

## The Pacific

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*The Pacific* forms part of the series 'Seas in History' edited by the late Geoffrey Scammell. Already published are the volumes about the Atlantic, the Baltic and North Seas and the Indian Ocean. The historiography of seas and oceans has an illustrious tradition (Fernand Braudel, Kirti Chaudhuri, O. H. K. Spate, J. H. Parry...) that has provided new insights into and perspectives on how human societies have evolved and are dependent on and connected by bodies of water. Oceans have played a fundamental role in world climate and have been a vital source of proteins, industrial materials and a variety of other products. These economic activities were followed in many cases by systematic exploration and colonization. Maritime transportation in general is cheaper than land transportation and, in many cases, is the only means for trade and immigration. Mercantile enterprises and colonization have had unpredictable ecological consequences, like the creation of Neo-Europes, using Alfred Crosby's term, in the Americas, Australia and New Zealand.

Donald Freeman follows in the wake of the historians mentioned above. His book covers a wide range of topics (geography, history, ecology, and representations of the ocean in art, literature and film) through a time frame that goes from pre-history to the present.

The text is divided into eight chapters with well-chosen illustrations, useful maps and a bibliography. In the introduction Freeman explains his interdisciplinary approach drawing from human geography, environmental sciences, anthropology, sociology, political sciences and economics with the object of casting new light on known historical events. In his own words: 'At focus is the interplay of human activities and physical aspects of the Pacific, such as its sheer vastness, inaccessibility, remoteness, diverse and changeability, and the productivity or hazardousness of its multitude of different environments' (p. 1).

Indigenous peoples colonized the archipelagos in the ocean and 'there is evidence that they had contact with the coastlands of the Americas. And yet their sagas had a distinctly regional rather than a pan-Pacific quality' (p. 3). The Chinese and Japanese knew about the 'southern seas' but there is no evidence of them venturing into the 'eastern void' of the Pacific. Before Ferdinand Magellan it seems that non-European peoples lacked a clear conception about the oceanic hemisphere; 'it has taken many centuries for human awareness of the character and dimensions of the Pacific Ocean to take shape' (p. 3). In Asia knowledge about Pacific geography was fragmentary and in Europe until the 1880s the 'Antarctic Islands' appeared in maps instead of the continent of Antarctica.

If coastlines were unknown until quite recently, other geographical features went unexplained for centuries. A crucial example is the changes in maritime circulation called El Niño. The inability to explain it made impossible to establish the crucial relationship between this ocean circulation and the world climate. The ignorance of plate tectonics made tsunamis and earthquakes mysterious events and left unexplained the location of mineral resources like the silver mine of Potosí or the 1848 Californian 'Gold Rush.' Recent scientific advances do not preclude lags in understanding of many physical processes and their interactions with biological communities on the oceanic shores.

The Pacific contains 45 percent of the planet's waters, being the largest and deepest ocean of the world, and its area occupies one third of the Earth's surface. Freeman adopts a conventional tripartite division of this area: the Asian Pacific rim, the American Pacific rim and the central-south Pacific. In addition to its vastness the access to the Pacific from other oceans has always been difficult, which explains why large areas were an unexplored frontier less than 200 years ago and the many deaths of European navigators due to scurvy and other misfortunes.

A substantial part of chapter one is dedicated to 'Climatic-Oceanographic Influences'. The Pacific 'gyres' (circular systems of ocean currents) and the 'thermohaline circulation' form part of the 'global ocean conveyor belt' that distributes heat around the world. Throughout thousands of years the Pacific has played a crucial role in the earth's environmental changes which can be rapid and extreme.

The atmospheric circulation patterns in the ocean originated the monsoons and trade winds on which peoples of the Pacific are highly dependent but also the tropical cyclones. More frequently in recent decades, the dominant easterly winds are disrupted by contrary winds and currents known as El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) and, less frequently, by the opposite effect called La Niña.

Events of great importance in human history are related to ENSO: Polynesian migrations notably improved their success when El Niño westerly winds and countercurrents helped the eastward voyages, and La Niña winds facilitated the movement of Maori peoples to New Zealand. Sir Francis Drake was saved in Sulawesi by a sudden reversal in the wind's direction. In 1877–8 widespread drought caused famines in Asia resulting in the deaths of more than nine million Chinese and the uprising of indigenous Kanak people against the French in New Caledonia. In recent decades drought induced by El Niño and forest clearing in Indonesia led to tremendous fires that covered the Asian-Pacific region with smoke.

Global warming is associated in the Pacific with rising sea levels, storm activity and the destruction of corals on the Great Barrier Reef. Fisheries are in decline and jellyfish have extended their habitat to large extensions of the ocean; low lying coasts are being infiltrated by salt-water and destructive burning events are numerous. Tropical diseases of plants and animals have increased as well as the spreading of malaria and

dengue fever to areas previously considered too cool to support the mosquito vectors.

Tectonic forces have been of crucial influence in human history. Earth crust movements produce earthquakes, tsunamis and active volcanoes that circled the Pacific in a 'ring of fire.' Earth dynamics resulted in mineral deposits and rich soils that support large populations. The downside of volcanism are large eruptions like the one at Toba (69000 BCE) in northern Sumatra that triggered a six year winter which destroyed many species of animals and plants and almost wiped out the hominids. The 1991 eruption of Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines caused hundreds of deaths and prompted the abandonment of Clark Field, one of the largest US military bases.

Chapter two treats the occupation of the Pacific from prehistory to the first European voyages. From Asia waves of population spread to the Pacific islands and the rim-lands. The Asian Pacific Rim had an environment consisting of coastal plains, river valleys and uplands covered by forests. Padi rice, fish farming and tree-crops on dry land supported large populations in river valleys and the deltas as of the Mekong, Chao Phraya, Huang He and Yangtze. In South-East Asia padi rice cultivation also fed its peoples. Trade in spices, rice, sago, pottery and metal wares created trade networks that lasted for centuries. Trade brought new technologies and religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam to these areas. More recently Catholic and Protestant missionaries spread Christianity. Eventually political entities like China, Japan and Korea emerged and 'are perhaps more strongly intertwined with the historical role of the Pacific Ocean than other polities in the Asian Pacific arena' (p. 39).

In China the oscillations of El Niño/La Niña were behind the fall of the Mongol dynasty: typhoons destroyed the expeditions to conquer Japan; famines (as a consequence of severe droughts followed by floods) reduced the Chinese population to 80 million people; peasant rebellions exploded in the devastated rice-growing areas of coastal lands and the Yangtze river. The Ming dynasty (1368–1644) took power and ushered a brief era of China as a major Pacific power in the 15th century. The trading cities of the Yangtze were revitalized, good relations were pursued with Japan and Korea and large fleets were dispatched in long-distance expeditions. The admiral Zheng He took in his fleet a contingent of Chinese to Melaka and established in 1405 'a community – locally called Bukit China – which still flourishes today' (p. 44). This was a rare event because China was not intent on colonizing other peoples but also indicated the importance that the Ming attributed to the Straits of Malacca in the routes connecting with India, the Middle East, Africa and Europe. In the same year, Zheng He's fleet reached East Africa.

Chinese voyages were massive undertakings: The treasury ships measured each about 120 meters in length and 50 meters wide. The 1405 expedition consisted of 62 ships with a crew of 30,000 men. In the hulls they carried live animals, large water supplies and nurseries producing soybean sprouts to protect sailors against scurvy. Pilots navigated using star charts, maps with landmarks and sailing instructions and primitive magnetic compasses. When the emperor Hong Le died, his grandson continued these activities but after the death of Zheng He in 1433 during the seventh and last Chinese expedition the fleets were dismantled. China and Japan officially disengaged from maritime activities which 'allowed a maritime power vacuum to develop in the western Pacific' (p. 45).

The chapter considers the population of the Americas and the three cultural zones of Oceania, Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. At the far eastern corner of the Polynesian triangle Rapa Nui, named Easter Island by the Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen in 1722, suffered an ecological catastrophe caused by deforestation and competition over the construction of stone statues of guardian ancestors (*moai*) that led to war between clans. During the 1860s Peruvian slavers took the remaining population to work in guano mining: Chapter three tells the story of the efforts by political entities to control the Pacific. Imperial China, the Iberians, the colonies of Britain, France and Germany in the South Seas, the Japanese Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, and the 'legitimate national interests' of the US. The aims of imperial powers were to control and regulate the wealth of the region justified by bringing civilization to indigenous peoples. Imperial dominance was backed up by military forces capable of confronting hostile natives or other imperialists.

Ferdinand Magellan's voyage opened up the ocean to European knowledge and exploration. He concluded in

J. H. Parry's phrase 'the discovery of the sea.' James Cook's three voyages and the expeditions' scientific labors were the prerequisite to the expansion of the British Empire in the Pacific. Imperial rivalry with England propelled the French to Pacific exploration and colonization. To improve access to French colonies in 1876 a society was formed to construct a canal similar to the Suez Canal without success, but finally under President Woodrow Wilson the Canal was opened in 1915.

Demographic constraints compelled colonial administrators to allow immigration to Pacific colonies from India, China and Japan, many arriving as indentured workers, all of which contributed to the diversity of population in the Pacific region.

Chapter four covers the technologies in transport, navigation and mapping that made possible 'to overcome the daunting friction of distance' (p. 99). The Pacific dimensions were overcome by western technologies from the caravels and galleons to the large container carriers and also by aviation. Developments in map making and navigational aids greatly facilitated the crossing of the ocean. A completely different trajectory was followed by the Polynesians, 'the greatest seafarers the world has even known', (p. 101) who used celestial navigation and 'the reading of environmental clues' to reach their place of destination. Chapter five deals with the exploitation of resources in the Pacific and the concurrent violence and environmental degradation. Whaling and the collection of sea otter furs, beche-de-mer, pearls and tortoise shells depleted the Pacific of all these species, but sandalwood exploitation was 'the most violent and ruthless of the many forms of assault on Pacific resources' (p. 132). Fisheries also are currently being depleted. The exploitation of minerals such as gold, nickel and copper has produced numerous episodes of violence like the California Gold Rush. Confrontations over nickel mining in New Caledonia have resulted in deadly clashes between Kanaks and the French settler community helped by armed forces during the 1980s. Conflicts also took place over the copper-gold open mine of Panguna in the island of Bougainville in the same years. The demand-pull exercised by China over Pacific resources throughout history is currently exemplified by the importation of iron ore, 'as it produces over 350 million tones of steel per year, larger than the combined output of its Pacific rim rivals, the United States, Japan and Korea' (p. 148).

Chapter six presents the conflicts and wars since Magellan's arrival to Pacific waters and continues until the Vietnam War. Freeman examines with detail the Second World War in the Pacific that opened up the nuclear age and US hegemony in the region. Chapter seven, entitled 'Picturing the Pacific: The Ocean Hemisphere in Art, Literature and Film,' begins with the impact of drawings made by Europeans in their voyages, representing the South Seas inhabited by attractive men and women as 'noble savages' in the middle of an earthly paradise. The trend was continued by the Orientalism of the Victorian Era in which the Polynesian stereotype was adopted in fashion design, jewelry, furnishings and art in general. The chapter continues with an examination of literary works about the ocean (Herman Melville, Robert Louis Stevenson, Jack London and Joseph Conrad) to be followed by natural scientists (Joseph Banks and Charles Darwin) and anthropologists (Bronislaw Malinowski, Raymond Firth and Margaret Mead). Chapter eight concludes the book with an examination of current issues like nation-building in 'Pacific microstates,' urban and industrial expansion, technological changes in shipping, the building of ports and commodity trade and the impact of these developments on the ecology of the ocean. If in the 15th century Imperial China was already active in the Pacific the current China 'with its huge reserves of cash from decades of profitable trade, has seized the opportunity in the present global recession to buy resource deposits around the Pacific cheaply, ensuring that it has the raw materials needed for even greater expansion of its carbon-emitting industries while stealing a march on its debt-ridden former Pacific rivals, the United States and Japan' (p. 241). Freeman ends his volume with a balanced observation: 'Despite the sobering lessons of the past and the travails of the present, however, there is still room for optimism about the future in what will surely be hailed as the 'Pacific century'' (p. 241).

*The Pacific* is a 'map of time' whose object is the oceanic hemisphere through history. The term is borrowed from the poet Henry Reed – 'the maps are of time, not place' – and the historian David Christian's book entitled *Maps of Time*. Donald Freeman has followed a rigorous methodology in which a dynamic physical geography with its challenges and resources is the scene for human activities and in which societies at different levels of technological development interact among themselves and with the environment over the

centuries. The author has carefully inserted anecdotes in wide contexts to exemplify a particular historical feature, like the successful Bounty mutineers able to escape retribution simply because the Royal Navy lacked good maritime charts of the ocean, or how the Chinese fleets fended off scurvy but class distinctions put obstacles in the path of eliminating the same affliction on British ships.

The effects of human activities in the ecology of the region are present in the majority of its chapters. Ecological degradation is exemplified by the inhabitants of Easter Island that sealed their fate due to irresponsible deforestation, by the need to close factories during the Beijing Olympic Games to protect the athletes' health and by the possibilities for navigation using the Bering Strait due to global warming.

Freeman's treatment of current maritime transportation across the Pacific could be summarized in a short sentence: 'More than half of the world's tonnage of container ships in 2008 comprised vessels that are too large to fit through the Panama Canal, which is thus threatened with obsolescence' (p. 225). Considering that the six largest container ports and several large bulk ports are located in the Pacific Rim there is not doubt about the crucial social and economic relevance of Pacific Ocean regions. Freeman avoids the pitfall of privileging in his narrative the countries of the rim over the Pacific archipelagos. Carefully he situates these societies in the context of the Pacific's interrelations.

The book explains with extreme clarity geographical categories, technology and economic events reaching to the US-led global recession of 2008–9. This volume could be used in undergraduate and graduate courses and also to be read with great profit by historians, social scientists and the general public. Freeman's learning and elegant writing style as well as his historical intelligence makes *The Pacific* an excellent 'map of time' of the oceanic hemisphere.

The author found the review by Arturo Giraldez to be thorough, fair and positive, and he is happy to accept it without further comment

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