

H-Net Reviews

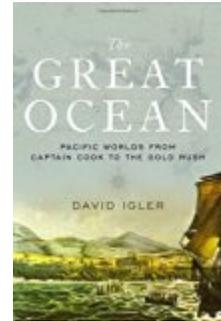
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Igler. *The Great Ocean: Pacific Worlds from Captain Cook to the Gold Rush*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 255 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-991495-1.

Reviewed by Thomas Osborne

Published on H-California (August, 2013)

Commissioned by Eileen V. Wallis



An unheralded yet profound Pacific shift seems underway in U.S. and international historiography. For the past three decades or so, outstanding monographs have expanded our understanding of the Atlantic world and its impact on much of U.S. and global history. In more recent times, as oceans have come to be seen as highways of exchange and connectors of polities more so than barriers, scholars have been tracing America's and the world's manifold links to the trade, peoples, and lands of the Pacific Basin as well.[1] David Igler's *The Great Ocean: Pacific Worlds from Captain Cook to the Gold Rush* makes a signal contribution to the growing body of seminal studies on North America's Pacific ties. Igler's monograph focuses mainly, though not exclusively, on the eastern side of that vast waterscape. His book reveals the emergence of a peopled, contested, and globalized Pacific to which the West Coast of North America became increasingly tethered during the pivotal timeframe beginning with Captain James Cook's epic Pacific voyages in the 1760s to the California gold rush in the mid-1800s.

Igler's thesis is that in the wake of Cook's voyages the eastern Pacific, defined as "the coastal Americas" and offshore and "most proximate islands" (p. 9), underwent commercial, cultural, and ecological transformations that markedly shaped the history of the region and places far beyond. Such transformations brought the eastern Pacific into the dynamics of global trade, international power struggles, disease transmissions, and encounters between whites and indigenous populations that had catastrophic consequences for the latter. The development of this thesis is predicated on the assumption (credited to historian Matt K. Matsuda, *Pacific Worlds: A History of Seas, Peoples, and Cultures* [2012]) that the Pacific waterscape was composed of such diverse peoples,

cultures, imperial regimes, and physical environments that it makes sense to think in terms of multiple Pacific worlds. Each of these maritime zones—lands and their cultural enclaves, littorals, and marine hunting grounds, for example—has its own discrete past to be plumbed by scholars and by inference insinuated into the grander history of the world's largest ocean basin.

Commercial transformations, Igler shows, were fueled by highly lucrative transpacific sea otter, fur seal, hide and tallow, and whaling enterprises linking the entire West Coast of North America to the United States eastern seaboard, Chile, Peru, Oceania, China, and Russia. One measure of commercial transformation, chronicled in a chapter titled "Seas of Commerce," was the nearly ever-increasing number of ships calling at such ports as Honolulu, Lahaina, and those of Alta California. Hawai'i boasted the busiest island ports in the Pacific, and possibly the world. With few exceptions, Pacific trade was virtually free market and conducted by merchants and companies, rather than national governments.

Cultural transformations, Igler indicates, were often ushered in by violence in the forms of armed clashes between whites and indigenous peoples, coerced native labor, and sexual slavery. Captive and hostage taking, which was carried out by both whites and native peoples, exemplified cross-cultural hostilities. On May 22, 1803, on the Northwest Coast, Mowachaht chief Maquinna ordered the decapitation and grisly display of the heads of twenty-five crewmen aboard the *Boston* at an anchorage earlier named Friendly Cove by Captain Cook. Maquinna subsequently held two seamen from that vessel captive for two years. Regarding coerced labor, Russian

overseers conscripted Aleut hunters and female skinners to search out and kill sea otters (whose pelts averaged twenty-five dollars each in Canton, China, in the early 1800s) from Alaskan waters south to Baja California. While sex between whites and natives of Polynesia may have been more consensual than elsewhere throughout the Pacific Basin, in the eastern part of that expanse clearly that was not the case: “From Alaska to Baja California, indigenous women were abused as hostages, openly bartered as sex slaves, and prostituted as commodities” (p. 51).

Meanwhile, a much quieter and seemingly more benign form of cultural transformation was taking place in the fields of oceanographic, biological, and ethnographic science. This was due to the discoveries of researchers aboard expeditions led by Cook, Jean-Francois de Galaup de La Pérouse, George Vancouver, Alejandro Malaspina, Otto von Kotzebue, Auguste Duhaut-Cilly, and Charles Wilkes. Consequently, for the first time, the Pacific whaling grounds were reliably mapped as were currents and winds; the flora and fauna of the region were described and catalogued for museum collections; islands and coastlines were located and surveyed; the volcanic origins of various archipelagos was demonstrated; reef formation was systematically studied; the seismically active Pacific Ring of Fire was glimpsed; and much more. Iglér’s coverage of this scientific reconnaissance of the Pacific is superb.

Many of the foregoing commercial and cultural transformations precipitated an ecological one, characterized by the spread of introduced diseases among indigenous populations and the threatened extinction of some marine mammal species by European and American hunters. With the advent of Cook’s voyages came successive boatloads of white contagions afflicting Pacific islanders and coastal North American Indians. Says Iglér: “Native Hawaiians certainly died as a direct result of introduced diseases like tuberculosis and typhoid fever, but it was the pervasiveness of venereal syphilis and gonorrhea that produced what were likely the leading causes of depopulation: infertility and chronic ill health” (p. 58). Iglér recounts the horrific death toll, along the Alta California coast, among mission Indians who, from soldiers, contracted debilitating sexually transmitted diseases; moreover, the cramped, squalid living quarters of the neophytes were breeding grounds for pathogens. Throughout the entire Pacific, during the late 1700s, such pathogens “radically reduced native populations in some places, by as much as 90 percent over the course of a few generations” (p. 45). Marine mammal

populations, too, were decimated by profit-driven, overhunting Europeans and Americans. Sea otters, fur seals, and gray whales were slaughtered in such large numbers that eventually an international agreement was required to assure the survival of some of these creatures.

What does Iglér’s account offer that distinguishes it from other studies? First, it treats masterfully the eastern Pacific as a distinct waterscape, with its own set of physical attributes, intercultural encounters, imperial projects, and individual human dramas. Second, *The Great Ocean* zooms in on a pivotal time period, revealing an assortment of globally significant transformations occurring in that maritime space. Third, Iglér’s book brilliantly elucidates the complex interplay between global, oceanic, and local scales of history. Fourth, it gauges the environmental consequences of the European-American penetration into the eastern Pacific world, especially in terms of overhunting of sea mammals. Fifth, drawing on a wealth of primary sources, indigenous voices and perceptions are sprinkled liberally and with effect throughout the narrative.

Historians and lay readers alike can learn much from this book. While more maps would have been welcomed, for example showing the tracks of some major voyages (especially that of Wilkes from 1838 to 1842) and transpacific commodity flows/disease transmissions), the two-page map near the beginning of the book is illuminating. The author’s thesis is bold and breaks new ground; his scholarship is impeccable; and his exposition is clear, succinct, and at times evocative. A tour de force, *The Great Ocean* is out in front on the wave of Pacific histories.

Note

[1]. Regarding recent Pacific-centric U.S. historiography, see, for example, Mansel G. Blackford, *Pathways to the Present: U.S. Development and Its Consequences in the Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007); Kornel Chang, *Pacific Connections: The Making of the U.S.-Canadian Borderlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); and Bruce Cumings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). In terms of classroom and textbook pedagogy, see Nike Nivar and Robert Townsend, “Pacific Worlds and the U.S. History Survey,” *Perspectives on History* 51, no. 3 (March 2013): 17-18; Thomas J. Osborne, “Teaching the U.S. History Survey as if the Pacific Mattered (a Lot),” *Perspectives on History* 46, no. 4 (April 2008): 19-21; and Thomas J. Osborne, *Pacific Eldorado: A History of Greater California*

(Malden: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2013). Concerning recent Pacific-centric international historiography, see, for example, Stuart Banner, *Possessing the Pacific: Land, Settlers, and Indigenous People from Australia to Alaska* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Paul W. Blank and Fred Spier, eds., *Defining the Pacific: Opportunities and Constraints* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); Dennis O. Flynn, Lionel Frost, and A. J. H. Latham, eds., *Pacific Centuries: Pacific and Pacific Rim History since the Sixteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1999); David Igler, "Diseased Goods: Global Exchanges in the Eastern Pacific Basin, 1770-1850," *American Historical Review* 109, no. 3 (June 2004): 692-719; Ryan Tucker Jones, "Running into Whales: The History of the North Pacific from Below the Waves," *American Historical Review* 118, no. 2 (April 2013): 349-377; and Matt K. Matsuda, *Pacific Worlds: A History of Seas, Peoples, and Cultures* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-california>

Citation: Thomas Osborne. Review of Igler, David, *The Great Ocean: Pacific Worlds from Captain Cook to the Gold Rush*. H-California, H-Net Reviews. August, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39352>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.