
The works of Robert Aldrich stand in a class apart among both English and French language writing on the French Pacific. France and the South Pacific since 1940 serves to confirm the quality of his scholarship, the breadth of his vision, the originality of his approach, and the ease with which he writes. This latest book follows, in both style and content, directly on The French Presence in the South Pacific, 1842–1940 (Honolulu, 1990), in the sense that it searches to chronicle metropolitan France's presence in the region in terms of both images and reality.

In order to realize this objective, Aldrich addresses the francophone islands as a whole, in a manner structured around major benchmarks and themes. Individual chapters deal, successively, with the Second World War, the recasting of the colonial order in its wake, economic history, population and society, and political change. Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna are then given separate attention, but always against the backdrop of the broader, regional preoccupations. In a closing chapter, the author turns to contemporary geopolitical and geostrategic issues: nuclear testing, the Pacific as "the new centre of the world," and the place of the Pacific in the broader context of French foreign policy. The whole is framed by a brief introduction and a conclusion, which seek to characterize Oceanic France (or what certain ambassadors have the habit of calling "la France australe") in terms of its raison d'être, its originality within the larger context of France d'outre-mer 'overseas France' and its future prospects.

The originality and quality of Aldrich's scholarship are based on several considerations. First, his capacity to exploit archives in both metropolitan France and in the Pacific Islands. Second, his mastery of the French language—there are, for example, virtually no errors in the book in the transcription of French names and text. Third, his familiarity with recent French research on the Pacific and his monitoring of current events in newspapers and journals—the bibliography is excellent. Fourth, his recourse to fieldwork in order to interview key actors and observers.

France and the South Pacific since 1940 is history brought alive, where frequent recourse to anecdotes and humorous asides gives a new dimension to what would otherwise be a rather arid chronicle of personalities and events. I chuckled, for instance, at the description of the attempted coup and annexation to the United States in Wallis at the end of the Second World War (24–25) and the remark that "Cargo cults did not develop in New Caledonia—except among the whites" (31). Such a lively treatment of the islands brings to mind yet another anecdote, obviously unknown to Aldrich, concerning negotiations between the French and English administrations over the name to be given to the capital of an independent
Vanuatu. Linguistic and imperial sensitivities had reached new heights, and every victory counted, however small. The French pleaded for the more evocative “Port-Vila,” while the British insisted on the more practical “Vila.” Following tense negotiations and the search for compromise, both parties magnanimously agreed on the linguistically neutral “Port Vila” (without a hyphen). Whether they consulted the Ni-Vanuatu is another matter!

On a more serious note, the ultimate strength of Aldrich’s study resides in his ability to read the French Pacific both from the islands and from the perspective of metropolitan France. His firm grounding in French history and politics serves him well. He has an excellent grasp of French colonial policy, of France’s global aspirations, and of its vision of social justice. He thereby presents France’s Pacific territories as being endowed with institutions and ideologies that are part and parcel of the political and social structure of metropolitan France. He reveals that France is a unitary and not a federal state, and is concerned to attribute rights to its citizens and to distribute benefits and wealth widely, but does not easily espouse the goal of separate political development. He understands that in certain respects the overseas territories are “mirrors” of metropolitan France—in terms of political parties, unions, discourse, rhetoric, and symbols—and that French scholars who work in the Pacific often have deep ideological and personal commitments. He inscribes events in the islands in the broader calendar of a European continent and of international affairs to which they are remarkably close. He understands the significance of France’s overseas territories to its maintaining the status of a great power. Finally, as a long-term resident of Australia, he clearly understands the rivalry between such regional powers as Australia and New Zealand and France to be “a joust for influence and profit in the Pacific” (340), a joust dictated more by realpolitik than by moral considerations.

At the same time, this view from beyond the islands is countered by an evident familiarity with the islands themselves. Aldrich reveals how they fit uneasily into a unitary state, with their coutume and kings and churches. He describes how they differ markedly from one another, with, for instance, the existence of a European underclass in New Caledonia, a totally Catholic primary education system in Wallis and Futuna, and the relatively high degree of consensus that characterizes the politics of French Polynesia.

In other words, Aldrich provides an immensely intelligent portrait of the francophone Pacific. Yet a reviewer has the responsibility to be critical. What can I fault in France and the South Pacific since 1940? Precious little! The maps and the geography perhaps. The former are rudimentary to the least. In the general presentation of “The Contemporary Pacific” there are no Marshall Islands, and Clipperton is named but not located, while for the detailed maps there are no coordinates. Within the body of the text the reader learns with some astonishment of “the Tuamotu island of Tubuai” (91) and is informed that the Gambier and Marquesas Islands are “remote atolls of French Polynesia”
(304). Elsewhere, the discussion of population in Chapter 7 relies exclusively on English sources, thereby overlooking the important work of Baudchon and of Rallu.

On a more substantive level, Aldrich occasionally glosses over his ignorance of certain key personalities and crucial events by referring to "two Melanesians," "another Union Calédonienne member," "another European settler" and so on. Generally insignificant in the context of the wealth of detailed information provided by the author, such lapses become crucial in the context of his discussion of the assassination of Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Yeiwene Yeiwene in May 1989. Here the reader is informed that "A Melanesian shot the two leaders dead . . . The assassin, a young FLNKS member, . . . was arrested and convicted of the murders" (255). The assassin was, of course, Djubelly Wea, who was shot dead on the spot by Tjibaou's bodyguards and who, at forty-four years of age, was hardly a young man.

I have perhaps one more important complaint. Aldrich draws surprisingly few parallels with the American Pacific, and yet they are numerous and pertinent. The United States, too, has its "noncontiguous territories," its strategic interests in the Pacific. It, too, has sought more or less successfully in the postwar years to draw its dependent territories closer to itself. France and the United States have conspicuously converging interests in the Pacific. There was certainly some degree of cooperation with respect to nuclear testing in Moruroa and, perhaps, complicity in the Rainbow War-

rior affair. The links and parallels surely merit reflection.

But such are minor grievances with regard to a book that offers an immense wealth of information, a refreshingly intelligent, lively, and measured view of the postwar French presence in the islands. I commend it to anyone with an interest in the contemporary Pacific.

ERIC WADDELL
Université Laval

This is a brilliant study of how certain nonwestern places came to be understood by certain constructs that take on a life of their own, and in so doing, show much more about the west than about the others to whom they were meant to refer. In anthropology, for example, it has been difficult to think of India except in terms of caste, Mediterranean societies except in terms of honor, and Middle Eastern tribes except in terms of segmentary lineage systems. The recent spate of studies that have treated such constructs dominating ethnographic areas of classic and continuing anthropological interest as representations rather than as realities has opened these areas to new questions and foci of attention, as well as provided the bases for strong cul-


This is a brilliant study of how certain nonwestern places came to be understood by certain constructs that take on a life of their own, and in so doing, show much more about the west than about the others to whom they were meant to refer. In anthropology, for example, it has been difficult to think of India except in terms of caste, Mediterranean societies except in terms of honor, and Middle Eastern tribes except in terms of segmentary lineage systems. The recent spate of studies that have treated such constructs dominating ethnographic areas of classic and continuing anthropological interest as representations rather than as realities has opened these areas to new questions and foci of attention, as well as provided the bases for strong cul-