Mary Taylor Huber first encountered missionaries in Papua New Guinea while assisting her husband on fieldwork at Wamu village in the Sepik district. She also encountered anthropologists’ reactions to them: distaste, skepticism about their task, and hostility toward “what often seems an uninformed a priori condemnation of indigenous ways of life” (4). Anthropologists, she concluded, have adopted “a critical stance” toward missionaries “seldom adopted in their approach to the study of native peoples,” and have generally cast their accounts of them “in the ironic mode” (4–5).

Intrigued by what she saw and heard of mission-villager relations, Huber chose to make the Catholic missionaries of Wewak, capital of the Sepik district, the subject of her dissertation. Her informants were her subjects, the missionaries of the Society of the Divine Word, and the Koil Islanders, migrant settlers in the town, among whom she lived. She also used public mission and government records, but no manuscript sources such as letters and diaries.

Huber’s interest lies not so much in the changes wrought by the missionaries on the lives of the people of the Sepik as in how the missionaries’ experience of living and working in the Sepik molded and changed the missionary project itself. She explores the adaptations the missionaries were forced to make by their environment: “the inevitable contradictions between local imperatives and metropolitan ideals” (xi).

Appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. US$29.95.

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In a survey chapter based on wide reading of published sources, Huber introduces the Sepik district, a colonial frontier little troubled by economic development or much administrative intervention until after World War II. Into this underdeveloped region in 1896 came the missionaries of the Society of the Divine Word, a congregation founded during the revival of Catholic missionary work in the second half of the nineteenth century. Previously established in China, South America, and Togo, Africa, they came to New Guinea with a clear definition of their status and role. But the nature of the environment, Huber argues, forced the first of the accommodations required of the missionaries.

To explain the modifications required of the missionaries, Huber employs Frederick Jackson Turner’s concept of the “frontier” which, for her, is more than a geographical frontier. She defines it as “the space between effective practice and authentic ideals.” On the frontier the lines between the sectors of society became blurred; status and role became less clearly defined. The priests of the Society of the Divine Word, bringing their spiritual mission to the underdeveloped Sepik, found that due to the lack of “a civilized infrastructure,” they were forced to put spiritual work aside to concentrate on building a material base, traditionally the preserve of brothers, not priests. This approach was later to be validated by Vatican Council II, but in the 1890s development work was treated with suspicion as deflecting missionaries from real, that is spiritual, work. In the Sepik the visionary prefect apostolic, Father Eberhard Limbrock, was the architect of the mission’s plantations and industries.

A second major adaptation identified by Huber was that forced by the indigenous social and cultural situation. Because of the deep divisions among the indigenous people, their political fragmentation and cultural diversity, the metropolitan model of closely knit hierarchical community was not apposite. Missionaries were isolated from each other and from central authority. Huber uses several neat ecclesiastical images to illustrate the adaptations made by the missionaries to each of the environmental challenges. As Father Limbrock, the plantation priest, reflected the missionaries’ response to their undeveloped diocese, so Bishop Joseph Loerks, and his mission boat, became a new focus for community in the fragmented society of the Sepik. Styling himself the servant of his missionaries, he became a symbol of unity for the mission through his travels.

Continuing her broadly chronological account of the development of the mission, Huber analyzes the triangular relationship between the missionaries, the government, and the Sepik peoples before World War II and traces the devastating effect of cargo cults, and more especially war, on the mission. With over half its personnel lost, stations in ruins, discredited by the cults and the alleged collaboration of Catholic New Guineans with the Japanese, the mission struggled to reestablish the relationship with government and people. But changing circumstances—a more active, interventionist postwar government, and a people determined to par-
ticipate more fully in the new order—
led to the need for new adaptations.
Huber defines a new frontier for the
missionaries, the “cultural gap” that
appeared to limit the Sepik people’s
capacity to enter new forms and insti-
tutions fully. The missionaries’
response was to diversify their mission
into a range of social and economic
areas to help their people adjust to the
modern world, an adaptation sanc-
tioned by Vatican II. As Father Lim-
brock and his plantations were the
symbol for the first frontier, and
Bishop Loerks and his boat the symbol
for the second, so Bishop Leo Arkfield,
the “flying bishop,” and the aeroplane
became the symbol of the third.

As Huber’s analysis moves into the
1970s, “localization” becomes the new
frontier, a political imperative based on
government policy and an ecclesiastical
imperative based on the resolutions of
Vatican II. She discusses some of the
tensions and ambiguities inherent in
attempts to implement this goal. Huber
concludes her analysis with a discus-
sion of the value of mission studies.
Their extrinsic value, she contends, lies
in the knowledge they offer of a region
and its people, and the understanding
they provide of missionary-ethnogra-
phers, usually the earliest observers of
traditional societies. But she argues too
for an intrinsic value, for the under-
standing of “the broader human condi-
tion” (212) offered by studies of such a
community. She ends with a plea for
comparative mission studies.

This book looks at missions from a
refreshingly novel perspective. It is a
healthy antidote to old-style mission
studies which tend to suggest that for-
eign missionaries arrived with a pre-
conceived blueprint that was imposed
on passive recipients; it is also a coun-
terbalance to the orientation of more
recent studies, which generally focus
on the impact of the mission process on
the local peoples rather than the impact
of the environment on the mission pro-
cess. It is a detached and scholarly
work; one could perhaps wish for a lit-
tle more flesh and blood. Huber argues
that the character and style of an indi-
vidual missionary are essential ingredi-
ents in mission-villager relations, yet
she gives little feeling for the mission-
aries as individuals. It is a pleasure to
read in the penultimate chapter of the
craftsman, Brother Joe, and we glean a
little understanding of the three mis-
ion heads who become the images for
the changing patterns of mission work,
but generally the missionaries are
rather anonymous and disembodied.
Perhaps the conceptual framework for
this study has been elaborated a little
too insistently at the expense of con-
tent. One is not left with a solid,
rounded impression of the mission or
its workers. My only other criticism is
a minor one: a number of typographi-
cal errors, of which the most unfortu-
nate is the name of an Australian prime
minister, J. G. Gorton.

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