

Caroline Ralston. *Grass Huts and Warehouses: Pacific Beach Communities of the Nineteenth Century*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1978. Pp. 268, maps, index. \$12.50.

For generations of scholars and romantics, the Pacific islands have been the stuff that dreams are made of. And as A. Grove Day has told us, the writings of Melville, Pierre Loti, Becke and Grimble, Stevenson, Maugham, Michener, and Nordhoff and Hall, and the imaginations of lots of Everymen, have conjured up for us the image of the Beachcomber, an enduring and sometimes endearing cultural fantasy of Western Civilization. It is probably a safe bet that all of us who love the South Seas have at one time or another toyed with the myth's connotations of freedom, beauty, *joie de vivre*, easy living, easy loving, and all that.

Caroline Ralston's book is a scholarly look at the real, historical beachcombers of the Pacific islands, and at the rather important role they played in the ethnography and ethnohistory of Oceania. She focuses on the historical record and the (albeit sketchy) economic and social data from nineteenth-century Honolulu, Pape'ete, Apia, Levuka and the Kiangabai of Islands area in Hawai'i, Tahiti, Samoa, Fiji and New Zealand in order to present a composite portrait of what she calls the "independent beach community." Her book makes three potentially lasting contributions to Pacific scholarship. One is the introduction and description of the beachcomber as a distinct anthropological and sociological type. The second is her implicit proposal of a historical sequence for describing the origins and growth of Pacific island port towns and their societies. And the third is her description and analysis of the key (and interesting) part these beachcombers had in these processes of urban evolution and acculturation.

No book is perfect and Ralston's *Grass Huts* has its defects. Most are relatively trivial. Theoretically she leans (too far) toward a naïve ecologi-

cal determinism in explaining why beach communities appeared where they did and not elsewhere (pp. 3 and 25). By directing attention to Polynesia plus Fiji, while ignoring equally interesting developments in Micronesia and some successful Melanesian settlements, she may help perpetuate unwarranted stereotypes. Her uncritical acceptance of the label "chief" indicates some unfamiliarity with modes and styles of traditional Pacific leadership, but she is, of course, not alone in this error. Likewise, her blanket condemnation of missionaries (p. 191) unfairly overlooks their often beneficial contributions. Finally, Ralston's book is in some ways too obviously a reworked doctoral dissertation in that it is too repetitive and has too many intrusive paragraphs that are not quite germane to the themes at hand. This is understandable, and it merits our sympathy. Dissertations are usually supervised by faculty committees composed of disparate egos, who are in their own views omniscient and from the student's perspective omnipotent, who read the work separately and piece-meal, and who always have their own private hobby-horses that must be discussed or their current favorite oracles who must be cited. This would ruin any book, and the writer gets hopelessly entangled in a futile struggle to please both self and multiple masters.

Returning to the positive aspects, Ralston makes clear that Pacific island cities are not like those of older Europe or America, and that their developmental processes have followed a different trajectory. South Seas urbanization is an artifact of cultural contact and interaction. None of the five sites she examines were important in aboriginal times. Synthesizing the data, she proposes a standard developmental sequence beginning with desultory contacts and trade between islanders and alien visitors. Next, the beachcombers themselves appear, men who abandon their European associates to live on the islands. The typical beach community was a point of cultural contact, an entrepôt where two cultures met to trade goods and knowledge, and where the beachcombers gathered and lived. They lived in fact in two worlds: a Western economy, but with Pacific islands social and sexual mores (e.g. local wives and families). In Ralston's schema, this era of relatively good social and ethnic relations gradually degenerated as foreign naval, consular, and missionary interests grew more numerous, more potent, and more intrusive. With the arrival of European or American women on the scene, the older harmony became discordant, and two social classes, native and expatriate, materialized. As she sees it, these Pacific islands beach communities end as port towns, alien enclaves where expatriates dominate commercial and administrative affairs and the islanders are disenfranchised in their own lands by foreign occupation or annexation.

As for the beachcombers themselves, she notes that they were neither particularly good nor evil, neither weak nor strong, neither wise nor foolish. Most were sailors, trying to readapt to life ashore. Most were simply human, trying to get along as best they could, bridging the two cultures. Most were possessed of at least some practical or trade skills, who would have had limited prospects at home, but whose services were valuable to the islanders. An overlooked and somewhat surprising point is that significant numbers of the resident beachcombers were Hindus, Filipinos, American Negroes or of other not strictly European origins (p. 54).

Finally, these beachcombers were in a sense builders of a new order. They were cultural brokers who introduced and interpreted Europeans (or Americans) and islanders to one another. They shared their rudimentary technical skills, and island leaders used them as informants about Western ways. In at least Samoa, they anticipated the later syncretic millenarianism and cargo-cultism by establishing definitely unorthodox and even bizarre quasi-Christian "sailor" religions among the villagers (p. 33). Ralston rightly has, it appears, more than just a tolerant acceptance of the beachcombers as cultural brokers or a phenomenon of the past. She duly credits them with helping protect the islanders from more rapacious Westerners, and she notes that there was little or no racial hatred during beachcomber days (pp. 43 and 210). Not all actors on the scene of Pacific history seem so non-malevolent, nor their sins so trivial, in objective retrospect.

Caroline Ralston has made a useful contribution to Pacific island scholarship with this study of urbanization in Oceania and her consideration of the mythical beachcomber as social type, cultural broker, and reality.

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