

K. Buckley and K. Klugman, *South Pacific Focus: A Record in Words and Photographs of Burns Philp at Work*. Sydney: George Allen and Unwin Australia, 1986. Pp. x, 126. A\$19.95.

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To scan any Pacific historian's bookshelves is to realize that most monographs originate from the much-maligned Ph.D. dissertation. Another genre is emerging and that is the commissioned company history based largely on company records and often carrying the presumed authority of academic authorship. Company sponsorships of their own histories have tended to result in somewhat sanitized accounts, not as a consequence of direct censorship imposed by the company but through a subtle process of self-censorship. Commissioned biographies tend to suffer from the same constraint. Among these company histories are Ken Buckley and Kris Klugman's two stout volumes on the Australian mercantile-shipping company Burns Philp (1981, 1983), and their delightful sequel, *South Pacific Focus*.

South Pacific Focus is quite different from its predecessors. It brings together reports and photographs relating to Burns Philp's activities in the Marshall, Gilbert, and Ellice Islands at a time of intense trading competition and eventual political readjustment following the outbreak of World War I. The reports were written by Frederick Wallin, a senior company official based in Sydney; the photographs are thought to have been taken by Neville Chatfield, a more junior company man who became Burns Philp's manager at Butaritari in the Gilberts in 1913.

Together the reports and the photos contribute--although from very different perspectives--toward an understanding of the expatriate commercial milieu in the three atoll groups. By the early years of this century their populations were accustomed to traders and to a degree dependent upon them, not least because Christian missionaries had stimulated a demand for European imports. The relationship between Islanders, missionaries, and traders, moreover, was regulated by German colonial rule in the Marshalls and by British rule in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. A further element in this interrelationship of interests was the incidence of return labor migration, under government aegis, from the Gilbert and Ellice Islands to the phosphate extractive industries at Ocean Island and Nauru, which provided the returnees with cash and further stimulated expatriate trading activity. Whatever the

vagaries of copra production and world market prices the Marshall, Gilbert, and Ellice Islands possessed sufficient inducement to attract trading companies, both large and small, and Burns Philp did not have the field to itself. It was a complex trading arena of interlocking interests that Wallin attempted to describe and manipulate to his employer's best advantage.

Wallin's three reports of 1910 and 1915 were not written with an eye to posterity but as confidential documents for the company management in Sydney. Preparation of the first report, in particular, also provided Wallin with the opportunity for on-the-spot familiarization with his new responsibility. On that occasion he reported that the company should concentrate more on the Gilberts, which he considered to have the greatest potential. By 1915, however, the trading situation in the three island groups was far more volatile, given the escalation of competition and the complicating factor of great power rivalries with the onset of the world war.

The broad outlines of the scenario are well known, not least because of Buckley and Klugman's previous efforts. But a detailed appreciation of how the various outside influences impinged on life at the local level is not evident in the secondary sources. The Wallin reports add depth and detail to the existing picture. They do not go much beyond it, which is not surprising given Wallin's lack of familiarity with and awareness of the nuances of island life, though he was sensitive to the delicate balance between effort and reward that motivated the indigenous copra producers. On the contrary, he saw through the eyes of a head-office company official and so brought to bear the perspective of the institutional center in his descriptions of the hinterland. Writing from this standpoint, Wallin was especially well placed to impart much useful information on shipping routes, the importance of shipping generally, overall trading strategies, mail contracts, copra prices, negotiations with colonial authorities, and the activities of rival trading firms. And herein lies the value of the Wallin reports: the lack of local understanding is to some extent offset by the wider view that was presented.

At the same time Wallin's view was inherently narrow, however instructive. He was a company man to the core and ever one-eyed and parochial in the pursuit of his employer's interests. As such he brings into sharp focus a recurring paradox of large-company domination of the island trade. These companies preached the doctrine of free trade but practiced a thoroughgoing protectionism. None was more adept than Burns Philp at averring a commitment to free enterprise while in practice actively restricting competition and availing itself of preferen-

tial treatment from government. Thus Wallin spent much time on his tours securing mail contracts that would serve to subsidize the firm's trading operations, while at the same time presenting Burns Philp's part of the bargain as a patriotic act. In other ways, too, Wallin showed his true colors, notably in his assumption that Burns Philp's receiving preferential treatment from government (meaning that competitors were discriminated against) was obviously and irreproachably right. In the heart of every capitalist lurks a monopolist and a protectionist, and the Wallin reports highlight this contradiction in the thinking of the firms engaged in the island trade. The scenario unfolds like a chapter straight out of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.

For these reasons and more the publication of the Wallin reports merits a warm welcome. Even so the book would have been a more useful research tool with a greater degree of editorial comment and annotation (the matter of inadequate editorial work has already been aired in *Pacific Studies* 9 [2]: 181-186). The extent to which the reports would have been enhanced by further editorial input is best conveyed by the reminder that comparatively little is known about the history of the Marshall, Gilbert, and Ellice Islands during the years of Wallin's oversight. To compensate, his reports should ideally be read with the relevant sections of Buckley and Klugman's previous two volumes on Burns Philp, and also with Alastair Couper's pioneering dissertation on "The Island Trade" (1967).

The final section of *South Pacific Focus* consists of a collection of photographs, most of which directly relate to Burns Philp's activities. They are grouped in sections (for example, copra loading, traders and trading, native officials, Burns Philp vessels and their crews, and rival firms). They are also explained and enlivened with comments by Neville Chatfield (who presumably took the photos) and by Harry and Honor Maude (who lived in the Gilberts during the 1930s and 1940s), and with quotations taken from Burns Philp's minute books.

The photographs have a scarcity value. Nineteenth-century photographers tended to steer clear of isolated atolls. Their equipment was cumbersome and at risk every time they went over the reef in a ship's boat or in a canoe, and the costs and hazards outweighed the gains. It is therefore a double misfortune that many of the photos that were taken have disappeared without a trace. In 1873 a photographer named A. Smith took passage on the schooner *Jessie Niccol* for a voyage through Micronesia and the Ellice Islands (*New Zealand Herald*, 10 December 1873); it is not known what became of his photographs and none appeared in the published account of the voyage (Wood 1875). In

1886 the schooner *Buster*, also of Auckland, made an extended trading voyage, calling at numerous Polynesian and Micronesian islands. The photographer on this occasion was a Mr. Andrews; some of his photographs appeared in the published account of the voyage (Moss 1889) and others in a trader's reminiscences (Dana 1935). But what has become of the rest? The answer to that question is well documented with respect to the three wide-ranging Pacific cruises of Robert Louis Stevenson and his entourage in 1888-1890. They were avid photographers and indeed Stevenson's pretext for embarking on the first cruise was to gather illustrative matter for a projected book on the South Seas. But a good half of their photographs were lost in a shipboard fire and others were never taken because one of their cameras fell overboard (Knight 1986:16). The remnants are housed in the Edinburgh City Libraries and a selection of the photographs from the 1890 voyage appeared in the published version of Fanny Stevenson's diary (Stevenson 1914). It is a cause of abiding regret that the early photographic record of Pacific atolls is so meager in contrast to North American Indians (e.g., Gidley 1979), but there are reasons. It is no accident that the most extensive nineteenth-century collection of photographs of the Ellice Islands was taken in 1897 by members of the Royal Society's coral-boring expedition, a shore-based operation. Some were published soon after (David 1899); the entire collection is housed in the Mitchell Library in Sydney.

Thus the collection of photographs in *South Pacific Focus* adds appreciably to this modest corpus. Added to their scarcity value is an intrinsic value, because they put a human face on Wallin's prosaic descriptions and go some way to providing the glimpse of island life that was beyond Wallin's reach. It would be altogether appropriate for an inexpensive paperback edition of the photographs to be prepared, with annotations in both the Kiribati and Tuvalu languages, for release in those places.

Burns Philp is to be commended for carrying the publication costs of this delightful volume. Ken Buckley and Kris Klugman are to be congratulated on producing a remarkable little book.

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