

Book Reviews

Houses Far from Home: British colonial space in the New Hebrides. Margaret Critchlow Rodman. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001. xiv + 247 pp., photographs, bib. refs and index. ISBN 1-8248-2307-9 (cloth) 0-8248-2394-X (pbk).

An unusual and excellent work, *Houses Far from Home* tells the life histories of British-built buildings in the New Hebrides. Through these stories of houses, offices, space and memory it also sketches the lives and project, over one hundred years, of the colonial British in these western Pacific islands now named Vanuatu. It is based on visits to one hundred and seventeen sites on six islands (for which Rodman prepared listings for the Vanuatu Cultural and Historical Sites registry), on archival research, and on over 50 oral history interviews with occupants past and present. At one point Rodman describes the research as ‘salvage ethnography’ (p.8). Indeed, her work in interviewing ex-colonial officials (work spearheaded by her initial colleague in this research project, Will Stover, a British former colonial officer and scholar, who died in 1997) most valuably records both personal details and a wider ethos of a political era, a project and way of life that no longer exist. Nuanced in its description of the British colonial culture and its space, the book is never nostalgic; it is quietly very clear on the racism of colonial gaze, space and society, and the subtle as well as blatant means in which it was mapped.

The work reads well. It is very much a descriptive account, following the contours of information from its sources, with the result that levels of detail are uneven, but always intimate. Rodman begins personably with the story of the bamboo house on Ambae island that she and her family had built and lived in as anthropologists during research visits in 1978–79, 1982 and 1985.

The subsequent chapter on Port Vila discusses the spatial rivalry of English and French buildings and through this description raises Vanuatu’s unusual colonial history: its ‘condominium’ shared colonial administration by England and France from cooperation begun in 1887

to the formal launching of the Condominium in 1906 until independence in 1980. Spatially, this entailed by 1910 six official residences and joint administrative buildings for the Joint-courts and for the postal service—the two institutions that were run jointly. Over time it also entailed a series of pairs of British and French buildings for the many institutions that were run separately and in parallel (with obvious duplication and competition). While generally in competition and discord, the British and French space was together defined as official—separated from missionary space, with its church, medical and educational buildings, and from settler space; and these three together were above all separated as white space, different from Ni-Vanuatu space. Rodman tracks the contradictions of the condominium arrangement by documenting the financial and social issues that dogged these buildings and future buildings, contrasts and conflict between English and French systems, and the reluctance of the French and the British colonial offices to pay to maintain the grand structures that were built to inaugurate the experiment.

The third chapter, on the British residency, traces the house's fate, continuing competition with the French, and some key points in Vanuatu's history through its occupation by 12 resident commissioners. The fourth chapter discusses police housing, prisons, prisoners and prison labour on the island and shows that the British depended on prisoners' labour, especially for garden and sanitation work, to maintain orderly British spaces. Rodman's British informants insisted on the docility of the prisoners, the ability of the British to control them without weapons. They did not fear prisoners, Rodman argues, because they had so thoroughly constructed British and Vanuatu worlds as separate—and also because the prisoners did not want to be seen as dangerous. Indeed, she suggests, prisoners' being absent from villages and working in Vila (even if it was prison work) served purposes (unknown to the British) in the Ni-Vanuatu social system.

Next, in chapter 5, Rodman chronicles the vicissitudes of 'The Paddock' and the British residences surrounding it. One was named the 'White House'; others were named after stops on the London underground transportation system. Despite gorgeous views of the coast and sea, the houses faced inward onto the sacred British grass. In addition to a history of the domestic and dinner party lives of officials and the post war of the housing crises of women, clerks and civil

servants, the chapter tells a tale of clashing ritual idioms of two powers. US troops from 1942 to 1944 commandeered houses, leased the Paddock to build housing for military personnel on it and ploughed the remainder. This last act occurred after a US Captain asked permission to plant a garden from a British Acting Assistant Resident Commissioner, who said that he 'thought that there would be no objection'. His apparent assumption that the US captain would proceed by means of a written request and that the British decision would be reached via the traditional, ritual minuting was proved wrong, as the captain performed what I would call 'an American anti-ritual ritual of insouciance' and ploughed up the un-built upon areas of the Paddock to plant corn. More recently, the British and the Americans are long gone, and the present-day life of the buildings is as government offices and dwellings of families of Vanuatu's government ministers. The Paddock is now Independence Park, site of the annual independence day celebrations since 1980.

Chapter 6, on the perhaps-haunted Tanna house, traces British district agents on the island, in tension with the French agents and in close intersections with Tannese people, white settlers and the Presbyterian church as well as the John Frum movement. Chapter 7 traces the house memories of district agents on Santo and chronicles the Santo rebellion. Both chapters use revealing archival and oral histories to explore issues of race and place in histories of particular officials' relations with Ni-Vanuatu, with 'mixed race' settlers, and with 'British ressortissants' of the islands.

Houses Far From Home has a light touch with theory. It invokes James Clifford's notion of 'traveling cultures' but has no extended theoretical discussions, no wider review of literatures on colonial architecture or anthropology of dwelling. The work's originality is in its focus on the houses and buildings, their appearance in the archives, and in the memories of their dwellers and users. Without sentimentality, but with real care, the houses and people are able to tell their stories. A remarkably nuanced picture of a complex bygone colonial world emerges.

Martha Kaplan
Vassar University
