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On Using Pacific Shipping Records to Gain New insights into culture contact in Polynesia before 1840*

Pacific Island maritime history before 1840 is ripe for revolutionary new thinking. Shipping Arrivals and Departures lists (SADs) have been prepared for all the main Pacific Island ports, and lists of foreign visitors before 1840 at all the main island groups. New questions now can be asked that penetrate well beyond the metropolitan and colonial mindsets that have prevailed so far. In 1964, Dr John Cumpston had the foresight and the stamina to devise a now standard format for listing each and every shipping arrival and departure, vessel by vessel, visit by visit.[1] This has proved to be a considerable legacy, as his pioneer work has sparked off research by many others who want to get beyond weak generalisations to look at the Pacific's maritime past in real and quantitative terms.

Comparable SADs have followed not only for all the main eastern Australian ports up to 1840, but also for the Bay of Islands, Akaroa and Port Otago.[2] In 2000, the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau (PAMBU) at The Australian National University and the Hawaiian Historical Society published a comparable list for Honolulu.[3] The publication of a comparable list for Tahiti is forthcoming, while the Samoas, Tuvalu, Solomon Islands, Marquesas and Pitcairn have already been covered in different ways.[4]

Indeed the stage is set to look afresh at all Pacific Islands and their ports to draw out new substantial facts about their contact and early post-contact histories. These new lists allow the track of a ship, previously unknown, to be followed across the Pacific from island to island and to see each ship's trade, its impact on local health, and other consequences, in time and in space, in ways that were impossible before, because no comparable ethnographic and oral records have survived. Even though some of the lists read rather like a turgid telephone book, all names and no plot, a great deal of red-blooded life can be drawn from these listings.

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*An earlier version of this paper was read at Te Moana-Nui-a-Kiwa, the 17th biennial conference of the Pacific History Association at Otago University on 7 December 2006.

[1] J. Cumpston, *Shipping Arrivals and Departures, Sydney, 1788–1825* (Canberra 1964).

[2] Rhys Richards with Jocelyn Chisholm, *Bay of Islands Shipping Arrivals and Departures 1803 to 1840* (Wellington 1992); 'The SAD truth about Bay of Islands shipping 1803–1840', *The Great Circle*, 15:1 (Sydney 1993), 30–5; Ian N. Church, *Opening the Manifest on Otago's Infant Years: shipping arrivals and departures Otago Harbour and Coast 1770–1860*, Southern Heritage 150 Series (Dunedin 2001).

[3] Rhys Richards, *Honolulu, Centre of Trans-Pacific Trade: shipping arrivals and departures, 1820 to 1840* (Canberra and Honolulu) 2000.

[4] R. Richards and R. Langdon, *Tahiti and the Society Islands: shipping arrivals and departures 1767 to 1852* (Canberra forthcoming), based on 'Ships at the Society Islands 1800–1852', lists compiled in the 1980s by R. Langdon, Pacific Manuscripts Bureau, Canberra; Robert Langdon, *Where the Whalers Went: an index to the Pacific ports and islands visited by American whalers (and some other ships) in the 19th century* (Canberra 1984); Rhys Richards, 'Pacific whaling 1820–1840: port visits, shipping arrivals and departures, comparisons and sources', *The Great Circle*, 24:1 (2002), 25–40.

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TABLE 1. Pacific Islands foreign contacts up to 1821

	Ship visits	Population	Greatest impact index (×1,000)
Tahiti	119	50,000	2.38
New Zealand	255	110,000	2.31
Marquesas	75	90,000	0.83
Hawaiian Islands	136	225,000	0.60
Tonga	15	25,000	0.60
Fiji	46	200,000	0.23
Cook Islands	15	15,000 (group)	1.0
Samoa	5	50,000	0.1

Sources: For population, mainly K.R. Howe, *Where the Waves Fall* (Sydney 1984) 46; for ship visits, mainly J.O'C. Ross, 'Chronological list of all vessels that visited New Zealand before 1840', Wellington, Alexander Turnbull Library, mss. 1500; for Hawaii, B. Judd, *Voyages to Hawaii before 1860* (Honolulu 1974); for Tahiti, R. Richards and R. Langdon, *Tahiti and the Society Islands: shipping arrivals and departures 1767 to 1852* (Canberra forthcoming), based on 'Ships at the Society Islands 1800–1852', lists compiled in the 1980s by R. Langdon, Pacific Manuscripts Bureau, Canberra; for Marquesas, G. Dening, *Islands and Beaches* (Melbourne 1980); for Fiji, 'Western ships to Fiji 1789–1856', Mss. list held with the inventory to the Pacific collection of the Essex Peabody Museum, Salem MA (*c*.2000); for Cook Islands, H.E. Maude, *Of Islands and Men* (Oxford 1968); for Tonga, D. Spennemann, 'A list of ships visiting Tonga 1821–1849', ms. list held by its author; for Samoa, Rhys Richards, *Samoa's Forgotten Whaling Heritage: American whalers in Samoan waters 1824–1878* (Apia and Petone 1992); and others.

To demonstrate my point, I have made a table of ship visits, island group by island group, before 1821. Here the exact figures do not matter, but the overall trends do. I want to address which islands and which Islanders in Polynesia were, and were not, exposed to foreign influences by the end of 1820 (see Table 1). This involves making a 'foreign contacts index' (or is it a 'foreign pollution index'?) to share out the nominal foreign impact as if it were spread evenly within each population. Table 1, for example, shows that, up to 1821, the impact of foreign diseases, ideas and technologies was slight, but seems to have been twice as high for the average Maori and Tahitian as for the average Marquesan, nearly four times higher than for the average Hawaiian and Tongan, and ten times the impact on the average Fijian. Or should that be recast as an index of relative isolation, to show which Pacific peoples were least affected? It also shows a potential for anomalies in very small island groups. The foreign impact on the average Cook Islander by 1821, when the missionaries began to arrive there, was ten times that at the Samoan Islands which had a bigger population and had had few visits.

It would seem from this simple index that, by 1820, except in Tahiti and New Zealand, the main culture contact period had scarcely begun to impact much on most average Pacific Islanders, unless in Tahiti and New Zealand. But if the initial contacts prompted the greatest changes, here is a whole new sphere of study opened up for closer attention and deeper research through the better use of shipping statistics.

The shipping records ship by ship, island by island, have been reviewed so far in various ways for the Chatham Islands, southern New Zealand, the Bay of Islands, Samoa, Honolulu, Tikopia, the Austral Islands including Rapa, and in unpublished records for the Cook Islands and Easter Island. These lists and related sources can now be seen in the context of other foreign contacts across Polynesia. For example, during the survey of ship visits to the Cook Islands before 1850, I was asked to trace the spread of foreign food crops, especially a better strain of red kumara, from South America to Tahiti, and the Cook Islands, and, a decade later, to New Zealand.[5]

Another off-beat request was to trace any tidal waves at New Zealand. Yes, one was recorded by a Canadian whaleship that just escaped a sand burial at Waikawa in 1837.[6] The elucidation of specific events is one level on which the shipping lists can operate, but they can also be worked and reworked to give valuable insights and comparisons within and between localities in Polynesia. These studies of the shipping records have proved well worth the considerable effort, because they have prompted new perceptions and new perspectives. As examples that have such a broader scope, note the following three graphs that help to clarify the part that whaling played in the early Pacific.

Pacific Ports and Whaling: Comparisons and Conclusions

Throughout Polynesia, 1820 was a watershed year, after which the scale and pace of foreign contacts increased markedly. There had been very little whaling anywhere in Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia before 1820. However, after 1820 came the flood of whalers who left no islands anywhere unvisited and untouched. A lot is known about practically all the American whaleships, and the French, but less about the British.[7]

The scale and impact of whaling cannot be exaggerated, and can now be covered in fine detail. In 1839, the US whale-fleet included 650 American whale-ships with 16,000 men, most of them cruising in Pacific waters. Commodore Wilkes said at one point that the sails of these American whale-ships whitened the blue of the ocean.[8] But while certainly a colourful metaphor, that was no more accurate than several dozen other contemporary observations which also exaggerated the numerical size of the whale-fleets.

Similarly, several writers of South Seas romance seem to have vied among themselves over which Pacific whaling rendezvous most deserved the odious title of 'The Greatest Hell Hole of the Pacific'. Much of this later hype was based on early exaggerations by reputable, but uncritical, historians. Even New Zealand's pioneer whaling historian, Robert McNab, spoke of a 'great fleet filling every bay in the South Island with whaling vessels'.[9] Percy Smith wrote of an old settler recalling 60 whale-ships anchored at one time in the Bay of Islands, and Dakin wrote that 'of the 186 whale-ships visiting the Bay of Islands in 1836, no less than 98 were Americans'.[10] This scale can be shown now to be the stuff and nonsense of legend, not of fact. Something closer to half those figures would be more accurate.

The first conclusion, illustrated in Figure 1, is that whaling in the Pacific rose steadily from l820, until from 1837 to 1840 there were more than 300 port visits each year. The second conclusion, also drawn from Figure 1, is that neither Sydney nor Hobart shared in these big increases. Honolulu, Lahaina and the Bay of Islands were by far the most important ports frequented by whale-ships during this 20-year whaling bonanza.

The third conclusion, more evident in Figure 2, is that port visits by whale-ships were by and large characterised by their unpredictability, with big increases one year all too

[5] Rhys Richards, 'Shipping across the South Pacific 1772–1840, the potential for the spread of foreign food plants and visits to the Cook Islands before 1840', unpublished 2006.

[6] Rhys Richards, 'Canadian whaling in the Pacific Ocean 1834–1850', *Argonauta*, 20:3 (Canadian Nautical Research Society 2003), 20–34.

[7] C. Townsend, 'The distribution of certain whales as shown by log book records of American whaleships', *Zoologica* 19:1 (New York 1935), 1–50; Judith Navas Lund, *Whaling Masters and Whaling Voyages Sailing From American Ports: a compilation of sources* (New Bedford 2001); A.G.E. Jones, *Ships Employed in the South Seas Trade 1775–1861* (Canberra 1986); Rhys Richards, 'Captain Thomas Rossiter, pioneer of French whaling at Australia and New Zealand', *Antipodes*, Journal of French Studies, University of Otago, 1 (1995), 7–17.

[8] Charles Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Expedition*, vol. 5 (Philadelphia 1845), 484.

[9] R. McNab, *Murihiku and the Southern Islands* (Wellington 1909), 425.

[10] J. Elder, *Marsden's Lieutenants* (Dunedin 1932), 451; W. Dakin, *Whalemen Adventurers* (Sydney 1934), 106.

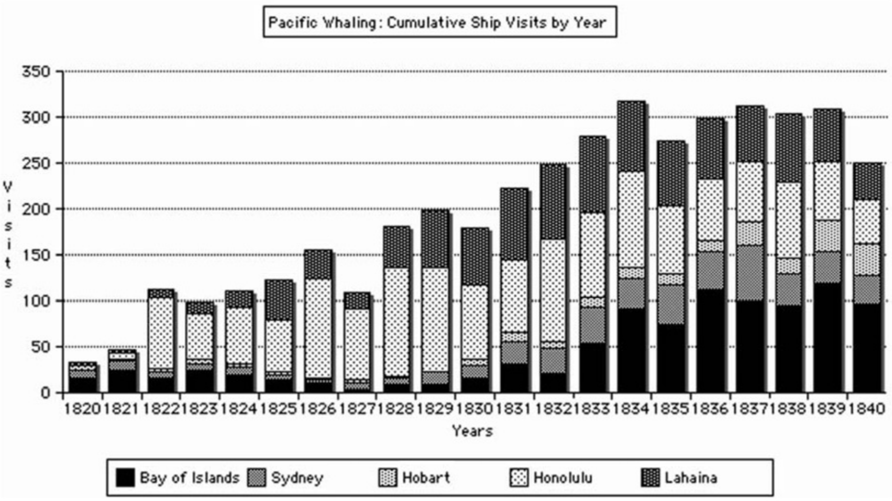

FIGURE 1: Pacific whaling: ship visits: cumulative port totals by year.

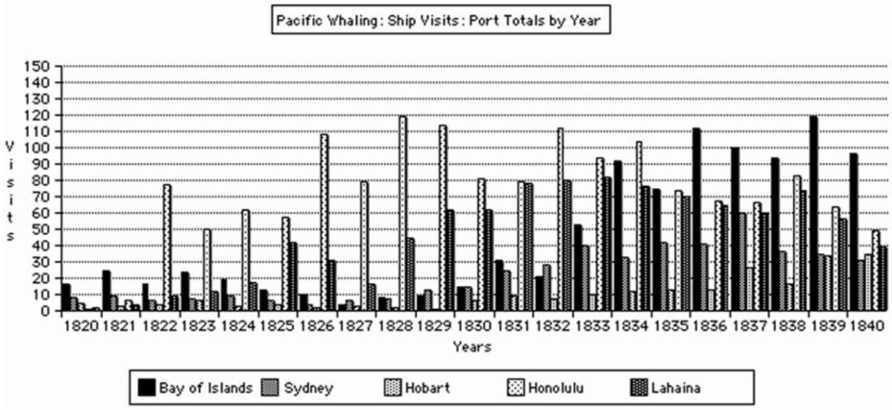

FIGURE 2: Pacific whaling: ship visits: port totals by year.

often followed by decreases. Such fluctuations must have had serious repercussions locally for shore-based entrepreneurs anticipating sustained growth. Servicing whale-ships was an erratic, unreliable enterprise, particularly where seasonal or perishable products like fruit and vegetables were concerned.

Figure 2 illustrates well that, despite the frequent references in contemporary literature to encountering in various ports 'one hundred sail or more', in reality during these two decades, this glib total was achieved only very rarely. The hundred was reached, during a whole year, at only two ports, namely Honolulu in 1826, 1828, 1829, 1832 and 1834 (that is, five times in 20 years) and only twice at the Bay of Islands, in l836 and l839. Even Lahaina never reached that figure during any year.

The overall predominance of Honolulu is very striking (see Figure 2). After 1824, Honolulu was always the most important port until 1835. Thereafter, it lost its numerical pre-eminence to the Bay of Islands for four years, 1836–39. This was while the Bay of Islands catered briefly for two different whale-fleets, those engaged in right whaling

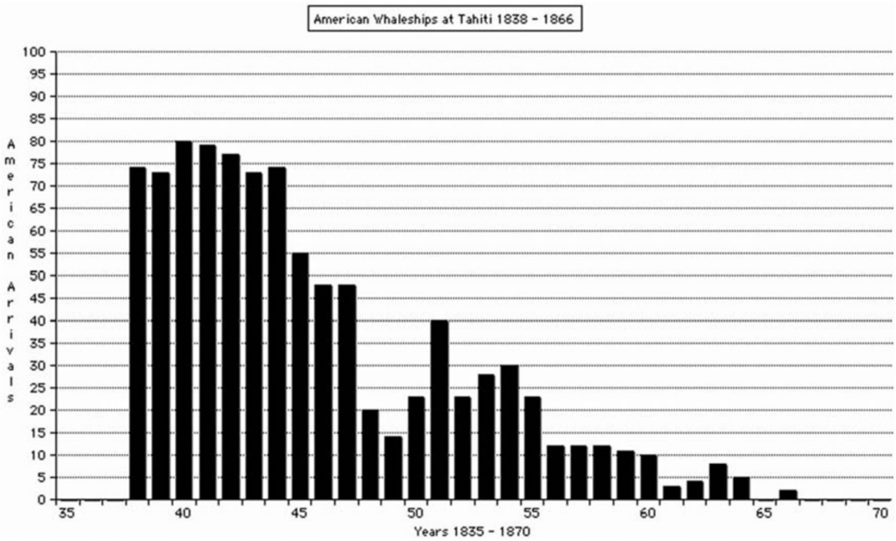

FIGURE 3: American whaleships at Tahiti 1833–1866. Source: US consul at Tahiti, Annual report to Washington for 1866.

inshore, as well as the more pelagic sperm whale-ships. The annual total there did not rise to over 50 until 1833, and averaged just 104 visits each year from l836 to l840. After that, the establishment of British rule, and port dues and taxes, brought the provisioning of visiting whale-ships abruptly to a mere trickle. The whalers, who were by then almost entirely Americans, simply shifted their trade elsewhere to less regulated minor ports and to Honolulu and Lahaina for their main items. Whale-ships were equipped to follow pelagic whales for several years with minimal supplies taken en route. Their basic needs were only for cleaner water, some firewood and potatoes, and these were usually obtained safely and inexpensively.

For Tahiti and the Society Islands, a few whale-ships had called before 1820, with the first American vessels, both still unnamed, arriving in 1818. The *Tuscan* and *Eliza Francis*, both of London, followed in September 1821. Whaling visits increased only slowly, averaging only six each year from 1821 to 1829, with as many British visits (29) as Americans (30). From 1830 to 1834, whaling visits still averaged only 14 each year. From 1835 onwards, however, Tahiti became a major whaling resort, hosting 365 visits between 1835 and 1840 inclusive, an average of 60 visits each year (see Figure 3).

For other island groups, similar figures can now be drawn from these detailed shipping lists. It is now clear that the number of ships in the South Pacific before 1820 has been underestimated, and the much greater volume of shipping after 1820 perhaps has been overestimated, particularly in the case of whale-ships. Pacific historians need to use these sources to re-evaluate the past.

New Perspectives

Let me share some other insights that have come to me through analysing shipping records and integrating those findings into wider contexts, historical and geographical, across the South Pacific. An examination of the scale of sealing around New Zealand included looking at the meticulous market records kept by the British, American and Dutch for the number of southern seal skins sold in London and Canton. These show that the number of skins actually sold there was much higher than previously estimated, greater indeed than the previously estimated stocks before human predation began. So the baseline for original stocks has had to be increased substantially, by 20%, particularly within the wider New Zealand waters. Expressed differently, that means that the remnant we have today is a much smaller proportion of the original stocks than estimated, and if the seals recover their former numbers, there will be many times more, perhaps 20 times more, seals in New Zealand waters than now.[11]

A similar look at the scale of whaling in New Zealand waters revealed that almost all the whaling was for sperm whales north of Auckland and around the Kermadec Islands. The only exception was the brief period of right whaling off the east coast of the South Island and in Cook Strait. By my estimates, the original global stocks of southern right whales probably numbered well under 100,000 throughout the southern oceans, yet the number killed in the wider New Zealand region alone from 1830 to 1850 was at least 18,000, or about 20% of the global total killed.[12]

Those are zoological examples which, through the shipping records, can now be covered with tangible figures, less uncertainty and better insights. The shipping records can be used in other ways too, as esoteric as tracing not only tidal waves and earthquakes, but even weather conditions in times long before meteorological records were kept.

Shipping records can provide a useful supplement to mission records for research on social histories, island by island. For example, in the case of Samoa, close attention to the chronology of ship visits revealed that, contrary to earlier impressions, especially in missionary literature, the decision to *lotu*, that is to adopt the new religion, had already been made by most Samoans before the first foreign missionary John Williams returned to Samoa with Islander missionaries in 1832. Samoa's two traditionally opposed chiefly families had already received The Word, the *lotu taiti* of the London Missionary Society (LMS) and the Wesleyan *lotu tonga*, from Tahiti and Tonga respectively, mainly from indigenous travellers and a few beachcombers. By 1832, Samoans were waiting the arrival of a facilitator who could act as their go-between to present their case for inclusion, and to facilitate the new God's acceptance of converts.[13] This situation had not been appreciated before, primarily because writers had focused on missionary records, without matching them with the shipping records.

A close study of the maritime history of the Austral Islands provides another example of the new perceptions that can emerge from closer attention to the shipping records. The island of Rurutu or 'Ohiteroa' was seen by Cook in 1769 but, despite some contact with the shore, no foreigners landed there until briefly in 1813. In 1820, a large canoe-load of Rurutuans drifted to Borabora and Raiatea. Four months later, a foreign ship repatriated that crew to Rurutu, where the travellers converted the island to the new foreign god and, in a stunning act of faith, the local chiefs dispatched several of their traditional but now rejected idols to the LMS missionaries at Raiatea. The first foreign missionaries did not visit Rurutu until the following year in 1822. By then, the population of Rurutu was already fast dying out from foreign diseases, especially influenza. These fatal diseases had been introduced by infected kinsmen who had returned home earlier, diseased after various contacts with germ-laden foreigners at other 'better known' islands. Evidently inter-island canoe voyagings were frequent enough to result in the death of dozens if not hundreds of people on Rurutu, including many who had never seen a foreigner, yet were already 'worshiping' the foreigner's God![14]

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[11] Rhys Richards, 'New market evidence on the depletion of southern fur seals 1788–1833', *New Zealand Journal of Zoology*, 30:3 (2002), 1–10.

[12] Rhys Richards, 'Southern right whales: re-assessment of whaling on the Kermadec grounds and of their former migration routes in New Zealand waters', *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, 32:3 (2000), 355–77.

[13] Rhys Richards, 'The decision to *lotu*: new perspectives from whaling sources on the sources and spread of Christianity in the Samoas', *Pacific Studies*, 17:1 (March 1994), 29–43; *Samoa's Forgotten Whaling Heritage: American whalers in Samoan waters 1824–1878* (Apia and Petone 1992).

Another cultural consideration concerns the importance and use of sperm-whale teeth and sperm whalebone among Pacific Islanders. What the whaling records show is that there were never very many sperm whales around Fiji, and only a few more around Tonga.[15] Originally such items, including the ceremonial *tabua* that are still a key item in Fijian culture, were valued for the rarity of their whalebone. Probably most came from Tonga, or perhaps there was inter-island trading much further afield. The local production and use of whalebone for decorations, breast shields and other items grew substantially after the first foreign visitors found that Fijians, and many other Polynesian and Melanesian Islanders around the Pacific, would readily exchange local foods and fruit for a whale-tooth.[16] From about 1810 onwards, the early sandalwood and bêche-de-mer traders flooded Fiji and Tonga with large sperm-whale teeth.

Put in context, this means that many, perhaps most, whale teeth introduced to Fiji and Polynesia were brought there by traders well before whaling expanded across the Pacific after 1820. Thereafter, there was no shortage of whale teeth. It has been suggested that the American folk art of scrimshaw, or etching sperm-whale teeth, though begun by 1805, did not proliferate until the Pacific Islanders' desire for sperm-whale teeth had been glutted first, by about 1820 or 1825.[17]

We need to recognise, though, that the new technologies, foreign influences and fatal diseases spread at very uneven rates. Some islands welcomed trade but would not tolerate foreign traders or whalers visiting or residing on shore. For example, the people on Easter Island, Rapanui, had many visits, but had not allowed any foreigners to live among them until the first priest arrived in 1864.[18] By then New Zealand had far more foreign *pakeha* residents than Maori, while Suva and Tahiti and Honolulu and Lahaina were all thriving centres of international trade. By 1864 too, on most of the bigger islands the indigenous people had had such a big influx of foreign genes that they had acquired some immunity to foreign diseases. Not so on Easter Island, where the Peruvian slavers in 1862 killed far more Rapanui by disease than by maltreatment. The Rapanui people paid a very high price for their social isolation.

The shipping records certainly have much to offer historians and anthropologists across the South Pacific. They highlight a paradox: for, while the shipping lists show that, apart from New Zealand and Tahiti, few ships were anywhere in the Pacific before 1820, yet other sources chronicle extensive changes locally across the region by 1830. Greater attention needs to be given to shipping records in order to resolve that apparent paradox. What does this mean, with few visits at most islands before 1820, but big changes by 1830? We need to re-think the early post-contact period afresh. Big changes could follow from few ships. That big changes followed from a few ship visits indicates that the main engines of change were not foreign, but were overwhelmingly local. Indeed, looking even closer, it can be seen that what matters is not the timing and length of each early visit, most of which were very short, or the volume of goods and ideas it deposited, but rather the spaces between visits. What matters is what the Islanders deliberated upon, and decided, and did between visits, and in preparation for the next visitors.

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[14] John Davies, *The History of the Tahitian Mission 1799–1830*, ed. C.W. Newbury (Cambridge 1961), 283; Rhys Richards, 'The earliest foreign visitors and their massive depopulation of Rapa-iti from 1824–1830', *Journal de la Société des Oceanistes*, 118:1 (2004), 3–10.

[15] C. Townsend, 'The Distribution of certain whales as shown by log book records of American whaleships', *Zoologica*, 19:1 (New York 1935), 1–50.

[16] F. Clunie, *Yalo I Viti/Shades of Fiji* (Suva 1986).

[17] S. Frank, 'The origins of engraved pictorial scrimshaw', *The Magazine Antiques: Folk Art*, 142:4 (October 1992), 514; Richards, 'The decision to *lotu*', 68.

[18] A. Altman, *Early Visitors to Easter Island 1864–1877* (Los Osos, CA 2004); R. Richards, *Easter Island 1793 to 1861: observations of early visitors before the slave raids* (Los Osos, CA 2008).

This is to say that what matters in Pacific history are the processes that followed locally soon after the Islanders on the reef had called out to their first alien visitors: 'We are humans. What are You?' The adjustments involved then included exactly the same changes we would have to make today if aliens invaded us from outer space. We can see now that in the Pacific there were few early visits, so the shocks and impacts of each visit may have been even greater than previously thought, but in a rather different way. In the culture contact period, what mattered most was the opening of local minds. Astonishment and fear was there, too, but more to the point, the foreigners prompted new intellectual ferment, new ideas, new objectives and new potentials.

All this is not to diminish the cataclysmic impact of the first few foreign visits that exposed Islanders to a different world. The immediate and continuing 'shocks' that hit island systems certainly sparked off massive social and political changes. But looking more widely at these shipping lists brings us to see the Islanders much more as participants driving the process from inside. Certainly Islanders were not just pawns in this massive invasion and time of massive social change. It was the Islanders themselves who led the changes, not the transient, erratic, foreign visitors.

The stage is now better set, with these SAD lists island by island, to move out beyond home-port studies and colonial mind-sets, to begin to apply the new perspectives available from the shipping arrivals on these lists. There is no excuse for being vague about the number of foreign visitors. There should be much less talk about them and their impact, and much more done to focus attention on the responses, island by island, village by village, highlighting the choices and decisions taken by local Islanders. Dare it be said that some Island leaders set their courses, set their fates, much better than others, and that not all the blame for failures goes to the foreigners and colonialists but some of it must go to the decisions taken by the local leaders themselves, whose decisions and actions set their own destinies and set their own futures?

If we can draw out of these tedious ship lists and their quantitative statistics something that opens our eyes to new perspectives and new ways of looking at the early post-contact period, these SADs have certainly been worth the considerable efforts made to compile them and make them readily available.

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