

## The Ivory Tower and Beyond: Participant Historians of the Pacific

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Helen Gardner

In the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Pacific History* in 1966 Jim Davidson, the first Professor of Pacific History at Australian National University, considered the historiography of the island groups of the Pacific Ocean and called for innovative methodologies to interpret the 'multi-cultural situations' of island communities.<sup>(1)</sup> His manifesto appeared as Britain and Australia were following New Zealand's lead and planning the end of their Pacific empires. It was a momentous time as scholars who had been born into empires watched and encouraged the seismic shifts that led to the end of European imperial rule. History was to be yoked to the service of the decolonising nations of Africa, Asia and the Pacific alongside a new spirit, encouraged by the likes of E. P. Thompson, which called for the democratisation of history and the recuperation of the voices of the colonised. These sub-disciplines founded their identities and literature in the new or expanded post-war universities in the optimistic years of the 1950s and 1960s as academic positions were created and departments were encouraged or dragged into these fields. Yet despite this expansion, only a few historians of the Pacific gained tenure either in the small pool of Australian, New Zealand and Hawaiian universities, or in the new universities established within the region: the University of the South Pacific (1968) or the University of Papua New Guinea (1965).

Doug Munro's book traces the origin of the sub-discipline of Pacific history through chapter biographies of a few of the key figures, in particular those who both made and wrote the history of the Pacific Islands. These academics were drawn to participation in the post-war era as the sub-empires of Australia and New Zealand responded to the world-wide call for decolonisation and sought new directions for their Pacific colonies. Dominion scholars such as Australian anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner and New Zealand historian Jim Davidson, were enticed back to the Pacific from Britain following their education at the centre of an empire that became increasingly self-critical in the 1930s and 1940s.

Munro's book begins with New Zealand historian John Cawte Beaglehole (1901–71), renowned biographer of James Cook. Beaglehole took the standard path of the clever young man and headed to England to complete his studies, expressing a common disdain for the insular society of New Zealand in the 1920s. While uneasy about the empire his PhD funding was secured on the instructions of the Colonial Office. He returned reluctantly to New Zealand as the great financial crisis of the 1930s was closing off all hopes of expansion in the small world of New Zealand universities. Fearing his left-wing affiliations, university councils blocked his efforts to gain permanent employment until his final appointment to the Victorian University College in the mid 1930s. While he was important to the sub-discipline of Pacific history his place in this book is a challenge to the overall theme as his political participation in the events of the time was not based on his area of historical expertise but on his sense of citizenship.

Jim Davidson (1915–73) is the key figure in this book and is credited with being the founder of Pacific history with his appointment to the Australian National University in the early 1950s. Davidson was Beaglehole's student as an undergraduate at Victorian University College in the 1930s and shared his politics, but their historical interests deviated as Davidson was drawn to the informal empire of the South Pacific, the little studied trading encounters and the settlement of Europeans who preceded the empire and who negotiated chiefly alliances and indigenous power structures.

Davidson's role as a participant in the decolonisation of the Pacific was sparked by his appointment in Britain to a major research project on colonial legislatures in Africa in the immediate post-war period. Surrounded by a dedicated group of anthropologists, historians and economists with experience of Africa, Davidson joined the discussions on colonial legislatures as Britain pondered the future of the empire. His work on a series of Admiralty Handbooks on the Pacific with anthropologist Raymond Firth consolidated his interest in decolonisation, anthropology and history from the 'native' perspective. He was determined to unshackle Pacific history from the empire and did so using the new anthropologically inspired methods of cross-cultural history that drew the historian from the Colonial Office to the village and brought Island participants to the fore.

This new perspective led Davidson to accept a position as a Trusteeship Officer to Samoa in the mid 1940s where he enjoyed the opportunities of colonial administration while simultaneously performing the last rites of empire. Munro claims that it was Davison's second assignment to Samoa that transformed him into a participant historian. He was disparaging of New Zealand's administration and was closely aligned with the holders of the chiefly titles in Samoa, a relationship that almost certainly led to a constitution in 1962 that restricted franchise to the *matai* or chiefs.

Munro's portrait of Davidson does not address his work as an advisor on constitutions throughout the Pacific – he died on assignment to Papua New Guinea in 1973 while assisting on the constitution for that country. Instead Munro takes us to Canberra and Davidson's appointment as Professor of Pacific History to the demountables of the Australian National University in the early 1950s. Davidson became a crusader for the island centred histories that came to characterise Pacific History at the ANU. These interests were readily translated into his work on constitutions which reflected his anthropologically inspired belief that local power structures should be reflected in the nation. This element of Davidson's political work throughout the 1960s and into the early 1970s really forms the core of his role as a participant historian and Munro's very important 'pre-history' of Davidson's participation in the politics of the Pacific will provide a useful spring board for a focused study of his constitutional work.

One of Davidson's first appointments was Harry Maude (1906–2006) who participated in Pacific events during a long career in the British Colonial Service in the Pacific, largely in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony – decolonised to Kiribati and Tuvalu. Despite his work on the restructuring of Pacific colonies in the post-war period, Maude's histories focused on the informal empire of the 19th century rather than the structures of colonialism that were instigated largely in the 20th century and were being dismantled around the historians they wrote. Inspired by a deep knowledge of the language and culture of the people from the southern islands of Kiribati, Maude sought to glean the islanders within the texts – the 'snippets' of sources to which Pacific historians of the island centred method are trained to be alert. His deep concern for the sources was central to his role in establishing the very important Pacific Manuscripts Bureau in 1968. To date, the PMB has copied over 3,000 microfilm roles of the documentary heritage of the Pacific Islands and scholars of the Pacific are deeply indebted to this institution. As this generation of historians sought to recuperate the actions of Islanders, they were drawn particularly to the nineteenth century when the chiefs on the beaches and villages of the Pacific negotiated with the beachcombers, missionaries and the consuls of the informal empire from a position of power. It was a complex archive: 'partial, haphazard and contested' as Douglas notes.<sup>(2)</sup> Maude's collection of essays *Of Islands and Men* <sup>(3)</sup> exemplified the island centred historical approach through his meticulous attention to the fine detail of the sources which allowed him to go beyond the European perspectives of the authors.

Munro is right to focus on the historical method of these pioneers of Pacific History for the island centred approach which sought to identify the 'other' side of the beach and the response of islanders was the sine qua non of this school. Yet this method took its toll, as shown in the tragic figure of Richard Gilson (1925–62). His talent was overwhelmed by the minutia of his painstaking work on the history of Samoa that dragged on until his premature death in 1963. Gilson points to the problems implicit in the impulse to recuperate all the voices in the round. This is exacerbated in Pacific history when a cross-cultural analysis is overlaid onto the complex archives of missionaries and traders. Gilson's dense narrative <sup>(4)</sup>, was finally finished by his talented wife Miriam (who deserved more than the brief mention in Davidson's introduction) and Davidson and published in 1970. The sub-title is typical of the interests of the Pacific Historians of the period who sought out the encounters, the engagements and the power struggles and accommodations that occurred within the multi-ethnic communities of the Pacific Islands.

Munro's final historian is Brij Lal the grandson of *girmityas* or indentured Indian labourers, who grew up in the sugar district on the outskirts of Labasa on the island of Viti Levu in the British colony of Fiji. Lal was of a different generation from the other historians of the book and met Davidson only briefly while he was an undergraduate at University of the South Pacific. Lal came of age in the early heady optimistic days of Fijian independence as Fijians either ignored or were oblivious to the seeds of disaster in the communal politics of the island state. His MA thesis on the Indian diaspora in Vancouver set his research interests and his ANU based PhD on the background of the *girmityas* who came to Fiji from Northern India between 1879 and 1916, was based on exhaustive research on the Emigration passes. While Lal was perhaps the least influenced by Davidson he followed most closely in his tracks. He moved from the 19th to the 20th century in response to the changing political situation in Fiji with an edited book on contemporary Fijian politics in 1986 which was quickly superseded by the Rabuka coups of 1987. Lal responded with *Power and Prejudice* published only a year later and then added a historical polemic for a successful multi-ethnic community in

Fiji *Broken Waves* (1992). Lal's most important foray into Fijian politics (to date) was his role on the Constitutional Review Commission which was established to revise the 1990 constitution written under the Rabuka administration and clearly unacceptable to a large percentage of the Fijian population. Yet, as with the previous Constitutions, this one was also challenged: first by the Speight coup of 2000 and then by the Bainimarama coup of 2006, before being suspended in 2009. A fourth Constitution is planned for 2013.

One of Munro's themes is the trials and travails faced by scholars in gaining permanent employment and the byzantine politics of university departments and their councils. This might perhaps have played closer to the participation theme if Munro had considered whether the political flavour of the day was sympathetic to decolonisation and thus more accepting of more radical historians, but while the book considers the political challenges of the Cold War in relation to academic freedom in post war universities it is silent on the challenges of the region. While there are passing references to the Cold War, there is no entry in the index for decolonisation.

These 'participant historians' bear some comparison to their fellow scholars the participant observers of anthropology whose method and analyses cross-pollinated the historians' efforts to recover the shadowed voices of the colonised. Anthropology and history have long been fellow travellers in the scholarship of the Pacific. An anthropological focus is essential to the unravelling of village events through the archives of the shipping logs of the copra and sandalwood traders, the correspondence of the beachcombers and that rich and awkward archive, the missionary journals that form some of the best sources of the lives of Islanders in the 19th century.

While Munro has focused on Davidson and his 'stable' of students in the establishing of Pacific History at ANU there is another strand to the genealogy via Melbourne University which nurtured Dorothy Shineberg, Niel Gunson and Greg Denning. These important scholars of Pacific islands trade, mission and exploration – Shineberg and Gunson were drawn to the ANU – have left a rich legacy to Pacific and Australian scholarship.. Shineberg, for example, combined the island centred method with the maritime history of the eastern seaboard of early colonial Australia in her work on the sandal-wood trade operating out of the 'sea-conscious towns' of Sydney and Hobart.<sup>(5)</sup> Gunson's *Messengers of Grace: Evangelical Missionaries in the South Seas* remains the foundation text on 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestant missions to the Pacific Islands.

Munro's densely packed research on these scholars will be an important resource for historians of the Pacific. Yet the book is perhaps based too closely on the university experience to really allow a full examination of these historians' participation in the important events of the Pacific Islands. It does, however, lay bare the importance and problems of the island centred historical method and the motivations behind it: Lal's supervisor for example, insisted Lal feed in all the details from all the Emigration passes from Northern India into his analysis as each *girmitya* was important. *Beyond the Ivory Tower* is an important companion to Munro's recent publication *Texts and Contexts: Reflections in Pacific Islands Historiography*, which he co-edited with Brij Lal.<sup>(6)</sup> This book is also a reminder of the need for a full study of Davidson's constitutional work in the formation of Pacific nations. Finally, it suggests the possibility of a further exploration of the theme of the scholar/participant with a stronger critique of the the observer who took part in the events. Scholars in the Pacific have often been drawn to participation. Within these small nations this participation can have important consequences. Munro's book hints at the possibilities of a major work on Pacific scholars who travelled the road from study to village and back again and influenced events within these communities.

## Notes

1. J. Davidson, 'Problems of Pacific History', *Journal of Pacific History*, 1 (1966), 11.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Bronwen Douglas, 'Imperial flotsam? The British in the Pacific Islands', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume Five Historiography* (Oxford, 1999), p. 368.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Harry Maude, *Of Islands and Men: Studies in Pacific History* (Melbourne, 1968).[Back to \(3\)](#)

4. Richard Gilson, *Samoa 1830-1900: The Politics of a Multi-Cultural Community* (Melbourne, 1970). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. D. Shineberg, *They Came for Sandalwood: A Study of the Sandalwood Trade in the South-West Pacific, 1830-1865* (Melbourne, 1967). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *Texts and Contexts: Reflections in Pacific Islands Historiography*, ed. Brij Lal and Doug Munro (Honolulu, HI, 2006). [Back to \(6\)](#)

Doug Munro is not tempted away from his belief that one should never - well, hardly ever - respond to reviewers, except thank Dr Gardner for her thoughtful review and for suggesting additional lines of enquiry.

**Other reviews:**

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