

Tuvalu: A History. By Simati Faaniu et al, edited by Hugh Laracy. Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, Suva, and Ministry of Social Services, Government of Tuvalu, Funafuti, 1983. Index, plates, maps, 208 pp. Price: N.Z. \$19.60.

TUVALU: A HISTORY is the most recent of a series of 'indigenous histories' jointly sponsored by the University of the South Pacific and the governments of island states of the southwest Pacific. Most of the books have been published to coincide with independence, or shortly after it; their purpose, at least in part, has been to put forward a 'national' view — here, as the Prime Minister of Tuvalu says, 'Tuvaluans interpreting events as they themselves see them' — as distinct from the views of outside observers. There has been a conscious effort to draw on oral tradition, and on the testimony of observers of, and participants in, more recent events of national or local importance. All of the books in this series have been collectively written — usually through workshops for local contributors with academics from the University of the South Pacific or Australasian universities as 'facilitators' and editors. *Tuvalu: A History* is the joint effort of 17 Tuvaluan writers and an academic support team of five led by Dr Hugh Laracy. Tito Isala, a Tuvaluan, was both a contributor and a member of the advisory team.

Tuvalu is one of the world's smallest microstates. Its nine small islands (with a total land area of only 26 square kilometres) were first settled from western Polynesia some 2000 years ago. In colonial times the group was known as the Ellice Islands and administratively linked with the Gilbert Islands (and other British possessions in the central Pacific) from 1892 to 1975. Separated by distance and by culture the Gilbertese and Ellice Islanders (now known as I Kiribati and Tuvaluans) were uneasy partners; the colony was divided before decolonisation and each community went its own way to independence. Although not greatly affected by commerce or by colonialism, Tuvaluan society has nonetheless been changed by these forces; still greater influences have been Christianity and labour migration to the phosphate industry at Banaba (Ocean Island) and Nauru. Even so, one of the major messages of this book is that despite the changes that have taken place, there is still a strong adherence to traditional beliefs and values.

The organisation of the book is a compromise between the desire to present a history of Tuvalu (none other is available) and the necessity to recognise and to represent the interests of individual island communities even though 'major' events and developments, as seen by outsiders (and by academic historians), may have been concentrated on only a few islands. Thus a basic chronological sequence of chapters that begins with Part I and discusses the origins and nature of pre-European society is continued in Parts III and IV which consider developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This sequence is broken by Part II, entitled 'Island Traditions', in which a series of authors sketch the outline history of the eight major islands of Tuvalu. Here, Tuvaluan rather than Western or academic views of history prevail. The emphasis is heavily on oral tradition, especially myths of origin, and for the post-contact era the high-points tends to be events within the island community itself: local wars, individual achievements, the payment of a debt, the opening of a school. Sometimes events with a wider significance are brought to the fore — the

Peruvian slave raids of 1863, for example, or the Second World War.

Parts I, III and IV trace the development of Tuvalu from creation in mythological times through to the general election and change of government of 1981. Part I deals with pre-contact society; Part III with culture contact and colonial rule; Part IV largely with modern colonial administration and political change since the Second World War. Some use is made of oral tradition and oral history but there remains a heavy dependence on written sources, including the accounts by outside scholars and the earlier documents upon which their conclusions were based. 'The Tuvaluan view' is to be found in the selection and use of these accounts even if the earlier findings are only seldom challenged.

As one would expect from so large a range of contributors, there are differing approaches and some ambivalence and inconsistency towards the use of earlier published material. Thus one author questions the conclusions of 'outside scholars' on pre-European population figures and on the incidence of infanticide and abortion, whereas elsewhere they are accepted without question; some early European accounts of Tuvalu are doubted as being by 'people who were not intimately acquainted with life in Tuvalu', yet these same observers are cited as authorities on traditional religion.

Religion, a major part of Tuvaluan life, is also treated with some ambivalence. The introduction of Christianity is credited to the Polynesian (mostly Samoan) missionaries who came to Tuvalu rather than to the European missionaries of the London Missionary Services who stood behind them. A clear distinction is drawn between the medium and the message. The role of Polynesian pastors — who are variously credited with assuming autocratic powers, undermining the authority of the *aliki* (chiefs), suppressing singing and dancing, and generally being the agents of cultural imperialism — are given some prominence, but the value of Christianity is not questioned and the emergence of the Tuvaluan Church (now catering for more than 90% of the population) is emphasised as a major national achievement.

The publication of this book is a major event in the infant historiography of Tuvalu, and it is unfortunate that the obvious dedication of the authors and their advisers has not always been matched in the final production: the photographs, though numerous and generally well-chosen, are not well produced (at least in the review copy); there are too many inconsistencies (McFarlane/Macfarland; Laing/Layng) and minor mistakes.

In the final analysis, however, neither the content, nor the conclusions, nor the production of this book are as important as the fact that it has been written. Its appearance should be welcomed as further evidence of the way in which the encouragement of the University of the South Pacific is leading Islanders to write for both their own people and for outsiders — the book is available in both English and Tuvaluan editions. Clearly, this is a genre that does not fit easily into Western academic traditions and, indeed, it is most interesting when it abandons them. *Tuvalu: A History* will be a success if it provokes discussion, debate and further writing in Tuvalu; it will also provide a useful introduction for a general audience to a little-known community and to a new nation.

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