Mapping the Pacific

Around the globe, imperial mapping systems have been challenged and redrawn; but the colonial division of the Pacific region into the distinct geographies of Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia has survived.

Carolyn O'Dwyer, Charles Sturt University

Abstract

This paper considers the history of the arbitrary colonial division of the Pacific region into the areas of Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia. While the terms have acquired significance attached to cultural and national identities, political agendas, and regional relationships, it is nevertheless important to understand their genealogy and the racist and imperialist understandings that are encoded within them. Reading maps as historical artifacts rather than as things that are fixed and immutable, introduces an awareness of the arbitrary nature of geographic divisions and opens discussion about the types of imperatives which drive territorial naming and claiming. With regard to the Pacific region they help students to understand some of the reasons why cultural and ethnic difference exists within national boundaries and why similarities might exist beyond this.

Mapping the Pacific

Oceania is not really a continent, but it can be seen as a geographic division of the world that includes Australia, New Zealand and some groups of islands scattered in the Pacific Ocean. The main groups are Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia.

http://www.geographicguide.com/oceania.htm

The first recorded European sighting of the Pacific Ocean was documented in 1513. A contemporary chronicler relates how the Spanish explorer, Vasco Nunez de Balboa, crossed the Isthmus of Panama from the Caribbean and 'having gone ahead of his company, climbed a hill with a bare summit and from the top of that hill saw the South Sea.'[1] According to this account, Balboa's immediate response was to fall to his knees and praise God; giving thanks for a discovery that might lead to the fulfillment of longstanding geographic aspirations. The mythic geography of the South Sea, a possible route to the fabled but yet unseen Southern continent, had tempted European explorers since well before the publication of *Mandeville's Travels* (1357). Neil Rennie has demonstrated that the ideas which became attached to the region called the South Sea were in cultural circulation in Europe long before European voyagers

OPPOSITE: *Resolution and Adventure with fishing craft in Matavai Bay*, painted by William Hodges in 1776. Shows the two ships of Commander James Cook's second voyage of exploration in the Pacific at anchor in Tahiti.

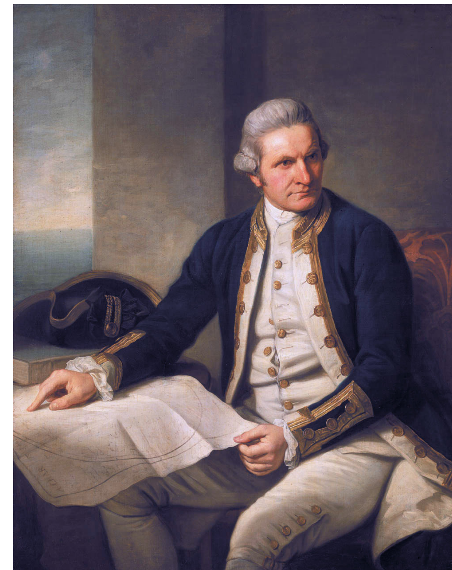
RIGHT, TOP: *Portrait of James Cook*, painted by Nathaniel Dance-Holland c. 1775.

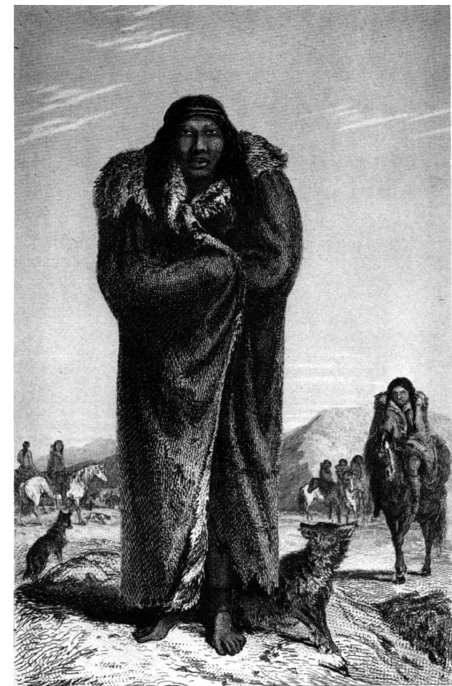
RIGHT, BOTTOM: The 'giant' people of Patagonia, 1839.

entered the area and returned home with their various reports. Among the sources he identifies are the works of Hesiod (an approximate contemporary of Homer), as well as the promise of the earthly paradise described in the Old Testament and the classicist conceptions of the Elysian Fields or the Isles of the Blest.[2] The terrestrial paradise was often known as St. Brendan's Isle (a record of St. Brendan having landed there dated from about the mid-sixth century), and this name was often confused with or substituted for that of the Blessed Isles.[3] This space, always retreating westward from advancing geographical knowledge, was charted on the Hereford *Mappa Mundi* (c. 1300), and appeared on maps as late as 1755.[4]

Such suppositions were eventually rendered largely redundant by the more detailed cartographic knowledges gained in the course of the exploratory voyages of the eighteenth century. For instance, the longstanding theory which had purported the existence of a continental landmass in the South to equal that in the North was dispelled in the course of Captain Cook's second voyage, and at this time Cook himself wrote that he thought that his ship had travelled 'as far as it is possible for man to go.'[5] The navigational achievement which established the Antarctic Circle as the southern boundary of the South Sea also placed finite limits upon the westward retreat of the Isles of the Blest. Nevertheless, the resilient dream of a terrestrial (island) paradise gave lustre and resonance to the expectations attached to the early period of Pacific exploration and conditioned the perceptions of later travellers. The newly authenticated sciences of ethnology, botany and geography had to contend with an existing cultural archive of imaginary accounts. Cultural beliefs stemming from suppositional travel narratives had direct and indirect influence upon factual accounts of Pacific exploration. They also mediated the ways that these were received in the metropolis and entered the knowledge framework which structured the formation of official histories, the imposition of imperial boundaries and the dictates of colonial policy.

The reputed gigantic stature of the first people of Patagonia offers an example of this influence. Following Balboa's record of his successful voyage, in 1521 Ferdinand Magellan sailed across the South Sea from east to west after charting a dangerous way through the straits which would later bear his name. The accounts of this voyage describe a turbulent thirty-seven day entry through the passage which was 'guarded by fearsome giants (of Patagonia) on one side and with flaming mountains (Tierra del Fuego) on the other.'[6] Of the original fleet of five vessels, two survived the hazards of this passage, finally making their way into an expanse of calmer water which Magellan named the Pacific in response to its comparative calm. Four months of continuous sailing across its vast expanse was enlivened only by the sighting of two small and uninhabited islands. The few embattled





1 Glyndwr Williams, *The Great South Sea: English Voyages and Encounters 1570–1750*, (Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 1.
2 Neil Rennie, *Far-Fetched Facts: The Literature of Travel and the South Seas*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 5. Rennie further points out that Ovid also wrote of the 'Golden Age', emphasising its cultural differences by cataloguing the absent features of civilisation: 'no wars, no agriculture, no private ownership of land, no knowledge of iron or gold.'
3 David Fausett, *Writing the New World: Imaginary Voyages and Utopias of the Great Southern Land*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 36–37.
4 Rennie, 11–12.
5 J. C. Beaglehole (ed), *The Journals of Captain James Cook*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), vol. 11, part 11, 322.
6 In the account which was brought back by the survivors of Magellan's expedition, these giants had been 'calling loudly for Setebos', (Caliban's 'Dams God' in *The Tempest*). Rennie, 38.
7 H. Wallis, 'The Patagonian Giants', in R. E. Gallagher (ed.), *Byron's Journal of his Circumnavigation*, (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society Press, 1964), 185–199.

ABOVE LEFT: Vice-Admiral John Byron, painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1759.

ABOVE CENTRE: Louis de Bougainville, painted by Jean-Pierre Franque.

ABOVE RIGHT: Charles de Brosses, painted by Charles-Nicolas Cochin.

survivors who eventually made their way back to Spain (Magellan was killed in the Philippines) returned to communicate their impressions of overwhelming oceanic emptiness. Somewhat daunted by these reports, it was not until 1668 that Spain established the first successful European colony in the Pacific. A small military contingent and a group of Catholic missionaries landed upon Guam, rendering it a viable port of call for Spanish vessels en-route between the Philippines and the New World. In 1765, Captain John Byron became the first British explorer in more than twenty years to sail across the Pacific. Byron corroborated earlier reports of the giants, describing a 'Patagonian chief of gigantic stature ... [who] ... seemed to realise the tales of monsters in a human shape.'[7] Even before Byron, in 1704, Captains Harrington and Carmen had returned to Europe from a voyage to the South Sea with tales of the giants. Accompanying the first voyage of Captain James Cook (1768–1771), Joseph Banks sought to dispel these misconceptions about the height of the Patagonians, recording in his journal that the height of the men varied only from 'five feet eight inches to five feet ten inches.'[8] Notwithstanding, Banks' professional integrity and careful documentation, the introduction to Hawkesworth's Voyages (1773) gave further credence to the existence of Patagonian giants. Furthermore, Bernard Smith has pointed out that popular collections of voyages and travels continued to include illustrations of giants as late as 1788.[9] Plainly, despite their recognised scientific and cartographic importance, the widely circulated accounts of the Pacific region which were published after the Cook and the Bougainville voyages were not unproblematically accepted as truth.[10]

Some of the earliest accounts of European contact with Pacific islands and peoples – at least initially – endorsed ideas of a terrestrial paradise, reporting the existence of a people whose appearance tallied closely with that of Hesiod's 'golden race of mortal men.'[11] Making landfall on Tahiti in April 1768, Louis de Bougainville wrote that one would think oneself 'in the Elysian fields', and later that he thought he was 'transported into the garden of Eden.'[12] His delight in the place did not interfere with his maintenance of shipboard order and commitment to European systems of ownership. A record from the ship's logbook states that the crew was ordered to shoot at thieves – as a result, four Tahitians died in trading disputes over the course of the nine day visit.[13] A year after Bougainville's stay, Cook, in the course of his first Pacific voyage, dropped anchor at Tahiti. Although not usually given to superlatives, in this first visit Cook wrote of the Tahitians that 'benevolent nature hath not only supplied them with necessarys [sic] but with abundance of superfluities.'[14] Despite this, by the time of his second visit, in the course of his third voyage Cook expressed discomfort with the pattern of romantic and classical allusion which attached to Tahiti and acknowledged his own unwillingness to partake of it. In the days after leaving Tahiti he wrote:

> *So much or rather too much, has been published of Otaheite and the neighboring [sic] islands that there is little room for new remarks. I have however been able to collect some that will tend to clear up former misstakes [sic] as well as give a little information. But I shall not now give them a place in this journal but take leave of the islands after giving an account of the Astronomical and Nautical observations made during our stay at them.*[15]

Cook's severe leave taking, and overt critique of the 'too much' information circulating around Otaheite, marks the degree to which he perceived this excess as compromising the enlightenment project of science and empirical truth.

The ordering project of science furthered by Cook and others was the beginning of the dynamic process

8 Bernard, Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific* (2nd ed.), (Melbourne, Oxford, Auckland, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 34–38.
9 Smith, 34–38.
10 A number of different accounts were published in a short space of time and were circulating simultaneously. Bougainville's *Voyage Around the World* was translated by J. R. Forster (the same who had accompanied the first Cook voyage) and appeared in its English version in 1772. The two volumes of Cook's *A Voyage Toward the South Pole and Round the World*, were published in London in 1777. Lieutenant King (who had accompanied the third Cook voyage) published the journals of that voyage with Cook's name preceding his own in three volumes as *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean* (London, 1784). Hawkesworth's *An Account of the Voyages Undertaken by the Order of His Present Majesty for Making Discoveries in the South Hemisphere*, was published also in London, in three volumes in 1773.
11 Rennie, 16.
12 Smith, 42.

‘It is useful to realise that although Magellan had bestowed the name “Pacific” upon the ocean he discovered at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the term did not enter common usage for the better part of three centuries.’

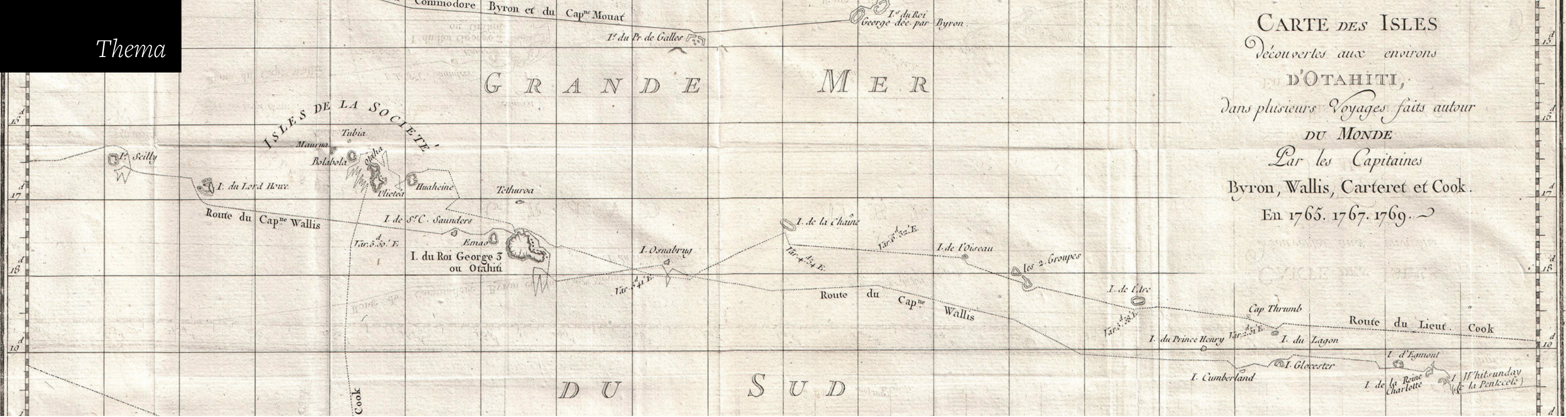
which transformed the mysteriously exotic South Sea into the empirically known and charted Pacific Ocean. Nevertheless, the new systems of naming were still inflected by those earlier understandings. It is useful to realise that although Magellan had bestowed the name ‘Pacific’ upon the ocean he discovered at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the term did not enter common usage for the better part of three centuries. The term ‘South Pacific’ in its current geographical sense was not generally used until relatively late in the chronology of European/Pacific encounters. Until the end of the eighteenth century, Europeans were as likely to refer to the region as the ‘South Sea’, a possible route to the fabled but so far undiscovered Southern continent. Oskar Spate has demonstrated that this usage was the norm, ‘not only in common speech (especially that of seamen) but very generally on maps and in academic discourse.’[16] In an overall survey of the names used upon the maps with which Europeans charted the region, Spate shows that until 1700 the use of the term ‘South Sea’ predominated over the use of ‘Pacific’ by a ratio of almost 2:1 (67:36) while after 1751 this ratio reversed (24:59). In literary sources, a similar trend can be noted, although interestingly, the shift occurs later. Up until the end of the eighteenth century the ‘South Sea was more the norm, not only in voyagers’ accounts but also in the writings of scholars and commentators.[17] By the 1830s the position is reversed. Further complicating these usages, Robert Kiste distinguishes between the usage of the terms ‘South Sea’ and the ‘South Seas’, pointing out that the former was usual until at least the beginning of the eighteenth century and observing that the latter term, ‘with all its romantic connotations would come later’.[18] In his study of early English voyages into the region, covering the period from 1570 until 1750, Glyndwr Williams adheres to this differentiation, referring to the ‘South Sea’ only in the singular case.[19]

Similarly, Rod Edmond observes that until the end of the eighteenth century the ‘South Sea’ was a more common mode of reference, but that by the middle of the nineteenth century this term had been largely supplanted by the Pacific or South Pacific, ‘except when used adjectivally for romantic or picturesque purposes.’[20]

The shift in naming that coincided (not coincidentally) with a growth in scientific and geographic knowledge was paralleled by island encounters that did not adhere to European romantic fantasy. In the course of Cook’s second voyage into the region (1772–1775), extensive contact took place with the people of the western Pacific. J. R. Forster, a scholar and naturalist who accompanied Cook on this voyage wrote of two distinct races of people differentiated by skin colour.[21] Nicholas Thomas has argued that this early contact and these observations were directly related to the initiation of a regional system of ethnographic hierarchisation. Thomas has argued that the systems of evolutionary racial ranking which privileged the Polynesian over the Melanesian may be traced back to the accounts of this voyage.[22] Cook made value judgments about different island groups and posited racial categorisations between them. In doing

RIGHT: People of Otaheite (Tahiti) in traditional dress, by Sydney Parkinson, c. 1769.

13 Bill, Pearson, *Rifled Sanctuaries: Some Views of the Pacific Islands in Western Literature to 1900* (The Macmillan Brown Lectures, 1982), (Auckland and Oxford: Auckland University Press and Oxford University Press, 1983), 14–15.
14 Beaglehole, *The Journals of Captain James Cook*, Vol. 1, 121.
15 Beaglehole, *The Journals of Captain James Cook*, Vol. 3, 1253.
16 O. H. K. Spate, ‘“South Sea” to “Pacific Ocean”’. *Journal of Pacific History*, XII, 1977, 206.
17 Spate, 208–210.
18 Robert Kiste, ‘Pre-Colonial Times’, in Howe, Kiste and Lal (eds), *Tides of History: The Pacific Islands in the Twentieth Century*, (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 3.
19 Williams, *The Great South Sea*.
20 Rod Edmond, *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 16.
21 N. Thomas, H. Guest, and M. Dettelbach (eds), *Observations Made During a Voyage Around the World*, (Honolulu, 1996).
22 Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism’s Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press 1994), 98–103.



so it appears that he was influenced by the darker skins of the peoples of both the south and western Pacific islands and by the fact that he and his men found them – with particular reference to the women of the region – to be physically unattractive in comparison to those of the east (notably the women upon the island groups of Tahiti and Hawaii).[23] However, although Cook's interest in scientific categorisation impacted upon the eventual geographic division of the Pacific region, the racial ordering noted by Thomas had earlier antecedents. In a two volume treatise published in 1756 – *Histoire des Navigations aux Terre Australes* – Charles de Brosses compiled accounts from two centuries worth of European voyages to the Pacific. His work argued that there were two distinct races inhabiting the different island groups. He also introduced the term 'Polynesia'. De Brosses proposed a tripartite division of the then largely unknown region along the following lines:

> *... One in the Indian Ocean to the south of Asia that I shall call for that reason 'Australasia'. Another that I will name 'Magellanic' after the man who discovered it ... I shall include in the third everything contained in the vast Pacific Ocean and I shall give this part the name Polynesia because of the many islands it encompasses.*[24]

Although the other terms he proposed have faded into obscurity, it was initially through de Brosses' comprehensive cataloguing of early European accounts of the Pacific that the term 'Polynesia' became embedded within evolutionary patterns of racialised ranking.

In a paper published in 1834, Dumont d'Urville proposed that all of Oceania be divided into four regions: 'Malaysia, Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia.'[25] He further proposed that two distinct races be identified in the region on the basis of skin colour, texture of hair, build and physical proportions. While the inclusion of Malaysia here may seem odd, Serge Tcherkezoff has observed that early mappings of the Pacific region often included parts of Southeast Asia.[26] Setting aside Malaysia in this grouping, the names immediately attest to the ways that Europeans were basing their imposed mappings on racial hierarchy as well as spatial logic. Taken from the Greek (Poly = many, nesia = islands) the bounds of Polynesia encompassed the largest proportion of the Pacific ocean area – a triangle stretching from Hawaii in the north to New Zealand in the southwest and Easter Island in the east. Micronesia (tiny islands), named because more than two thousand of its mapped islands are coral atolls, was mapped to the west of this area and included the Caroline Islands, the Marshall Islands, the Marianas and Kiribati. Melanesia (black islands), named for the comparatively (in relation to Polynesia) darker skin of its indigenous peoples, encircled an area west of Polynesia and south of Micronesia, including Fiji and New Caledonia in its lower loop and New Guinea at its upper easterly margins. Robert Kiste has pointed out that the dual system of classification generated ongoing ambiguity. One of many examples here is the case of Fiji, which is usually claimed to be Melanesian on racial grounds but has distinct cultural links to Polynesia.[27]

In the context of these racist and colonial mappings it is apposite to query our continued use of the terms and the meanings attached to these geographical divisions in the twenty-first century. Epeli Hau'ofa, while critical of the colonial provenance and racist suppositions of the terms Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia, has insisted on their continued relevance, noting their strategic place in contestatory post-colonial politics and claiming that his own usage is dictated by the fact that they are 'already part of the cultural consciousness of the peoples of Oceania.'[28] Robert Kiste similarly remarks that in the postwar period:

> *Pacific islanders have taken ideas that were once the purview of anthropologists*

ABOVE: A map showing the explorations of Captain Cook, Captain Byron, Captain Wallis and Captain Carteret in the vicinity of Tahiti and the Society Islands from 1765 to 1769.

23 Smith, 53–108.
24 Charles de Brosses, Histoire des navigations aux Terres Australes, 1756. Cited in Tcherkézoff, Serge. 'A Long and Unfortunate Voyage towards the "Invention" of the Melanesia/Polynesia Distinction 1595–1832.' *The Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 179.
25 Tcherkézoff, 178.
26 Tcherkézoff, 176.
27 Kiste, 'Pre-Colonial Times.' 6.
28 Epeli Hau`ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands', in Wilson and Dirlik (eds), *Asia Pacific as Space of Cultural Production*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 93.

> *and given them meanings of their own. The distinctions between Polynesians, Micronesians and Melanesians now have significance with regard to cultural and national identities, political agendas and regional affairs. They are no longer categories of use only to outsiders.*[29]

The indigenous re-appropriation of the geo-colonial triad of Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia may also be seen in relation to the way the term 'South Pacific', despite its resilient colonialist baggage, has come, since 1945, to stand for an interactive community of island states and their historical and contemporary relations with each other. In the aftermath of World War II, the idea of the South Pacific has been exercised in ways which assert the links between First Nations and indigenous groups of the area, as well as their relations with the wealthier and more populous Southern Pacific nations of Australia and New Zealand. The development of such local and regional associations in the South Pacific makes it possible for island nations to pool resources for economic and cultural gain. More significantly, such ties enable a more effective political resistance to the neo-imperial policies of those larger nations and to those powerful transnational bodies with particular regional interests. Such regional organisations such as the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone and the South Pacific Forum offer a case in point. The language of colonial history has been re-appropriated into the idiom of indigenous re-negotiation and resistance.

Despite their recuperative reclamation by local collectives, Hau'ofa prefers to avoid using the terms 'South Pacific' and 'Pacific Islands' in favour of the more inclusive 'Oceania':

> *There is a gulf of difference between viewing the Pacific as 'islands in a far sea' and as 'a sea of islands'. The first emphasises dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centres of power. When you focus this way you stress the smallness and remoteness of the islands. The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships ... it was continental men, Europeans and Americans who drew imaginary lines across the sea, making the colonial boundaries that for the first time, confined ocean peoples to tiny spaces.* [30]

For Hau'ofa, the historical and contemporary structures of power embodied in these practises of naming makes the choice of terms not simply an exercise in semantics but a projection of political intention. The interactive social and economic networks of the peoples of pre-imperial Oceania were transformed by the nation-state confines mapped by cartographers and imposed by nineteenth-century colonial domination. Edmond takes issue with Hau'ofa's argument here and claims that a pedantic unpacking of terminology exposes the difficulty inherent in attempting to 'suddenly disengage from earlier classifications and mappings'.[31] He points out that 'Oceania' is also a colonial construct. While Edmond is correct to insist that a change of names does not necessarily herald a corresponding adjustment in the ways in which power is configured, Hau'ofa is entirely justified in arguing that the various names attached to the Pacific region are weighted with colonial history and encoded within a conceptual apparatus which has had debilitating effects upon local struggles towards autonomy and self determination. Considering ways in which the Pacific region was initially imagined, mapped and named by Europeans, does offer a valuable reminder of the longstanding conceptual links between the projects of colonial science and order, capitalist investment and the romantic imagination. They mark as well the perpetuation and re-formation of such power saturated links into a global era where the post-colonial independence of the Pacific Islands is, in many cases, nominal rather than actual. This is compromised by change in sea level, lack of natural resources and the need for economic aid.

Works Cited

Beaglehole, John Cawte (ed). *The Journals of Captain James Cook*. Vol. 11. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967.

Edmond, Rod. *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Fausett, David. *Writing the New World: Imaginary Voyages and Utopias of the Great Southern Land*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993.

29 Kiste, 6.
30 Hau`ofa, 91.
31 Edmond, 15.

Hau`ofa, Epeli. 'Our Sea of Islands.' Wilson and Dirlik (eds). *Asia Pacific as Space of Cultural Production*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995.

Kiste, Robert. 'Pre-Colonial Times.' Howe, Kiste and Lal (eds). *Tides of History: The Pacific Islands in the Twentieth Century.* St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1994.

Pearson, Bill. *Rifled Sanctuaries: Some Views of the Pacific Islands in Western Literature to 1900* (The Macmillan Brown Lectures, 1982). Auckland and Oxford: Auckland University Press and Oxford University Press, 1983.

Rennie, Neil. *Far-Fetched Facts: The Literature of Travel and the South Seas*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

Smith, Bernard. *European Vision and the South Pacific* (2nd ed). Melbourne, Oxford, Auckland, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Spate, O. H. K. 'South Sea' to 'Pacific Ocean'. *Journal of Pacific History*, XII, 1977.

Tcherkézoff, Serge. 'A Long and Unfortunate Voyage towards the "Invention" of the Melanesia/Polynesia Distinction 1595–1832.' *The Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 175–196.

Thomas, N., Guest, H. and Dettelbach, M. (eds). *Observations Made During a Voyage Around the World*. Honolulu, 1996.

Thomas, Nicholas. *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994.

Wallis, H. 'The Patagonian Giants.' In Gallagher, Robert E. (ed). *Byron's Journal of his Circumnavigation*. Cambridge: Hakluyt Society Press, 1964.

Williams, Glyndwr. *The Great South Sea: English Voyages and Encounters 1570–1750*. Newhaven and London: Yale Universtiy Press, 1997.

medieval ♦ education

Ancient & Medieval incursions

Victoria wide

Hands-on, participatory programs

Meaningful, ***memorable*** education.

[We] were amazed at how much breadth and depth of understanding had been achieved during one day.

Kim Widdrich, Lavalla Catholic College

If there was one incursion the kids really look forward to, this is it.

Michael McLean, Flinders Christian College

medieval.com.au

1800 002 575

Copyright of Agora is the property of Copyright Agency Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.