

[Book Review]

## *Pacific: An Ocean of Wonders*

*Pacific: An Ocean of Wonders*. By Philip Hatfield. British Library Publishing, 2019. 224 pages. £30.00 (hardback).

Covering nearly a third of our planet, the Pacific is home to more islands than any other place on earth and inhabited by highly diverse groups of peoples, cultures, and histories that are bound by their relationship to this ocean. Thus, producing a single volume that aims to cover this greatness would be a rather ambitious act.

The first impression you get when you open this large volume is how beautifully it is illustrated. In fact, it is the visual material, sourced from the British Library archives, that forms the focal point of this publication. With some items reproduced for the first time, the reader is offered a visual feast. One might say that the accompanying explanatory text of one or two pages does not do justice to the vast array of topics covered. However, the author, Phil Hatfield, has used his knowledge, as a curator at the British Library, of historic maps, photographs, paintings, and images of artifacts and historical characters and other illustrations, to put together a largely visual story of the Pacific Ocean. Perhaps that is the only way you contemplate doing justice to the world's greatest ocean.

The diversity of topics, ranging from mapping, trade, wars, ports, slavers, empires, flora and fauna, the vessels used to traverse the ocean and connect the islands and the lands around them, religion and missionary politics, pirates, “explorers,” cults, pestilence, literary imaginations, and pollution, among many others, signal to the reader that this ocean is one of many stories and voices, interwoven and interdependent.

Given that the Pacific contains the largest number of islands on the planet, it was expected to see islands dominating the headings of different sections, several of which made it by name, including North America's islands, New Guinea, Taiwan, and Hawai'i (on several occasions), Rapa Nui, and Russia's Aleutian Islands, while others came in a “framed” manner, including references to “islands of mystery,” “outcast islands,” “closed islands,” “spice islands,” “islands against the bear” (referring to Russia), “the war of islands,” “another ocean's island” (referring interestingly to how the whalers of an Atlantic ocean island made it to the Pacific and shaped part of its history and ecosystem), and in keeping with the times, “disappearing islands.”

The islands are often seen from the outside in, through the history of the colonial, occupying, “exploring,” exploiting and seeking to influence forces, distant (European), and surrounding mainlands (China, US, Russia), which broaden the history of the Pacific

from the one we are accustomed to, one that centers on the islands. Here the mainlands are framed in their turn as powerful, including, for instance, “Bad Partners: Russia and the Aleutian Islanders,” “China, Engine of the Pacific,” and “the American Lake” (matching an earlier heading of “the Spanish Lake”). So many different Pacifics.

The Pacific people’s perspective on their cultures and histories and impact on the outside world come through the eyes of the outsiders and collectors, including Banks and his team, which recorded in detail much of what they encountered in the Pacific, and through the “assistance” of Tupaia, an indigenous Pacific islander who got his own section in the book. The section “Colonizing Pacific Histories” tells us that even when the Pacific islanders contribute to the interpretation of their ocean homes, like the Maori Te Rangikaheke, they either go unacknowledged or are misquoted, further compounding the seeing of the Pacific with the distorted lens of the outsiders.

The book is organized around three parts: An Ocean of Peoples, which focuses on the early history of human engagement in the Pacific; The Empire of Islands, which takes us through the building of empires and the destruction of colonisation with all the usual suspects; and Islands in a Globalized World, which stretches from the late nineteenth century to today and the disappearing islands of the Anthropocene. It is the conclusion, though, that strikes me as a reader most and where one finally finds an answer by the author to an obvious question, How could collections held at the British Library that would inherently reflect “a colonial perspective more than that of the indigenous peoples, favouring the printed word over spoken heritage” (208), do justice to the peoples of the Pacific and their perspectives of their ocean homes? Hatfield, while acknowledging that “such collections will always have significant blind spots” and that the interconnected Pacific is not the result of the explorers and colonisers, argues we cannot ignore how they changed the future of many of these islands by shifting balances of power that “set in motion chains of events that would result in fundamental changes” (210) to islands’ socio-cultural and natural environments. In defence of collections like those held in the British Library, the author says that it is important to know about and understand these collections and the histories they illustrate, “not only because of how they help us understand the past but also of how they help us interpret the future” (210). Taiwan and its revived geo-strategic position comes to mind here.

It may be apt, thus, to close this review with a quote from one of sons of the grand Pacific, Epeli Hau’ofa, that brings the attention back to the inhabitants of this ocean and the significance of the ocean to Pacific Islanders:

“Oceania” connotes a sea of islands with their inhabitants. The world of our ancestors was a large sea full of places to explore, to make their homes in, to breed generations of seafarers like themselves. People raised in this environment were at home with the sea. They played in it as soon as they could walk steadily, they worked in it, they fought on it. They developed great skills for navigating their waters, and the spirit to traverse even the few large gaps that separated their island groups.<sup>1</sup>

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**Notes**

1. Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu, and Epeli Hau'ofa, eds, *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands* (Suva: The University of the South Pacific, 1993), 8.