particular position in Pacific scholarship, between the clinical regard of the transient scholar and the impassioned Oceanian voice, thereby occupying the middle ground that so effectively links the local with the universal, or what he characterizes as the link between Kanak microhistory and universal history: “a descendent of Algerian immigrant workers, born in France, finds himself professor of philosophy located, in spite of himself, in a configuration created by the colonial power, then meets, in the context of a colonial ritual, the man who incarnates Kanak sovereignty. The strangeness of the situation took the form of a fold that I had to open in order to appreciate the cunningness of history.” (un descendant de travailleurs immigrés algériens, né en France, se retrouve professeur de philosophie situé, malgré lui, dans une configuration instituée par la puissance coloniale, puis rencontre, à l’occasion d’un rite colonial, l’homme, incarnant la souveraineté kanak. L’étrangeté de la situation configurait un pli qu’il me fallait déplier pour comprendre les ruses de l’Histoire.) (343)

Jean-Marie Tjibaou was in part nourished by the Algerian experience and it is, no doubt, one of those strange configurations of history that helps explain why this is a fascinating book.

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As ethnobotanist Douglas Yen tells us in the concluding chapter of this hefty volume, academic discussion about the dispersal of the sweet potato (Ipomoea batatas) in Oceania may be traced back to the 1786 doctoral thesis of the younger Georg Forster (De Plantis Esculentis Insularum Oceani Australis), who, in reviewing the economic botany of Cook’s voyages, attributed to sixteenth-century Spanish voyagers the introduction of this American crop into the Philippines and the East Indies. But Forster left without comment the source of the varieties in Tahiti and “the Southern Ocean.” Over the intervening centuries, much comment has been offered about the mechanisms and chronology of the sweet potato’s dispersals throughout Oceania. In recent decades the principal foundation for continuing research on the sweet potato in Oceania has been the work of Yen himself, whose 1974 publication, The Sweet Potato and Oceania: An Essay in Ethnobotany (Bernice P Bishop Museum Bulletin 236), the volume under review honors in retrospect. And the debate that has surrounded Yen’s depiction of the three-part hypothesis of the dispersal of the sweet potato, from Mexico and northern South America into farthest
Oceania, remains an important theme.

This book grew out of the 2002 annual meeting of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania (ASAO), where thirteen papers were presented at a working session intended to review the status of knowledge about the sweet potato in Oceania since the publication of Yen’s study almost thirty years earlier. The volume that resulted from that beginning contains eighteen chapters, all of which respond through various topics and levels of specificity to the concern with recent developments in Oceanic sweet potato research. General fields of knowledge dealt with include the agronomic, botanical, oral historical, archaeological, geographic, and ethnographic. As the editors acknowledge, an obvious absence is any detailed coverage of recent genetic research and the molecular analysis of variation, although several of the authors mention recent DNA research in passing. The editors agree, generally, that to be definitive these approaches await a more rigorous collection of samples and closer collaboration with archaeologists and other Pacific researchers.

Chris Ballard’s trenchant introduction reviews the two major foci of the “sweet potato problem”: first, the timing and direction of the multiple introductions of the crop into Oceania, and, second, the impacts of its introduction on Oceanic peoples, whether those impacts have been agronomic, demographic, or broadly sociological. A good example of the expansion of knowledge since Yen’s volume is our increased understanding of the agronomy and small-scale distribution of the sweet potato, particularly thanks to the uniquely detailed data available from the Mapping Agricultural Systems in Papua New Guinea project (MASP) carried out during the 1990s from the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University. This increased knowledge is clearly reflected in chapters 2 and 17, both by R Michael Bourke, who was a scientist on the MASP project and who has carried out research on Papua New Guinea (PNG) agriculture for over thirty years. An example of a line of inquiry newly developed since the 1970s is our greatly expanded research on extreme climatic events, particularly the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO). Both of Bourke’s chapters include consideration of the role of extreme events on the adoption of new crops and the shift from one cultivar to another. In chapter 9 (much of which has to do with Māori and Hawaiian mythology in relation to the introduction of the sweet potato), Serge Dunis looks at how the ENSO weather phenomena provide a voyaging link from the west to Rapa Nui and between Rapa Nui and the coast of South America.

Although archaeological research over the years since 1974 has come up with unexpectedly few “smoking tubers” that would reveal more definitively the sweet potato’s past in Oceania, several of the chapters discuss scattered clues as to the timing and direction of the crop’s entry as well as to its impact, mostly described with reference to James Watson’s hypothesis of “the Ipomoean Revolution,” as put forward in the 1960s. Chapter 7 (James Coil and Patrick
Kirch) and chapter 8 (Paul Wallin, Christopher Stevenson, and Thegn Ladefoged), respectively treating dryland Maui and Rapa Nui, both put forward broad archaeologically based interpretations that posit a significant increase in food production based on the secondary introduction of the sweet potato—which would grow and produce heavily in agriculturally marginal areas unsuited to the earlier basic crops of taro and yams. In contrast, Polly Wiessner (chapter 12) adopts an ethnohistorical approach to examine the introduction of the sweet potato among the Enga people of highland Papua New Guinea. Based on extensive fieldwork among the Enga, Wiessner uses oral traditions from 108 Enga tribes to conclude that the crop entered the Enga world some 200 to 400 years ago and had an initial impact on settlement patterns and human diet by providing a reliable staple—before it assumed its great importance as fodder for the expansion of the pig population that fueled the development of the extensive Enga networks of ritual exchange.

The longest chapter is Roger Green's “Sweet Potato Transfers in Polynesian Prehistory.” Employing what he calls “a holistic historical anthropological approach” (43), Green thoroughly examines the available lines of evidence, concluding that during the eleventh to twelfth centuries AD, some Polynesians found their way to South America and returned with the sweet potato to the central region of east Polynesia, whence the plant was then distributed in pre-European times to Rapa Nui, Hawai‘i, and New Zealand. But its arrival in Island Melanesia (the eastern islands of Melanesia) is not thought to be so early, according to Matthew Allen in chapter 10. On the basis of documentary evidence, Allen argues that the sweet potato may have been introduced to Vanuatu, Fiji, and New Caledonia from eastern Polynesia before the beginning of the nineteenth century, but that line of movement extended no farther west. The crop’s introduction into western Island Melanesia from the early nineteenth century is attributed to whalers, traders, missionaries, and returned mission students and plantation laborers.

In chapter 3, Simon Haberle and Gill Atkin dash any hopes—at least for the present—that searching for evidence of sweet potato in the fossil pollen record will make it possible to construct a chronology for its first appearance in a specific place or its rate of dispersal across the region. Because sweet potato pollen grains are relatively fragile, they degrade rapidly in sedimentary environments; and because the plant is pollinated by insects rather than by the wind, sweet potato flowering does not produce an abundant and widely spread pollen rain. In chapter 11, Tim Bayliss-Smith, Jack Golson, Philip Hughes, Russell Blong, and Wal Ambrose turn to admittedly ambiguous archaeological evidence for the Ipomoean Revolution at Kuk Swamp in highland Papua New Guinea. Pointing to changes during the final phase of Kuk’s 9,000-year record of wetland use, the authors suggest a transition to sweet potato, expanded pig husbandry, and social changes after about 1700 AD—a picture that closely fits chronologically with Wiessner’s reconstruction (chapter 12), based on oral history of
the coming of the Ipomoean Revolution to an adjacent part of the PNG highlands.

Using data from four parts of the PNG Highlands Fringe, where (unlike the Highlands proper) sweet potato is not everywhere the dominant crop, David Boyd surveys peoples’ diets and agricultural systems to critique elements of Watson’s Ipomoean Revolution. Paula Brown and Harold Brookfield, veteran researchers of Chimbu (Simbu) in the PNG highlands, detail the close connections first observed by Europeans in the early twentieth century between pigs, sweet potatoes, and the elaborated Chimbu cycles of exchange and ceremonial presentations. Then they trace how coffee growing and the growth of a money economy brought about the decline and fall of the pig-based economy through the latter decades of the twentieth century. They may be describing the end of the original Ipomoean Revolution in the highlands, but as Michael Bourke writes in chapter 17, there is a “continuing Ipomoean Revolution” still progressing in the Papua New Guinean lowlands and Islands Region (171), where surveys show the recent widespread adoption of the crop.

Richard Scaglion turns geographic attention to coastal Ecuador and the search for linguistic clues among variants there of kumara, the widespread Polynesian word for sweet potato. Hints of pre-Columbian connections between Ecuador and Polynesia are offered by the presence of a term similar to kumara around the Gulf of Guayaquil, which was also the only area on the coast of South America with sailing rafts. Helen Leach proposes, arguably, that when Polynesians first met the sweet potato, they had to see it as a variant of an existing crop if the new crop was to be found acceptable. Aside from describing the similarity of the sweet potato to some types of yam in appearance and agronomic requirements, Leach provides linguistically and ethnographically rich reasons why sweet potato was initially most likely perceived as a type of yam, an idea she reinforces by hypothesizing the name ufi kumara—that is, “yam sweet potato.”

Anton Ploeg looks at the highlands of Papua (the Indonesian province that makes up the western part of the island of New Guinea), summarizing the ethnographic literature on the main highland groups and describing the place of the sweet potato in their agricultural systems, with a special focus on wetland agriculture. His contribution is especially welcome inasmuch as studies of Papuan agriculture are few and, as he notes, knowledge about the prehistory of the region is “spectacularly deficient” (160). Unfortunately opportunities for contemporary research in the region are also few. The main message of chapter 16, by Alexander Yaku and Caecilia A Widyastuti, is that despite the crop’s significance in highland Papua, sweet potato breeding and agronomic research on the crop was suspended when the Dutch colonial period ended in 1963 and has been pursued only irregularly since that time, leading the authors to urge that sweet potato research and development should now assume a central priority.

This is not a volume many will read from cover to cover, but it is a
valuable compendium for those of us who would like to think further about a humble tuber and its fascinatingly influential voyage through time and place in Oceania.

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Any book that attempts to cover the complete history of a Pacific island from first human colonization to the present day is almost always bound from the beginning of the project to have a patchy outcome with some areas of the past treated more thoroughly, or in a more expert way, than others. In attempting an ambitious book that has both academic weight and popular appeal, Steven Roger Fischer provides us with such a patchy account. Fischer is a linguist with a special interest in the rongorongo script of Rapa Nui (the local name for Easter Island; the people of the island are called Rapanui). He is clearly also a polymath, as indicated by a plethora of academic and popular publications ranging from the history of writing to a complete history of the Pacific. The focus on Rapa Nui is timely, as contemporary scholarship appears to be challenging some of the orthodoxies of the last couple of decades. However, this book is perhaps a few years too early in being able to present the divergent views to a wider audience.

If patchiness is a feature of this book, then it is best expressed in the first chapter, which attempts to synthesize the very difficult terrain of the history of Rapa Nui prior to European visitation (beginning in 1722) provided by archaeology and oral history (the latter written down over a very long period, including the twentieth century). This is a contested area and for the nonspecialist a very hard one to follow from the primary sources, particularly when some of the source material used is very dated indeed. In summary, this chapter continues the familiar orthodox model for environmental collapse and isolation (for at least two centuries prior to European arrival), but Fischer is at pains to point out that this did not equate with “cultural collapse.” The next three chapters detailing the recorded history of Rapa Nui illustrate both the decimation of the Rapanui as a society and population and also how elements of pre-European culture survived and were transformed through centuries of colonial and external oppression, ambivalence, and strong supporters.

The three historical chapters develop the story of Rapa Nui in a clear narrative style, and particularly strong are the discussions linking the various expeditions (eg, that by the Routledges in the early twentieth century) with major transitions in the historical trajectory of the people of the island. These discussions make clear a continuation of the importance of external influence on this supposedly isolated community (we might perhaps ask, does relative isolation make more noticeable external influ-