

Island Ministers. Indigenous Leadership in Nineteenth Century Pacific Islands Christianity, Raeburn Lange. Pandanus Books, ANU, Canberra, 2006. 250 x 176 mm, 440pp., maps, notes, bibl., index. ISBN 1 74076 176 6, pb. Rrp A\$34.95.

For all that modern scholars proclaim the virtue of ‘island-orientedness’ and putting Pacific Islanders at the centre of their works, *Island Ministers* is a rarity in modern historical scholarship in being true to this behest. Not that Raeburn Lange makes an ideological statement out of it; he simply does what he set out to do, to tell the story of the role that Pacific Islanders played in church leadership during the period when attention is mostly focused on expatriate (white European) missionaries. Lange’s Pacific is comprehensive, including Hawai‘i, New Zealand and New Guinea, which are so often hedged off from the Pacific in modern scholarship.

From the beginnings of Christian ministry in the Pacific, Pacific Islanders played a significant role in evangelisation, consolidation and perpetuation. Some of this was informal from the first proclamation of the ‘Good News’, but as soon as there were literate converts, missionaries encouraged and trained the most able and most devout among them to share and extend the work. The function of mission was to establish churches, and local



leadership was acknowledged everywhere, and particularly among the Protestant missions, as a prerequisite. (Catholics took a more long-term view.) Notwithstanding this general trajectory, there was considerable local variation in the timing and character of indigenisation, with debates about readiness, competence and character similar to those rehearsed in the age of decolonisation. Individual island circumstances also varied, and had contrasting effects on the process.

Lange very wisely chose to structure his book as a series of island studies. This is not merely a matter of convenience, but prevents the book from degenerating into an incoherent tissue of generalities each with so many exceptions as to become meaningless, as would very likely be the case if the book were thematically organised. Christianity developed not as a universal Pacific phenomenon, but as a series of 'national' undertakings. It also follows the logic of history. The process was also extended over a lengthy period: Christianity began in Tahiti in 1797, but in New Guinea not until the 1870s; Tonga had an autonomous church at the same time as New Guineans were first hearing the Gospel. Variations in culture and chronology defy common treatment. The island-group structure moreover allows the distinctive development of indigeneity to be placed in its proper mission context. For all that, generalisations are possible and necessary, and these are drawn together in an illuminating and thoughtful final chapter.

The eventual result was not just indigenous churches, but indigenous Christianity, a blend of exotic and traditional that was, Lange says, 'not an illegitimate syncretism . . . distorted and invalid in Christian terms . . . [but] a synthesis of two traditions successfully expressing much of the spirit of authentic ministry . . . in terms that are meaningful in Pacific culture' (324).

The study of Christianity should not be set aside as marginal to Pacific studies. As Lange points out, there are few places in the world where Christianity is so intimately integrated into private and public life as in the Pacific. Many modern national leaders have been church leaders (ordained or not), many members of new Pacific élites have come to those positions via church service, patronage or membership; and much education is still provided by churches. Historically, the churches were the principal vehicle of modernisation and did more than commerce to give Pacific Islanders access to a new material and intellectual as well as spiritual world. Lange's book gives a good sense of this place of the missions, and gives the book a potential importance for scholars interested in other aspects of Pacific societies than religion.

This exemplary work of scholarship has been exhaustively and meticulously researched. Notes and bibliography occupy one-third as



many pages as the text, a statistic that testifies to the exhaustiveness and thoroughness of the author's long labours. While historians have known of and awaited this book for many years, the achievement shows among other things that good scholarship is best not hurried. This book will tower as the standard reference for a very long time to come, not just because the scale would daunt most would-be competitors, but mainly because it bears the stamp of authority and deliberation. In every sense, it is monumental.

Ian Campbell
Division of History
University of the South Pacific
