
The Pacific Islands is an overview of the colonial period in the Pacific Islands with a short section describing the prehistory and cultures of the indigenous Pacific Islanders. It ends in 1950. When pondering why I found so little in this book that I could relate to the Pacific Islands of today, I reminded myself that I was two years old in 1950. Professor Oliver wrote the book in the 1940s and published it initially in 1951 as an overview of the contemporary Pacific Islands. If its title leads people to buy it expecting to learn something of the Pacific Islands as they are now, they will be disappointed.

The third edition of The Pacific Islands was published in 1989. It differs from the 1961 revised edition most obviously in the first chapter. The old six-chapter, eighty-page section, "The Islanders," has been pruned to a thirty-page summary of the geography and precolonial cultures of the region. The next section, entitled "The Aliens" in the earlier edition, is now called "The Invaders" and remains an overview of the periods the author perceives to have been dominated in turn by explorers; whalers, traders, and missionaries; planters, labor recruiters, and merchants; and finally miners and administrators. The third section, "Metamorphosis" in the earlier edition, is retitled "Transformations" and reorganizes and extends the earlier version to present a thematic overview of social and economic change between the time of European contact and the outbreak of the Second World War. This is followed by a short section, entitled "Cataclysm," on the war in the Pacific and a brief overview of postwar colonial arrangements. The book retains its breezy, readable style.

Aside from the pruning and rewriting of the first chapter, the book is not greatly changed. It tacitly acknowledges new work in Pacific history—for example "blackbirders" are now referred to as "labour recruiters" in the title of chapter four, recognizing that the labor trade had various aspects, certainly not all based on kidnapping—and each chapter ends with a list of sources that are mainly works published since 1961. It also recognizes new social attitudes; most offensive anachronisms from the earlier edition have been deleted (but, alas, some remain).

The question is: Was it worth revising? On the whole, I consider that it was not. The book has served Pacific studies very well and will always be a useful supplementary reference, as a scholarly and entertaining postwar view of the Pacific past. But an overview of the Pacific Islands must link the past to the present to be useful for teaching or to inform the general reader. Unless the author was prepared to write a major new section covering the past forty years, there was no point in undertaking the revision.

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