands spend all their time contemplating their navels and have little inclination to raise their heads and look around. Whatever strengths Oliver's book has, the main one is, I believe, its lack of competition.

Thirdly, we need to return to those topics which can be approached in terms of thematic and/or regional systems. In throwing out the imperial view and coming down to island level, we have tended to lose sight of those features of Pacific islands history which transcend the purely local and institutional. Various economic ventures are a good example of this. Colin Newbury has demonstrated how you can steer a new direction between seeing the labor trade as an imperial or sub-imperial economic concern on the one hand, and as a simple function of "culture contact" in any one area on the other. Instead Pacific islands laborers can be seen as an essential resource in a much broader pattern of commercial development--development of a kind that cannot necessarily be defined in imperial or national economic terms, or in terms of an impact on indigenous communities, though it clearly can have major implications for both these areas.¹⁴In 1966 Davidson wrote: "There is no history of copra, of phosphate, of cotton, of sugar, or of any of the industries, such as cocoa or gold, which have been so important in more recent times."¹⁵ This is still the case, and one could add others to his list--whaling for example.

This sort of approach leads to a fourth category--that of seeing the Pacific islands within the much wider geographic, economic and political framework of the Pacific Ocean involving, as it must, its adjacent shores--the Americas, Russia, Japan, Korea, China, Southeast Asia, and Australasia. This is an Oceanic as opposed to insular orientation.¹⁶ For too long we have been caught up in geopolitical straitjackets whereby one region becomes, for purposes of historical investigation, quite autonomous. Thus can we fail to see the interplay of exotic and indigenous influences. For example, **we** have the *Journal of Pacific History* based in Canberra which covers Micronesia, Polynesia and Melanesia (though it generally excludes

¹⁴Colin Newbury, "Imperial History or Development History? Some Reflections on Pacific Labour Markets in the Nineteenth Century," address to the 1979 ANZAAS Conference, Auckland.

¹⁵Davidson, "Problems of Pacific History," p. 17.

¹⁶Spate, "The Pacific as an Artefact."

Australasia). From the other side of the ocean, from California, there is the *Pacific Historical Review* which deals with countries on the Pacific rim, especially Southeast Asia and the Americas and virtually excludes the islands in between. We are fortunate that an Oceanic view is being attempted by Oskar Spate who has completed volume one of a planned multi-volume history of the Pacific.¹⁷

Fifthly, apart from a pioneering work by Caroline Ralston on early beach communities,¹⁸ there is virtually no comparative history of the islands. One can think immediately of many topics which are admirably suited to this approach mainly because of their ubiquity and elements of commonality, for example, the emergence of Polynesian kings and missionary kingdoms. One could take any of a number of themes and study them in several islands, for example the nature of indigenous leadership and its evolution, land usage, cults, or indeed any other aspect of social, economic and political life on the islands. There has yet to be any comparative work on colonial rule, the experience of the second world war, or the whole process of decolonization.¹⁹

Sixthly, and last, dare I raise yet another plea for more interdisciplinary investigation? There is some truth in the hackneyed view that the social scientists have the theory but no facts, while the historian has the facts and no theory. But how many interdisciplinary projects have there been? And what, for example, has come of the brave new hopes for ethnohistory--that blending of anthropology and history--advocated by Greg Denning more than ten years ago?²⁰

¹⁷O. H. K. Spate, *The Spanish Lake* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1979). See also his "Prolegomena to a History of the Pacific," *Geographia Polonica*, 36 (1977).

¹⁸Caroline Ralston, *Grass Huts and Warehouses: Pacific Beach Communities of the Nineteenth Century* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1977; Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1978).

¹⁹Since this paper was prepared, there have appeared two publications which take some steps towards a comparative approach: Peter J. Hemptstal, *Pacific Islanders under German Rule: A Study in the Meaning of Colonial Resistance* (Canberra: Australia National University Press, 1978), and *The Journal of Pacific History*, 14, Nos. 1 and 2 (1979) which are devoted mainly to the nature of leadership in Pacific societies. See especially Bronwen Douglas, "Rank, Power, Authority: A Reassessment of Traditional Leadership in South Pacific Societies," pp. 2-27.

²⁰Gregory Denning, "Ethnohistory in Polynesia: The Value of Ethnohistorical Evidence," *Journal of Pacific History*, 1 (1966), 23-42.

I have suggested some of the more practical ways in which we could give Pacific islands history more impetus and direction. I have perhaps been rather harsh in my criticism, and I know that some exciting research is currently underway. But this is no time for complacency. We must constantly keep our minds not just on the mechanics of our research but on our overall direction. We must keep in mind Davidson's exhortation for the testing and modification of generalizations. We must work with material that emerges from a micro level but we must constantly try to see the implications of our findings in a broader perspective.

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