Traditional voyaging in Polynesia offers one of the most engrossing historical and contemporary stories of the seaborne movements of people on the planet. This book by Ben Finney, together with many of his longtime colleagues, is an admirable contribution to it.

Since western explorers of the Pacific were surprised to find that others had settled it before them, and apparently without benefit of navigational instruments of a kind recently developed in Europe, there has been a long-term fascination as to how, why, and when it happened. The subject has escaped the confines of academic discourse, is of wide interest to a general public, and some of the major protagonists are now Polynesians who are rediscovering and developing their own navigational traditions.

Sources of information on traditional navigation include a rich ethnography and history and a vast field of experimental voyages by various replica canoes, rafts, and western vessels, and even include the hyperspace of computer simulation. The discussion is also informed by historical linguistics, biological anthropology, and, most important, results of the first half-century of modern archaeology.

Extreme reconstructions of the past range from mythical heroes able to sail the ocean at will, discover new islands, and return to their homelands; to unfortunate and inadvertent travelers and exiles making accidental discoveries on one-way voyages of kamikaze canoes. The modern view is that Pacific colonization was intentional, and navigational technology was controlled and competent. However, within that context there are many unknowns. The long-term experiments conducted by a distinguished group of colleagues in the Polynesian Voyaging Society have been among the most successful and important of the practical experiments. The canoe Hōkūle‘a, the main character of this book, has reached many of the scattered islands of Polynesia since its launching in 1975, and is now a living legend as well as a scientific entity. Quite a tall order!

As Ben Finney describes, the canoe and its voyages have also become explicit vehicles for the cultural revitalization of Hawaiians and other Polynesians and have helped bring widespread communities back in touch with their oceanic heritage and with one another. A rapidly expanding consciousness and enterprise is now active in several Polynesian entities.

The book is organized thematically. It starts with a preface that gives the background and narrative of events. The following chapters cover the developing history of theories about the colonization of Polynesia, experimental voyaging, and cultural revival. Among the most important contribu-
tions of this entire project have been the experiments in dead reckoning, position fixing, and latitude estimation, especially by the Hawaiian navigator Nainoa Thompson. Moreover, their application at sea, by all of the people involved, has taken theory into the realm of practical experience. That prehistoric colonists had intent has been obvious for some years. Their motives for expansion remain elusive. The main and vital contribution of the experiments described here has been to explore method.

Later chapters deal with voyages of the Hōkūle‘a from Samoa to Tahiti, from central East Polynesia to Aotearoa, and to and from Tahiti and Hawai‘i. The chapter order follows the prehistoric significance of these respective legs. There are detailed discussions of weather and wind patterns, and the strategic scheduling of sailing, which follows from them. The penultimate chapter puts this accumulating voyaging experience into the context of Polynesian prehistory. It is very much in line with modern thinking in archaeology and makes fascinating reading. A final chapter includes a useful discussion of the multifaceted nature of oral tradition and draws the inference that the voyages of Hōkūle‘a have replicated multiple voyaging, which may be implied in tradition.

The book is clearly written and has much to offer the layperson and scholar alike. There are many maps and diagrams and excellent illustrations by Richard Rhodes. The various artistic reconstructions have much more visual impact than photographs would have had. The book is well laid out, with endnotes, appendixes, bibliography, and an index. The use of endnotes makes for an uncluttered text. No major experiment in history could ever hope to realistically duplicate all of the conditions that obtained in the past. Ben Finney is candid about this. Hōkūle‘a was intended as a “performance accurate” replica, not one built by traditional technology. The results achieved by pursuing this strategy, at that particular stage in this long-term and continuing experiment, are very well justified. Nor did the project intend to duplicate the exact colonizing voyages made in prehistory. The circumstances of the first people who sailed into empty ocean without knowledge of what lay ahead cannot be repeated. Yet, as Finney and his colleagues show, “we can say that by sailing throughout Polynesia in a canoe designed to perform like an ancient voyaging craft, and by directly testing our relearned skills in traditional navigation and seamanship over a variety of legendary voyaging routes, we have been able to gain realistic, hands-on insights into canoe sailing, noninstrument navigation, and how to use variations in wind patterns to sail where you want to go” (xvi).

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