

# 3

## The ‘South Seas’ in the imperial imagination

From the time of the Pacific voyages of Louis Antoine de Bougainville and Captain James Cook in the late eighteenth century, Europeans began to discern significant diversity in language, culture and attitude among the island societies across the Pacific Ocean; yet at the same time, they saw this diversity as existing within a broader regional unity. For the European cartographer, voyager, natural scientist and ‘man of letters’ of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the creation of this new unifying frame—referred to variously as ‘the Pacific’, ‘Oceania’, the ‘South Seas’ or the ‘Pacific islands’—was an important part of mapping, cataloguing and creating knowledge about this last part of the ‘unknown’ world in relation to what was known. The accompanying ideas about the nature, or desired nature, of an idealised ‘Pacific islander’ and ‘island society’ were constant reminders of the existence of this underlying regional frame in the European imagination.<sup>1</sup> This conceptual framing of the Pacific island region created the context in which the establishment of imperial control of these societies was thought possible, and indeed became part of the imposition and management of empire. It was also an important influence on the successful efforts of evangelical Christians to spread their religious ideas across all Pacific island societies in the nineteenth century.

---

<sup>1</sup> Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific 1768–1850*, Ch. 1; Howe, *Nature, Culture and History*, Ch. 1.

While Europeans shared the idea of the existence of a regional unity within which particularities might be approached, they differed on the content they gave to the idea. To adapt Nicholas Thomas's insight, 'colonialism's culture' was complex: it was never 'a coherent imposition'.<sup>2</sup> Within the European imagination there were contending ideas about how to represent the idealised Pacific society and how that society should be changed. There were also contending ideas about the question of whether it was possible or desirable for Pacific islanders to have political agency, and indeed on the question of who belonged to the region, and on what basis. These differences varied over time depending on the changing self-image of Europeans, on geopolitical developments and on the rise and fall of grand ideas such as neoclassicism, racial hierarchy, Darwinism, imperialism, evangelism and self-determination.

These differences also varied according to which colonial power was involved and which particular interests within a colonial empire were representing Pacific island life and its possibilities. There were, for example, vast differences between the attitudes of planters, traders, anthropologists, missionaries, artists and colonial officials. There was also variation depending on which part of the island region was influencing the image of the idealised Pacific society. A Tahitian-driven regional image of 'the noble savage' was, for example, very different from one drawn from Tanna or Malekula in current-day Vanuatu.<sup>3</sup>

The contest within the European imagination about how 'the Pacific society' should be characterised and changed occurred in three key intersecting arenas: the world of official policymaking, the world of the representatives of religion and commerce and the world of the creators of knowledge—the *philosophes* and the natural and social scientists. As we have seen, the official 'framing of the islands' began as an idea associated with exploration, cartography and science and, later, with imperialism. Colonial management also encouraged regional thinking as a practical way of rationalising administration over a number of territories, institutionalised in the British Western Pacific High Commission, and later the Central Medical School and the Makogai Leper Colony.

---

2 Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture*, p. 3.

3 O.H.K. Spate, *The Pacific Since Magellan. Volume 3: Paradise Found and Lost*, Sydney: Australian National University Press, 1988, pp. 200–1.

In examining these political contests among Europeans concerning the nature of the ideas that should govern the peoples of this region from the late eighteenth century to the 1930s, this chapter focuses on five particular aspects of this story. The first is the debate concerning the characterisation of Pacific islanders and Pacific island societies that underpinned the establishment of the imperial practices and Christian evangelism of the nineteenth century. The second is the emergence and development of the so-called Australasian Monroe doctrine of the late nineteenth century—a set of ideas that has continued to influence Australian and New Zealand hegemonic approaches to framing the Pacific island region. Third are the shared imperial norms concerned with establishing legitimate colonial forms in the Pacific. The fourth is the way in which the formal colonisation of the Pacific encouraged *regional* and subregional governance. Fifth are some of the proposals for regional confederation put forward by European planters and traders in the late colonial period.

## Noble, ignoble and romantic savages

Following the publication of Bougainville's *A Voyage Round the World* in 1772 and, in the following year, John Hawkesworth's account of Cook's first Pacific voyage, the idealised Pacific islander and the idealised island society became influential in philosophical debates within Europe. They provided various 'state of nature' assumptions in normative debates about political and social organisation.<sup>4</sup> In his magisterial account of the interplay between European conceptions and the Pacific world between 1768 and 1850, Bernard Smith argues that Bougainville's description of his visit to Tahiti in particular 'stamped itself permanently upon the imagination of Europe'.<sup>5</sup> Bougainville's description of Tahiti as the Garden of Eden, and elsewhere as the Elysian fields and *la Nouvelle Cythère*, seemed to confirm for many the existence of a 'golden age' and a state of nature in which the 'savage' was 'noble' or, in the case of the French, *bon* or *beau*.

---

4 Louis Antoine de Bougainville, *A Voyage Round the World*, trans. J.R. Forster, London, 1772; John Hawkesworth, *An Account of the Voyages Undertaken by the Order of His Present Majesty for Making Discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere*, London, 1773; Denis Diderot, *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, 1796.

5 Smith, *European Vision*, p. 25.

This was reinforced by Hawkesworth's interpretation of the journals of Cook and Joseph Banks and his provocative observation that, based on these accounts, the Tahitians were perhaps 'happier than we are'.<sup>6</sup>

While the impact of these Arcadian images on European thought was particularly marked at the end of the eighteenth century, this was not the first time European voyagers had created such pictures of the islands of the South Sea—or Mar del Sur, as it was called before the nineteenth century. Over the previous 200 years, this had in fact been a dominant conception in the observations of Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch navigators as they explored the Pacific and came in touch with local inhabitants.<sup>7</sup> As Smith so persuasively argues for the Cook and Bougainville voyages, this Arcadian imagery was as much a product of preexisting currents in European thought as it was of what these navigators experienced in the Pacific itself.<sup>8</sup> Smith prefigures Edward Said in seeing these early European conceptions of the Pacific as saying as much about the idea of Europe as about the idea of the Pacific. He graphically illustrates this point by reference to the paintings made on these voyages and the influence of neoclassical themes on the representation of people and the landscape.

Other protagonists in the debate over the nature of man and society at this crucial juncture in European history read the reports of the Cook and Bougainville voyages very differently. Instead of drawing an image of a noble savage living in Arcadia, they drew from the social practices reported in the manuscripts by Bougainville and Hawkesworth another idealised and exaggerated creation: an ignoble savage living in an amoral society.<sup>9</sup> Kerry Howe is very persuasive in painting a nineteenth century in which the 'ignoble savage' image comes to predominate, encouraged by the experiences of 'death and fear' in the Pacific—particularly Cook's murder in Hawai'i in 1779 and the disappearance of Jean-François de La Pérouse in Melanesia in 1788—and how that was reported; and later by evangelism and scientific views of racial hierarchy.<sup>10</sup> The evangelical mindset required a wild and fallen 'other'.

6 Cited in *ibid.*, p. 27, as drawn from Hawkesworth's account of the first voyage.

7 *ibid.*; Spate, *The Pacific Since Magellan*, Vol. 3; and particularly Howe, *Nature, Culture and History*.

8 Smith, *European Vision*, Ch. 2.

9 Howe, 'The Fate of the "Savage" in Pacific Historiography'.

10 Howe, *Nature, Culture and History*, Ch. 1.

Howe argues that this image of the Pacific islander continued through the nineteenth century, encouraged by evolutionist thinking, and in the early twentieth century by the decline in island populations and the rise of the perception that these 'races' were dying out. His portrayal is of a shift in European thought from one in which culture prevails over nature to one in which nature prevails over culture (for example, in environmental determinism or racial hierarchy).<sup>11</sup> Smith paints a slightly more complex picture. He argues that not only do we see the emergence of an ignoble savage in European thought that becomes influential in the nineteenth century, but also we see the offspring of the noble *and* ignoble savage—the Romantic savage.<sup>12</sup>

Of importance for the story of the idea of region-building told here is that these images, generated by a particular place in the Pacific, become a generalised image of a South Sea islander in terms of European scientific and philosophical debates. There is constant slippage between the particular and the general. An idealised Pacific island society and Pacific islander are born. They become the site of a European debate about how all Pacific islanders live and should live.

The crucial move is the shift in the dominance of the longstanding 'noble savage' idealisation to the 'ignoble' and 'romantic' savage of the nineteenth century. The initial noble savage framing led to ideas of treating Pacific islanders equally and even to the idea that contact with an impure Europe was to be discouraged and the innocence of such societies protected. But the shift in the nineteenth century to conceptions of the ignoble savage and the romantic savage had implications for what was thinkable for Europeans to do in relation to Pacific islanders. This framing licensed and even compelled Europeans to have power over Pacific islanders, either to bring civilisation and protection or to save their souls. In particular, it allowed and encouraged imperialism and evangelism. Following the logic of their conceptual starting point, pagans needed Christianity and to be civilised; the 'child races' needed protection, the wild needed to be tamed and, as science had established that Pacific islanders were lower on the racial hierarchy, they required European rule.<sup>13</sup>

11 *ibid.*, Ch. 2.

12 Smith, *European Vision*, Ch. 11.

13 On the link between the ignoble savage conception and the 'evangelical mind' and its application in the Pacific, see Howe, *Where the Waves Fall*, Ch. 6.

Smith, Howe and Spate all provide some openings to understanding how we might consider the political implications of these European framings of the Pacific in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For example, with regard to the ignoble savage idealisation of the Pacific native promoted by the evangelicals, Smith says:

Evangelism in a greater or lesser degree permeated all phases of British life and thought during the first half of the century and the graphic portrayal of Pacific islanders in general took on an evangelical purpose and direction.<sup>14</sup>

The evangelicals needed an ignoble ‘other’ to justify their actions. This set the context in which missionary activity was seen as not only justified, but also required. The ‘noble savage’ imagery, on the other hand, informed a very different policy attitude. After stating that the Tahitians are perhaps happier than we are, Hawkesworth’s moral judgement is ‘why then should we stand in judgement upon them!’<sup>15</sup> The ‘noble savage’ idea could later be seen as inherent in indirect rule and protection strategies, whereas the ‘ignoble savage’ depiction underpinned missionary activity, imperialism and the civilising mission.

While there were significant differences in these European representations of Pacific peoples, they came together in seeing Pacific islanders as childlike or as ‘child races’, particularly once Darwinian theories of racial hierarchy were influential from the mid nineteenth century. These conceptions made it possible for Europeans to think they had the right, and even the responsibility, to colonise this part of the world. French, British and German annexation of nearly all of the island territories of the Pacific in the nineteenth century, followed by Australian and New Zealand colonisation in the twentieth century, was enabled by a characterisation of Pacific islanders as ‘child races’, savages (whether noble or ignoble) and, later, seen through Darwinian lenses, as ‘dying out’.<sup>16</sup>

This general image of Pacific islanders was moderated, in policy terms, by perceptions of difference within the Pacific. Those Europeans who spent time in the South Seas saw considerable differences within the Pacific. From his first voyage, Cook was differentiating the Polynesians in the east

---

14 Smith, *European Vision*, p. 244.

15 *ibid.*, p. 27.

16 See, for example, Howe, *Nature, Culture and History*, pp. 31–57; and J.W. Burton, *The Call of the Pacific*, London: Charles H. Kelly, Every Age Library, 1912, p. 5.

of the region from 'races' in the west. From the 1830s, it became common to divide Oceania into three cultural areas: Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia (indeed, there was also a fourth, covering present-day island South-East Asia). While it was common to see the South Seas peoples as belonging to 'races' located at different levels on a perceived hierarchy of races (whether as fixed for all time or part of an evolutionary scale), with the Tahitians and their 'noble savage' status at the high end, all Pacific islanders were seen as below 'the European'.<sup>17</sup> They were seen as being in need of protection or civilisation, and as not qualifying for the rights of the liberal individual.

## The Australasian Monroe doctrine

Although Britain did not begin to acquire an island empire until 1874, it nevertheless enjoyed 'primacy of influence' in the area in the preceding century. According to W.P. Morrell:

[T]he advent of a Power which was mistress of the sea and hence of the means of communication between the island groups gave the history of the Pacific islands a unity it never previously had.<sup>18</sup>

The flow of British settlers to the South Pacific in the nineteenth century made the emergence of regional thinking inevitable. Those who came to the Australian and New Zealand colonies were quick to see the need for a secure region under one flag; the lawlessness of British labour recruiters and traders was to impel the British Government to attempt a regional solution; British administrators had to coordinate policy towards the territories of a newly acquired Pacific island empire; and British planters and other settlers in the islands were later to see the economic advantages of regional cooperation. Despite the penetration of the South Pacific by other European powers, it was the more extensive British settlement that led to the most significant developments in regional thinking.

British reluctance to formalise its dominant position in the region was of concern to the settlers in the new colonies of Australia and New Zealand who called throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century for British

17 Thomas, *In Oceania*, Ch. 5.

18 W.P. Morrell, *Britain in the Pacific Islands*, London: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 1.

annexation of the Western Pacific region.<sup>19</sup> They wanted a united region under a British flag: ‘Oceania for the Anglo-Saxons’, as the demand was later to be described.<sup>20</sup> Imperialistic in design and motive, the Australasian proposals were expressions of the first official regional thinking in the South Pacific.<sup>21</sup>

The Australasian position was most forcefully put at an intercolonial convention held in Sydney in 1883. It was resolved that

further acquisition of dominion in the Pacific, south of the Equator, by any Foreign Power, would be highly detrimental to the safety and well-being of the British possessions in Australasia, and injurious to the interests of the Empire.<sup>22</sup>

A second resolution urged the British Government to ‘promptly adopt the wisest and most effectual measures for securing the safety and contentment of this portion of Her Majesty’s dominions’.<sup>23</sup> This stance immediately became known as the ‘Australasian Monroe doctrine’ because it was seen as proclaiming that the South Pacific was an Anglo-Saxon preserve in which other ‘powers’ should not trespass. This is certainly how the resolutions were interpreted by other powers, particularly France and Germany, and by the British Colonial Secretary, who, in a letter to the British prime minister, described the idea of a ‘Monroe Doctrine laid down for the whole South Pacific’ as ‘mere raving’. The prime minister regarded the extreme demands of the convention as ‘preposterous’.<sup>24</sup>

The various proposals of a similar vein that had been put forward by the Australian and New Zealand colonies in the 30 years preceding the intercolonial convention had received a similar reception in London. The British Government did not agree with the colonists’ assessment of the territorial intentions of other powers. And, in view of the presence

---

19 Even to the point of angering Otto von Bismarck, who found the “grasping policy” of the English colonists as offensive and irritating as the original “insolent” Monroe “dogma”. Tate, ‘The Australasian Monroe Doctrine’, p. 281.

20 A phrase used by Andre Siegfried in the early twentieth century, cited in C. Hartley Grattan, *The Southwest Pacific to 1900: A Modern History*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963, p. 179.

21 These proposals—variously termed ‘Australasian subimperialism’, ‘the Australasian Monroe doctrine’ or ‘colonial imperialism’—are examined in John M. Ward, *British Policy in the South Pacific*, Sydney: Australasian Publishing Co., 1948, pp. 197–204; Neville Meaney, *A History of Australian Defence and Foreign Policy, 1901–23. Volume 1: The Search for Security in the Pacific, 1901–1914*, Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1976, pp. 9, 16–22; and Tate, ‘The Australasian Monroe Doctrine’.

22 Tate, ‘The Australasian Monroe Doctrine’, p. 275.

23 *ibid.*

24 *ibid.*, pp. 277–8.

of German and French interests in the region, they did not think it would be as simple as the colonists claimed to declare British sovereignty over the region, even if there was sufficient reason to attempt to do so.<sup>25</sup>

The Australian and New Zealand colonies wanted a British South Pacific. They were concerned lest other powers gained control of the Pacific islands. They each saw a regional solution as desirable, but beyond this general level of agreement there were important distinctions to be drawn with regard to their respective motives, and to the specific nature of their proposals. The New Zealand schemes invariably involved the idea of a 'confederation'; they centred on the Polynesian groups of Fiji, Tonga and Samoa and, most significantly, they were concerned with gaining more territory for New Zealand.<sup>26</sup> The Australian colonies were less concerned with extending their territorial boundaries. Their schemes did not as a rule involve direct Australian control of the islands.<sup>27</sup> They were concerned, however, to persuade the British Government that it should declare a protectorate over the islands of the Western Pacific.<sup>28</sup> They were motivated in this by commercial interests both extant and potential, by the need for protection of Australian settlers in the region, especially after the 1850s, and by strategic considerations.<sup>29</sup> The last reason was particularly important, and was most evident in the colonists' concern about the future of Fiji, New Guinea and the New Hebrides.

Thus, in contrast to the New Zealand schemes, the Australian proposals tended to place less emphasis on territorial gain; they were not concerned with 'confederation' and they centred more on the Melanesian area of the South Pacific. Already Australia and New Zealand had begun to see different parts of the South Pacific as their concern—a tendency that continued in their later foreign policies. Although the Australasian entreaties to the British Government were unsuccessful, they were

---

25 *ibid.*

26 For details of the various New Zealand schemes, including governor George Grey's annexation proposals of the 1850s, premier Julius Vogel's proposal for a 'grand island dominion' of the 1870s and premier Richard Seddon's imperialistic designs of the 1890s, see Angus Ross, *New Zealand Aspirations in the Pacific in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964.

27 The Victorian Government did, however, suggest to the British Government that it annex Samoa after the civil war of 1893–94 because of 'the manifest destiny of Australasia to be the controlling Power in the Southern Pacific'. Meaney, *A History of Australian Defence and Foreign Policy*, p. 22.

28 *ibid.*, pp. 9, 16–21.

29 The importance of Australian trade with its 'Pacific frontier' and the movement of Australians into the islands as traders, missionaries and planters in the nineteenth century are examined in John M.R. Young, ed., *Australia's Pacific Frontier: Economic and Cultural Expansion into the Pacific, 1795–1885*, Melbourne: Cassell Australia, 1967.

nevertheless very important developments in the evolution of regionalist thought. They represented the genesis of an attitude that has, at least in part, been behind all subsequent Australasian efforts to promote region-building in the Pacific.

## Imperial norms

The ‘messy entanglement’ between the imperial ideas of Europe, the United States and the Australasians, on the one hand, and Pacific societies, on the other, began in the nineteenth century and particularly in the 1840s, when the period of annexation and European missionary and trader activity began. The impact varied enormously across the region. The colonial powers had different approaches (contrast the indirect rule of Britain with the assimilationist approach of France), and some island groups experienced several waves of colonial rule (some Micronesian islands experienced Spanish, German, Japanese and American rule, for example). Furthermore, a particular colonial power could adopt different approaches to different Pacific island territories (for example, the significant difference between French colonial rule in New Caledonia and that in French Polynesia).<sup>30</sup>

Although the imperial powers were in strong competition with each other, and while each imparted distinctive forms of colonial rule, there were also shared dominant European norms concerning legitimate statehood and appropriate social organisation, which could be said at a very general level to dramatically influence the political change in the Pacific island region over the following century. While imperial norms could be seen as being diffused by one imperial power in one particular island society, they could also be seen as ‘international’ norms in the sense that they were accepted shared norms of the European system of states. The rights and responsibilities associated with imperialism itself could be seen as norms of the interstate system of Europe. There was a general acceptance of the idea that the norms concerning sovereign equality did not apply to those who were ‘child races’ or who were not organised politically in such a way to meet the ‘standard of civilisation’.

---

30 Stephen Henningham, ‘France in Melanesia and Polynesia’, in Howe et al., *Tides of History*, pp. 119–46.

The Kingdom of Tonga was the only Pacific island society that was accepted as conforming to the norms of legitimate statehood. King Taufa'ahau Tupou I worked hard to adopt all the trappings of a modern European state. He unified the Tongan chieftaincies through warfare, converted to Christianity, abolished slavery, set up a new titled nobility, promulgated a constitution that among other things established a Christian state and the rule of law and even changed his name and that of his wife to that of the reigning King and Queen of England, George and Charlotte (Tonganised to Siaosi and Salote).<sup>31</sup>

The annexation of all other island societies by France, Spain, Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, the United States and, later, by Japan, Australia and New Zealand, created revolutionary political change. It created new political boundaries, the idea of a centralised state, 'perpetual peace' between warring tribes (for example, in Fiji, the New Guinea Highlands and Solomon Islands) and new ways of resolving conflict over the larger area of the colonial state through conferencing and council consensus. Although Britain attempted indirect rule, new norms inevitably governed political interactions and processes at the national level. For example, a Fiji-wide Council of Chiefs was set up by the British to introduce a peaceful way of resolving intersociety disputes. The church was also a new source of power, and the changing cosmology associated with conversion impacted on island society.

## Colonial regional management

In 1877, in what was the first institutional expression of colonial regional thinking in relation to the South Pacific area, Britain attempted a coordinated approach to controlling its subjects in the then unclaimed islands of the South Pacific through the establishment of the Western Pacific High Commission. The High Commission's territorial jurisdiction was much larger than was suggested by its name. It included Tonga, Samoa, the Union, Phoenix, Ellice, Gilbert, Marshall, Caroline, Solomon and Santa Cruz islands, and Rotuma, New Guinea, New Britain, New Ireland, the Louisiade Archipelago and 'all other islands in the Western Pacific Ocean not being within the limits of Fiji, Queensland or New South Wales and not being within the jurisdiction of any civilised

---

31 Howe, *Where the Waves Fall*, Ch. 9, especially pp. 188–94.

Power'.<sup>32</sup> The High Commission was established partly to obviate the necessity for further annexation in the South Pacific. It was thought that if the high commissioner could use his judicial powers to check lawlessness perpetrated by British subjects then further, and more expensive, involvement in the region could be avoided.<sup>33</sup> It was also seen as a means of satisfying Australasian demands for an official British presence in the area. The high commissioner was given the power to make

such regulations as to him seem fit for the government of British subjects, by enforcing the observance by them of ... any treaty between Her Majesty and any King, Chief, or other authority in the Western Pacific Islands and for securing the maintenance ... of friendly relations between British subjects and those authorities and persons subject to them.<sup>34</sup>

The High Commission was not successful in checking the problems associated with the labour trade. This failure can be largely attributed to a small budget, poor access to transport, inadequate staff and a high commissioner who also had the demanding job of Governor of Fiji. Also the High Commission could only act after the event in a judicial role; it could not prevent the infringement occurring.<sup>35</sup> With the failure of the High Commission's attempts to cope with the problem, the British Government realised it would have to declare protectorates over some of these territories if it was to handle the problem more effectively.

Despite Britain's initial reluctance to acquire political responsibilities in the South Pacific, the circumstances of the late nineteenth century eventually impelled it to do so. It was by then clear that a political presence was required to check the lawlessness of British subjects involved in labour recruitment and protect the British settlers clustered in trading settlements throughout the region. There was also the impetus provided by the intentions of rival powers, particularly Germany. Apart from moves by France earlier in the century to declare a protectorate in the Marquesas in 1842 and to annex New Caledonia in 1853, and by Britain to accept an offer of cession from the Fijian chief Ratu Seru Epenisa Cakobau in 1874, no substantial annexation of territory took place until 1884. From

---

32 Ward, *British Policy in the South Pacific*, p. 267.

33 Deryck Scarr, *Fragments of Empire: A History of the Western Pacific High Commission 1877–1914*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1967, pp. xvi, 21–3.

34 *ibid.*, p. 30.

35 *ibid.*

that date, Germany and Britain moved quickly to secure territories in which they already enjoyed a predominant influence. By 1900, each island group in Oceania was part of one of four Western empires: British, French, German or American.<sup>36</sup>

The partition of Oceania was an important step in the development of regional governance, in terms of both its immediate effects and its long-term implications. It meant that almost immediately a degree of subregional unity was achieved. Scattered island groups as far apart as the Cook Islands and Solomon Islands now came under the one flag. A degree of subregional unity was promoted not only by the fact that general policy for all of the Pacific islands was now decided in four metropolitan capitals, but also by the efforts of France, Germany and Britain to achieve some form of administrative coordination within their Pacific empires. The great distance separating the American possessions of Guam and American Samoa discouraged the adoption of a coordinated approach to their administration until they were joined, after the Pacific War, by the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands in Micronesia.<sup>37</sup>

In the French Pacific, although great distances separated possessions in the west from those in the east, a coordinated approach to administration was taken within each group. In the west, the governing of New Caledonia, New Hebrides and the Wallis and Futuna Islands was coordinated by the creation in 1900 of the office of Commissaire Général de la République dans l'Océan Pacifique, which was held by the Governor of New Caledonia. Completing the centralisation of power, the office of Haut-Commissaire de France dans l'archipel des Nouvelles-Hébrides, established in 1907, was also assigned to the Governor of New Caledonia.<sup>38</sup> In the eastern Pacific, the administrative integration of the hundreds of scattered Polynesian islands was achieved by the creation of the Etablissements Français de l'Océanie, which equates with present-day French Polynesia.<sup>39</sup> The German Government also divided its Pacific empire into two segments. The possessions in the western Pacific—Micronesia (including Nauru) and New Guinea—were, after 1906, administered jointly from government headquarters in New Britain.<sup>40</sup> Samoa came under a separate

36 For a detailed examination of the partition of Oceania, see Morrell, *Britain in the Pacific Islands*; and Grattan, *The Southwest Pacific*, Chs 22–3.

37 See David Hanlon, 'Patterns of Colonial Rule in Micronesia', in Howe et al., *Tides of History*.

38 Grattan, *The Southwest Pacific*, p. 403.

39 *ibid.*, p. 411.

40 *ibid.*, p. 346.

administration; however, this arrangement was short-lived. The German territories were taken over by Australia, New Zealand and Japan during World War I.

Administrative coordination in the British Pacific was achieved through a reconstituted Western Pacific High Commission. Under the *British Settlements Act* of 1887, which was applied to the South Pacific by the Pacific Order in Council of 1893, the High Commission was to provide a centralised administration for the new British protectorates—Solomon Islands and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands—and continue its old functions in relation to unacquired territories and islands with which Britain had a special treaty relationship.<sup>41</sup> The High Commission did not fare much better in its new task. Suva was too far removed from the territories—a fact aggravated by poor transport and communications—and the old problems of a tight budget and few staff continued. Conflicts arose between resident commissioners and the high commissioner. This arrangement of centralised control continued despite the unsuitability of the High Commission structure to its new responsibilities.<sup>42</sup>

One of the most significant aspects of the High Commission's operations until the 1890s was the emphasis on 'native welfare' or 'trusteeship'. The High Commission was there to protect islanders against the actions of British labour recruiters and settlers. This was reinforced by the personal attitudes of the high commissioners, who were accused by the British settlers of being one-sided. This emphasis, however, was to change around the turn of the century. The interests of the islanders now took second place to those of the European settlers. The high commissioners began to act on the assumption that the 'native races' were dying out and that there was a 'sacred imperial duty' to develop the resources of the region.<sup>43</sup>

The creation of the Central Medical School in 1928 signalled a return to 'native welfare' considerations.<sup>44</sup> The school was an extension of training facilities that already existed for Fijian 'native practitioners'. Its establishment owed much to the inspiration of Dr S. Lambert and

---

41 Ward, *British Policy in the South Pacific*, pp. 326–30.

42 Scarr, *Fragments of Empire*, pp. 283–5.

43 *ibid.*, pp. 293–4.

44 For a brief discussion of the work of the Central Medical School, see Linden A. Mander, *Some Dependent Peoples of the South Pacific*, Leiden: E.J. Brill for Institute of Pacific Relations, 1954, pp. 495–7; and Felix M. Keesing, *The South Seas in the Modern World*, New York: John Day Co., 1946, pp. 214–16.

to the financial support of the organisation for which he worked, the Rockefeller Foundation. The four-year medical courses were attended by students from Fiji, Tonga, Western Samoa, the Cook Islands, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, New Hebrides, Solomon Islands and American Samoa after 1933.<sup>45</sup>

## Regional confederation proposals

In the 1920s, the British settlers in Fiji and Western Samoa put forward various proposals for regional confederation that were aimed at benefiting the European settler, not the indigenous inhabitant. In 1921, Henry Scott, a member of the Fijian Legislative Council and Mayor of Suva, proposed a confederation of British territories centred on Suva. Although ostensibly aiming at administrative efficiency and the benefits of a coordinated approach, Scott had other things in mind. Richard Herr and Doug Munro argue that the real motive underlying Scott's initiative was the possibility of gaining 'for British subjects in Fiji and other islands a greater measure of political control of "popular representation"', and further, that this was a 'frantic attempt to ensure that Indians and Fijians remained in their state of subservience'.<sup>46</sup> Although enthusiastically supported by the other members of the legislative council, the proposal received only a lukewarm reception from local officials and was not entertained seriously by the Colonial Office. It was the fear of being 'swallowed up' by Australia or New Zealand that motivated another British settler in Fiji, Henry Stead, to advocate some months later another confederation proposal. Stead's idea was intended to benefit the planter who, he thought, faced similar problems throughout the region.<sup>47</sup>

The cause of the planters and traders was taken up in the 1930s by an Australian, Robert W. Robson, who was editor of the magazine *Pacific Islands Monthly*. The establishment of this monthly magazine in Sydney in 1930, and its circulation to the settlers in most islands of the South Pacific, created an awareness of a common situation faced by European settlers throughout the region. It was an important contributor to, as well as a reflection of, the developing regional consciousness of the

---

45 At the same time, there was a considerable saving in cost to the participating governments through the sharing of training facilities and by the use of native practitioners.

46 Doug Munro and Richard A. Herr, 'Island Confederation and George Westbrook', *ANU Historical Journal*, 9(December), 1972: 10-18, at p. 12.

47 *ibid.*, p. 12.

European settlers. In January 1931, a *Pacific Islands Monthly* editorial by Robson advocated the establishment of a Pacific island association 'for the purpose of consultation, so as to secure united action regarding many vital matters of common interest'.<sup>48</sup> The territories Robson had in mind were the 11 British, Australian and New Zealand territories, plus New Caledonia and American Samoa.

His idea was to have a periodic conference, at first initiated among the British administrations, but later to include France, America and even Japan if they were interested.<sup>49</sup> He thought the following interests should be represented at the conferences: administrators, planters and producers, merchants and traders, 'educated natives', missions and those responsible for communications. The main objective of such an association would be 'the consideration and discussion of all matters of common interests to the islands communities, and the dissemination of information relating thereto'. All of the examples Robson gave of items of common interest that could be discussed related to the interests of the planter: copra prices, wages and pests and diseases affecting crops.<sup>50</sup>

Robson continued his campaign later in the decade. In a radio broadcast in Suva on 24 July 1936, subsequently reported in the *Pacific Islands Monthly*, he once again called for the formation of a regional organisation. Although he saw the ideal as cooperation by all of the colonial powers, he asked that the 'British communities' make a practical start. He regarded as particularly urgent the need for a 'central bureau of economics' to advise planters throughout the region.<sup>51</sup>

Robson's proposals were more influential than previous ones because of their regionwide publicity in the *Pacific Islands Monthly*, and because of his constant travels throughout the islands. In his proposals there is a continuation of some of the main themes in regional thinking of the previous decade. Most importantly, his proposals were aimed mainly at benefiting the European settler in the Pacific islands. Regional cooperation was viewed as a means of sharing information and taking united action in relation to crop production, trade and commerce.

---

48 Robert W. Robson, 'Need for a Closer Relationship between Territories', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 17 January 1931: 1-2.

49 Robson used the term 'British' to refer also to the Australian and New Zealand territories.

50 Robson, 'Need for a Closer Relationship', pp. 1-2.

51 Robert W. Robson, 'Plea for Co-operation in Pacific Affairs', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 24 September 1936: 53-4.

But Robson also introduced some new dimensions to regional thought. Unlike his predecessors, he was not advocating a solely British regionalism. He wanted, ultimately, to see French, American and Dutch involvement.

His cry was not that of 'Oceania for the Anglo-Saxons', but rather 'Oceania for the white race'. Regional cooperation was seen not only as a means of preparing 'the way for a much bigger settlement of white folks', but also as a defence against the 'countless swarming millions of Asia'.<sup>52</sup> In desiring to see cooperation among all colonial powers in the South Pacific, Robson consequently envisaged a much more extensive region than did his predecessors. It in fact was slightly more extensive than what is today generally acknowledged as constituting the official Pacific island region. Although the various confederation proposals put forward by the British planters and traders were overtaken by the impact of the Pacific War, they nevertheless formed an important stage in the development of regional thinking.

The proponents and initiators of a regional idea in the period from European settlement in the South Pacific until the outbreak of World War II were mainly British. Within the British camp there were, as we have seen, a number of different groups involved, with varying motives and proposals. In particular, the distinction between the role of the British Government, on the one hand, and that of the various groups of British settlers in the region (especially those in Australia and New Zealand), on the other, should be emphasised. The British Government entered into commitments in the Pacific islands reluctantly, drawn in by the activities of its subjects who, by contrast, were eager to become involved in the region.

While the British Government's regional initiatives were concerned with the protection of the indigenous inhabitants and with administrative and judicial rationalisation, British settlers supported the concept of regional cooperation, and a united region under a British flag, for different reasons. They were concerned with the benefits that such an arrangement could bring to them, in the form of security and territorial gain (in the case of the Australasian colonies), profit (in the case of British traders and planters) or prestige. Apart from the spread of the British Pacific empire, which was

---

52 *ibid.*

a form of regionalism that the Australasian colonies had proposed, the main substantive expressions of regionalism were the regional institutions created within the British Pacific.

By the outbreak of World War II, then, there had already been a long history of regional thinking. Institutions had been established and there was evidence of a regional consciousness among the Europeans living in the islands and recognition of a shared situation in territories thousands of kilometres apart. This regional thinking had already extended to the non-British Pacific in Robson's proposals and already incorporated all of the territories included in the postwar boundaries. Absent, however, from prewar developments was the inclusion of the indigenous inhabitants of the region, the Pacific islanders. Also absent was cooperation among the various colonial governments with territories in the region. This was soon to change. The Pacific War of 1941–45 spurred the social democratic governments of Australia and New Zealand to impose a new regional frame on the Pacific island region.

This text is taken from *Framing the Islands: Power and Diplomatic Agency in Pacific Regionalism*, by Greg Fry, published 2019 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.