

COMMENT

Pasts, Presents and Possibilities of Pacific History and Pacific Studies: As Seen by a Historian from Canberra

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PASTS

I am a historian, not a prophet. So, rather than prognosticate much about futures, I shall discuss ‘pasts, presents, and possibilities’ with specific reference to Pacific history and, more generally, to Pacific Studies that are not always historically framed. My geographical orientation is from broadly defined Oceania, spanning Island Southeast Asia, Taiwan and Australia as well as the Pacific Islands.¹

Having studied Pacific History as an honours student at the University of Adelaide, I began a PhD at the Australian National University (ANU) in the late 1960s in Jim Davidson’s Department of Pacific History, within the Research School of Pacific Studies (RSPacS), then two decades old. From the outset, the Department included Southeast Asia within its remit, but neither Australia nor, at least in principle, New Zealand. The Pacific Islands, including New Guinea, were the almost exclusive focus. The emancipatory, decolonising 1960s and 1970s were the heyday of the ‘island-centred’ school of Pacific historians to which I was an enthusiastic recruit. In retrospect, it was a common sense, rationalist historiography, inspired by universalising secular humanism or radicalism and largely unconcerned with theory or ontological differences. The key themes were ‘culture contact’, colonialism, and decolonisation, addressed from the Islanders’ point of view and with some cross-disciplinary liaisons, especially with structural functionalist anthropologists, who mostly were not much interested in history. From about 1980, a conceptually more sophisticated

¹ This short reflection was presented on 30 October 2014 to an Emeritus Seminar on ‘The Future of Asian and Pacific Studies (viewed from Canberra)’, held at the Australian National University by the School of Culture, History and Language, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific.

ethnohistory or ethnographic history emerged, especially in Melbourne, in partnership with more historically oriented anthropologies, notably those of Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner. By this stage, Pacific history was widely taught in Australian universities, especially newer ones such as Flinders, Macquarie and La Trobe, where I worked for 25 years before moving to a fellowship at the ANU in 1997. In the mid-1980s, La Trobe had three Pacific historians and our courses attracted large student numbers. We interacted regularly with 15-20 colleagues in other disciplines in a thriving Research Centre for Southwest Pacific Studies, which provided a focus for Pacific studies across Melbourne's tertiary institutions. Ten years later, the Dawkins legacy had forced arts faculties to shrink and discipline-based departments to amalgamate. Pacific history all but disappeared from La Trobe for more than a decade and was in general decline as a teaching subject in Australia, maintained only by the efforts of a few dedicated individuals at the University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology, Newcastle University, Melbourne University, and latterly Deakin. Other so-called 'peripheral' histories (that is, non-Western, including Asian) were also seriously threatened. At the ANU, Pacific history was not taught to undergraduates for a decade from the mid-1990s. In the Institute of Advanced Studies, Pacific history and Pacific studies were partnered organizationally with Asian history and Asian studies and in 1994 the Research School was renamed Pacific and Asian Studies.

Until the late 20th century, most academic Pacific histories, particularly those emanating from the ANU, were bounded within a particular archipelago or even a single island, or they considered the trans-archipelagic activities of a category of European. Archaeologists and linguists also tended to be geographically circumscribed, notwithstanding their temporal depth, while ethnographers usually focussed more or less microscopically and ahistorically on a single community or even a village. General histories of 'the Pacific' normally hinged on categories of European endeavour – explorers, traders, missionaries, settlers, colonisers and so forth. Spate's 'Oceanic' geographical history is an imperious but consciously Eurocentric exception. Beyond Oceania, most global histories universalised a Euro-American world view that demeaned non-Europeans generally and elided Pacific Islanders as irrelevant.

PRESENTS

In the mid-2010s, in the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific (CAP) and its School of Culture, History and Language (CHL), Pacific studies are much outnumbered by Asian, as signalled in the inversion of the earlier nomenclature 'Pacific and Asian' into 'Asia and the Pacific'. Befitting their

sensitivity to precedent and the past, the historians opted to ignore the weight of numbers and retain the name ‘Department of Pacific and Asian History’ (PAH). Nonetheless, Pacific researchers at the ANU have done spectacularly well, notably in CHL, where 3 of 4 Australian Research Council (ARC) Laureate Fellows work on Oceania, plus another in the College of Arts and Social Sciences. Whether that Oceanic momentum can be sustained in the long term is perhaps uncertain.

Historically and still, a key difference between Asian studies and Pacific studies at the ANU has been the relative status of language studies. Whereas Asian studies has properly demanded expertise in an Asian language, the sheer volume of indigenous Papuan and Austronesian languages renders that goal problematic for Pacific historians, who usually make do with lingua franca – mainly the Melanesian Pidgins, English and French. For example, I did my first fieldwork in New Caledonia across four language zones with French as the lingua franca, absorbing only a useful smattering of Indigenous vocabulary. Learning Bislama in Vanuatu later provided some sensitivity to Austronesian grammar and syntax. My more recent research on encounters in Oceania over five centuries requires expertise in nine European languages, met through close teamwork with linguistically qualified colleagues and students.

With the recent abolition at the ANU of the institutional divide between teaching faculties and research schools, undergraduate teaching on the Pacific has revived, though enrolments generally remain low. Pacific history often has to be taught in tandem with Australian to attract sufficient numbers to mount a course. In this country, a relative dearth of honours graduates who have experienced Pacific history necessarily affects postgraduate recruiting. PhD students in Pacific history are less likely these days to have followed the standard honours/MA trajectory unless trained outside Australia, particularly in Pacific Islands institutions or in New Zealand, where Pacific history is taught at several universities. Pacific studies courses – particularly focussed on Polynesia and Polynesian diasporas – more than hold their ground in New Zealand where, however, Islands students are said to care more about questions of present identity and genealogy than about history as they understand or are presented with the discipline.

This suggests that if academic historians are to retain or regain relevance, they need to rethink their strategies to embrace the essential historicity of such concerns alongside more familiar ones. Indeed, thinkers of Pacific histories in the wider, existential sense are directing informed vernacular attention to Indigenous time, breaking out of a profoundly Eurocentric discipline and rooting pasts and presents in local places, cosmologies, genealogies, trajectories and practices.

Even within the conventional academy, the narrow chronologic that largely confined Pacific history to studies of colonialism or decolonisation has been stretched in both directions, as the high colonial era recedes and is itself rehistoricised in deeper temporal and more balanced ethnic and national perspectives. So too, deep Indigenous, archaeological, linguistic, biological and ecological times are increasingly taken seriously by professional Pacific historians.

Unlike in Australia, Pacific history courses are apparently expanding in the United States, where the focus is largely on the North Pacific and the so-called rim. That shifting centre of gravity is evident in recent books by Matt Matsuda and David Igler and in the Palgrave volume *Pacific Histories: ocean, land, people*, edited by David Armitage and Alison Bashford with a particular eye to a US student market and roadtested in Armitage's Harvard course.² Only half of the 16 contributors to *Pacific Histories* are antipodean, only one of whom is of Islander descent, while three are now at Cambridge or Oxford. Only one, myself, was based at the ANU at time of writing, though another trained there and a third recently moved to the ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences as an ARC Future Fellow. The editors' explicit concern is the relationships between Pacific and world histories. However, this theme is unevenly addressed by the contributors, whose practical challenge was to correlate diverse local and regional perspectives from a range of very different chronologies, vantage points and scales – ocean, islands and continental littorals.

Something like that – managing imbricated local, national, regional, oceanic or transnational orientations in the light of varied geographical scope and temporal span – constitutes the main task for Pacific history and Pacific studies at the ANU, in unequal partnership with what can feel like an Asian juggernaut. Yet in practice, there is no holistic 'Asia' any more than a single integrated 'Pacific'. Within CHL, and even in PAH, area studies or groups tend to cluster in separate silos, students rarely attend seminars outside their areas, and the undoubted potential for mutual enrichment is too little realised. The Pacific historians have raised their horizons to embrace a wider 'Oceania' that includes Australia, Island Southeast Asia and Taiwan. This extended sense acknowledges ancient, far-flung, often enduring affinities of origin, language, customs, religion and material culture, as well as human trajectories over 40-60 millennia until the freezing of colonial borders and the severing of Asia from Oceania in the late 19th century. It also problematises the hyperrealism of the modern states that inherited those colonial borders and challenges the

² Matt Matsuda, *Pacific Worlds: a history of seas, peoples, and cultures* (Cambridge, 2012); David Igler, *The Great Ocean: Pacific worlds from Captain Cook to the Gold Rush* (New York, 2013); David Armitage and Alison Bashford (ed.), *Pacific Histories: ocean, land, people* (Basingstoke, 2014).

conventional quarantining of Asian, Australian and Pacific studies. The widening spatial, temporal, material and conceptual visions of Pacific historians are epitomised in the *Journal of Pacific History* of which I am at present co-editor. Alongside papers on familiar Pacific Islands topics, recent or forthcoming issues include articles on Chinese perceptions of the Pacific, *hula*, Great Barrier Reef tourism, climate change, surfboards, Lapita, Timor, peninsular Malaya, white Australia, the far north Pacific, Chinese in the Pacific, and the history of leprosy.

POSSIBILITIES

I conclude with a few reflections on prospects and possibilities for Pacific history and Pacific studies. First, I stress that the Pacific, unlike the Indian Ocean or the Atlantic, is an *island* sea. That geographical reality has driven human settlement and diasporas over millennia, through eras of slowly accelerating outside contacts and colonialism into the mostly postcolonial present. The resultant key themes of movement, exchange and creative appropriation will continue to be central in Pacific historiographies, as they were in even its most Eurocentric phases.

Second, from the outset, members and ex-members of RSPacS were heavily involved in advising decolonising and newly-independent states on constitutional, economic, land reform and other matters. Practical involvement in advice, development and policy issues has been a recurrent theme throughout the history of the Research School/College. These days, the political demand for applied research is deafening and its economic necessity non-negotiable. In recent years, such functions have been largely devolved to specialist units in CAP, such as the Crawford School of Public Policy, Regulatory Institutions Network, and the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program. However, numerous discipline- and area-based individuals continue to make practical contributions in their zones of expertise. In these contexts, it is crucial that the disciplines retain their relevance and integrity in both teaching and research. This is a particular challenge for history as its practitioners leach into area and thematic studies. Moreover, development and policy studies are often historically vacuous.

Third, recent approaches in Oceanic history address world, regional, national and local pasts in highly creative ways, usually by interspersing general perspectives with examples or vignettes of local praxis that can complicate the global, problematize the regional and dereify the nation state. Contesting widespread assumptions that 'the local' is necessarily subsumed and dominated by wider formations, such strategies show how 'the global', 'the transnational', or 'the national' are always enacted locally and are variously inflected by that local grounding and its pasts. While

raising horizons and expanding temporalities, Pacific historians must remain embedded in the local and in the particularities of human encounters and experience in space and over time.³ They should also extend the now normal rejection of colonial victimology into the present and the future by listening hard to Islanders' growing insistence on their resilience and resourcefulness in facing challenges of globalisation, marginalisation, gender imbalance, ongoing exploitation and climate change – voices that are often not heard by global agencies, NGOs, and development or policy advisers.

I conclude by suggesting several strategies to further the ongoing vitality and renewal of history as a discipline. That we continue to exploit every opportunity offered by digital technology to broaden creative engagement with historical materials – archived, published, and especially visual – and to enhance their availability to local or Indigenous people. That we be open to forging active partnerships with artists and performers, mutually enriching different visions and ways of representing pasts. That we cross-fertilise with area and thematic studies, especially gender, cultural, colonial, postcolonial, policy and development studies. That we pursue creative interdisciplinarity by eclectic but selective appropriation of relevant information and exciting perspectives or methods in a dizzying array of other fields – from long-term partners in geology, archaeology, linguistics, anthropology, geography, demography, and politics; but also from newer ones such as ecology, genetics, epidemiology, and architecture.

³ I adopted this strategy in a recent monograph, *Science, Voyages, and Encounters in Oceania 1511-1850* (Basingstoke, 2014).