
EDITOR'S FORUM

**NEW DIRECTIONS IN PACIFIC HISTORY:
A PRACTITIONER'S CRITICAL VIEW**

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The field of Pacific history has come a long way since J. W. Davidson, its founder and for years its doyen, laid down its charter in 1955 and gave it academic respectability. Davidson made the then revolutionary proposal that the traditional perspective on European imperial history be reversed--that is, that the interaction between the West and the island Pacific be viewed from the perspective of the islands themselves rather than the European capitals that governed them.¹ The primary object of study of the new Pacific history was not to be the London Missionary Society *in se* and the dispersal of its missionaries over the globe, but the arrival of such missionaries in the island Pacific and its significance for the island societies. The consequence of this reversal, as Kerry Howe points out, was that the "new" Pacific historian was charged with the task of examining any and all European influences on the islands, "the lowly beachcomber, an impoverished sandalwood trader, a ragged whaling crew," as well as the LMS missionary or even the ostrich-plumed governor.² Moreover, the historian had to duly take note of the fact that even the cherished European institutions that had formerly been the exclusive object of his or her study were likely to have been transformed to some degree in the Pacific environment. To comprehend this transformation, as well as the foreign institution's impact on the local environment, entailed some knowledge of the indigenous society, of course. And so was born island-oriented history.

But island-oriented history, which gained universal acceptance in academic circles, is today regarded as only a partial corrective of the Eurocentric history of old. Island-oriented history must give way to what is sometimes called islander-oriented history, many apologists assert, if local people are to be given their rightful place in the history of their own islands.³ The apologists argue that Davidson's original vision, for all that it achieved, is badly outdated in this age of Pacific nationalism and must be broadened greatly if Pacific history is ever to become more than the account of a procession of foreigners and their institutions to island shores. The complaints usually made about island-oriented history are that it almost always begins with Western contact, focuses on Westerners rather than on islanders throughout, and makes almost exclusive use of written sources that are, of course, Western and hence invariably biased.

While it is nearly impossible to disagree with the desirability of islander-oriented history in principle, one can have serious questions about its practicability. Given the severe limitations under which Pacific historians work, are the canons of the "new" Pacific history a bold initiative that promises a depth of understanding hitherto unimagined or merely a formula for frustration? How is the author of a written history to keep Pacific Islanders in the forefront of the narrative when the local people, unfortunately, are nothing more than an undivided sea of humanity? Rarely does the historian know of the names, faces, personal quirks, and anecdotes needed to make islanders live as individuals--and when he does, it is almost always from a Western source.⁴ And where does a historian turn to supplement the Western sources upon which he draws so heavily for his work? The obvious answer is, of course, oral material--if he is fortunate enough to have access to it, if he possesses the requisite skills to use it wisely, and if the scope of his study is confined to one or two cultural areas. Finally, how is a historian to extend her story back beyond the point of initial European contact except by adding one of those insipid chapters on precontact island life that have become *de rigueur* in an age acutely self-conscious about suggesting that it all began when the first Europeans walked ashore?

I am not suggesting that Pacific history should not move in the direction of what is called islander-oriented history. Clearly islanders deserve a place in their own history, and as grand a place as possible. But they will never hold center stage in that genre which we Westerners have been accustomed to call history, if for no reason other than that they happen to belong to nonliterate societies and have left us comparatively

few records that can be used in writing about them by those engaged in this discipline, whether they be Western historians or islanders themselves. We historians play with a stacked deck--not only because of the preponderance of Western sources (although there are some islands, especially in Polynesia, that have rich indigenous traditions), nor because we must rigorously adhere to a European-born tradition of historiography (sometimes we do not!), but because we are in the business of turning out our product in written form. If the medium that we use can be said to be at least partially determinative of its contents, then the very fact that we write rather than compose chants, for instance, imposes on our work serious limitations. Written sources are naturally more congenial to anyone who intends to produce a written work, especially since they are presumed to reflect the concern for facticity, chronological ordering, and other things associated with written history.

All this was brought home to me very vividly last year when I wrote a series of historical monographs in preparation for the centenary of the Catholic Church in the Caroline and Marshall Islands.⁵ To chronicle the events in the founding and growth of the church, I drew heavily on archival and published materials, many of them in languages other than English, that provided a time sequence and structure that would have been difficult to obtain through oral sources. Naturally, however, they also weighted the narrative toward the European and American missionaries who figured so prominently in these accounts. I canvassed local leaders for information on Micronesian personalities, but, try as I might, I was unable to achieve the balance that I had hoped for and so could not do justice to the hundreds of unheralded islander church workers who contributed so significantly to the building of the church in the area. To provide evenhanded treatment, so to speak, would have taken far more time than I could possibly spend on the project. Instead, the monographs were turned over to local people, leaving them not only to redress the imbalance, but more importantly to determine the way the story of their church should be presented at their separate celebrations. In Yap the church history was danced; in Truk it was sung in a number of hymns, each composed by a separate island group; and in Pohnpei it was dramatized in a series of humorous tableaux underscoring the multiple misunderstandings that occurred throughout the early attempts at intercultural communication. Each of the island groups had its history, presented in an art form that best suited its genius, and I had my monographs.

It may be belaboring the obvious to insist that Pacific Islanders--if they are anything akin to the Micronesians with whom I work--do con-

trol their own history, dramatizing themes that are meaningful to them in art forms of their own choosing (although rarely *written* forms). My experience has taught me that islanders will freely make use of--while seldom being enslaved by--written materials that we may proffer as they proceed to chant or act out or dance their history. Perhaps the humbling recognition that we Westerners have no monopoly on island history, despite our self-important fidgeting about imposing yet another form of cultural imperialism, will liberate us at last to do what we can and to do it well. Pacific historians are a nervous lot by and large. We are forever anguishing over our efforts as if they were the final word rather than the very provisional contribution they are--another brick in the edifice, as H. E. Maude wisely used to say. Anthropologists seem much less squeamish about the texts they produce, possibly because they possess the conceptual vocabulary to allow them to distinguish between the emic (indigenous perceptions) and the etic (organizing principles that they impose on their material). Then, too, their year or two of living in the field among the people they study can be counted upon to lay to rest most of the pretensions that they might have harbored regarding the lasting impact of their work on the local culture.

The fact that Pacific peoples have their own populist histories, usually three or four removes from our rarefied academic workspace, should not, of course, cause us to abrogate all responsibility to move toward a historiography that takes serious account of island people. A work like Greg Denning's *Islands and Beaches*, which masterfully integrates anthropological literature and oral tradition with written sources on Marquesas history, demonstrates how far the historian can go in this direction.⁶ It also indicates something of the limits to which this approach may be pushed, however, for Denning wrote on a homogeneous cultural group with a rich oral tradition and limited the scope of his history to about a century, yet he admits to being able to rescue only a few individuals, all of them royalty, from oblivion.⁷ For the rest he quite effectively (but reluctantly, I suspect) generalizes the Marquesan people as "Te Enata" in their interaction with the host of Europeans who lingered on or crossed their beach. Recently there have been a few historical theses on Micronesia that, making judicious use of oral history, have offered admirable reinterpretations of island events during the past century and have moved considerably closer to a more balanced treatment of islanders.⁸ These works, like Denning's, are necessarily restricted both culturally and geographically, however, and each of the authors had the additional advantage of having lived for years in the island group about which he or she is writing. As the range of the his-

tory broadens, such treatment understandably becomes less feasible. K. R. Howe's partial survey of the precolonial Pacific, for instance, despite the author's obvious commitment to the notion of islander-oriented history, is more a recitation of common themes than a dramatization of these through actual islander-European encounters.⁹

Even works such as those just mentioned, which come as close as any to the contemporary ideal, fall well short of the criteria laid down by Routledge: islanders are not in fact the main actors, but are usually defined exclusively through their collective responses to European initiatives.¹⁰ From this one can only conclude that some of the norms linked to islander-oriented history are thoroughly unrealistic and in need of serious revision. Even if it is argued that these criteria are meant to represent a historiographic ideal that may be approached but never attained, there remains the danger that islander-oriented history will emerge as the principal or, worse, the only standard by which the value of a historical work is judged. That would be tragic, for it would deny legitimacy, for instance, to O. H. K. Spate's ambitious and elegant trilogy on the making of the modern-day Pacific, a work that is so sweeping in coverage that it does not have the luxury of focusing on the peoples of the Pacific.¹¹ To have to apologize for a history of the breadth and synthetic power of Spate's because it does not meet our current standards of island history is ludicrous. Clearly there are any number of books on topics of vital importance to our understanding of the Pacific whose merits cannot adequately be evaluated by such standards. If there remains, as Routledge says, a surprising "pertinacity of doubts as to what Pacific history is or ought to be,"¹² the confusion may well be attributed to the unworkable norms we have adopted.

If islander-oriented history, as described earlier, is indeed an unreliable norm, what do we have to offer in its place? I believe Routledge himself offers some excellent suggestions in his article on the subject,¹³ but before elaborating on this I would like to offer for consideration a test case at the other end of the historical spectrum. Some time ago I had occasion to delve into the Spanish conquest and early colonization of the Marianas, something that occurred three centuries ago and about which there is no surviving oral tradition.¹⁴ To what extent is it possible for the researcher foolhardy enough to undertake this topic to avoid the excesses of Eurocentric history while shedding light on the island group's past and helping present-day citizens of the Marianas appropriate their distant history?

First of all, there is little one can do to prevent Europeans--in this case, the troops, missionary priests, and governors--from dominating

the narrative, although the islanders as a collective unit can be kept in the story, even if invariably in the background. In this case, of course, the author must be prepared to receive the inevitable reproach that what he has to offer is far from islander-oriented history.

Second, the author can use imagination and analogy, powerful but sometimes undervalued tools of his trade, in reassessing the motives and strategies of islanders in their interaction with Europeans and one another. If he has any knowledge of the people of whom he writes, or of their analogues in other Micronesian societies, he is aware that the mere planting of a flag or declaration of Spanish sovereignty is not and has never been a *casus belli*. Likewise, verbal attacks by the Spanish on local customs, although capable of provoking ridicule and contempt, would not ordinarily lead to violence. On the other hand, personal assaults by the Spanish on the people would have invariably triggered attempts at retaliation just as they still do today. Perceived alignment of the Spanish with rival political forces could also occasion armed violence. The nature of the hostilities throughout this period was clearly intermittent warfare of the kind employed elsewhere in the Pacific. If there were major battles, they were heavily ritualistic and were concluded quickly after the first few men were lost. These few conclusions alone could generate still others that might give rise to an entirely new understanding of this initial period of colonial history.

Finally, the historian can and should attempt to show the impact of Spanish intervention on the island society of the Marianas with respect to population change, settlement patterns, acculturation in life-style, social organization, and so forth. The importance of this island transformation or "social history," as it may be called, was a major point made in Davidson's often-cited inaugural address as first head of the Pacific Studies Department in Canberra, and was reaffirmed strongly in Routledge's survey of new directions in Pacific history.¹⁵ We may not have a large cast of individual islanders with speaking parts in our production, but we do have the faceless local community about which we can write. If, as is often the case, we are forced to remain silent on the workings of the internal social and political systems of the local people, and if we have little to say about their initiatives vis-à-vis the European, we can at least describe the effects of European incursions on their island society. This brings us back to island-oriented history, seemingly *passé* but a reasonable enough minimum standard in the light of the real constraints under which many of us work.

Will such modest historiographic goals satisfy the aspirations of today's young island nationalists who are impatient to shed every last

vestige of colonialism? Perhaps not, but I am not sure that this matters a great deal. The young and principled, whether white-skinned or brown, can be extraordinarily myopic at times. A deliberate adjustment of our norms for Pacific history will provide some reassurance for those who might have misgivings about doing important research that cannot comply with the impossible standards that we have set for ourselves. Howe cites with approval Davidson's long list of the agricultural and other industries that have produced such wide-reaching change in island communities from one end of the Pacific to the other.¹⁶ If our goal is to reach an understanding of how island people came to be the way they are, then these foreign industries represent a vital force in that story and thus are legitimate, even critically important, research topics. Anything that might discourage such directions in historical research, as old-fashioned as they may seem, will simply leave island historians all the poorer tomorrow when a generation of highly literate islanders seriously turns to the task of reinterpreting its own history. In the meantime, there is ample room for islanders and expatriates to work out, in very different directions and via different media, their own perceptions of island history. Pacific-born academics need have no fear: their fellow islanders will maintain for the foreseeable future a monopoly over those forms of history that are truly honored by their people.

This critique of the shibboleths accepted by Pacific historians should end in some constructive recommendations for those practicing the art today, so I offer these rather platitudinous propositions as a summary of my position. To avoid the appearance of belittling my peers, let's just say that this is the advice I would give to someone just launching into the field. This draws on very little reading background in historical method, several attempts to write Micronesian history, and twenty years of living and working on a Pacific island with island people.

(1) *There is no such thing as a definitive history, so learn to feel comfortable with the provisionality of your work.* Few historians today would have the audacity to term their books "complete" histories, as was the common practice some years ago. Today's historian sees himself as producing a necessarily partial history--"partial" in both senses of the word: biased and incomplete. Hence, he writes in the knowledge that what issues from his efforts may be incorporated into the fuller and richer historical synthesis that will surely follow.

(2) *It is better to get European material relating to the islands into print than to suppress publication indefinitely until it is totally free from the usual biases.* The conscientious historian will do what he can to present an impartial treatment, but he should be aware that his read-

ers, not least of all the growing Pacific audience, have the wits to read between the lines and supply corrections of their own. Revision of European bias is the task of more than a single generation. While this should not excuse us from making an attempt at evenhanded treatment, neither should it be permitted to paralyze the writer into inactivity.

(3) *Oral traditions, while they can be helpful if the problems of obtaining them and the hermeneutical difficulties associated with their use can be overcome, are not the only means at our disposal for filtering and correcting Western sources.* At times the historian will have no body of local material from which to present an alternate explanation of island events, but this should not leave him resourceless. As I suggested above, he can legitimately draw on the powers of imagination and analogy. We may make reasonable inferences regarding the past on the basis of our familiarity with a cultural group's behavior today, or at times on the basis of a similar society's response in the past.

(4) *Maintain a healthy respect for the limitations of the medium that you choose to use.* The print medium is less suitable for presenting much of the indigenous material we might collect than the various media in which they were originally presented. This is not to say that oral material cannot be successfully incorporated into written history, only that we may not presume this can be done without major reworking of the sources. The differences between literacy and orality, which are receiving much attention from social scientists these days, are of consequence here. The author would do well to recall that, however sympathetic he might be to his islander subjects, the very act of sitting down to compose at a typewriter or word processor constitutes still another alien slant.

(5) *To show the impact of foreigners and their institutions on island society is one of the most important services a historian can render to island peoples.* Islanders today don't require the services of Western historians to sing the praises of their ancient heroes or to do biographies of their contemporary leaders. What they do need is any insight that we can cull from our sources, European and indigenous, on the process of social change that has revolutionized their societies. The Micronesians I know are still struggling to understand the upheaval of the past century or two--how they came to be impacted from without, how their ancestors responded to these changes, and how the most visible of the changes affected still other areas of their life. A major part of our efforts in Pacific history today must be to help island populations address these questions through the social history that we present.

(6) *Tell a good story before all else.* A good story requires at least a few colorful personalities, and the historian would do well to let them

emerge, whatever their nationality, without apology. Don't clutter a history with sermonettes on the virtues of island folk and the vices of Westerners (or vice versa). Avoid those dull treatises on the local culture before the advent of the white man, often done in the historical present with no semblance of movement, the sole purpose of which is to assure readers that we are mindful of the fact that islanders were there long before Europeans. Spare us the pieties that are intended to testify to a fond sympathy for the islander. Instead, produce a readable history that will give us as balanced a picture as the narrative will bear. If you have a story to tell, get on with it.

If these reflections strike readers as a bit reactionary, so be it. Nevertheless, the intention of what I have written is not to deny islanders their own rightful place in Pacific history, but to make sure that they get it. To the extent that we historians stop strangling our own initiative with unrealistic norms for the practice of our trade, island people will have the advantage of our output, as imperfect as it may be. They can react to it, revise it, even reject it outright--but they will at least have our work on which to pronounce their own judgments. Who knows but that this may be the catalyst needed to bring on the age of Pacific Islander domination over their own written history!

NOTES

1. Davidson's address was later published as "Problems of Pacific History," *Journal of Pacific History* 1 (1966): 5-21.

2. K. R. Howe, "Pacific Islands History in the 1980s: New Directions or Monograph Myopia?" *Pacific Studies* 3, no. 1 (1979): 82.

3. See, for instance, David Routledge, "Pacific History as Seen from the Pacific Islands," *Pacific Studies* 8, no. 2 (1985): 81-99.

4. In the remainder of this article I use the pronoun *he* for the sake of brevity and clarity, but I intend it to encompass both males and females. This is especially worth mentioning because of the significant contributions that women have made and are making to Pacific history in nearly all geographical areas.

5. The monographs--"The Catholic Church in Yap," "The Catholic Church in Pohnpei," and "The Catholic Church in Truk"--were mimeographed by the Micronesian Seminar, Truk. They remain unpublished.

6. Greg Denning, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas 1774-1880* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1980).

7. *Ibid.*, 93.

8. Perhaps the most notable examples are David Hanlon's work on nineteenth-century Pohnpei, "Upon a Stone Altar," Ph.D. thesis, University of Hawaii, 1984; Karen Nero's

still uncompleted dissertation for the University of California at Berkeley on the ascendancy of Koror in Palau during the last century; and Mark Berg's recent thesis for Australian National University on internal migration in Yap and Palau in the nineteenth century.

9. K. R. Howe, *Where the Waves Fall: A New South Sea Islands History from First Settlement to Colonial Rule* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984).

10. Routledge, "Pacific History," 90.

11. O. H. K. Spate, *The Pacific since Magellan* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1979-); vol. 1, *The Spanish Lake* (1979), and vol. 2, *Monopolists and Freebooters* (1983), are published, and the third volume is still being written.

12. Routledge, "Pacific History," 81.

13. Ibid.

14. F. X. Hezel, "From Conversion to Conquest," *Journal of Pacific History* 17, no. 3 (1982): 115-137; F. X. Hezel, "From Conquest to Colonization," *Journal of Pacific History* (in press).

15. Davidson, "Problems of Pacific History"; Routledge, "Pacific History."

16. Howe, *Where the Waves Fall*, 88.