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## BOOK REVIEW FORUM

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Douglas L. Oliver, *The Pacific Islands*, third edition. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989. (First published 1951; second edition 1961.) Pp. xi, 304, illustrated, maps, bibliography, index. US\$14.95 paperback.

*Review:* COLIN NEWBURY  
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Enhanced by useful maps and the late Sheila Oliver's tasteful and accurate illustrations, this book has been a text in colleges and universities for nearly forty years. Textbooks, unless constantly revised, should be allowed to quietly fade away. The chronology of this one takes the Pacific's "contact histories" to about 1950, since when there have been considerable social, economic, and political changes. On what grounds should one welcome a third edition undertaken, we are told, on the persuasion of colleagues "who continue to make use of the 1961 edition in their teaching despite its many obsolescences" (p. xi)?

It is simply written and easily accessible, to be sure. I would recommend it still to students for the excellent first chapter on island societies in precolonial times, and for the final section on the impact of the Second World War enlivened by personal observation and documentary style based on the author's own experience. For much of the rest, however, there are intrinsic problems in organization and exposition. Such problems were inevitable, given the range of materials and the time span, imposing severe selectivity and a condensed historical narrative that access to new source materials from the 1960s has not entirely removed.

First, it should be noted that the contents of the third edition are somewhat different from its predecessors. The Australian Aborigines

have vanished from the scene and the general survey of "The Islanders" is shorter by far. The "Aliens" of the four chapters covering early European exploration and activities in the islands have become "Invaders" and some new material has been included. It is surprising to find still that the old error about the "annexation" of Tahiti in 1843 (disavowed) is repeated twice (pp. 51, 141), when the important date is the protectorate of 1842. "Transformations" has supplanted the former "Metamorphosis" in the section of ten chapters on economic staples and the effects of contact on sample societies. The final section on "Cataclysm" is much the same, minus the chapter on "Events and Prospects" in the 1961 edition. Best of all, the bibliography reflects the state of the art some twenty years on. Is it reflected in the text?

I am not sure that it is, apart from some expansion of the examples in the major themes—staples, religious conversion, administrative systems—where we have been well served by new monographs and by a few distinguished general surveys from Peter Bellwood, H. C. Brookfield, K. R. Howe, O. H. K. Spate, François Doumenge, and by the author's much more valuable *Native Cultures of the Pacific Islands* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989). Treatment of the agents of change, whether from outside or inside island societies, is summary in the light of what we now know about Pacific entrepreneurs, officials, missionaries and their auxiliaries among the converts, the labor recruiters and the chieftaincies. Some older errors are repeated. Missionary expansion was the product of the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival continued into the "Victorian" era when, admittedly, there was an infusion of some new values based on British commercial success and the Utilitarians. Certainly no missionary resolutions came from a place called "Essex Hall" (p. 47); and any generalizations about Catholic expansion require a different framework and reference to Catholic churches in Latin America. Arguably, too, the political and commercial changes in Latin America should be mentioned as one of the influences on the opening of the Pacific basin to European commerce (pp. 48–49) if Jean-Paul Faivre's work (mentioned in the bibliography) is taken into account. A further difficulty is that the chronology of missionary activity in Melanesia does not fit into this tidy sequence about missionary "invaders" to 1850. Nowhere is the technical and institutional contribution of alien administration (public works, revenue and taxation, health, education and legal systems) really accounted for. The theme of religious change is taken up again later in the chapter on "Souls," which contains some useful warnings on theorizing about religious systems and adds to the example of Tonga new material on Siuai and cargo cults

from Laracy and Worsley. Administrators vanish along with the Aborigines; and they have no entry in the index. Were they not among the principal agents of change? On the other hand, although there is no general entry under "business" or "companies," an attempt has been made to incorporate material on Burns Philp, the Colonial Sugar Refining Company, and Sanford Dole, and to avoid stereotypes.

There is a second difficulty, perhaps more fundamental. We are not told the purpose of the text; and the foreword by Harry L. Shapiro to the 1961 edition did not tell us either. On page 80 of that edition the careful reader will discover that "the subject of the book as a whole is cultures." Unexceptionable in itself, this purpose requires some enlargement on the use of the term in its historical context even for "the nonspecialist American" at whom the book was originally aimed and who is intelligent enough to be interested in the first place. Something more needs to be said about the process of change in these cultures. And is it really true that the lot of "full-blooded Islanders" was "easier than that of the mixed bloods" (pp. 250-251), given the access to education and intermediate roles in business and administration enjoyed by the latter? Did they all live in a "caste limbo" by the 1950s, or were many of them political brokers in French and British territories?

Distance changes the perspective. What is the "culture" of the Hawaiian Islands in mid-century? Are the New Zealand Pakeha part of the local culture or not? Indeed, New Zealand is a very awkward case in this context. The new edition gives the same potted history as before and nothing has been added to the short statement on Maori revival from the end of the nineteenth century (pp. 105-111). All that has been added is reference to four or five new books at the end of the chapter and the "nonspecialist American," unless he digs into these, will not be any the wiser about the content of New Zealand "culture" in the mid-twentieth century.

Admittedly, W. P. Morrell had much same trouble with his homeland in *Britain in the Pacific Islands* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960); he resolved it by leaving New Zealand out altogether. But there are other themes integral to the economic welfare of islanders that require more substantial treatment. To use the major staples—coconuts, sugar, minerals, and so on—as a framework of reference for economic change was a good idea, and this arrangement still serves to group the islands by their dependence on exports. But the section has become inflated with other material concerning French Polynesia, the Solomons, and New Guinea that has nothing to do with staple production. More disappointing, the chapter on "Sea Harvest" still takes us no farther than the

Torres Strait. The mining chapter is much better in its treatment of guano, gold, and nickel, though it is unnecessarily mysterious about the ownership of Société le Nickel (Rothschild's).

In the light of Douglas Oliver's scholarly works, I reluctantly conclude it was a mistake to be persuaded by colleagues to revise this book. Too much has happened to the "cultures" since the 1950s. But if the book is still cited as a teaching text, the students will be well served by the bibliography and encouraged, one hopes, to read beyond an introductory survey that is no longer adequate.