

Review: CAROLINE RALSTON
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In concluding a review of Kerry Howe's *Where the Waves Fall* published in these Book Review Forum pages in 1985,¹ I wrote that I hoped a new general history of the Pacific would soon be written, one informed by the latest developments in anthropological and ethnographic history, in the changing patterns of gender relations, and in the recognition of the heterogeneity of island populations and historical experience. Howe had failed to address these new fields, hence my desire for another general history. The publication in 1989 of the third edition of Oliver's *The Pacific Islands*, only five years after Howe's book, does not fill the bill, however. Despite Oliver's claim (p. xi) that this edition "contains extensive revisions and additions" and the inclusion of a substantially updated bibliography, it is not a new general history. Works by Hanson, Hanson and Hanson, Schoeffel, Ortner, and James on gender relations, all published before 1985, are not included,² nor are Sahlins's, Valeri's, and Dening's more recent publications focused on the intersections of history and anthropology.³ In scope,

structure, and interpretation this edition offers only minor modifications, additions, and deletions from previous versions of the same titled text.

In scope the excision of the Australian Aborigines, who were included in the first and second editions, makes good sense on many grounds, but Oliver still attempts to cover in 304 pages the whole of Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia from precontact times to 1950. With no organizing theory or theme apart from the claim that the islanders have been exploited and their lives disrupted, Oliver attempts encyclopedic, empirical coverage, which inevitably becomes so generalized, selective, and superficial that the reader gains no insight into historical or cultural processes and is offered few clues where to go for more complex analysis or detailed data. No footnotes or endnotes are provided, and only a handful of references itemized by place or topic appear at the end of some, but not all, chapters. For example, notwithstanding the enormous range of published material on the nature and history of millennial or cargo cults, which occurred throughout the Pacific from precontact times through to the late twentieth century (a fact the author fails to establish), Oliver discusses these phenomena in three pages and supports his case with two references at the chapter's end. No contentious issues, no differing interpretations can be acknowledged or discussed using such a bland, broadbrush approach.

The structure of the third edition is basically identical with that of the second edition. The text is divided into four sections, the titles of two of which have changed from "The Aliens" (1961) to "The Invaders" (1989) and from "Metamorphosis" (1961) to "Transformations" (1989), a fashionable concept in current anthropological debate but not one that informs Oliver's methodology or interpretation. The first section, "The Islanders," attempts comprehensive coverage of the precontact island world. In reviewing Howe's *Where the Waves Fall*, Oliver accused him of giving "an overbrief description of those islands' recent indigenous cultures (which numbered into the hundreds!)." ⁴ But in twenty-seven pages (in contrast to Howe's sixty-three pages) Oliver has attempted to cover an even greater number of islands and includes geological and climatic data as well. Such abbreviation and attendant selectivity cannot provide satisfactory anthropological analysis or insights into cultural processes. The second section, "The Invaders," poses a similar problem of condensation (a potted history of foreign presence in the Pacific from 1521 to 1939 in forty-eight pages). "Transformations" (sect. 3) outlines economic changes in a number of islands oddly grouped under chapter headings such as "Land" (New Zealand),

“Souls” (Tonga and Siuai), and “Sugar” (Hawaii and Fiji). The organizational principles underlying this section do not enhance an understanding of the island groups’ diverse historical experiences. Why is the loss of land so crucial in New Zealand but not Hawaii? How can conversion to Christianity be said to have characterized the history of Tonga and Siuai but not that of Samoa, Fiji, or the majority of other islands in the Pacific? Oliver’s conclusions, offered in the final chapter of the “Transformations” section and in the epilogue at the end of section 4, “Cataclysm,” are brief (five pages in total) and simplistic: “To begin with, it required no great perspicacity to see that foreigners as a whole had usually profited at the expense of the Islanders” (p. 246). The analysis that follows continues in the same generalized, superficial vein.

Not only the structure has remained unchanged from the second to the third edition of *The Pacific Islands*. The underlying interpretation and tone are also the same; and despite the citing of much new literature, the wording of many passages is identical with the 1961 edition. In these circumstances the third edition offers no competition for Howe’s *Where the Waves Fall* for the period in which the two books overlap. Given the limitations of both *The Pacific Islands* and *Where the Waves Fall*, is it realistic to demand a general history of the Pacific for the whole period of foreign intrusion? The area and geographic variations are too great, the cultures too numerous and diverse, and the 450 years of cross-cultural contact too long and individually specific to be encompassed satisfactorily in a generalist account. I now believe we need smaller areal and thematic studies on topics such as the rise of indigenous political elites in different contexts throughout contact and later periods, the impact of the loss of economic self-sufficiency, the role of the Christian churches or nuclear politics. Such works would allow comparative analyses across several archipelagoes and island isolates, as well as fine-grained explication of historical and cultural processes within particular islands or island groups.

The basic difference in interpretation between Oliver and Howe can be simply stated as that between seeing the islanders as naive victims of foreign exploitation (the Fatal Impact, a theory popularized by Alan Moorehead in his book of the same name) versus seeing the islanders as historical agents and equal partners in cross-cultural events. In Oliver’s version of the islanders as victims, disruption, cultural loss and exploitation are inevitable and vitiates the need for any careful exploration of the historical and cultural processes that preceded these outcomes. The foreigners are rogues and exploiters; the islanders, frequently referred to as natives, are pawns satisfied with knickknacks and geegaws. Faced with

the Samoan Mau or later islander political movements, Olivers lacks the interpretative tools and outlook to analyze them seriously and resorts to explanations of the influence of foreign dissidents and leftists (pp. 149–152, 271). Anticolonial activities in post-World War II New Guinea are described as “some nasty local incidents” (p. 271). The problems with the opposing assertion of islander agency I have dealt with elsewhere.⁵ Suffice it to say that to argue persistently for islander agency precludes any exploration of the various oscillations of power between island and foreign groups that pertained in specific contact situations, and ignores that in the long term the balance was to swing against the interests and well-being of the majority of islanders.⁶ The increasing integration of the island world into the margins of the international capitalist system left the islanders with greatly diminished economic and political power and initiative. This situation remains true today in many contexts.

Among Pacific historians the interpretative debate over islander agency versus exploitation is rarely publicly confronted and has not developed beyond this rudimentary level. Among anthropologists, in particular Marshall Sahlins and Jonathan Friedman, similar interpretative models are being explored and developed on a more theoretical plane. Sahlins, who pioneered the writing of structuralist cultural history in the Pacific with his work on Hawaii and Fiji,⁷ is criticized by Friedman for the central and determining role the former claims for indigenous cultural myths and practices, and his refusal to acknowledge the foreign forces that in time overwhelmed them. Friedman argues that the universal pattern of incorporation into the Western capitalist system cannot be denied.⁸ The intellectual exchange is verbose, vehement, and fascinating, if at times difficult to follow.⁹ Being less theoretically oriented myself, I wonder whether the protagonists have not at times allowed their theories to predetermine historical analysis. Ideally, in any postcontact context the cultural and personal factors influencing all participants should be investigated as carefully and thoroughly as possible and the final judgment on the balance of the power relations between them should be based on the specific interplay between structure and process (culture and history). At times, particularly in the early contact period, islander agency could be clearly established; more frequently, foreign domination and exploitation could not be denied. No group of islanders would be conceived of as essentially passive or eternally malleable, nor on the other hand would they be seen as always successful active agents.

The tension between analyses of culture and history, between anthropological and historical methodologies, will not be resolved and, as

Dening has so cogently argued, should not be: "The tension between model-construction and actuality description is in both anthropology and history. That the tension can be resolved is a false hope; that it *should* be resolved is a wrong ideal."¹⁰ But the fruitfulness of analyzing the interplay between structure and event is clearly attested in the works of Sahlins, Dening, Valeri, and several others now in the field,¹¹ and I believe some of the most exciting studies of the Pacific past in the next decade will come from practitioners of this approach.

NOTES

1. Caroline Ralston, review of *Where the Waves Fall*, by K. R. Howe, in Book Review Forum, *Pacific Studies* 9, no. 1 (1985): 160.

2. F. Allan Hanson, "Female Pollution in Polynesia?" *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 91 (1982): 335–381; F. Allan Hanson and Louise Hanson, *Counterpoint in Maori Culture* (London, 1983); Penelope Schoeffel, "The Origin and Development of Women's Associations in Western Samoa, 1830–1977," *Journal of Pacific Studies* 3 (1977): 1–21; Penelope Schoeffel, "Gender, Status, and Power in Samoa," *Canberra Anthropology* 1 (1978): 69–81; Sherry B. Ortner, "Gender and Sexuality in Hierarchical Societies: The Case of Polynesia and Some Comparative Implications," in *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead (Cambridge, 1981), 359–409; Kerry James, "Gender Relations in Tonga 1780–1984," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 92 (1983): 233–243.

3. Marshall Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (Ann Arbor, 1981); Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985); Valerio Valeri, "The Transformation of a Transformation: A Structural Essay on an Aspect of Hawaiian History (1809–1819)," *Social Analysis* 10 (1982): 3–41; Valerio Valeri, *Kingship and Sacrifice: Ritual and Society in Ancient Hawaii* (Chicago, 1985); Greg Dening, "Possessing Tahiti," *Archaeology in Oceania* 21 (1986): 103–118.

4. Douglas Oliver, "A New Approach to Pacific History" (review of *Where the Waves Fall*, by Kerry Howe), *Honolulu Star-Bulletin/Advertiser*, 1 July 1984.

5. Ralston, review of *Where the Waves Fall*, 150–163.

6. I am grateful to Dr. Nicholas Thomas for discussions on this point and for access to work on it that he has in progress.

7. Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors*; Sahlins, *Islands of History*.

8. Jonathan Friedman, "Captain Cook, Culture, and the World System," *Journal of Pacific History* 20 (1985): 191–201; Jonathan Friedman, "No History Is an Island: An Exchange between Jonathan Friedman and Marshall Sahlins," *Critique of Anthropology* 8 (1988): 7–39.

9. Marshall Sahlins, "Deserted Islands of History: A Reply to Jonathan Friedman," *Critique of Anthropology* 8 (1988): 41–51.

10. Greg Denning, *Of Islands and Beaches* (Melbourne, 1980), 42.

11. For Sahlins, Denning, and Valeri see n. 3. Other scholars working in the field include Bronwen Douglas, "Written on the Ground: Spatial Symbolism, Cultural Categories, and Historical Process in New Caledonia," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 91 (1982): 383–415; Nicholas Thomas, "Unstable Categories: *Tapu* and Gender in the Marquesas," in *Sanctity and Power, Gender in Polynesian History*, ed. Caroline Ralston and Nicholas Thomas, special issue, *Journal of Pacific History* 22 (1987): 123–138; Nicholas Thomas, "The Contradictions of Hierarchy: Myths, Women, and Power in Eastern Polynesia," in *Myths of Matriarchy Reconsidered*, ed. Deborah Gewertz (Sydney, 1988), 170–184; Phyllis Herda, "Gender, Rank, and Power in 18th Century Tonga: The Case of Tupoumohefo," in Ralston and Thomas, *Sanctity and Power*, 195–208; Phyllis Herda, "The Transformation of the Traditional Tongan Polity: A Genealogical Consideration of Tonga's Past" (Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 1988); Margaret Jolly and Martha Macintyre, eds., *Family and Gender in the Pacific: Domestic Contradictions and the Colonial Impact* (Cambridge, 1989).