

E. H. McCormick. *Omai: Pacific Envoy*. Auckland: Auckland University Press and the Oxford University Press, 1977. Pp. xviii, 364, illustrations. \$31.35.

Omai was the first Polynesian to visit England and the second to visit Europe. He disembarked from the *Adventure* into a series of remarkable English adventures in the summer of 1774. In the country which was to be his home for the next two years, he found people who were willing and indeed eager to see him, study him and also to manipulate him for their own ends. The time was ripe for his advent, for under the stimulus of Rousseau's theories--which, for all the shock they caused, were merely the latest and most radical contribution to a debate which had been gathering intensity since the discovery of America--"all Europe" was arguing the merits and demerits of "nature" and "civilization" as educative influences on the moral character of man. The idea of a perfectible human society moving towards Utopia still had its passionate adherents, such as Samuel Johnson. For such men, Omai and other visitors from remote and little-known lands were simply "savages," men irretrievably remote from the Utopia of "civilization," but for many the theory of the perfectibility of society was gradually yielding to theories of the relativity of societies. Controversialists leaped at the chance to test their abstract theories by empirical observation, so that Omai became the object of scientific and theological experimentation. In a letter to a learned friend the Reverend Sir John Cullum provides a list of "the salient features of this new specimen of the human race" (McCormick, p. 129) and it is difficult to avoid a certain sense of embarrassment at seeing Cullum and other scientific English gentlemen coolly and abstractedly observing the behavior of the warm-hearted, charming, though possibly unintelligent Omai.

Cullum's letter, which McCormick quotes in detail, is only one of a considerable number of unpublished documents which this thorough-going researcher has unearthed and incorporated into his narrative. For this contribution to our knowledge about the confrontation of Polynesia and Europe, McCormick deserves the gratitude of all who are interested in the subject. *Omai* adds touches of vivid color to the picture of a crucial period in the history of both regions.

But it contains much more than these original contributions to scholarship. They could have been passed on in one or two long articles, but *Omai* is a book of no small size. It is only reasonable to ask how and why the remaining parts of the book have attained such length and comparative weight.

McCormick sets out to provide a frame-work for the story of Omai, and often the frame seems to dominate the picture. He has chosen to retell the whole story of Pacific exploration from Bougainville to Cook's last voyage and to include anecdotal material which touches this story at various points. In earlier chapters the author seems to be tempted to write a biography of Banks--and there is no doubt that a book of this kind from his fluent pen would be very welcome. He includes, for example, Banks's journey to Iceland and his short but turbulent engagement--interesting stories well told, but not really relevant to the story of Omai. It is hard to avoid the impression that they are there for their own sake, rather than for their relevance or their information value, since most of the details of Banks's life which McCormick refers to are readily available to those willing to inquire. The same applies to most of Chapter 9, for example, which re-tells Cook's third voyage, depending heavily on the Captain's journals with additions from Burney and Rickman. These parts of the book raise the question whether Beaglehole's lucid narrative and edition need a competitor. Don't they rather need a commentary and interpretation?

But McCormick's strength is in narrative, not commentary. He asks "What?" rather than "Why?" He remains uncritically close to his sources and reformulates their message. His industry, accuracy, thoroughness and stylistic skills are impressive, but he makes only sporadic use of his powers of interpretation. Often the contents of his sources seem to call out for verification by modern scholarship, but McCormick's exercise in empathy leaves no room for such verification. He notes, for example, that Bligh's informants spoke of six classes of Tahitian society, rather than the "commonly recognised" three, but he doesn't call on recent anthropological or historical research to check this out (Douglas L. Oliver, for example).

His method is essentially positivistic: it presupposes a naïve faith in

the value of factual information for its own sake. His enthusiasm for tidbits of knowledge is infectious, so that the reader is usually prepared to follow him along his by-ways. For example: once he has found a letter by Horace Walpole which refers to Omai, he cannot resist quoting the rest of the letter, despite its irrelevance. The reader enjoys the excursion, but the overall form of the book suffers.

In reacting against positivism, Wilhelm Dilthey pointed out that while science may follow a causal chain, history discovers *meaning* in an event. Heinrich Rickert pointed out that while science is concerned with generality, history is about individuality and that individuals can only be understood with reference to a scheme of moral values, and A. D. Xénopol made similar attacks on positivism in France--and these theorists were at work in the last years of the nineteenth century! *Omai* strikes one as a pleasant, but oddly old-fashioned book.

Part of the problem is that McCormick, a New Zealander, has a natural desire to tell his story from a Pacific viewpoint. If there had never been an Omai, the history of the Pacific would scarcely have been different from what it was. Omai's true significance is within European cultural history, and even there only as an example, not as something unique. He is one of a number of visitors to Europe from non-European cultures who influenced the debate about nature, civilization, man and society. McCormick mentions the Eskimos who were in Britain at the same time as Omai, but draws no conclusions. He does not mention the other non-Europeans who, unlike Omai, left their critical accounts of Europe: the African slave Equino, for example. How interesting it would be to compare the accounts of these other literate visitors with the fictitious accounts put into Omai's mouth by English wits and satirists and reported in gratifying detail by McCormick. And even these were only examples of a genre which attained greater fame in Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* and Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*.

Salvador de Madariaga once remarked that describing a national character is like trying to judge the speed of a moving ship from the deck of your own ship which is also moving. A conceptual framework based on a theory of the relativity of nations and cultures would seem more appropriate to Omai than the narrative framework which McCormick has chosen to provide.

Neither are occasional critical judgments or moments of speculation a substitute for a conceptual frame of reference. McCormick does not hesitate to use his critical faculties at particular points of his narrative, but he does not organize these critical insights into a coherent theoretical infra-

structure. As a result, they can tend to seem arbitrary. Symptomatic is his dismissal of Colnett's account of Omai's death as the "obviously least authentic legend." This may well be true, but the use of the word "obviously" blocks off any weighing of evidence. Similarly, McCormick shows a willingness to speculate rather than think through. He records that Omai met a certain "Mr. Conway" and wonders what was said: "Conway is as likely as any to have examined . . . Did he . . . ? Possibly . . . Or . . . Their conversation might well have . . ." After a similar series of questions (on page 194) the author remarks, "One can merely speculate." HOW much more satisfying it would be if one could build on the excellent insight that Bligh curiously blended tolerance towards Polynesians with intolerance towards his own countrymen (p. 273) into a considered theory of cultural relationships, incorporating perhaps the lively tolerance-debate which took place amongst theologians during the eighteenth century.

Yet, for all its structural and theoretical flaws, *Omai* makes for enjoyable reading. The scholar will find individual passages of great interest (above all Chapter 6) and the general reader will find it as good an introduction to the story of Pacific exploration as many another, before he goes on to other sources. Much of what it has to say is not new, but it is pleasantly told. And those parts which *are* new and are based on painstaking research will provide useful material for future writing-desk explorers, who will want to absorb them into their own conceptual frames of reference.

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