Jeremy Beckett, *Torres Strait Islanders: Custom and Colonialism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. Pp. xiii, 251, maps, illustrations. A$39.50.

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I received Jeremy Beckett's book for review at approximately the same time as the lush production *Australians: A Historical Atlas* (1987) arrived for my perusal. Yet I was disconcerted to find virtually no intersection of the approximate worlds these two productions inhabit. Torres Strait Islanders, and indeed the Torres Strait Islands themselves, simply do not seem to exist for that latter, expensive volume. Neither historically nor geographically do people and place merit even a glancing acknowledgment, even though their fate and environment have been absorbed within Australian boundaries since the late 1870s. Translated into European terms, a commensurate snub would be to drop Tasmania peremptorily from sight at the southern declination of the Antipodes.

Torres Strait Islanders feel this marginality keenly, particularly the material neglect embodied in being consigned always to the periphery of concern. That is why Australia's bicentennial year carried yet another niggling little surprise for its generally rejoicing citizenry when Jim Akee's Torres United Party renewed calls in January 1988 for the independence of Torres Strait from Australian jurisdiction, last heard in a full-throated way in the mid-1970s. Although there is by no means unanimity upon this issue among the diaspora of some twenty-five thousand Islanders—scattered from Thursday Island to Perth—the independence movement, nevertheless, is fired by a burgeoning sense of deprivation and neglect.

Islanders, as Beckett shows, resent the contrast of their meagre, subsistent life-styles with what they observe as the glittering affluence of white Australian society. Specifically, they resent the relative powerlessness associated with being a "remittance economy," dependent upon that "uneasy condominium" of state and federal control. They demand greater share in the extractive prawning, pearlshell and trochus industries of the strait; and they angrily wonder why Augold NL and Mount Isa Mines Limited should be granted mining leases to islands (such as

Horn Island) by the Queensland government without any negotiation for mineral royalties with the traditional landholders. They enviously observe the annual A$25 million that the privately owned Sydney company, Torres Strait Pilots, receives for its services in guiding an average dozen vessels per day through Prince of Wales Channel, including oil tankers from the Middle East and bauxite carriers from Weipa.

Islanders obtain little of this largesse themselves, while their major connection with mainland Australia, run by Air Queensland, operates at inflated prices in antiquated Fokker Friendship aircraft. Crippling water and energy restrictions have been common on these islands and concern is also expressed at lax border controls that permit an unwanted influx of illegal Papuan migrants into the strait. Piloting this entire flotilla of specific irritants is the urgent complaint that white political parties and white bureaucrats ultimately decide the Islanders' future, while possessing little understanding of their sacred culture or knowledge of their extensive past.

Beckett's *Torres Strait Islanders: Custom and Colonialism* is thus a timely production; for, prior to its appearance in 1987, no single, in-depth study of this community existed, apart from Nonie Sharp's "in-house," typewritten monograph, "Torres Strait Islanders 1879-1979: Theme for an Overview" (1980), which, although revealing and percipient, enjoyed only limited circulation. Timeliness in Beckett's case, however, should not be equated with any sense of expediency or a rush to publication. Indeed, quite the opposite is true. Beckett has only slowly and cautiously arrived at this substantial publishing milestone across the stepping-stones of several field trips to the islands and the production of numerous scholarly papers and articles upon various aspects of Islander life during a span of almost three decades.

The result is a work that, to say the least, has been intellectually well honed—as thoughtfully crafted and polished as the pearlshell artifacts of this fascinating region. The study operates upon numerous levels: as anthropology, as history, as human geography, as race relations theory, and as a political economy, in microcosm, of Western colonialism. Each level sustains and fortifies the rest, building a solid and skillfully imbricated structure, well defended against external criticism. The book begins and ends with a "tombstone opening" ceremony on Murray Island. Yet, whereas such attention to funereal rites would have once been the stuff of maudlin Western pronouncements about a despondent and dying race, here the ceremonial is shown to betoken largely the optimism, vitality, and resilience of Islander society. In between these examinations, the reader is regaled with insights into precontact culture

(which are perhaps overemphatic about its negative connotations), the rich and often tumultuous history of culture contact (particularly that of Badu and the Murray Islands, which, along with Saibai, Beckett has most closely investigated), as well as the varied implications of what he terms "internal colonialism" and "welfare colonialism."

The term internal colonialism is, perhaps fortuitously, not extensively employed; for, upon reflection, it seems to broach a theoretical minefield of problems. For example: Are we simply dealing here with "people brought within national boundaries as in the case of Britain's 'Celtic fringe' " (p. 13)? Or are we dealing, rather, with people essentially colonized from without—by missionaries from the British metropolis and the South Pacific, by pearling and fishing companies operating from Sydney in the distinct colony of New South Wales (and even, incidentally, from Germany), and eventually by an intrusive administrative process emanating, in political collusion, from both Brisbane and Whitehall? The concept, as developed by Stavenhagen (1965), Blauner (1972), Hechter (1975), and Wolpe (1975), seems at best a fuzzy one that does not entirely mark off the process that it purports to delineate from "classic colonialism," wherein "a country's native population is subjugated by a conquering colonial group" (Cashmore 1984: 136-137). Beckett deals fairly cursorily and somewhat gingerly with the term; and, in one significant footnote, even renounces the applicability of Harold Wolpe's analysis of internal colonialism in South Africa, which had informed an earlier article on pearl fishing in the Torres Strait. Rather, what seems operative here is a style of administrative colonialism, overseeing (usually with laconic ineptitude) a relatively intense mode of resource extraction, coupled with considerable labor exploitation (sometimes bordering literally upon slavery) and a thoroughgoing ideological indoctrination by white missionaries and their Pacific Island functionaries. In short, it is a highly complex situation that does not lend itself to easy theoretical labeling.

Beckett's anthropological skills allow him to perceive how, despite such an exterior onslaught, the Islanders were (and are) rather more than the passive victims of Western expansionism: how, in practice, the activities of the fishers of bêche-de-mer and pearlshell, as well as the "fishers of men," were mediated by the responses of Islander society and how the former's imperious demands (both material and spiritual) were overwoven stubbornly into customary practice. Colonialism becomes in the process less the story of white power's naked imposition and more accurately one of subtle symbiosis, wherein each community "was able to negotiate the terms of its surrender" (p. 110) as its members reserved

"an essential part of themselves, outside the relations of production and consumption, which constituted the dominant order" (p. 10). As well as indicating far-reaching cultural retentions, what Beckett seems to be concretely emphasizing here is the point that Torres Strait Islanders, not violently decimated as mainland Aboriginal tribes usually were, retained supportive kinship ties; and by not being forcibly dispossessed of their islands and uprooted—again unlike reserve-bound indigenes on the mainland and in Tasmania—they preserved an environmental advantage beyond that of numerous other colonized groups.

The contrast is an instructive one; but it is not one, I feel, that should be taken too far. The missionaries, the fisheries, and extension of the British "rule of law" did make forceful inroads, which cut a swath through traditional practices—so much so that it is arguably impossible to determine in retrospect how much has been lost. Secondly, Islander communities may not often have been shot or poisoned wholesale (although the degree of frontier violence was arguably greater than admitted here), yet much more could be made of the negative repercussions to kinship involved in various epidemics of exotic diseases that halved the original Islander population by 1900—as well as in male life expectancies being seriously truncated by the hazards of deep-sea diving from the 1870s onwards. Such profound developments are merely mentioned in passing by Beckett and their impact upon the overall analysis does not seem sufficiently absorbed.

Thirdly, although Islanders were not so dramatically displaced by white settler colonialism as mainland blacks were, the marine resources that helped underpin their livelihood were rigorously plundered (as were their cultural artifacts) and their quality of life was consequently undermined. They lost, in effect, a considerable degree of environmental control as well as the easy mobility offered by traditional trading routes and conduits of cultural exchange. This loss was accentuated by the fisheries and mission stations that came to dot the islands (often operating as tiny company townships and petty theocracies), the "mosquito fleets" of pearling luggers and the occasional British man of war that moved through Islander waters, and the hand of white government that, by 1879, had scooped all of the islands to the New Guinea coastline into the imperial net. The Islanders, as they would later discover to their intense dismay, henceforth walked Crown Land.

Indeed, upon approaching this question from the perspective of a race-relations historian, one can question the often more sanguine conclusions of the anthropologist upon the matter of ensuing agency and the amount of room actually left to maneuver voluntarily once Western

commerce and imperial power elbowed their way forcefully into the scene. I do so, however, with requisite caution and with a marked respect for the author's interdisciplinary grasp. Beckett rather shyly admits to being "an anthropologist with historical inclinations" (pp. x-xi). Yet, like Charles Rowley and Peter Lawrence before him, his historical methodology is invariably sophisticated and thoughtfully integrated. It is never that ill-digested, precursive melange of dates and events, concocted in afterthought and served up as a hasty hors d'oeuvre to the main course, as in so many other social science texts.

Yet, as Beckett also emphasizes, the study's "centre of gravity" (p. 21) lies in a two-year anthropological field trip to the Torres Strait between 1958 and 1961. The time frame stretches backwards and projects forward from that experiential encounter and, in so doing, the focus possibly becomes less distinct at the outer edges—particularly in its backward projection. For instance, Beckett makes less use of documentary material than he might; he believes that such sources "do not allow us to form more than a vague impression of island life in pre-colonial times" (p. 30). Granting that such sources do tell us more about ethnic contact than precontact, and granting that Westerners' initial impressions are often peremptory and misleading, one can nevertheless suggest that a closer reading of such sources does disclose considerably more than the author here allows.

Beckett does not seem to have seen, for instance, H. M. Chester's detailed "Narrative of a Cruise of the North East Channel," written in October 1871, during which he visited Mabuiag, Badu, Moa, Murray, Warrior, and Prince of Wales islands (although an earlier, unprinted report by Chester is cited). A short review article is undoubtedly not the place to disclose all that Chester reveals in this lengthy report of the "Gamaleega" of Mabuiag, the "Badooleega" of Badu, the "Italeega" of Moa, and the "Korarega" of Prince of Wales Island. Detailing such a report—as well as those by Frank Jardine, Commodore Sterling, immigration agent Robert Gray, H. Kennett (master of the *Southern Cross*), government agent D'Oyley Alpin, Commodore Heath, John Douglas, and others during the 1870s—may also appear as carping and perhaps even nit-picking in the context of the range of primary sources Beckett's account does actually feature. Yet the existence of such exemplary historical data should induce a cautionary rider to be added to our otherwise happy acceptance of Beckett's study—and that rider is that a comprehensive race-relations history of the Torres Strait is yet to be written.

In such a history, I would suggest, the impact of fishery, mission, and colonial administration will be shown by primary documentation as

more dramatic, violent, and devastating than we presently acknowledge; Islander resistance and intransigence will be revealed as more intensive and prolonged; and subsequent labor relations will emerge as more intrusive, exploitative, and harmful to these peoples' general well-being. Moreover, a history of the Torres Strait, rather than an investigation of Torres Strait Islanders per se, will emphasize the immense complications of Australian race *relations* operating in these waters, as representatives of literally dozens of ethnic groups meet and interact haphazardly, acting out that complex drama of "lived dominance" (p. 91) both cooperatively and abrasively, industriously and riotously. Such a history, too, should coax more of the accumulated folk-memory from the throats and the pens of the Islanders themselves. We already catch such resonances here in the Islanders' expressive phrases—" 'ardwork for nothing" (p. 147) and "all belly scar long crawl" (p. 195)—reflecting the realities of labor relations and welfare colonialism from the perspective of black worker and state ward. Yet we need to see more productions in the future like Tom Lowah's *Edad Mer* (My Life; 1987), published recently by the cooperatively run Ram's Skull Press at Kuranda, the first extended autobiography of a Torres Strait Islander to be printed.

With Beckett's weighty contribution, therefore, the doors to this emporium of long-neglected research should be seen to open, rather than to be resealed by the imprimatur of the ostensibly definitive investigation.

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