Pacific history. We can be thankful to Greg Dening for publicly sharing his gift with us.

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In March 1779, Lieutenant King of HMS Resolution penned a lengthy summary of observations on the newly discovered Sandwich Islands, including some speculations on the size of the archipelago’s population. His rough tallies for various islands “collect’d together give half a Million for the population of these Islands.” In a later published account, King attempted a more elaborate calculation—based on the supposed extent of inhabited coastline—arriving at a figure of 400,000. Subsequently, virtually every scholar who has considered the subject of Hawaiian population at the eve of Western contact has taken King’s estimate as a maximum, and most have lowered it by 100,000–200,000. The eminent modern authority, State of Hawai‘i Statistician Robert Schmitt, puts the 1778 population at 300,000 or less.

In a provocative book that deserves to be read by anyone concerned with precontact (or, as he insists on calling it, “pre-haole”) Hawai‘i, Professor David Stannard of the University of Hawaii now challenges this orthodox scholarly position. The gist of Stannard’s argument is that King’s projection was in fact an underestimate, and “that a population for Hawai‘i of about 800,000 at the time of Western contact seems a restrained and modest figure” (80).

The book is organized in two parts. In the first, consisting of three chapters, Stannard presents his case, commencing with a reconsideration of the King estimate, moving then to demographic models for possible rates of population growth in Hawaiian prehistory, considerations of carrying capacity, and the anticipation of “some likely objections.” Part 1 is followed by 21 pages of detailed notes documenting sources and elaborating certain points. Part 2, titled “Critical Commentary and Reply,” consists of two comments on the preceding section by Eleanor C. Nordyke and Robert C. Schmitt, both leading authorities on Hawaiian demography. Their responses to Stannard’s arguments make it clear that the orthodox position they represent will not readily accede to this new heresy. The book ends with a reply by Stannard, a final section of notes, and an index.

Stannard makes a conscious effort to break out of the narrow mold of often parochial and “arrested” scholarship (xvii) that has characterized the literature on Hawaiian and Pacific Islands historical demography. In contrast to Schmitt, who in his comment accuses Stannard of “trendiness” and jumping on a “scholarly bandwagon” (119), I found the frequent references and comparisons to research on historical demography in the Americas and...
Europe refreshing and enlightening. More important, Stannard does not confine himself to the usual kinds of evidence, such as estimates by explorers and early missionary censuses. Rather, he brings to bear relevant data from such fields as archaeology, paleodemography, and geography to construct his case. Although his work is confined to Hawai‘i, it is pregnant with implications for other Pacific Island groups.

Chapter 1 lays out, in considerable detail, the case against accepting the King estimate of 1779 as at all credible. Stannard addresses four critical assumptions underpinning King’s calculations: (1) an assumed “population density of 800 persons per coastal mile”; (2) the acceptance of the Kealakekua Bay density as typical; (3) the assumption that “a quarter of all the islands’ coastlines were uninhabited”; and (4) the belief “that there was no inland population” (14). Each of these is shown to be unreasonable or unfounded, although Stannard gives us good reasons why King may have reached his conclusions (such as his lack of close familiarity with the more fertile and densely populated windward regions). On the assumed absence of inland population, for example, Stannard marshals both ethnohistorical and archaeological evidence sufficient to demonstrate that vast inland areas were in fact well populated in late prehistory. Some aspects of Stannard’s analysis are, however, questionable. For example, he refers to the region surrounding Kealakekua Bay as a “notoriously dry landscape” (17) when, in fact, the Kona district is a highly productive agricultural zone noted by archaeologists for its vast formal field system. Likewise, his reliance on a not-yet-published estimate by Marion Kelly for a “10 to 1 or 15 to 1 ratio of irrigated taro to dry-land taro production potential” (30) is unconvincing in light of empirical agronomic data on aroid production in traditional Pacific agricultural systems. These are minor points, however, and do not affect the overall argument.

Having established that King’s 400,000 estimate—and scholarly re-estimates that derive from it—rest on unwarranted assumptions, Stannard proceeds in chapter 2 to address three critical demographic questions: (1) is it theoretically feasible for the Hawaiian population to have increased from about 100 at first settlement to 800,000 or more in the time allotted? (2) were their resources sufficient to support such a large population? and (3) what happened to the people? While one may again quibble with some points (for example, Stannard makes no effort to adjust his population density figures for habitable or arable land, a point raised later by Schmitt [38, 116–117]), his arguments are reasonable and well documented.

In chapter 3, Stannard attempts to head off “some likely objections” to his thesis, including some old arguments on the possible impact of infanticide, and the problem of whether the pre-contact Hawaiians were beset with such debilitating diseases as tuberculosis or yaws. In his zeal Stannard at times runs roughshod over those whose work he obviously feels may threaten his conclusions. For example, he accuses me of “quite blithely” claiming that precontact Hawaiians commonly
suffered from tuberculosis (78), quoting phrases out of context from my 1985 book on Hawaiian archaeology. My actual statement, in a paragraph that began “in general, the early Hawaiians enjoyed good health” (Kirch 1985, 243) was merely that tuberculosis was among several “other pathologies that have been noted” based on examination of skeletal remains. These and other unnecessary digs give chapter 3 an aggressively hostile tone.

The comment by Eleanor C. Nordyke in part 2 barely deserves mention, and certainly is not even close to the standard of scholarship exhibited by Stannard. Nordyke’s claim that “archaeologists do not believe that the natives lived inland in large numbers” (109) simply displays her ignorance of the past two decades’ work in Hawaiian archaeology. Her invocation of historically fabricated and quite unbelievable tales of invasions by thousands of “tall fierce” Tahitian warriors (111) is wholly out of place in a work of scholarship. Schmitt’s comment is reasonable, and raises some important issues. All of these, however, are effectively addressed by Stannard in his reply.

Stannard concludes with the assertion that “for those who bring on a holocaust, willfully or not, nothing is more desirable or sought after than historical amnesia. Thus, the politics of this subject. And thus, the assurance that debate has just begun” (143). Indeed, given the importance of this matter—not only for scholars concerned with all aspects of early Hawaiian culture and society, but for contemporary Hawaiian politics—we can expect that Stannard’s book will provoke substantial controversy. One can only hope that those with new data and insights will be stimulated to attack the problem. This is particularly so for Hawaiian archaeologists, who, as Stannard’s book frequently points out, control some of the most important new evidence on precontact Hawaiian population density, levels of subsistence production, and even—through the direct study of skeletal remains—paleodemography. If the archaeologists put their heads to it, they may yet disprove Schmitt’s prophecy that “the true number is ultimately unknowable” (120).

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Fisheries—their utilization, political economy, and geopolitics—are a subject of considerable importance and interest throughout the island states of the Pacific. At the center of the topic lie such policy issues as the nature of development, the exploitation of resources of often unknown stocks, international relations with aid donors and hegemonic metropolitan powers, state-village relations, rural-urban relations, and the commodification of traditional (noncapitalist) economic and social practices. In a low-key way,