

Oceania Under Steam: Sea Transport and the Cultures of Colonialism, c.1870–1914

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In *Ocean Under Steam* Frances Steel explores the impact of the 19th-century sea transport revolution in one of the extremities of the British Empire, the South Pacific Ocean. Published as part of the Manchester University Press 'Studies in Imperialism' series, under the general editorship of John MacKenzie, this is a self-consciously 'de-centred' imperial history. It seeks to challenge the traditional emphasis on radiating connections between metropole and periphery, focusing instead on regional or intercolonial 'sub-imperialisms', the complex webs of economic, social and cultural networks that developed in various parts of the world. Here the Southwestern Pacific, or Oceania, is presented as a transcolonial maritime space in which colonial steamship companies – notably the Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand, the largest and most significant regional maritime enterprise – and Australian, New Zealand, and Pacific Island ports played key roles as sub-metropolitan sites of empire.

Compared to the Atlantic or Indian Ocean worlds, the scholarship of empire and sea in the Pacific, especially in the age of steam, is distinctly underdeveloped. As Epeli Hau'ofa has argued, outsider academics and writers have too often marginalised or belittled these scattered 'islands in a far sea', emphasising their isolation, fragility and tiny size, and framing the vast ocean as a barrier.⁽¹⁾ This dominant Western view was reinforced by imperial partition, which reordered the Pacific seascape and often ignored longstanding maritime connections and exchanges between island societies. The majority of earlier works, both academic and popular, that have explored the history of empire and the Pacific have tended to focus on the epic era of European exploration and contact (with Cook's voyages retaining a particular fascination), early maritime industries (such as whaling) or on the high politics of imperial rivalry, including, in New Zealand's case, its

own colonial ambitions to become the Britain of the South. Even James Belich, who placed a welcome emphasis on the importance of the maritime dimension to New Zealand's history, privileged the 'giant meat ships' that connected the Dominion with Britain, tightening the vertical or bilateral links between the metropole and its far-flung periphery. Viewed in this way, the Pacific has often been reduced to an obstacle, a 'mere space' to be conquered or eradicated by modern maritime technology.

New Zealand maritime historians, meanwhile, have produced a valuable body of work, one notable example being Gavin McLean's lively account of the early years of the Union SS Co., *The Southern Octopus*.⁽²⁾ But this field too has been dominated by business histories of shipping companies, their 'glamour ships' and dramatic events such as shipwrecks, rather than the social and cultural relations of the maritime world.

While acknowledging the value of this work, and the significance of the global shipping arteries that linked Australasia with Europe, Steel takes a different tack, broadening the frame of reference and posing questions about issues of race, gender and colonialism. Focusing on the regional maritime connections within Oceania, and in particular on New Zealand's Union SS Co. and the Fijian port of Suva, she attempts to animate the 'rigid black steamer lines mapped out in the company chart of routes' (p. 152), connecting the politics and economics of shipping with the more intimate worlds of shipboard and port life, and recovering the experiences of common seamen, stewardesses and Islander wharf labourers. By placing human stories at the centre of this story, the micro-geographies of ships and ports emerge as important sites of social and cultural, as well as commercial, exchange, offering new insights into everyday colonial life in the South Pacific.

This is an admirable aim, but achieving it is far from easy. Few working people or steamship passengers left many traces of their lives and travels. The evidence that survives is often filtered through the views of European and/or elite writers, or can only be pieced together from fleeting references in government, company and trade union archives. The archival challenges of silence, exclusion and fragmentation are always present for historians, but are even more acute when dealing with the floating world of maritime labour and indigenous engagement with it. Given such limitations, Steel is to be commended for the way she has weaved together a range of diverse and often fragmentary sources, skillfully drawing the reader in by starting each chapter with an engaging personal story or event that in some way illustrates the larger themes that follow.

Oceania Under Steam explores regional shipping connections and cultures across the five decades from the 1870s, when routine steamship operations began and regional trading relationships were consolidated, until the First World War. The book is organised in three parts, grouped under the headings 'Afloat', 'Aboard' and 'Abroad'. Each part seeks to engage with the stories of steam from a different angle of enquiry. The two chapters in part one set the economic and political context of Pacific steam shipping, charting the rise of the Union SS Co., teasing out the overlapping and sometimes conflicting maritime agendas of imperial authorities and Australasian political leaders, and exploring the cultural and symbolic power of the steamship. The three chapters that comprise part two seek to bring the story down to a more intimate, human scale, exploring the rhythms and patterns of working life at sea. Chapter three offers a nuanced account of 'crew culture' during the transition from sail to steam, as technology, managerial capitalism and the concerns of social reformers and unions helped to reshape seafarers' work, skill and status. The following two chapters focus explicitly on issues of race and gender. In chapter four Steel skilfully examines the 'lascar question' – a highly politicised issue that for many years dominated the agendas of seamen's unions and maritime authorities. From the mid-19th century the stokehold of the steamship, a dark, dirty and physically demanding workplace (especially so in the tropics), became the focal point of fierce debates over the employment of 'coloured' or 'lascar' seamen. While Australasian companies and unions, reflecting the prevailing political climate, employed racial arguments to enforce a 'whites only' policy in their coastal, intercolonial and Pacific islands trades, the Union SS Co. recruited lascars for its Asian trades, stressing 'the protection this afforded white men from poor work conditions' (p. 120). Chapter five seeks to recover the often neglected histories of (white) women at sea, both as Union SS Co. stewardesses and as passengers, revealing how their presence was circumscribed by prescriptive gender ideals and notions of shipboard space and order.

Perhaps the book's most valuable insights are to be found in part three, which explores the Union SS Co.'s island trades and the connections they helped to forge between societies and individuals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Chapter six focuses on the white workers who manned steamers and port branches, making excellent use of the Union SS Co.'s archives to illustrate management's persistent concerns at the perils their white employees faced in an unruly tropical environment: physical and mental 'slippage', alcohol abuse and intimacy with the 'wrong crowd' ashore (p. 167).

Perhaps the book's real highlight is chapter seven, '*Sitima* days in Suva', which presents a fascinating micro-history of the early years of Fiji's capital, at a time when regional steamer services were forging new networks of connection and exchange. In this dynamic littoral world, the Union SS Co.'s successful operation depended heavily on interracial cooperation, creating a web of social and cultural relations that were far more complex than the simple hiring and control of native casual labour. The cargo work that attracted local men on 'steamer days', Steel maintains, was 'not entirely at odds with pre-colonial, cyclical labour practices' (p. 189). Indigenous leaders sought to minimise the disruption from new opportunities brought by colonial power, and for its part the Union SS Co. was prepared to negotiate and periodically reset its terms of engagement. Of course, ports and beaches have always been contestable, liminal worlds where social norms and taboos might be challenged or overturned. In Fiji, as elsewhere, colonial authorities, missionaries and sometimes indigenous leaders expressed much concern over the impact of contact with the more unwelcome aspects of European society; vulnerable men from the native town of Suvavou, for example, were said to be 'always in Suva picking up ideas from loafing low-class whites' (p. 179). A Methodist missionary lamented that the 'best type of Fijian character' could only be found 'in the more remote districts' – that is, far away from the steamer ports – where 'the native can follow a simple and natural life untrammelled by the pernicious example of a degenerate civilisation'. As Steel observes, while modern transport links were readily celebrated as markers of progress, a 'steamer in port could as easily symbolise corruption as sophistication' (p. 180).

The book's final chapter, which explores the engagement of Pacific Islanders with the steam shipping industry as seafarers and passengers, adds another layer to the emerging picture of a connected, mobile world. Despite the interventions of colonial authorities and new patterns of surveillance and control – '[I]n labour ordinances, travel permits and immigration laws were some of the innovations that accompanied the rise of modern shipping' (p. 220) – new maritime technologies enabled older cultural practices to be pursued on a larger scale. The Islanders who travelled freely between Tonga, Samoa and Fiji, carrying their mats, food, animals and even indigenous boats on the decks of steamers, and the authorities' anxious response to this kind of mobility, illustrate how the Union SS Co. was hooked into a complex web of 'maritime circuitries', which did not necessarily fit predominantly Western understandings of seaborne commerce. These networks moved in both directions. Indeed, thanks to the Union SS Co., the longstanding regional triangulation between Fiji, Tonga and Samoa now extended further south to Auckland and Sydney, raising fears about the 'wrong' forms of circulation and resulting threats to social order. As Steel observes, an influx of goods from the Pacific into Australia and New Zealand was one thing, an influx of Islanders quite another (pp. 210–11).

As is typical of transnational, de-centred histories, there is a focus here on the unsettling of smooth, linear narratives, and on the telling of diverse, dispersed stories. As Steel acknowledges, in the absence of an overarching narrative or big-picture history of the 'story of steam', an emphasis on movement and fluidity can produce an 'inherent unevenness' and raise questions about the representativeness of fragmentary evidence. Nevertheless, there is a power in these more intimate stories, which adds a new dimension to the 'narrower tradition' of business and economic histories of ships and the sea (p. 221). My only slight frustration with this valuable book is that its plain production, small number of images and academic tone mean that it is unlikely to reach the wider readership it deserves.

Oceania Under Steam, as its author explains, is intended as a contribution to a newer, richer and more connected maritime history, one which moves the analysis of steam shipping away from a preoccupation with political and business history, and the centre/periphery exchange, instead emphasising social and

cultural relations and sub-imperial regional trades. Exploring the impact of steam from the viewpoint of ‘marginal’ sub-metropolises like Sydney, Auckland and, especially, Suva, Steel challenges hierarchical models of imperial space and brings new webs of connection and exchange into focus. Markus Vink’s call, in a 2007 article, for a reinvigorated scholarship of the Indian Ocean that historicises and localises ‘porousness, permeability, connectedness, flexibility, and openness of spatial and temporal boundaries and borders’ [\(3\)](#) is equally applicable to the Pacific Ocean. *Oceania Under Steam* rises to that challenge, making an important and timely contribution to our understanding of the shared histories of New Zealand and the Pacific in the age of Britain’s global maritime dominance. It is to be hoped that it will encourage further studies in this still-underdeveloped field.

Notes

1. Epli Hau’ofa, ‘Our sea of islands’, *Contemporary Pacific*, 6, 1 (1994), 148–61. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Gavin McLean, *The Southern Octopus: The Rise of a Shipping Empire* (Wellington, 1990). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Markus P. M. Vink, ‘Indian ocean studies and the “new thalassology”’, *Journal of Global History*, 2 (2007), 41–62. [Back to \(3\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7863>