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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Donald Denoon, Stewart Firth, Jocelyn Linnekin, Karen Nero, Malama Meleisea, eds. *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Islanders.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xiv + 518 pp. A$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-44195-7.

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Gradually, the small pool of academic historians of the Pacific is producing general histories of the whole region to serve the needs of students, non-specialists and, of course, themselves. In the last 12 years there have been one single-authored history of the pre- colonial Polynesia and Melanesia, one multi-authored history of the twentieth century, two single-authored histories of the whole region for all periods, and now a multi-authored volume which attempts to cover the whole subject. In the half century since the watershed event of the founding of the Department of Pacific History at the Australian National University, this does not seem very substantial, but for the numbers of full-time, tenured academics concentrating on Pacific history, it is perhaps not a bad level of productivity.

All the same, this latest volume, the most ambitious project, is surprising for the selection of authors. The big names which have dominated the historiography of a generation are not there; of twenty authors, two are young scholars yet to make their mark; two are archaeologists, five anthropologists, six historians and seven from other disciplines or professions. Notwithstanding this eclectic pool, the bulk of the book is the work of four authors, two historians (Denoon and Firth) and two anthropologists (Linnekin and Nero).

Any book on a large subject presents difficult questions about inclusion and comprehensiveness, more so when multiple authors are involved, breaking up the continuity of thought. Ostensibly the book covers the whole field: pre-European settlement, the European contact period, colonialism and the post-war and post-colonial periods. There is much that seems to be embraced by these categories but which is missing or dealt with very sketchily: the traditional period, well documented for some archipelagoes through archaeology and oral tradition, is almost entirely missing; European exploration is incomplete and unsystematic; missions are cursorily dealt with, often alluded to but never given their due; foreign annexation similarly appears obliquely rather than systematically and comprehensively, the variety of colonial regimes is generally understated; the period of development colonialism after World War 2 is almost entirely missing as the authors jump from the war to independence via the nuclear testing issue. Decolonization as such is referred to rather than discussed. These omissions limit the usefulness of the book quite seriously, as they are not peripheral subjects.

The gaps make room for some topics of lesser importance, and others of contemporary concern such as the significance of castaways, historiography, a couple of creation chants, gender issues in labour, modern fisheries issues, the nuclear issue, a full 30-page chapter on World War 2, and more nebulous topics like paradigms and identity. Some of the chapters include sections on the New Zealand Maori, but their inclusion seems to reflect author interest rather than editorial policy. The many allusions to Australian Aboriginal issues suggest that some writers regard even these people as Pacific Islanders, but the coverage is by no means even.

Perhaps the selection of writers and their idiosyncratic interests reflects a quest for innovation to set a new tone and new goals for the next generation of scholars. And perhaps innovative history (if that is what it is) needs to violate a few conventions and disappoint the expectations of historians who have already made up their minds about what sort of history they like; innovative history runs the risk of being bad history, or of being mistaken for bad history. This volume, however, does not purport to be innovative as such; instead, it wants to celebrate heterogeneity, and eclecticism, and to give up on the idea of consensus, to substitute idiosyncrasy for authority. It is a bold reviewer these days who would condemn such thinking, or insist on an agreed approach, on objectivity or stylistic harmony as did Lord Acton, the original editor of the Cambridge Histories, but it is perhaps fair to warn the reader that large slabs of this vol-

ume are written by authors who have fairly elastic views on those matters. The preface claims that the book offers first words rather than the last word, professes that in the ideal Pacific history indigenous scholars would determine the structure and dominate the writing and laments the genetic inadequacy of most of the authors; ideally also we would give weight to each part of the region, in rough proportion to its population (rather than considerations of historical significance) but the varying depth of scholarship makes that impossible. Relativism, diversity and particularity are explicitly espoused in the first chapter.

In keeping with that approach, I suppose it is acceptable for a reviewer to make his own relative, individual and idiosyncratic comments, rather than try to give a balanced appreciation of the books merits, or a detached description of its scope. On the whole, I think that the book neither succeeds in its aims, nor meets the usual standards of its publisher. There is an unacceptable level of errors of fact, and of unjustifiably deviant interpretations. I will make no attempt to catalogue these, or single out individual authors for criticism. But generally speaking, I think that the contributions of the anthropologists are rambling and often pointless. I object to the general classification of Pacific historians as racist simpletons who have conceived their subject in terms of islander simplemindedness and the irresistible appeal of western technology especially by an anthropologist who has read so little history as to assert that Polynesia was evangelised before Melanesia because of racist associations with 'blackness' or whose devotion to the doctrine of islander agency is so flexible as to attribute to them achievements which were not theirs (as in the role of Tahitian evangelists in Tonga) while overlooking a clear case of islander-agency in the breakdown of missionary comity agreement between Tonga and Samoa in the 1840s. Or that warship justice gave way to gunboat diplomacy about mid-century (the 19th) whereas if the matter can be summed up so simply it should surely be expressed the other way round.

I do not like attempts to co-opt the reader's complicity in the author's opinions by an allusive style which makes judgments implicitly or in passing, but without explicitly making a case. I have misgivings about the acuity of a historian who writes that in the 1990s the overturning of the terra nullius doctrine began the unravelling of colonial institutions throughout Australia; even-handedness is not apparent in Australia seized New Guinea while Japan was rewarded in Micronesia during World War 1, drawing a contrast which seems to go beyond mere elegant variation. Another contributor, observing that in pre-colonial times resource bases had been ravaged by the extraction of resources and capital puts ideology ahead of evidence, as well as requiring a non-economic definition of capital; the same contributor wants to deny post-colonial dependency by ignoring its plain economic meaning.

Multiplying examples becomes tedious; it is also invidious because it is both selective and sweeping. But the volume is marred by having so much of it written by contributors with an insecure grasp of the subject and of historical methodology, especially in thinking that authorship is a license to air prejudices, as for example in adopting a patronising tone when dealing with Europeans in the Pacific, especially when those Europeans are colonial officials; the same tone with reference to the Pacific islanders would be unthinkable. This sort of partiality cannot be swept away simply by saying that multiple voices should heard expressing their own perspectives: the multiple voices should be striving for fairness, accuracy, balance and comprehensiveness; they may address contemporary intellectual interests (even try to direct those interests), but should avoid present-centredness. Parts of the book are indeed, clear and reliable, especially those chapters written wholly or in part by Stewart Firth, and the 30 or so pages allowed the archaeologists. So while parts of the book are useful, the volume as a whole is neither an authoritative work of reference nor a suitably comprehensive summation of the scope of Pacific history or the accomplishments of its historians. These are the qualities one expects to find in any collaborative Cambridge History.

The achievement of this volume is in the effort that has gone into it; and Donald Denoon's initiative it is commendable. His two predecessors at the ANU, their tenure extending over nearly 40 years, were better resourced to undertake a task of this kind, but failed to do so. However, I think it very much to be regretted that more discipline was not shown (or exercised) both individually and collectively, and that the principal author yielded to the fallacy that non-historians write better history than historians.

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