

Jane Samson, *Imperial Benevolence: Making British Authority in the Pacific Islands*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998. Pp. 256. US\$35 cloth.

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Unlike many books on colonial history, *Imperial Benevolence* explores the humanitarian side of British authority in the Pacific in the era leading up to colonialism. The book argues that there was a close link between a humanitarian mission and imperialism in the Pacific in the seventy-five years before the cession of Fiji in 1874. During this period, which is often ignored in histories of colonialism, imperialism was reluctant and ambivalent. This study focuses on the role of captains of the Royal Navy, individuals who typically were assigned the task of establishing the supremacy of British influence without taking on unwelcome responsibilities or upsetting other European or American powers. Samson argues that these naval officers had a sense of imperial mission and that their humanitarian endeavors were crucial to making a legitimate British authority in the Pacific. Thus, the book provides a valuable antidote to the idea that British imperial power was focused on exploitation alone. Instead, it shows that many of the people entrusted with carrying out the imperial mission were concerned with humanitarian goals. Some were devout Christians who applauded the work of missionaries. Many viewed the Pacific Islanders as savage but redeemable under the influence of civilization and Christianity. Officers commonly saw their role as protecting islanders, often refusing to retaliate for injuries to British residents.

*Imperial Benevolence* is full of the complexities of Pacific history. The Royal Navy captains are sometimes but not always supportive of British missionaries. They usually view the white settlers with suspicion, lumping together traders, ex-convicts, escaped seamen, and beachcombers as uniformly troublemakers. They insist on protecting islanders even when the islanders have attacked white men. This is not a two-sided story of European–Pacific Islander interaction but one in which there are multiple groups of Europeans with very different ideas of their missions and situations. Class differences run deeply through the European community. Officers are increasingly members of the aristocracy in Britain or connected to it. They respect the upwardly mobile missionaries while disdaining the lower-status whites living in beach communities. The islanders are outside this class system altogether, viewed as savages or sometimes as analogous to the ancestors of the British people.

The islanders have less voice in the book, partly because the naval officers

failed to pay attention to them. Rather than considering how the islanders were navigating complex new situations, the naval officers saw them as child-like objects of their protective concern, in need of civilization and Christianity. They attributed islander attacks on white settlers and missionaries to retaliation for injuries done to them by Europeans rather than as responses to indigenous politics. The officers seem not to have understood that the indigenous rulers were actively manipulating the British gunships. Nor did they see that islanders might have interpreted British actions—such as destroying villages in retaliation for attacks on Europeans—in ways other than they did. The officers were demonstrating the power of the British navy, but sometimes they also laid bare the ease with which islanders could escape unscathed into the mountains.

Samson provides rich documentation of the views of British naval captains. The book is a happy combination of British naval history and Pacific Islands history so that the actions of the officers, while presented in their own terms, are contextualized within the events in the region. The author clearly shows the challenges the officers faced trying to carry out such an ambiguous mandate, often with little instruction from their superiors. The policy of protection and benevolence without British control constantly put captains in an irreconcilable dilemma since they were to act but not to foster any territorial expansion. *Imperial Benevolence* examines their general approaches to this dilemma. They developed a disdain for the white beachcomber communities, where convicts, traders, and deserters often lived with islander women. Samson acknowledges that the racial mixing was a tense issue but does not spend much time on the way discomfort about this racial/gender system might have contributed to the officers' disdain. The creation of these racially liminal communities, with no clear loyalties, added to the complexity of the British naval surveillance. It seems likely that understandings of appropriate and inappropriate sexual relations contributed significantly to officers' views (see Stoler 1997).

The sandalwood trade compounded the critique of indigenous whites, particularly in Melanesia. Here, officers frequently complained about the sandalwood traders' exploitative tactics and sought to defend the islanders from their abuse. As the labor trade known as "blackbirding" developed in the 1860s and 1870s, the naval captains saw this as yet another evil wreaked upon innocent and unsuspecting Pacific Islanders by rapacious white men (p. 117). Samson notes that the navy had played a heroic role in the termination of the African slave trade and retained a sense of duty to protect the vulnerable, particularly from slaverylike practices such as blackbirding. These humanitarian naval officers believed that "only naval vigilance stood between civilization and anarchy in the South Pacific" (p. 106). Yet, Samson notes that

the Pacific Islanders in the labor trade were often eager to travel and acquire new goods, and that only some of the recruiters, only during some time periods, engaged in the abuses for which all were blamed.

Law and order was always a thorny issue. Whether the naval captains had jurisdiction over the British residents scattered across the Pacific and whether they had the right to convict and punish those islanders who injured the British was a constant dilemma for these captains. Some held trials, others did not. Efforts to impose British justice with its forms and its apparatus of hanging sometimes repelled the islanders rather than impressing them. The officers' legal authority did not extend to the indigenous peoples, for the British refused to sign any treaties with local leaders between the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 and the cession of Fiji, despite several requests for protectorate status (p. 110). Samson points out the ambiguity of the concepts of "protectorate" and "cession" during this period and notes that the less-ambiguous term "annexation" was rarely mentioned. It appears that the British naval captains created floating centers of British law and order, constantly feeling out the nature and extent of their power as they moved through the islands. They also worked to make kings in some areas, such as Tonga and Fiji, on the theory that if a ruler is ceremonially treated as a king and supported by a gunship, he may become one. The final chapter describes some of the complexity of the cession of Fiji in 1874, an event that marks the end of this ambivalent period of imperial influence without imperial control and is clearly the product of British imperial king-making.

My reading of Hawaiian history suggests that the British naval officers were more protective toward the islanders and less sympathetic to the demands of the white settler communities than American officers during the same period (see Merry 2000). Time and again they refused to retaliate for injuries or to accept requests for British protection and support. But how typical were these officers? The book focuses on the writings of ten to fifteen officers, yet Samson notes that between the beginning of regular island patrols in 1829 and the cession of Fiji in 1874 there were at least forty-nine men who commanded vessels in the South Pacific islands (p. 131). Were all these men equally humanitarian? Samson says the humanitarian impulse in Britain was fading at the end of this period and a new group of officers was taking over (p. 131). Perhaps those she discusses were typical, or perhaps they were the most prominent and widely read. Indeed, several became members of Parliament after their service in the Pacific and several wrote important treatises on the region. Clearly they were a powerful group, but they might have been the minority of officers.

In sum, this is a fascinating and important book. It makes a persuasive case for a new understanding of the role of the British navy in the Pacific

and, as such, contributes to refocusing Pacific history away from simple two-sided readings of the events into more complex intersections (see Thomas 1997). Moreover, it covers an important period between the initial explorations of the eighteenth century and the establishment of colonial control in the last quarter of the nineteenth. This book will be of interest to anthropologists, historians, students of naval history, and scholars of colonialism and postcolonialism as well as those interested in Pacific history. The writing is clear and precise and the book is full of details and careful documentation. Indeed, the book is a pleasure to read. It offers a new and fascinating perspective on the history of imperial projects in the Pacific.

### REFERENCES

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