'NOW AN ISLAND IS TOO BIG'
limits and limitations of Pacific Islands history

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When Doug Munro asked for this paper, he invited me to resurrect and reflect upon some comments I had made at the Australian National University in 1991 at a workshop on the limits and limitations of Pacific Islands history.* In response, I intend to use some of the issues raised at that workshop as the basis for some reflections on transitions over time in what we now call Pacific Islands histories. In particular, I will be concerned with the nature and fate of colonial histories, island histories, and postcolonial histories—taking the last of these to mean histories of the postcolonial period, rather than postcolonial views of some earlier time. All three of these themes raise the questions of limits and limitations on Pacific Island histories, and the borders and boundaries—geographic and disciplinary—within which we operate. To some extent, too, these perspectives have been shaped by the most recent Pacific History Association conference, which was held at Hilo, Hawai'i, in August 1996.

My 1991 comments, like the workshop in general, looked back over nearly four decades of Pacific History as a distinct discipline or as a subset of some wider history, depending on preference, taking as its most common starting point either the arrival of Jim Davidson to take up the Chair of

*For a report on the workshop, see Lal 1992. My own comments were by way of Workshop summary, and were not published.

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Pacific History at the ANU in 1950, or his inaugural lecture delivered some four years later (Davidson 1955). Other founding figures, heads of clans within a broader tribe, were acknowledged but the seminal role of Davidson remained a major focus with his emphasis on island-oriented history, the importance of fieldwork and personal experience to inform analysis, and the necessity of theory being derived from empirically-based knowledge, rather than the other way round. Several speakers noted the emphasis in 'the Davidson years' on what we then called culture contact and have since learned to call cultural encounters, and on precolonial studies generally. For many, the Davidsonian preference for island-oriented history meant a rejection not only of the imperial framework for writing histories of the Pacific Islands, but of imperialism and the colonial period as the subject of historical research (e.g. Howe 1992: 228). The irony was that this approach made Pacific Islands history even more insular than it needed to be, with little heed paid to the substantial literature that had, by then, emerged not only on imperialism in Africa and Asia but, increasingly, on the colonial experience as well (see Hempenstall 1992:70–73). Pacific Islands history self-consciously stood aside from those precedents, just as it also stood aside from comparable experience in other countries on the Pacific Rim.

The range of participants at that workshop demonstrated that membership of the tribe of Pacific historians had moved well beyond the founding walls of the Coombs Building. And the name had changed, at the ANU and elsewhere, from Pacific history to Pacific Islands history, to emphasise a focus on islands rather than metropoles; it also self-consciously sets Pacific Islands history aside from a Pacific that includes East and Southeast Asia. At the same time, it has the unintended irony of highlighting the insularity of content and approach of much Pacific Islands history, as well as its geographic focus. Even so, postmodernism and Pacific Islands history was discussed at the workshop, as it had been at the Pacific History Association conference at Guam a few months before, indicating that our discipline (or was it sub-discipline?) was at least being touched by wider concerns. There was, however, a significant difference between the strongly historical approach of those at the ANU workshop (where, not surprisingly, most participants had at some time been associated with the ANU but rejected the notion of an ANU 'school') and Guam, where historians were joined by anthropologists, geographers, political scientists and practising politicians as well as specialists in film, dance and music. Compared with previous

conferences, there was a stronger Micronesian presence at Guam than at any previous PHA conference; there was higher American representation (most but not all from Hawai'i); and a higher proportion of postgraduate students, many of whom were studying at Pacific Island rather than metropolitan institutions. The Guam experience demonstrated that any lingering concerns of hegemonic control over Pacific Islands history from the ANU could now be set aside.

In a setting that demonstrated the lasting influences of Spanish and American colonialism on the local culture and environment, as well as the power of modern Japanese investment, the PHA at Guam seemed transformed. It was noteworthy that for many whose work focused on Polynesia and Melanesia, this was their first visit to any part of Micronesia. In part, this more vibrant PHA may have reflected the increasing willingness of social scientists to acknowledge the importance of an historical perspective, and the use of historical sources. The work of most Pacific Islands scholars has always, and of necessity, been interdisciplinary to a degree—if only to the extent that most individuals sat firmly within one disciplinary setting and dabbled in the literature of others. But there were now an increasing number of papers reporting on projects that were interdisciplinary in design and methodology (Rubenstein 1992). Even more significant was the fact that these papers were delivered in a context that encouraged interdisciplinary exchange by virtue of the range of disciplines represented in the audience. (At a more mundane level, it might also have been accidental—a wider range of Pacific Studies scholars relishing the opportunity to secure, with the mere offer of a paper, institutional funding for attendance at a conference in a new and interesting location within the 'Small World' of academic conferences (Lodge 1984).

These are trends that have continued and, indeed, a run through the list of participants at the 11th PHA conference, held recently at Hilo, would probably show that those who identified themselves as historians, and/or worked out of academic departments of history in tertiary institutions, were a minority. It was also noticeable how many postgraduates were among those present. Of the 280 or thereabouts registered for the conference, only two of us, as far as we could make out, had been at the club-like founding PHA meeting at Martindale Hall in South Australia in 1980. At Hilo, the 'official' themes of history, culture and power provided a loose and all-embracing structure but not a rigid framework. What this meant was

that, as well as now-explicit panels dealing with images (film and photograph), theatre and dance, the scope of other sessions ranged across local and vernacular sources, libraries, colonialism's cultures, decolonisation, sovereignty and identity. There were two panels on 'postcolonialism and the native'. The effect was of panels and audiences representing a range of nationalities, experience, and disciplinary perspectives. Of necessity, the discussion was interdisciplinary in nature and the more constructive for it. Although in many senses, this was a Pacific Studies rather than Pacific history conference, the primary unifier was *history*, a perspective of, and interest in, the past. This was a conference that reflected and encouraged the concept of a multiplicity of histories, voices, approaches and perspectives. For the longer term, it might also suggest that Pacific Islands histories have played a major integrative role in the development of Pacific Studies, facilitating interdisciplinary perspectives and, through the Pacific History Association, providing a venue where the interdisciplinary approaches can find expression. This might also suggest that those who remain locked in traditional approaches to traditional 'historical' concerns may find themselves marginalised in the (sub)-discipline as well as in their own conferences.

At the very least, then, Pacific Islands historians are no longer operating within the narrow disciplinary boundaries that tended to confine their work a decade ago. The exploration into related disciplines that was once individual and informal is now more explicit and formalised. The disciplinary boundaries have shifted and film, oral tradition, theatre and music are no longer dismissed by 'mainstream' historians as fringe activities, interesting but not quite history. There is now more explicit recognition of postmodern and postcolonial theories, terminology and perspectives. Mention of reflexivity or discourse no longer causes a titter or causes a rolling of eyes. There was also a strong current-orientation to many of the papers.

Of the Davidson era, Kerry Howe observed in 1991 that 'ironically many, if not most, of these [culture contact] studies were not really informed by the Pacific Islands present. Or rather the nature of that present . . . did not offer any obvious contemporary political agenda or conscious ideology' Howe 1992: 226). Certainly, that comment can no longer stand; the Pacific Islands present was central to many papers, perhaps to most—especially those dealing with land rights and indigenous rights generally, decolonisation and sovereignty. While the precolonial past of culture contact often provided images of autonomy, cultural integrity, local control

and Islander agency that became powerful symbols for the decolonisation era, it is the experience of the colonial past—especially examples of land deprivation, resource exploitation, the undermining of customary sociopolitical structures, colonial violence and the mechanisms of colonial control—that seem to be emerging in the postcolonial era. A scan through the abstracts of more than eighty papers listed for the Hilo conference shows only a tiny number of the culture contact studies that were so characteristic a generation ago; and there is hardly a missionary to be seen (PHA 1996).

Postmodern analyses of historical experiences ranging from personal to national reflected not only the emergence of much stronger current agendas in the work on display but, in a further characteristic of postmodern scholarship, a stronger focus on author's experience and location (broadly defined) in defining the subject and emphasis of research projects. This focus on a personalised present, especially for the growing numbers of Pacific Islands researchers, leads inevitably to a reaching back into a recent rather than a remote past. The focus now takes constitutional independence for granted but is inclined to seek its deficiencies and problems in the colonial experience when, despite the recognition of Islander agency, initiative was lost and grievances born. The effect, then, is to see the West as the originator not only of the 'agents of change' as they were neutrally described by Davidson, but as the source of disease and social disruption, an assault on traditional society, and an undermining of political organisation (especially the power and status of leaders) —all leading to a loss of control over resources (especially land) and individual lives. At Hilo, these themes were particularly strong in papers dealing with Hawai'i but were also evident in papers from New Zealand on the other side of the Pacific and for most places in between. It raises the question of how far the wheels have turned, and whether we are returning to a more 'fatal impact' and victim-driven view of the Pacific past, which seemed to have been discredited by a generation of culture contact studies demonstrating Islander agency as central to encounters on the Pacific frontier.

This is by no means an all-embracing trend. It is ironic that most of the criticism of uncontrolled exploitation of resources by Pacific Islands governments in the post-independence era (notably over mining and forestry in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands) comes from non-governmental organisations like Greenpeace and metropolitan

governments and international agencies now deeply involved in aid delivery and the preparation of development strategies for these countries. The voices of local critics and sub-national groups having their resources exploited and experiencing a loss of identity in the face of national assertions of sovereignty, struggle to find expression in a region where the government of one nation is reluctant to interfere in the internal affairs of another.

In 1991, Peter Hempenstall also identified the postcolonial states and post-independence politics of the Pacific Islands states as missing from public awareness and professional interest of Pacific Islands historians (1992:68). While this is still the case in the metropolitan media, it is no longer true of the Pacific Islands historians and those who attend their conferences. At Hilo, there were several panels dealing with national identity, sovereignty, postcolonial politics, neocolonialism and issues of governance, with at least some of these adopting the methodologies and research agendas of Third World Studies more broadly defined. Here, and in discussions of Hawai'ian nationalism, current agendas were at centre stage.

While the disciplinary boundaries may have changed, or at least are being more flexibly defined, the geographical boundaries have hardly shifted. The tendency to talk about 'Pacific Islands history' has, as I have already suggested, tended to confirm the insularity of both content and approach and to marginalise the sub-discipline. Such a view highlights but leaves unresolved the issue of the geographic and geopolitical limits within which we tend to operate. This is an issue that raises the question of how far it is legitimate, or useful, to concentrate on islands, island groups, or nations and reaches within these to the study of identities— local, sub-national (as in Bougainville), ethnic (as in Fiji), or across national boundaries (as in the Samoas or the Western Solomons including Bougainville). In practice, it is the identities that are becoming the focus—identities that conflict within nations, or those that define groups of people or regions that share common culture, experience or expectations. With this narrowing focus, there are two accompanying trends: the first, to maintain the distance from external influences and imperial frameworks; and the second, to move away from studies that take island groups and countries as their organisational framework, and to concentrate on local events and circumstances (representing, perhaps, the boundaries of precolonial polities) with a heavier dependence on oral and vernacular sources.

It might be suggested that the reluctance to engage wider historical frameworks is more than a postmodern fashion, which allows an author more freedom than before in defining topic, framework, sources and themes. With a multiplicity of voices to be heard, and histories to be written, the choices are infinite. But there is more to it than this. It seems to me that the current fashion of speaking of Pacific Islands history rather than Pacific history is not merely descriptive, but is also about academic turf battles, and reflects an awareness that the study of Oceania is under threat with the 'rationalisation' of academic programmes, cutbacks in research funds, and the retirement or reorientation of practising historians. In Australia and New Zealand, at least, there is less Pacific Islands history taught now than there was even five years ago. In a post–Cold War world, the Pacific Islands states no longer have the economic and political leverage that they once enjoyed in international affairs. And there is little doubt that the Pacific Islands remain marginalised in the metropolitan media, finding a headline only when there is a financial or political scandal, or a natural disaster strikes. The recent attendance of Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, at the South Pacific Forum meeting in Majuro prompted the following from one journalist who specialises in Asian affairs:

> The Prime Minister, John Howard, should make this sojourn on the Marshall Islands his first and last visit to a South Pacific Forum . . .
>
> With the Cold War over, the South Pacific is of almost no importance to anyone. Its economic performance is woeful and future aid should be dependent on economic reform. All future meetings should be attended by a deputy prime minister, a foreign minister, an aid minister or whatever.
>
> This is especially so, given that the Government has made fundamental changes to the pursuit of regionalism which really counts. These decisions focus on India (Sheridan 1996).

This view is widely shared and is to be found in governments and the universities, as well as in the newspapers. It seems to be assumed that Oceania is internationally insignificant; and it follows that the study of the region is, by extension, a low priority. The shifting emphasis from Pacific Studies to Asian Studies at some institutions is just one manifestation of this. All of this raises the question of whether Pacific Island Studies is

doomed, at least in its present form, and at least in countries other than in the Pacific Islands themselves.

To speak of the Pacific Islands emphasises that we are concerned with a distinct region and, for an American audience, separates the islands from the Asian Rim. Pacific Asia is important, however, because in strategic and economic terms the might of Asia is recognised. There is some ambivalence over linkages between Asia and the Pacific Islands though the interest of ASEAN nations in Oceania is cautiously welcomed—even though that interest in Oceania is often associated with the exploitation of Pacific Islands resources—a new imperialism, rather than a partnership for the twenty-first century (see, for example, Callick 1995). The continued avoidance of international issues and broader comparative studies leaves Pacific Islands history with a northwestern boundary that coincides with the Papua New Guinea–Indonesia border. Melanesian Indonesia, even West Papua, finds only an occasional place in Pacific Islands history, despite its centrality to the archaeology and anthropology of the region. Is it only the practical difficulties of undertaking research that has allowed this imperial border to take precedence over other definitional possibilities? But while these imperial borders have a degree of prominence in fixing the geographic basis of what Pacific Islands historians study, practitioners remain as reluctant now as they were in the Davidson era to engage the history of the relationships that, for a century or more, tied Oceania to the hegemony and interests of the major powers (European, American and Asian) and defined many of its national boundaries.

This is something rather broader than the impact of a particular colonial power on an island, locality or family. The study of 'imperial' or hegemonic relationships, and the underlying forces that drive them, still seems to be consciously rejected. If this is even partly true, it is difficult to understand the reasoning behind it. To speak of Pacific Islands history is to consolidate the notion that what we do is island-centred, that it is non-imperial, and that it is not concerned with 'the Pacific' as Americans are inclined to describe it to include East and Southeast Asia, or what might even more broadly be defined as 'the Pacific Rim' or 'the Pacific Basin'. If the focus begins with the Pacific Islands at its centre, it will be the more difficult to explore case studies of broader international themes.

At the same time, we are witnessing the growth of Pacific Islands history as Harry Maude used to define it—that is, intensive local studies,

often of the pre-encounter period, which could only be undertaken from within the society itself, or by an outsider who was so thoroughly steeped in the language, culture and traditions of the society being studied that it became, in effect, a study from within (and not merely from an island-orientation) and thus a rather special type of ethnohistory. An impression from the recent PHA conference would suggest this type of Pacific Islands history is expanding rapidly as a new generation of postgraduate students, many if not most of Pacific Islands origin themselves, draw increasingly on their own histories and cultures as part of an academic training within Pacific Islands institutions to pursue themes, issues and perceptions of the past that are currently relevant for them and their peoples. If Davidson encouraged a reorientation of the history of the Pacific Islands, this is a true decolonisation that allows for an independent, local view. It also reflects the decolonisation of Pacific Islands nations that has taken place since the 1960s. Political autonomy is no longer an issue. The product will be scholarship that has a relevance within the region, and will prompt an empathy for students studying with the growing number of tertiary institutions and secondary schools within the region, as well as providing a focus for identity and encouraging historical and cultural awareness for an indigenous readership. This is and will be valuable in itself, but it may also have the effect of distancing the new scholarship from the old and heightening the sense of insularity within the discipline.

There is a danger that a stronger local focus will serve a local, perhaps even a nationalist purpose but will mean even less connection to international frameworks. An exploration of, and linkage to, the theoretical literature will take Pacific Islands Studies into broader fields but will not necessarily tie local studies into the discussion of the influences from outside the region that have helped to shape developments in the Pacific Islands over the past 400 years. Such an approach flows from the new nationalisms and sub-nationalisms that insist on the primacy of local forces in shaping modern histories, to criticise the use of imperial boundaries and chronologies, and tend to relegate imperial factors (broadly defined to include colonial, commercial and missionary activities) to malevolent influences that have disrupted, demoralised, dispossessed and depopulated indigenous metropolitan societies. In some cases, a sense of victimhood, now and then, and a desire for redress from perceived injustice, not only informs but effectively controls the research agenda; such has been the level of

dispossession—of language, dignity, and an effective voice—that it is only now that some aspects of the past are being explored. As the colonial period has come back on the research agenda, it is the impact of the colonial presence rather than the societies, policies and pressures that gave rise to it that is the focus of attention. Ironically, because of the preoccupation with the local manifestations of colonialism, rather than the broader forces that lay behind it, such studies will lack the context to make them accessible to a wider audience and, more seriously, historians may lose sight of sources and evidence that would give even more power to their arguments.

Pacific history, as it emerged at the ANU and elsewhere, was self-consciously island oriented; colonial relationships were examined 'from the island end', with attempts to balance or counterbalance imperial sources from local records, oral history, anthropological studies, and so on. Pacific history was seen as an alternative to, rather than complementary to, histories of imperialism in the Pacific Islands. The rejection of the imperial framework, and the increasing specialisation of historical research on the Pacific Islands, led to the tendency to remove the history of the Pacific Islands (and especially Pacific Islands history) from the broader context of international influence and change. There was a reluctance to study African or Asian models, for example, or to recognise the importance of the United Nations in promoting decolonisation, even though, within Oceania, it was only seldom a direct player in the process. Pacific history was also heavily empirical rather than ideological in its orientation. To some extent, this was a reflection of the same reluctance to explore other Third World models, which were rejected, perhaps, because colonialism was generally perceived to be a benign process in the Pacific Islands and the extreme poverty and authoritarian regimes of Africa seemed unrelated to the Pacific Islands experience. This was to be expected in light of the emphasis on Islander agency, and the emphasis on acculturation rather than a fatal impact. Perhaps the current shift reflects a realisation that while Islanders, as individuals, may well have chosen whether or not to trade on the beach, sign on as labour recruits, work as prostitutes, become Christian, or move to town they were, none the less, effectively powerless against the inexorable forces of imperialism and its agents. There are many examples of amelioration of imperial encroachment, of constructive engagement, and individual profit, but we should not pretend that this was an encounter between equals. Even so, these realisations give additional weight to the argument for an

exploration of the nature of these forces, and the relationships and attitudes that sustained them, as well as their impact in local contexts.

Decolonisation, and the emergence of independent and self-governing nations in Oceania, created a new opportunity for national histories, many of them facilitated and published by the University of the South Pacific and particularly encouraged by Ron Crocombe as Director of its Institute of Pacific Studies. Often pioneering works written by local historians, they filled a gap but, rightly, gave low priority to aspects of the wider context. Many were a valuable learning experience for their authors, and introduced a local voice but, for the most part they were, perforce, based on limited research and a narrow range of sources. The withdrawal of the colonial powers from formal constitutional relationships has seen some, like the United Kingdom, opt for a reduced role in the region but, even so, the limited research that has been done has tended to maintain the focus on the 'traditional' administering powers for the region—the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Australia and New Zealand. There is not yet a balancing interest in the newer players in the region—Japan most obviously, but also China, Taiwan, Korea and, until its collapse, the Soviet Union. Malaysia and Singapore have growing interests in trade and investment.

All will have increasing influence on Pacific nations, which, in terms of geography, are small and remote; they also have small populations, they are aid dependent and strategically vulnerable. A lack of expertise within government also makes them vulnerable to adventurers offering get-rich-quick schemes for toxic waste dumps, tax avoidance, land investment, or financial scams. Whether or not these microstates are subject to crude international pressure because of size, strategic vulnerability or economic dependency, and whether or not they can occasionally exert influence in international forums, the fact remains that the aspirations and lifestyles of their people are increasingly being shaped by migration, the influence of Western media, tourism, imports, overseas development assistance and other external influences. In many ways, some of those external influences are now transnational, more powerful than national governments or the old colonial powers. International forestry, fishing, garment manufacturing or tourism interests are difficult to resist, and can divide and conquer among nations anxious to competitively depress wages, permit labour migration and offer tax breaks in order to secure a perceived economic advantage. These influences, no less than formal colonial rule in

its time, are shaping lives and nations and yet are more often the subject of political pressure, protest and demonstration than serious investigation. In a post independence era, politicians exercise a new form of 'Islander agency' in their dealings with multinational companies and agencies. In this area there have been conflicts between 'national' and 'local' interests, including those of landowners. As a consequence, and given government media controls, some parties have difficulty in being heard; outside researchers are discouraged. This suggests yet another limitation upon contemporary Pacific Islands history, a border that excludes key features of post independence politics and the economy— features that are firmly rooted in the local culture and the colonial past.

I have already suggested that one generation of Pacific historians worked in a context that was unnecessarily and distortingly narrow (as narrow, in some ways, as the imperial perspective that preceded it). I am tempted to suggest that the next is likely to do the same by ignoring aspects of the current world of which the Pacific Islands are a part and, even more, by failing to take full account of the process by which this has come about. This all suggests that the changing role of middle and large power activity in the region, and the presence of transnational economic interests, need re-examination not just in the present, but in the colonial past and in the decolonisation era when the present trends were established. After more than a decade, *Foreign Forces in Pacific Politics*, edited by Ron Crocombe and Ahmed Ali (1983), still stands out in the literature as one of the very few works trying to grapple with these issues on a regional basis though there have been more recent works—for example, *Tides of History*, edited by Howe, Kiste and Lal (1994) and Henningham, *The Pacific Island States: security and sovereignty in the post–Cold War world* (1995)—at least begin to address some of these issues. For Pacific Islands countries, their constituent communities, and for individuals, there will still be choices, of course, but they will increasingly be choices that are shaped outside the immediate region. Unless the research agenda of Pacific Islands historians is broadened to address these issues, it is likely to determine its own marginality from any attempt to explain the current present when it becomes a future past.

This linkage of Pacific Islands history to broader themes, bigger issues (or bigger nations) is essential if it is to demonstrate its relevance to a wider

audience. At the same time, unless Pacific Islands history is to become a mere exemplar or vehicle for broad scholarly and intellectual concerns, it must retain its relevance for those who are its subjects. One of the limitations of Pacific Islands history has been the way that the intellectual or even geographical frameworks used have effectively excluded, as an audience, the peoples who are the subject of discussion.

Identity is fundamentally about kinship, culture and propinquity. It is a layered experience. When viewed by another it is like the ripples around a stone thrown into a pond: broadly defined, the ripples might represent obvious expansions—family/household, clan/village, tribe/district, and so to larger affiliations that might be subsumed within islands or range across them but would still be fundamentally about descent groups and relationships defined by marriage. These might be thought of as primary identities, that define an individual's place in society and, like nationalism, are fundamentally about a shared past, common values, and expectations of a shared future. But there are also other identities defined by education, employment, religion, gender or political alignment, which cut across kinship, culture and propinquity and establish shared experience and common values that find expression in politics and other activities at national level, or across national boundaries. The question for the historian is the layer, or level, at which the history will be meaningful either by virtue of its particular content, or as an illustration of some broader concern. The professional historian, at least, has to establish the legitimacy of the area of study, a judgement that is often made in terms of events, themes, pressures or hegemonic power that have their origins outside the island or group of islands being studied.

This dilemma has been elegantly described by my colleague, Basil Poff, as 'the Fivizzano Inheritance'—an expression referring to Guicciardini's treatment of the small village of Fivizzano in his sixteenth century histories of Florence and Italy (1995). A history of a local area that has the 'particularities' that make it meaningful to the locals is likely to end up as a *local* (insular, in our context) history—quaint, antiquarian and self-serving, but largely meaningless to others. If it becomes an illustration of major events and themes in some largely national or international history then, inevitably, the 'particularities' are lost and, while the study may discuss broad themes and win acclaim as an illustration of this or that, it will become largely meaningless to those in the locality—or, in our case, the island.

For an earlier generation of Pacific historians, 'island histories' of individual islands or, by extension, of island groups or island nations, were consciously included in the research agenda simply to establish a research foundation upon which more specialised studies could be built. For the pre-colonial period, research areas so defined might represent either more or less than what was bounded later by colonial borders. In all cases, however, the'island(s)' was taken to represent something more than a convenient geographic limit to research. But in some, perhaps many, cases, the notion of an 'island' may be a distraction because in terms of either local history, or of wider themes, it may be either too large or too small. The island boundary is both a geographic reality and an academic convenience. As Oskar Spate tellingly observed, Oceania is eminently divisible into topics of study wherein researchers may become marooned in 'their little atolls of knowledge' (1978:34, 42). The coastline of each of these atolls does not necessarily reflect either a cultural division or a modern political boundary. Whether the study of an island or island group is contemplated, the Fivizzano principle applies with the added danger, perhaps inevitability, that even the study of a small 'site' will be seen to represent the interests of one family, village, island or other subgroup of some larger unit at the expense of other similar groups.

This failure of islands, groups, national boundaries and academic interests to coincide has posed difficulties for Pacific Islands historians and, where the focus is on the island(s)—island-oriented—the complexities of borders and limitations remains. In Melanesia in particular, the overlaying of political borders over geographical realities and cultural diversity is most noticeable. We have few histories of the island of New Guinea, the Solomons group—or, elsewhere in Oceania, of, for example, the Samoan people (in the Samoas, with or without the Samoan diaspora). Practical issues, like the availability of archives, the politics of acquiring research permits, the language of colonialism, and our nervousness about comparative research, as well as academic orthodoxy, lead us towards a dependence on the borders of nations as determinants of the focus of our (sub)-discipline.

This is now less true than it was, and may reflect the changing generations of scholarship. It may be that island histories are more easily written by outsiders who can sit above the pond and see how the ripples spread. In doing so, of course, they will inevitably ignore or discard some of the 'particularities' that will be central for a perspective from within.

Even more, many of those particularities and their significance will be beyond the knowledge and comprehension of the outsider, however empathetic towards the subject. It is, however, that same detachment from the particularities that allows the outsider, if inclined, to consider broader influences and consequences of local events. To some, the outsider is an academic imperialist, exploiting both the history and people of a community, or nation, for personal advancement and without sharing either the knowledge or the benefit with those who are the subject of the research. In the early years of independence, such concerns sometimes produced restrictive research policies, bureaucratic difficulties over access to archives or permission to enter specified areas, and hostility towards outside researchers. But this is less true than it was as 'outsiders' have more commonly formed partnerships with 'insiders', involved local students in research and, perhaps most important, Pacific Islands governments have acquired the confidence to monitor their own research policies and establish mechanisms for securing for themselves access to research data and findings where it has a significance in policy analysis and formulation. It is probably also the case that Pacific Islands governments have been so inured to the presence of 'experts' that academic researchers are regarded with benign tolerance and, like the visiting experts, dismissed as irrelevant as long as they pay their way and stay out of politics.

The writing of histories based on dependencies or nations, whether a general survey or a thematic study, was largely the preserve of non-indigenous historians. There were a few exceptions of indigenous historians drawing on their own cultural experience while also working in a western academic tradition—most notably Sione Latukefu (1974), Malama Meleisea (1987) and, to include New Zealand, Ranginui Walker (1990)—but most were Western historians writing about 'the other'. Within the history of Pacific Islands history, there was also a stage at which the writing of island or national histories was seen as more appropriate than it might be now. For one thing, the historiography was so limited—a couple of weeks (at most a couple of months) in the library might well exhaust the relevant secondary literature. These were pioneering times with 'national' histories seen as the foundations that would provide the background for both more detailed island or thematic histories and, at the same time, the case studies for broader regional interpretation. Only in part was the writing of national

histories more directly associated with decolonisation and the development of an identity for independence.

This brings me to my own work on the then Gilbert and Ellice Islands, published as *Cinderellas of the Empire* (Macdonald 1982). *Cinderellas* was published in 1982, after the decolonisation of Tuvalu and Kiribati in 1978 and 1979 respectively, but based partly on research and a thesis completed a decade before (Macdonald 1971). In 1994, while a visiting scholar at the University of Hawai'i, I was asked by David Hanlon to talk to his postgraduate students about 'island histories' and, more specifically, about *Cinderellas*. The invitation came at a time when I had recently read, or re-read, for a quite different purpose, several island/island group/national histories—among them Greg Dening's *Islands and Beaches* (1980), Malama Meleisea's *Making of Modern Samoa* (1987), Howard Van Trease's *Politics of Land in Vanuatu* (1987), Brij Lal's *Broken Waves* (1993), Mark Turner's *Papua New Guinea: the challenge of independence* (1990) and David's own *Upon a Stone Altar* (1988).

I had also revisited the 1991 Canberra Workshop through its published proceedings. In the session, I raised several of the issues I have already discussed here—the problem of authorship, particularities in conflict with larger pictures, the recovery of local voices and sources, the place of oral history, problems of interdisciplinarity and the co-option of material from other disciplines. Though not explicitly to the forefront, these same issues had shaped my research in Kiribati and Tuvalu. The boundaries of my research shifted with those of a colonial entity described for some sixty years as the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony. Although the Gilbert and Ellice groups remained at its heart, it also gathered in Ocean Island (Banaba), some of the Phoenix and Line Islands and, for a time, the Tokelau group. Even setting these appendages to one side, the Gilbert and Ellice groups were divided by several hundred kilometres of ocean and by their respective cultures. In broad terms, one was Micronesian, the other Polynesian, but neither group had a homogeneous culture, language or socio-political organisation despite three-quarters of a century of supposed colonial integration. While recognising the presence of other islands, and aware of a wider Pacific world, neither group had a heritage of unity or common experience.

While small islands with a population of a few hundred might exist as a single polity, this was the exception rather than the rule. In both groups, the primary identity was with the extended family household and its landholdings, then with a larger district grouping, still linked through the male line by common descent, and then with the island. Intermarriage might have established linkages to other adjacent islands to which descent might also be traced but this was usually beyond the horizon in a political as well as geographic sense. This again raises the issue of the particularities compared with the generalities and the limitations imposed by chosen boundaries, whatever they might be. In the case of *Cinderellas of the Empire*, I observed that: 'The exercise demands a concentration upon major themes, national issues and general trends—a concentration that is sometimes difficult to reconcile with the particular concerns of so many small and relatively isolated communities' (Macdonald 1982:ix).

The layer of historical engagement is, of course, defined by the fundamental questions being posed, or hypothesis under examination. In my case the starting point lay with Jim Davidson who, in the late 1960s, found himself travelling via Funafuti in the Ellice Islands and Tarawa in the Gilberts on his way to Nauru where he was engaged as constitutional adviser. He pondered the differing responses to the questions he asked about decolonisation and wondered how it was that two such seemingly different peoples had been linked within a common colonial boundary and, further, what the prospects might be for a shared independence in the future. These questions were sufficiently intriguing to engage my attention and so I began with a thesis topic that was present/future oriented but with explanations and answers to be found in the remote as well as the colonial past. Most of the focus was on the colonial period, the nineteenth century era of culture contact being a thesis-sized topic in itself and, besides, the speciality of Harry Maude, my other supervisor. The immediacy of the decolonisation process, then in train, gave an added edge to the research, and I became involved with local politicians in discussion of constitutional issues and provided an informal link between them and the constitutional expertise of Davidson. One of my friends later suggested, kindly I think, that I had written a one chapter thesis (on decolonisation) and a nine chapter introduction. This was not a national history, but an attempt to understand and explain the decolonisation process and its implications. The final section of the thesis suggested that government policy had systematically ignored

fundamental issues of cultural difference and that 'unless further guarantees and concessions . . . are forthcoming, future separation seems inevitable' (Macdonald 1971:249). This bold prediction was immediately rejected by senior British officials, as was the suggestion that a policy shift was necessary to achieve the basic objective of British policy—a unified, decolonised dependency. Within five years, however, there was a United Nations-supervised referendum among Ellice Islanders, leading to secession and the creation of the independent nation of Tuvalu in 1978—if nothing else, a comment on the level of awareness in the colonial administration.

Cinderellas of the Empire had to wait a further decade before publication—time for more research on the nineteenth century leading to three new chapters in the front; and for decolonisation, leading to three new chapters at the back. In the end, the thesis represented little more than half of the book, and even that half was rewritten beyond recognition. A major limitation, characteristic of works of this kind, remained; there was only one chapter on the pre-European past—one chapter to encapsulate at least two, and perhaps three thousand years of distinctive history, because this was to remain the preserve of anthropologists and archaeologists, and of Harry Maude with his unparalleled qualifications to work in this area. But the book was much more of a national history than the thesis had been. This was partly a conscious (or self-conscious) outcome with geographic limits that coincided with colonial boundaries, and an end point that coincided with independence. In a history so defined, the 'major themes, national issues and general trends' were more important than the particularities of families, villages and islands. This is not to demean or diminish particular families, villages and islands, or the history of families, villages and islands in general, but to state the obvious—that the limits and limitations of any given study (Pacific Islands history or otherwise) are not absolute but are defined by the questions that it asks. In this particular case, it was the points of comparison and commonality within each nation, and the points of contrast between them, that were central to the study and to the historical outcome that it explores.

Cinderellas of the Empire is now out of print—traded in the secondhand catalogues of booksellers and, notwithstanding more specialist studies, yet to be superseded (despite its limitations and deficiencies) as an overview or national history of either Kiribati or Tuvalu. In Tarawa and Funafuti, some library copies have been borrowed indefinitely by users who forgot to leave

their names; others have been cut up to facilitate photocopying and the sundered chapters lost, like the photocopies. It remains central to the teaching of national history in Kiribati even though there are insufficient copies for teachers, let alone students. A reprint, currently planned, is part of a solution. However, one is left feeling uncomfortable that a book fundamentally defined by what was the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony is now the basis of study by a generation of 16–18 year olds who were not even born when the referendum on secession took place. It might be argued that *Cinderellas* provides reference points beyond the island and the nation, but its defining issues are not those of Kiribati now.

Not surprisingly, my discussion with the students at the University of Hawai'i also embraced David Hanlon's study of Pohnpei. *Upon a Stone Altar* is a history of Pohnpei from first foreign contact through until 1890, taking advantage of a pause between the effective departure of Spanish colonialism and the arrival of German authority, to end at that point. This is an island history of a quite different kind, dealing with early cultural encounters and the first phase of Pohnpei's colonial past. Different, too, because it deals with a period when Pohnpei's relations with its Micronesian neighbours were less defined by imperial structures and the imperatives of decolonisation than in more recent times. Different most of all, because of its interdisciplinarity: it draws much more explicitly on the linkages of history, ethnohistory and anthropology explored by Marshall Sahlins (1981) and Greg Dening (1980), in particular, both of whom published major works in the early 1980s. Having the advantage, if that is what it was, of focusing on a single island rather than an island group, a narrower focus meant that several, competing, island identities did not have to be accommodated. Even so, there was a multiplicity of lineages and districts to be accommodated and, if the study was to be given meaning in a wider context, particularities that had to be subsumed. Inevitably, too, some would think that their perspective had been given insufficient weight. Even narrowing the focus to an island with a population of 10,000 at the beginning of the nineteenth century and 5,000 at the end does not overcome the fundamental problems.

To some extent, the differences were generational within the historiography, a narrowing focus—spatial, chronological and thematic—within Pacific History being characteristic of the 1970s and 1980s. While not a universal characteristic, the trend continues, and was a distinctive

feature of many of the papers presented at the Hilo conference. While this does not seem to inhibit the conduct of the research, it does leave unresolved the matter of audience, and limitations on the dissemination and application of new understandings beyond an increasingly specialist literature unless authors can engage in and contribute to, and not merely draw upon, wider historical and theoretical debates. David Hanlon and I reflected on this again at the Hilo conference (in fact, while he combined bus driving duties with those of conference organiser) as I shared some preliminary thoughts on this paper. It seemed that in exploring the theories and methodologies of the l990s, researchers were looking to smaller and smaller cases to study. Although imperialism and colonialism are recognised as major influences in the history of Pacific Islands, neither was likely to provide either the organisational basis or even the key questions for future research. Similarly, studies that adopted national boundaries and island groups as the basis of research were decidedly out of fashion. I suggested that international and broad comparative works remained out of fashion, that *Cinderellas of the Empire* represented a type of island group or national history that was unlikely to find a place in the future, and that even the history of a single island like Pohnpei might prove problematic. ‘You’re right;’ he replied, ‘now an island is too big.’

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