The Fate of the ‘Savage’ in Pacific Historiography*

THE impact of Western civilization upon Pacific islanders has been a major preoccupation of writers on Pacific affairs since the days of Captain James Cook. Yet in considering such issues as whether European contact was destructive or beneficial for island communities, a good many commentators invariably tell us as much if not more about their own views as about the events they purport to analyse. Indeed a survey of how Europeans have portrayed the ‘savage’ in culture contact situations is essentially a study of what these writers have imagined happened to islanders, and not necessarily of what actually took place. At the risk of oversimplification it seems most commentators on the fate of the ‘savage’ fall into one of two broad categories.

The first and most prominent category consists of what can be called the Fatal Impact writers – those people who claim that European entry into the Pacific had very destructive consequences for the islanders and their cultures. The Pacific Paradise was ruined. Island populations, if not wiped out entirely by European diseases, firearms and customs, were at least tragically decimated and demoralized by the deliberate or unintentional depredations, crimes and curses of civilization. This interpretation has two notable features: it has persisted from the late eighteenth century to the present, and it has been shared by writers of the most diverse backgrounds.

When Europe discovered the Pacific Islands in the later eighteenth century, one of the more popular notions in Britain and France was that of the Noble Savage. He was a fanciful figure who had existed for generations in European thought but there was renewed interest in him at this time thanks to the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He conceived of the Noble Savage as a perfect primitive man, one who lived in harmony with his natural surroundings, a man of simple needs who eschewed social and technological sophistication, a man who possessed a classical dignity and innocence of body

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1 The writers mentioned have been selected because their opinions are representative of widely-held viewpoints and because in many cases their comments have been influential in Pacific historiography. Only published works are referred to.
and mind. Many of the French and English explorers in the Pacific, in particular Joseph Banks, George Forster, and Louis Antoine de Bougainville, were steeped in both the current wave of neo-classicism and the cult of the Noble Savage. To their delight, many Pacific peoples appeared to be living examples of Rousseau's Savage, especially Tahitians whose lifestyle seemed to epitomize a pre-industrial, Arcadian purity. But in looking through such rose-coloured spectacles it was easy to take the next logical step: if there were such child-like innocence and harmony what would happen now that Europeans had burst onto the scene? To many contemporary observers there was little doubt. Cook and his officers were very concerned about the effects of venereal diseases which they believed their women-starved sailors introduced to many Polynesian societies. On his first voyage, Cook expressed fears that the disease would 'in time spread itself over all the Islands in the South Seas, to the eternal reproach of those who first brought it among them'. By his third voyage such a fear seemed justified. 'We have left them', wrote one officer, 'an incurable disorder which will for ever embitter their quiet & happy lives, & make them curse the hour they ever saw us.' But it was more than just a matter of disease. The very presence of civilization was a cause of considerable regret, as Cook sometimes moralized: 'we debauch their Morals already too prone to vice and we interduce among them wants and perhaps diseases which they never before knew and which serves only to disturb that happy tranquillity they and their fore Fathers had injoy'd. If any one denies the truth of this assertion let him tell me what the Natives of the whole extent of America have gained by the commerce they have had with Europeans.' Comments on the corrupting influences of civilization were made by a number of visitors to Polynesia in the 1770s and 1780s. Captain Bligh on his second voyage to Tahiti lamented the changes that had occurred since his first visit. There were, he said, 'no longer clean Otaheitans, but in appearance a set of ragamuffins with whom it is necessary to observe great caution.' Bligh had strong feelings on the subject: 'Our friends here have benefited little from their intercourse with Europeans. . .I declare that I would rather forfeit anything than to have been in the list of ships that have touched here'. George Forster perhaps best summed up such sentiments:

It were indeed sincerely to be wished, that intercourse which has lately subsisted between Europeans and the natives of the South Sea islands may be broken off in time, before the corruption of manners which unhappily characterizes civilized regions, may reach that innocent race of men, who live

6Ibid., p. 74.
here fortunate in their ignorance and simplicity. . . If the knowledge of a few individuals can only be acquired at such a price as the happiness of nations, it were better for the discoverers, and the discovered, that the South Sea had still remained unknown to Europe and its restless inhabitants.  

Back in Europe such ideas were sometimes taken to extremes, and invariably by people who had never been to the Pacific. Moralists and satirists hastened to publish (usually in verse) their own fanciful opinions about the South Seas and the likely consequences of European influences. One of the more influential writers on this theme was the Encyclopaedist Denis Diderot, a friend of Rousseau. Using material from Bougainville’s *Voyage autour du monde*, Diderot launched a strong attack on Christian views of right and wrong and on the corrupting effects of civilization generally. His *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* juxtaposes the innocence of the islanders and the wickedness of Europeans and especially missionary intrusion. One of his Tahitian characters rails against Bougainville: ‘We are innocent, we are happy, you will only harm our good fortune. We follow nature’s pure instinct, and you have tried to obliterate her character from our souls.’ Diderot then warns the Tahitians of their likely fate: ‘One day . . . [the Christians] will come, with crucifix in one hand and the dagger in the other to cut your throats or to force you to accept their customs and opinions; one day under their rule you will be almost as unhappy as they are.’

Christian missionaries did come, and in force. By the 1850s probably most Polynesians owed allegiance to one of the several Christian faiths. Such apparent evangelical success did much to stimulate the anti-missionary sentiments of many travellers. Diderot’s harsh words were to be echoed time and time again. For example, the Prussian navigator Otto von Kotzebue was disgusted with the influence Protestant missionaries seemed to have over their Tahitian converts in the 1820s: ‘By order of the Missionaries, the flute, which once awakened innocent pleasure, is heard no more. No music but that of

7. Forster, *A Voyage round the World*, London, 1771, p. 368. The dilemma was, though, that the South Sea had been discovered and it was regretfully accepted that further European contact was needed to supply the islanders’ wants, already created by explorers. Cook wrote: I cannot avoid expressing it as my real opinion, that it would have been far better for these poor people never to have known our superiority in the accommodations and arts that make life comfortable, than, after once knowing it, to be again left and abandoned to their original incapacity of improvement. Indeed, they cannot be restored to that happy mediocrity in which they lived before we discovered them, if the intercourse between us should be discontinued. It seems to me, that it has become, in a manner, incumbent on the Europeans to visit them once in three or four years, in order to supply them with those conveniences which we have introduced among them, and have given them a predilection for. (Cook, *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*, II, London, 1784, 136.) This same view was expressed by George Vancouver, *A Voyage of Discovery*, I, London, 1798, 145.


psalms is suffered. ...Every pleasure is punished as a sin, among a people whom Nature destined to the most cheerful enjoyment.' Kotzebue also drew attention to a decline in the island population, claiming it was 'the bloody persecution instigated by the Missionaries which performed the office of a desolating infection'. These and similar statements by others received wide publicity. Perhaps the most widely read author on this theme was Herman Melville. Two of his novels, Typee and Omoo, were based on his experiences in the Pacific in the early 1840s, and also drew upon some published historical and ethnographic material on the Pacific. Both novels are an attack upon what Melville interpretated as civilization's devastating impact. Typee is set in the Marquesas and portrays the inhabitants as Noble Savages in the Rousseau manner. Melville then considers what will happen to these innocent people once Europeans have introduced their diseases, firearms, and above all the repressive rules and inhibiting morality of Christian missions.

When the inhabitants of some sequestered island first descry the 'big canoe' of the Europeans rolling through the blue waters towards their shores, they rush down to the beach in crowds, and with open arms stand ready to embrace the strangers. Fatal embrace! They fold to their bosoms the vipers whose sting is destined to poison all their joys; and the instinctive feeling of love within their breasts is soon converted into bitterest hate. ...Ill-fated people! I shudder when I think of the change a few years will produce in their paradisical abode.

Omoo is set in Tahiti in the early 1840s where, according to Melville, the European poison had already done its work.

...the Tahitians are far worse off now than formerly. ...Their prospects are hopeless. ...Years ago brought to a stand, where all that is corrupt in barbarism and civilisation unite, to the exclusion of the virtues of either state; like other uncivilised beings brought into contact with Europeans, they must here remain stationary until utterly extinct.

The islanders themselves are mournfully watching their doom. ...I have frequently heard it chanted, in a low, sad tone, by aged Tahitians:-

The palm tree shall grow,
The coral shall spread,
But man shall cease.

The notion that Pacific islanders were headed for extinction long predated evolutionary theories of Darwin and others in the second half of the nineteenth century.

12 e.g. F.W. Beechey, Narrative of a Voyage to the Pacific and Beering's Strait, I, London, 1831, 270, 307-9; and travellers quoted in G.F. Angus, Polynesia, London, 1866, pp. 290-1. Anti-missionary sentiments were also published in the Edinburgh Review, Quarterly Review, and Westminster; see M. Russell, Polynesia, Edinburgh, 1853, pp. 111-29.
Those writers in the early nineteenth century who supported the introduction of Christianity and civilization were at pains to defend themselves against such attacks. Missionaries themselves had long since rejected the stereotype of the Noble Savage. That a savage could in any way be noble was to them a contradiction in terms. The stereotype they advanced was that of the Ignoble Savage, one who led a brute-like existence. The sooner he was transformed into a brown-skinned European through the good agencies of Christianity and civilization the better. Missionaries and their supporters published many volumes describing the blessings they had brought to the islanders by the mid-nineteenth century. Yet while they argued that European civilization was the most superior social and moral order yet developed by man, and therefore the best one for Pacific islanders to adopt, they had to admit that there were some imperfections. These took the form of civilization’s scum — the vagabond beachcombers (many of whom were escaped convicts) and rogue whalers and traders who had ‘hung their consciences on Cape Horn’ and indulged in orgies of rum and sexual depravity. For missionaries and their supporters such characters were frequently portrayed as a debased and cruel people intent on the physical and moral destruction of the naive, helpless islanders.

The behaviour in the numerous port-towns that grew rapidly from the 1830s and 40s was a constant source of anger for respectable, God-fearing travellers. The language they employed could be just as vitriolic as that of Diderot or Melville.

Yet those who expressed such sentiments had to acknowledge other pernicious consequences of Western contact for the islanders, notably introduced diseases. The venereal curse could be blamed on sex-crazed beachcombers, but even missionaries had to accept that little could be done to prevent the introduction of epidemic diseases, such as measles and influenza, to which most Pacific communities initially had no immunity. By the 1840s and 50s there were many missionaries and their supporters who noted what they believed to be a decline in Pacific populations.

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...the native population of all the islands is rapidly decreasing under the operation of causes more or less connected with the arrival of the white men. ...Disease of various kinds have been introduced. ...An enfeeblement of the constitutions of multitudes, too, has resulted from licentiousness and indolence... and so great as to make the natives an easy prey to epidemics which do little harm to foreigners. The use of intoxicating drinks, likewise, has done enormous evil. Still, all the perceptible or special causes taken together, with which the most intelligent observers have assigned for the rapid depopulation of Polynesia, fail to give an adequate explanation of the melancholy fact... . There seems to be a certain incompatibility between the tastes of the savage and the pursuits of civilized man, which, by a process more easily marked than explained, leads in the end to the extinction of the former; and nowhere has this shown itself more visibly than in Polynesia.\footnote{Russell, pp. 468-9. (Dr John Owens kindly drew my attention to this book.) See also Bennett, p. 245; H. Bingham, Residence of Twenty-one Years in the Sandwich Islands, New York [1855], 1969, p. 485; William Ellis, Polynesian Researches, [London, 1829], Tuttle edition, Tokyo, 1969, 'Society Islands', pp. 65-6, 'Society Islands, Tubuai Islands', p. 35; Murray, p. 161; George Turner, Nineteen Years in Polynesia, London, 1861, p. 220; Wilkes, pp. 82-83.}

Thus many of the most pious writers were forced to the same conclusion as men like Melville, though for very different reasons. Whether one believed in the Nobility or the Ignobility of the savage, the ultimate consequence of European contact seemed likely to be the ruination of Pacific races. This view gained momentum over the second half of the nineteenth century and beyond: the image of the Noble Savage and the Ignoble Savage merged into that of the Dying Savage.

Evolutionary theories which made such an impact from the 1860s were hardly a startling revelation to those acquainted with culture contact in the Pacific. Rather, such ideas merely confirmed and provided apparently scientific explanations for the seeming inability of islanders to withstand the European onslaught. Such catch-cries as 'struggle for survival' and 'survival of the fittest' are liberally sprinkled through later nineteenth-century studies of Pacific communities. 'The present races of Polynesia have long ago been doomed, in obedience, doubtless, to immutable laws, to extinction. Of late, they are marching more rapidly to their destined goal, and no mortal hand can stay their fatal progress. But surely this is no matter for fond regrets or philanthropic sighs. These Polynesians have doubtless performed some allotted part in the economy of nature.'\footnote{A.L.A. Forbes, 'On the Extinction of Certain Races of Men', New South Wales Medical Gazette, III (1873), 321. See also W.T. Pritchard, Polynesian Reminiscences, London, 1866, p. 424.} Even those commentators who rejected evolutionary explanations nevertheless came to similar conclusions. Missionaries, for example, could argue that the imminent extinction of some Pacific races resulted from the 'retributive justice of Providence for the idolatry and bloodshed of heathen times'.\footnote{Walter Lawrey, evidence in Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Decrease of the Native Population, Suva, 1896, p. 64.} Other writers based their explanation of the Dying Savage on empirical observation. A major
government study in 1896 into the decline of the Fijian population concluded that an unregulated European presence had shattered Fijian society, but, the final report suggested, with proper administrative controls this depopulation could be halted; extinction was not necessarily inevitable. This additional theme was commonly aired in the later nineteenth century. At the height of imperial expansion in the Pacific, annexation of islands by the great powers was often encouraged and justified on the grounds of trying to protect and save the disappearing savages. More European presence and regulation rather than less was necessary to alleviate the islanders' suffering.

The image of the Dying Savage was further popularized by Robert Louis Stevenson who went to the South Seas determined to 'tell...more...than any other writer has done except Herman Melville'. Stevenson was amongst the first to emphasize the so-called 'psychological factor' behind depopulation. Guns, diseases, strange new customs and regulations were not in themselves so much directly responsible for a declining population as the 'psychological' state engendered in the savage mind by their very presence: 'The Polynesian falls easily into despondency...and sadness detaches him from life...with the decay of pleasures, life itself decays....Each change, however small, augments the sum of new conditions to which the race has to become inured....the unaccustomed race will sometimes die of pinpricks....Experience seems to show us...that change of habit is bloodier than a bombardment.'

Paul Gauguin, who lived his last years on Tahiti in the 1890s, despised 'modern' Tahitian living around Papeete and sought to steep himself in the 'true' Tahitian style in the remoter areas of the island. He was sad [he wrote in his Noa Noa]...shall I manage to recover any trace of the past, so remote and so mysterious? and the present had nothing worthwhile to say to me. To get back to the ancient hearth, revive the fire in the midst of all these ashes.

Gauguin was stricken with poverty and syphilis, and his self-despair was intensified by his belief that the Tahitians were vanishing as a race. His canvasses portray saddened, wistful women. Their titles are suggestive: 'Where did we come from, where are we going?' He saw his subjects as if they were: 'Eve after the fall, still able to walk naked without shame, preserving all her animal beauty as at the first day....Like Eve's, her body is still that of an animal. But her head has progressed with evolution, her mind has developed subtlety, love has imprinted an ironical smile upon her lips, and naively she searches in her memories for the why of present times.'

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22 ibid., pp. 66-67.
25 R.L. Stevenson, In the South Seas, [1907], London, 1924, pp. 36-37.
Neo-Darwinian theories accounting for the alleged destruction of Pacific races reached a peak as late as the 1920s. S.H. Robert's *Population Problems of the Pacific* and Macmillan Brown's massive *Peoples and Problems of the Pacific* both began with the premise, based on notions of the Noble Savage and social Darwinism, that Pacific Islanders had degenerated into a state of slothful decadence and decay before Europeans ever arrived. For Roberts, 'The race, denied the health-giving process of selection and of struggle, was giving way.... To this world, rotting to the core, and crumbling with the heritage of generations of contributory weaknesses, came the Europeans, destroying the last vestiges of regulation... Religion, society, clan, tribal pride—all gone: the shadow of the white man, with his incomprehensible code, is over everything: and the native feels that he has but to pass.' Brown took the notion of innate degeneracy to extremes. Pacific cultures 'disintegrated' into idleness and despair once 'the necessity of long voyaging in search of new homes had ceased'; 'The law of struggle is the basis not only for racial advance but of racial health and racial continuance. No species can persist if not subject to it'. Thus before Europeans arrived, the islanders' racial heart had given out on them, with the result a 'slow phthisis'. G. Pitt-Rivers' *The Clash of Culture and the Contact of Races*, rejected this interpretation. He laid the blame for depopulation squarely on the shoulders of various European influences. Still there are echoes of Diderot and Melville. 'The Puritanical benevolence and interference which has everywhere followed in the wake of, or preceded, commercial exploitation in the Pacific is, of all interference, the least supportable to the barbarian. It has destroyed his tribal life, the prestige of his chiefs, his morality, his pleasures, his hopes, the cement of his society and the very meaning of his life... It has left him with new fears and suspicions, and a helpless incapacity to control his own destiny'. Although there were other explanations, the premise that there had been massive depopulation went unchallenged. The extent of such literature in the 1920s and 30s indicates a major preoccupation with the issue of the dying Pacific races. Major theoretical developments in anthropology reinforced this culture crisis syndrome. The 'functional' approach, as expounded by scholars like Bronislaw Malinowski, saw societies consisting of many elements each with its own indispensable function or purpose within an integrated whole. Change in any one element meant all the others were necessarily affected. This meant that a culture was seen as a very fragile

structure, easily altered or destroyed. Further, anthropologists and ethnologists were not at this stage interested in studying cultural or social changes for their own sake. They were more concerned with trying to recreate models of what various non-European societies had been like in their so-called untouched or uncontaminated stage. Changes that European influences had occasioned were seen as symptoms of decay and thus were more often lamented than subjected to careful analysis. Malinowski's classic *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* begins with the statement: 'Ethnology is in the sadly ludicrous, not to say tragic, position, that at the very moment when it begins to put its workshop in order, to forge its proper tools, to start ready for work on its appointed task, the material of its study melts away with hopeless rapidity. Just now, when the methods and aims of scientific field ethnology have taken shape, when men fully trained for the work have begun to travel into savage countries and study their inhabitants — these die away under our very eyes.'

From about the mid-1930s, even armchair theorists began to realize that Pacific races were not in fact dying out, indeed that many of them were increasing all too rapidly. But if depopulation itself was no longer an issue, the idea that European contact had had nasty, bewildering and demoralizing consequences for Pacific cultures continued as strongly as ever. The second world war did much to stimulate such thinking, especially (but not solely) amongst Americans, since their country was so involved in the Pacific war zone. A number of American writers came to feel a sense of guilt not only for the destruction caused by the war, but also for earlier European activities. Such guilt was commonly reflected in an inverted racism — the white man could do no right, the poor brown man no wrong. There was also a feeling of growing responsibility for the region in the post-war era — the shouldering of some of the brown man's economic and political burdens. Two important histories of the Pacific, both written by Americans, express such sentiments. J.C. Furnas's *Anatomy of Paradise*, published in 1946, has as one of its themes the view that 'The virtues and arts of civilisation are almost as disastrous to the uncivilised as its vices'. In surveying European contact in the Pacific from explorers to American marines, he concluded that 'White intrusion' was 'shattering', causing little but upheaval, despair, and decimation. Furnas then found himself in an insoluble moral dilemma when he discussed what he saw as the new problem of overpopulation: 'It looks distressingly as if western medicine and western notions of the sacredness of human life might prove the most destructive of all the things the white men

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32 Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, London, 1922, p. xv. Most of the functionalist anthropologists shared the belief that the 'psychological' factor was the ultimate cause of depopulation, as did writers like Stevenson, Pitt-Rivers, and Rivers. Malinowski commented, 'Now once you make life unattractive for a man...you cut the taproot of his vitality. The rapid dying out of the native races is...due more to wanton interference with their pleasures and normal occupations...than to any other cause' (p. 465).

brought.\textsuperscript{34} Douglas Oliver's \textit{The Pacific Islands} first appeared in 1951 and, with only minor revisions, is still being reprinted. It remains one of the few readable general histories of the Pacific. But, as with Furnas, Oliver's historical survey is made up of a rogues' gallery of wicked Europeans. Beachcombers were an 'infestation', whalers were 'lusty fellows' who had a 'quite stupifying' effect on islanders, traders 'chalked up a record of chicanery, violence and evil to equal the blackest chapter of colonial history': 'Whatever these aliens touched they altered or destroyed...most islanders lost more than they gained.'\textsuperscript{35}

This interpretation of Pacific history is still common enough,\textsuperscript{36} especially amongst writers on the academic fringe.\textsuperscript{37} For example, a book which most clearly sums up this theme, and indeed relies heavily on most of the works already mentioned, is Alan Moorhead's widely read \textit{The Fatal Impact. An Account of the Invasion of the South Pacific}: 'When Captain Cook entered the Pacific in 1769 it was a virgin ocean, pristine and savage, and its inhabitants lived a life of primeval innocence. Seventy years later firearms, disease and alcohol had hammered away at this way of life until it crumbled before them'.\textsuperscript{38}

It is much easier to list such works than it is to explain why for over 200 years writers of the most diverse backgrounds have persistently painted this picture of the poor benighted savage reeling under Western impact. Two considerations might provide a step towards some understanding. First, in these studies there lurks the assumption of European cultural and technological superiority. The islanders are thus explicitly or implicitly inferior. Europeans are active, the islanders passive; Europeans call the tune, the islanders dance to it. Indeed most of these studies are really about Europeans and what they did. They are the subjects. The islanders are the objects, often just in the background, slightly out of focus, having things 'done' to them. It is assumed they were basically a helpless, persecuted lot, a poor, unsophisticated, stone-age people obviously unable to take any initiatives of their own in face of the white man's all-powerful civilization. Yet there is a dichotomy here which involves a second consideration: one suggested in a brilliant study by Henri Baudet, \textit{Paradise on Earth}.\textsuperscript{39} He advances the view that for many

\textsuperscript{34}J.C. Furnas, \textit{Anatomy of Paradise} [1946], London, 1950, p. 385, and passim.

\textsuperscript{35}Douglas Oliver, \textit{The Pacific Islands} [1951], New York, 1961, pp. xxii, 103, 107-8, and passim.


\textsuperscript{37}e.g. H. Holthouse, \textit{Cannibal Cargoes}, Adelaide, 1969; E. Docker, \textit{The Blackbirders}, Sydney, 1970. There is also a vast range of travel/autobiography/fiction which contains the theme of the Pacific Paradise Lost. Tourist industry advertising is based almost entirely on the notion that a very few 'untainted' societies and places remain: e.g. 'Experience the real Pacific'.


centuries European man, while extolling the virtues of his own culture also commonly feels a nostalgia for real or imagined former times. Combined with such nostalgia, and sometimes a reason for it, is often an element of self-doubt or dissatisfaction. In projecting this nostalgia and/or dissatisfaction, European man sees various non-European societies (and in this case Pacific communities) as having the longed-for characteristics of some elemental simplicity, harmony and purity which are seldom experienced in modern Western culture. This in turn results in a feeling of envy and even guilt. With technological and mercantile sophistication there has been a loss of a former innocence: look at what we once were either as children or in former times, and look at how our world has changed; look at life as it once was in the Pacific, and we have spoilt that simplicity too. In other words, there is perhaps a conflict between an assumption of cultural and technological superiority, and a realization of the inadequacies in or dissatisfaction with one’s way of life. Many of the writers so far mentioned would appear to be describing images and events which, to paraphrase Baudet, have derived less from observation, experience, and perceptible reality than from various psychological urges. Indeed it is possible to suggest psychological motives for many of the above interpretations — for example, guilt-ridden American historians writing immediately after the second world war; neo-Darwinists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries trying to absolve themselves from responsibility for the apparent imminent extinction of Pacific races by blaming various other European interest groups or influences, or even immutable ‘natural laws’; missionaries and traders of the earlier nineteenth century looking for scapegoats for their own difficulties and accusing each other of ruining Pacific cultures; and the Noble Savage purists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries reacting against industrialization and socio-political upheavals in Europe.

The second major category dealing with the fate of the ‘savage’ consists of the modern school of Pacific historians. Many of these writers have rejected notions of a Fatal Impact for the islanders. Instead of portraying islanders as passive, helpless and inferior, they have substituted the image of an active, initiative-taking savage whose way of life was not necessarily ravaged by European contact. The leading personality amongst these writers was, until his death in 1973, Professor J.W. Davidson. He founded the Department of Pacific History at the Australian National University in Canberra in the early 1950s which provided opportunities for extensive research in Pacific studies. Publications by staff and students from this department now form the basis of modern Pacific history. Davidson made a number of theoretical contributions to Pacific history in the 1940s and 50s. In brief, he attempted to decolonize Pacific studies. He argued that for too long Pacific history had been a history of Europeans in the Pacific, not the history of the islanders themselves. Significantly, he credited the islanders with a history of their

ibid., p. 6.
own, and one that was worthy of serious academic study. Thus, rather than a history of the expansion of European interests in the Pacific, Pacific history became a detailed study of the subtleties and complexities of cultural interaction and in particular of the social, economic and political changes the Islanders experienced during the period of European contact. Instead of looking at the Pacific from a European viewpoint, the modern Pacific historian developed an island-oriented view. New techniques had to be employed to do this. Davidson insisted that his students supplement the usual archival research with fieldwork in Pacific communities, and that they be familiar with the relevant findings of linguists, demographers, prehistorians and anthropologists.  

Pacific history at Canberra became something of an interdisciplinary subject. Such a reorientation meant that modern Pacific historians have been able to free themselves from the more obvious European-centred value judgements. Also, they have evolved a much more sophisticated understanding of island societies and the changes they experienced. For example, thanks to the findings of recent demographic studies, it is now known that the depopulation in the Pacific which so obsessed writers for several generations was to a large extent a myth of their own creation: most Pacific communities did not in fact suffer massive population declines because of European diseases or other such influences. Also, anthropologists from the later 1930s had refined much of the simplistic functional analysis of Malinowski and others. Social changes resulting from European contact were no longer ignored and lamented, but were now studied for their own sake. Research into social change (acculturation) was very much in vogue. The Pacific became a vast laboratory for such influential scholars as Margaret Mead, Raymond Firth, Ian Hogbin, C.S. Belshaw and numerous others. Their findings produced a host of new interpretations which Pacific historians have been able to use and develop further. For example, there was the view that social changes in the Pacific and elsewhere were not necessarily imposed by Europeans. Nor were such developments necessarily destructive. It was demonstrated that changes could come as much from within an island community as by direct outside stimulus. Furthermore, changes could be creative. Many societies were shown to be highly adaptable. They could with relative ease shed or modify what would have seemed to earlier anthropologists the most important and functional elements of a culture. All such findings are grist to the modern Pacific historian’s mill. Davidson has perhaps best summed up current thinking about the con-


sequences of European presence in island communities: "The indigenous cultures...were like islands whose coastal regions outsiders might penetrate but whose heartlands they could never conquer." 

Most of the books and articles of the modern school which typify this approach are detailed case studies rather than wide-ranging surveys because much basic groundwork needs to be done. Such studies have revised many orthodox interpretations and seriously challenged many of the myths created by earlier generations of European commentators, as the following brief examples illustrate.

The sandalwood trade in the south-west Pacific in the first half of the nineteenth century has long been interpreted as a bloody confrontation between helpless savages and cruel, commando-type European traders. Dorothy Shineberg's *They Came for Sandalwood* advances a totally different view. She documents how violence was the exception rather than the rule, and how successful trading was dependent of the willingness of both sides to co-operate with each other. Further she illustrates how Melanesians quickly took their own initiatives in attempts to turn the coming of the traders to their own political and economic ends. In the supply and demand situation, traders were forced to barter with those European goods the islanders most desired at any particular time in return for sandalwood. The Melanesians also proved eager and capable labourers and sailors for the traders who became increasingly dependent upon such assistance. Thus islanders found travel and work on sandalwood vessels an admirable way to see far off corners of the Pacific. In assessing the impact the trade made upon Melanesian communities Shineberg suggests that such European influences invariably assumed to have


been highly destructive of island life, namely firearms and alcohol, were not, in fact, of any major significance. Similar studies of other trading ventures elsewhere in the Pacific suggest that Shineberg's overall analysis has much wider application than to just the Melanesian sandalwood rush.

On a related theme Peter Corris's *Passage, Port and Plantation* presents an even more revolutionary interpretation. Perhaps no other episode in Pacific history has received (and receives) more condemnation from historians and others than the use of some 100,000 Melanesians as plantation labourers in Queensland and Fiji over the second half of the nineteenth century. Tales of kidnapping, or 'blackbirding' as it is more commonly termed, are legion in Pacific historiography. Corris's detailed research on the Solomon Islands, a major source of labour, suggests that there was very little kidnapping, and then only in the earliest years of the trade while both sides were inexperienced in dealing with the other. The vast majority of Solomon Islanders wanted to be recruited as indentured labourers because they earned what they considered adequate payment, they could travel and see life in other countries, and it was fashionable and even a source of status within a village to gain such overseas experience. For some islanders, too, a voyage away from home represented an escape from either the dullness or tensions of village life. Corris also produces a host of evidence illustrating that most recruits enjoyed plantation life and work. They returned to their islands with considerable quantities of the goods they most wanted — guns, tools, cloth, tobacco. It was common for up to 50 per cent of the recruits to sign on for a second term of indenture. Individuals and communities back in the Solomons also benefitted by doing business with the constant stream of recruiting vessels' masters, providing them with provisions, translators, and guides.46

On the subject of missionary impact, numerous studies have now examined how missionaries and their teachings could be exploited successfully by the more astute chiefs and their followers. No longer are missionaries seen as always imposing their will on hapless islanders and converting them. Emphasis is now placed on the rather more complex interaction between missionaries and islanders, and in particular on how islanders were often able to utilize, adopt and adapt missionary customs, ideas, and institutions within an indigenous framework. Similarly, in recent studies of colonial administrations: instead of taking the traditional historical view from government house verandah, historians are trying to see how local villagers were affected, how they and their village culture and social structure operated in the colonial era. As the decolonization of several Pacific countries is now revealing, indigenous customs and lifestyles have proved remarkably adaptable and resilient. Modern Pacific historians have thus thrown new light

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on those changes that did occur in island societies, but they have also highlighted how important it is not to lose sight of the continuities.

The findings of modern Pacific historians do not indicate that Western influences were always of great benefit to the Pacific people; most modern historians make no claims that islanders were necessarily better off or worse off as a result of European contact. Their research suggests, however, that the blanket interpretation of a Fatal Impact cannot be sustained in the face of the great amount of evidence to the contrary. It suggests too that Fatal Impact interpretations are more often than not the product of over-fertile and perhaps guilt-ridden imaginations. Also, it is now implied that to see islanders as passive, helpless, and always persecuted and suffering in a contact situation ultimately denies the islanders their humanity. As Peter Corris says of one of his critics who insists Solomon Islanders were kidnapped for plantations, ‘He is obviously one of those people who believe that two generations of Solomon Islanders were so witless as to stand about on their beaches year after year and allow themselves to be kidnapped by a handful of Europeans and their henchmen’.

But just as all those writers in the Fatal Impact category have put many of their personal feelings into their works, so too have modern Pacific historians, to a greater or lesser extent. Their interpretations as to the fate of the islanders should also be considered in the light of some of their conscious or unconscious preoccupations.

The task of uncovering an island community’s history which has for long been buried under the fallacies and fancies of earlier writers is often one such preoccupation, which sometimes borders on a crusade. Modern Pacific history has among other things, says one influential writer, ‘a very practical and therapeutic role to enact in assisting the Pacific peoples...by renewing their self-respect and providing them with a secure historical base from which to play their part as responsible citizens of independent or self-governing communities in a new world’. By no means would all modern Pacific historians accept this view. However, a reader should be aware that there is commonly an element of commitment by these historians to the islanders. In some cases such commitment takes a practical form. J.W. Davidson, for example, spent a good deal of his time in later years helping to write constitutions for and providing political advice to some of the emerging Pacific states. Some of his colleagues have also been involved in similar activities. It would be unrealistic to argue that such sympathy with islanders’ aspirations never influences these writers’ historical interpretations. On a more general level modern Pacific historians are also very much creatures of their own time and place. Numerous unstated assumptions are commonly present in their publications. For example, a belief in the dignity of all men,
not just of Europeans; a concern with stripping away the more blatant European-centred value judgements; a belief in the justness of communities controlling their own destinies. This is by no means to suggest that modern Pacific history is a conscious moral exercise. Yet it can be questioned whether, in reacting against the helpless savage interpretation, in attempting to put the islanders’ humanity back into the historical context, there is now the tendency to recreate the savage in the image some writers (consciously or not) wish him to have. No longer are the savages in a contact situation invariably portrayed as witless, and justly so, but it can be asked whether there has not been some over-reaction. Have the islanders become imbued with just a little too much rationality, have they become too intellectual: is the modern Pacific historian in danger of creating the stereotype of a cerebral savage?

Modern Pacific historical studies have described in very considerable detail what a chief might have done when a missionary or labour recruiter sailed into his bay, but they cannot always say why. Thus another basic issue, which needs more consideration than it usually receives, is the question of just how much progress these historians have made in understanding motives behind actions, ideas behind facts. This question immediately raises one of the basic limitations of modern Pacific history. Most people writing it are Europeans. No matter how much documentary investigation and fieldwork is undertaken, it is perhaps impossible for Europeans to penetrate the psyche of islanders who lived generations ago. It can be suggested that Taufa’ahau of Tonga or Pomare I of Tahiti did this or that for what appears to be a political or economic reason, but because European historians can never be sufficiently steeped in the Pacific cultures of those times they can never be fully confident as to the accuracy of such interpretations. One solution sometimes advanced is that islanders should write their own histories; Pacific history has been decolonized and now it is time to decolonize Pacific historians. To date this solution has not proved very successful. There is the obvious difficulty that so far very few islanders have the necessary educational opportunities and facilities to attempt such a task. Even when some do, their interpretations can still fail to satisfy European expectations. Though an island writer might be on the ‘inside’ of a society this does not necessarily mean that he or she will have particular insights into historical events, or that these can be expressed in exciting new ways. In this respect it may be that, as has happened in Africa, a generation of indigenous historians will emerge in the

50 For example see reviews of Sione Latukefu, *Church and State in Tonga. The Wesleyan Methodist Missionaries and Political Development, 1822-1875*, Canberra, 1974. Noel Rutherford comments: ‘However, while... [Latukefu] has tapped sources unavailable to European scholars and has been able to rest facts and interpretation against oral as well as written evidence, on the whole he does not exploit his opportunity to the full. The book reads very much like any other history. Latukefu is anxious to adhere strictly to the forms of academic historical writing, but in doing so a chance to say something quite rare slips through his fingers.’ (Historical Studies, XVII, 66 (1976), 111.) See also review by Barrie Macdonald, *The New Zealand Journal of History*, X, 1 (1976), 87-89.
Pacific, when (and if) there is a stronger sense of nationalism, and when, consequently, educational syllabuses throughout the region develop some of their own curriculums and identities. But in the immediate future it seems likely that any islanders who make their way in European academic institutions will continue to write and publish history in the usual European mould, or else will reject 'straight' history altogether in favour of other modes of self-expression, particularly in various forms of literature. This raises the suggestion that Europeans were too concerned with the historical rather than with the philosophical considerations of the nature of history itself. Even though it may be decolonized, Pacific history is still essentially a product of a Western intellectual tradition and world view. If it is as Western oriented and bound as some people would claim, there are insuperable obstacles to anything other than a surface scratching upon the layers of a non-European culture.

Apart from experiments with literature, some islanders are attempting to put their past into an historical context; for example, in Papua New Guinea where university students return to their villages and record oral tradition. Field-work amongst family and friends overcomes the more obvious problems caused by the linguistic and cultural barriers that hinder European researchers. Yet when the results are examined, history, as most Europeans conceive it, is quickly left behind. One enters a world of mythology; fact and

51 This is apparent in Papua New Guinea where a growing sense of nationalism is being reflected in a concern for an historical identity. This is most commonly expressed in a flourishing literature in English – drama, poetry, novels. See Papua Pocket Poets, Port Moresby, 1967–; Papua New Guinea Writing, Konedobu, 1968–; Kovare: a Journal of New Guinea Literature, Brisbane, 1969-75; Pacific Writers Series, (ed.) Ulli Beier, Brisbane; Beier (ed.), Black Writing from New Guinea, Brisbane, 1973. Much of this writing tends as yet to articulate moral outrage against colonialism rather than show concern for future nation building, and thus it often presents a Fatal Impact interpretation. See e.g. John Kasaipwalova’s poem ‘Reluctant flame’ containing such lines as:

**FUCK OFF, WHITE BASTARDRY, FUCK OFF!**

your weighty impotence has
its needle into me!

(Beier, Black Writing, p. 61.) Significantly, this poem was first published in Africa (Pan African Pocket Poets, Ife, 1971). It may be that straight history never has a strong appeal for island writers. For example, the Samoan poet/novelist Albert Wendt, who has a New Zealand MA in history, comments: ‘The fact that I have a degree in history matters very little to me, and, consequently, little to my writing. In a major way, all creative writers are historians. The most revealing and meaningful “histories” about a people are the stories, poems, myths, plays, novels and so on written by themselves. “Inside us the dead” [Wendt, Auckland, 1976] is not a straight historical poem, it is a fictional history of my family, at the same time it is a history of palagi penetration and cultural change on the Pacific. It was written to try to understand my own family and country and why the Pacific is what it is now.’ (Interview with Marjorie Crocombe, The Mang Annual of Creative Writing, Sydney, 1973, p. 46.)

fiction are blurred; chronology is a meaningless concept. Such material might be the stuff of the Levi-Straussian structuralists — the symbolic anthropologists concerned with cultural ecologies and cybernetic processes — (and of the indigenous poets and dramatists) but few Western trained historians have much idea of what it all ‘means’; for most it is like a ticking clock, without hands.

The work of modern Pacific historians has presented a much more accurate picture of what happened to the savage when the white men came, although it is suggested that there is still a long way to go before these historians shed light on what he thought and felt as a result of Western impact. And there is perhaps still the tendency for these historians to recreate the savage and his emotions in the light of their own preoccupations. All of which suggests an as yet untouched topic: how have European views of Pacific islanders and their history influenced the islanders’ own view of their past? How do they grapple with the (often conflicting) interpretations of European romantics and academic imperialists? The Samoan poet and novelist Albert Wendt gives one answer:

ME ADAM

Melvilles and film-makers tell
that my pre-european ancestor
was the ‘noble savage’.

Missionaries and gauguins tell
that my pre-christian ancestor
was very much like Adam.

No wonder I love
coco-cola, westerns
and air-conditioned bibles:

Me, Adam,
Son of Noble Savage
Of the House of Polynesia.

K.R. HOWE

Massey University

54 In Harvey McQueen and Lois Cox (eds), Ten Modern New Zealand Poets, Auckland, 1974, p. 177.