

Conclusion

Australian travel writing forms a rich and diverse collection of the impressions and observations of Australians abroad. These stories of travel are significant because they can extend our historical understanding of Australian engagement with the Pacific Islands. They are also important because they enrich the broader narrative of European colonial encounters in the region, as well as offer an alternative perspective from the periphery of the Empire. Once dismissed for its momentary, superficial and touristic nature, travel literature can now offer new information about encounters with, and representations of, the Pacific Islands. These accounts challenge the notion that engagement was restricted to political and economic channels only. Ordinary Australians regularly discussed and encountered the Pacific Islands outside official or business capacities, and their accounts were crucial avenues for informing Australian readers at home.

These sources illuminate an important period in Australia's national history, one in which a growing, Australian-born population began to negotiate its own sense of identity and articulate its role in the broader region. Between c. 1880 and 1941, Australian engagement with the Pacific Islands increased dramatically due to improvements in transportation, the growth of trade and business, Christian outreach and colonial administration in the region. Further, the development of the publishing industry and literacy in Australia facilitated the circulation of travel accounts around the country. During this time, Australians were closely connected to the Pacific Islands and were well aware of their neighbours. Of course, stereotypes and misunderstandings persisted and, in some aspects, Australian knowledge of the Islands was rudimentary or simplified. However, Australian travel writing contributed to an increasingly informed Australian public. This was accomplished at a time that has often been overlooked by historians who were more concerned with the legacy of the Pacific War in transforming Australian perceptions

of the Islands. Although this war had significant consequences for the region, it should not overshadow the long-term engagement between Australians and the Pacific before 1941.

Travel writing provides a more nuanced and complex perspective of Australians and how they perceived their place in the region. Analysis of this genre must maintain a balance between acknowledging the individual experiences of travel and situating travellers within a collective historical context. These individual impressions formed layers of representations over time, substantiating and perpetuating particular tropes and stereotypes that ultimately contributed to a broader Australian literary corpus. Australian travel accounts suggested that most travellers conformed to popular tropes and stereotypes when representing the Pacific Islands. The development of steamship travel and tourism shaped Australian expectations and impressions of the Pacific Islands, with travellers often following well-worn paths and making similar remarks about the voyage and the moment of first arrival. Australian travellers shared expectations of the Pacific as a place of economic prosperity and potential wealth, embodied by the figure of the enterprising trader, prospector, planter and overseer. This extended to Polynesia, which was commonly idealised as alluring and idyllic, despite the effects of European contact and development. Australian travel writers were also united in their criticisms of French colonial ambitions in the Pacific before World War I. The clearest commonality that Australian travel writers shared was popular attitudes to race and racial theory. Observations of disease, depopulation, ethnic diversity and Islander savagery reflected widespread assumptions of the perceived stasis of the Pacific in comparison to Australian progress and superiority.

Yet, there were cases of dissent and difference too. In response to the growth of tourism, many rejected the tourist label because it contravened the ideals of adventure and exploration that were traditionally associated with the Pacific. Similarly, idyllic tropes of economic wealth or of an alluring Polynesia were challenged by the accounts of travellers who reported on the realities of commerce in the Pacific, and on the difficulties of realising a utopian life in the Islands. Closer inspection of the accounts of the Queensland labour trade and the New Hebrides condominium also suggest that Australian travellers and readers were just as likely to be confused as they were to be convinced or conformist in their views. While the science of race was popularly regarded as absolute, face-to-face encounters in the Pacific could unsettle Australians' racialist assumptions

of Islander savagery and inferiority. Though the travellers who expressed uncertainty and doubt were a minority, they offered a more complex understanding of how Australians negotiated and contested popular themes and narratives about the Pacific Islands.

This study has provided glimpses of the numerous accounts of travellers in the Pacific Islands, showing that the most well-known travel writers were not isolated cases. The travel accounts that were highlighted represent only a small fraction of a wider body of European and American literature that had described and entrenched images of the Pacific. They also represent an even lower percentage of the Australian travellers who move across the Pacific Ocean. Though they were situated on the edge of the British Empire, Australian travellers were well informed about the region before embarking on their journeys, so that they were knowledgeable about the Islands themselves, about their relationship to Australia and about the travellers who preceded them. Their own accounts contributed to a growing body of knowledge about the Pacific that was accessible to a broader readership. It was preferred as truthful and educative over the exaggerated fictional tales that had been so popular in the 1800s.

Determining how widespread Australian interest in the Pacific was is problematic, as well as whether there was a particular time between 1880 and 1941 when Australians were more aware of the Pacific. The 1880s and 1890s were a time when Australian public interest in the Pacific Islands peaked due to French and German presence in Melanesia and the growth of the Queensland labour trade. Despite well-established maritime connections with the eastern colonies, Australian travel writing was limited in volume until the 1890s, and tourism in the Pacific was in its infancy. From these few accounts, it is evident that Australians continued to subscribe to conventional European tropes of the Pacific Island as a romantic and exotic location with the potential for savage encounters at the end of the nineteenth century.

From the 1890s until 1914, travel writing increased dramatically and the Pacific featured prominently in Australian public discourse. It was encouraged by economic prosperity and social mobility in Australia, the growth of publishing and the development of steamship and tourism industries. This was also a period of national self-confidence and optimism, as the newly federated nation articulated its own role in the Pacific. Australian-born travellers began to identify themselves as distinct from their European origins, and their travel accounts began to show evidence

of a more localised and specific relationship with the Pacific Islands than previous European generalisations. This included making judgements on colonial rule in the region and discussing the potential benefits of Australian imperialism.

Australian interest in the Pacific Islands peaked in the interwar period between 1918 and 1941. Following World War I, Australians travelled to the Pacific Islands in higher numbers than ever before and subsequently produced more travel writing. After the social and economic upheaval of World War I, a white urban middle class in Australia drove demand for travel and literature simultaneously. Travel writers thus increasingly needed to distinguish themselves in a competitive commercial market. Concurrently, Australia acquired mandated territories in the Pacific, which was followed by greater interest in, and criticism of, the nation's new internationally sanctioned role in the Pacific. A growing number of travel accounts that were written during the interwar period conveyed uncertainty about conventional European and Australian assumptions and narratives about the Pacific Islands. These include accounts that challenged or rejected stereotypes emphasising Islander inferiority and savagery and that advocated a more humanistic identification with them.

These accounts may reflect a broader shift in Australian society during the 1920s and 1930s towards a cultural maturity, marked by a reaction against the racialised and essentialist assumptions that had underscored the White Australia policy. However, this response may have been limited to the cultural elite. A close analysis of travel writing reveals more broadly that Australian travellers and readers grew weary of the exaggerated and overused tropes about the Pacific Islands. A similar response had occurred 30 years earlier, when Australian readers chose literature that departed from the formulaic British fictions of the 1880s. This apparent trend towards a more critical and nuanced understanding of the Pacific Islands may also reflect the numerical growth of travellers and travel accounts in the 1930s, offering more occasions for intimate encounters in the Pacific that challenged individuals' preconceptions.

Our ability to understand the effects of these travel accounts on the wider Australian audience is limited by the availability of information about the publication, distribution and reception of these texts. It is important not to inflate the effects of Australian travel writing on the Pacific Islands, as argued in Hank Nelson's study of Australian descriptions of Papua and New Guinea. This suggested that even by the 1930s, most Australians

rarely thought about the region at all.¹ Occasionally, clues point to the popularity of particular texts—the number of editions printed and where they were printed; book reviews listed in newspapers; references to particular authors or works in other travel accounts; and the persistence of certain themes or representations in the literature. However, the extent to which they influenced popular opinion is not always clear.

Australian readers were as diverse as those who were travelling and writing, with different responses to the Pacific Islands in the various Australian colonies and states over time. The eastern colonies of Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland were more closely connected to the Pacific Islands than South Australia and Western Australia. On the eastern seaboard, Sydney's maritime connections and its location as a centre of Pacific trade fostered a regard for the Pacific Islands that was distinct from the protectionist attitudes in Victoria. As the seat of the national government from 1901 to 1927, Victoria was also the location of vigorous lobbying by the Presbyterian Church for greater involvement in the New Hebrides. Similarly, Queensland's proximity to Melanesia, its tropical characteristics and its demand for cheap agricultural labour are just a few of the factors that distinguished its engagement with the Pacific Islands from others. Within these regions, the rural–urban divide complicates our understanding of Australian readers and responses. So too does the mobility of Australians, many of whom moved fluidly between countries, colonies and continents and cannot be pinned to a particular home or localised identity. These nuances within Australian readerships and travellers require further exploration in the future.

Travel writing is an ideal source for contemporary historical studies that recognise the mobility of Australians and the need to consider Australian history in a transnational context. Australians were, and continue to be, exceptionally mobile—to the point that this has become part of what it means to be Australian.² This brief survey of the Pacific Islands is a small contribution to a broader study of Australian travel writing, one that explores how travel to Asia, Europe and North America shaped the nation. There is merit to considering the views of those on the periphery of empire, and to considering the distinct historical contexts that shaped

1 Nelson, 'Looking Black: Australian Images of Melanesians', 156.

2 Agnieszka Sobocinska and Richard White, 'Travel and Connections', in *The Cambridge History of Australia*, vol. 2, ed. Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 493, doi.org/10.1017/cho9781107445758.051.

Australian perceptions of the world. At the turn of the twentieth century, an emerging Australian nation began to consider itself at the centre of an oceanic region. The scale and geography of the region necessitate a more sophisticated understanding of the Pacific Islands, one that recognises the specific historical relationships between particular Islands and Australian localities. This was especially the case in Melanesia, where Australians associated individual Islands with specific historical encounters, often marked by trade, conflicts, murders and reprisals. Queenslanders were familiar with the New Hebrides due to labour traders, and caricatures such as ‘Tommy Tanna’ demonstrate that Australians did not always consider the Islands according to regional or colonial boundaries. Australians distinguished specific Islands as more or less savage than others in recognition of the past martyrdom of a particular missionary or official, or in an attempt to justify their own ambitions or achievements. There is the need for a more localised and specific history of Australian encounters in the Pacific that recognises that while generalisations and stereotypes continued to persist in Australian representations of the Islands, there were local influences in both regions that challenged and modified popular notions.

Pacific Islanders were also extensive travellers, and their historical mobility within Australia and the Pacific is a burgeoning area of study. Indigenous crews on ships, missionaries and political leaders offer important counter-narratives that enrich our understanding of colonial mobility at this time. They also highlight how visiting Australia might have unintentionally shaped the ways in which Pacific people have viewed their neighbour. The changing reactions and responses of Pacific Islanders to Australian visitors in their Islands also require further attention in the future, particularly as tourism has become a significant part of Pacific Island economies at present.

Determining the influence of Pacific travel on itinerant Australians is fraught. Australian travel writers dedicated comparatively little space to describing their departure from the Pacific Islands than they did to describe their arrival. The moment of departure often abruptly ended the travel account—there were few reflections on steaming back into Sydney harbour, or about settling back into life at home in Australia. For those embarking on, or returning from, their grand tours, the Pacific Islands were a brief chapter or subheading within a broader account, overlooked in the travellers’ excited anticipation of reaching Europe or returning home. Some travellers ended their accounts with a short summative

statement or paragraph, while published books usually included a reflection in the preface or final chapter. These remarks varied in their content and purpose, from simplistic short impressions to more well-planned observations about the Islands, the travellers or their future. The author's views were frequently unclear, such as those of politician Thomas Henley, who warned 'readers of the foregoing generalizations may, and probably will, conclude that I have presented to them a hotchpotch collection—a mixture of many thoughts about many things, from many sources. I admit the impeachment'.³

In some cases, travellers remained unmoved by the Pacific Islands. But, more commonly, authors argued that the Pacific Islands had something to offer to the Australian traveller. In attempting to justify their travels and distinguish their writing from others, many Australians argued that the Pacific Islands (or, more accurately, *their* experience of the Pacific Islands) could satisfy the 'enquiring mind'. Henley claimed:

My object in writing has been to present in as simple a form as possible some of the answers to the questions propounded to enquiring minds when travelling in the great archipelago of the Pacific in search of information and recreation.⁴

Beatrice Grimshaw framed her own journey as 'a quest after information spiced with amusement', in accordance with conventional notions of travel as an activity in self-improvement.⁵ For this reason, travellers frequently reiterated the accuracy of their accounts and explained their attempts to be objective. Dr Casey Albert Wood remarked:

Possibly the following descriptions, that I jotted down in my notebook from time to time may appear to be sentimental exaggerations and worthy of being classed with the productions of South Sea 'fakirs', but they were, at the time of observation at least, genuine impressions.⁶

Although most travellers tried to justify their recollections as being honest, accurate and authentic, few could resist relying on the familiar descriptions of the 'indescribable' or 'picturesque', or alluding to European

3 Henley, *A Pacific Cruise*, 155.

4 Henley, *A Pacific Cruise*, 155.

5 Grimshaw, *From Fiji to the Cannibal Islands*, 29.

6 Casey Albert Wood, Letter, 1923–1924, MS 3526 (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1923–1924), 8.

fantasies such as ‘the lure of the Pacific Islands’.⁷ A few accounts were more explicit in embracing the romance that imbued the Pacific and the travellers’ memories, who sometimes wrote years after their travel. Arnold Safroni-Middleton was upfront with the reader about his ‘half-remembered romance’.⁸ Elinor Mordaunt was explicitly nostalgic, writing that ‘one is not really happy traveling, one is most happy in remembering’.⁹ For others, the process of writing and remembering was cathartic. Eric Muspratt described this in his autobiography, *Fire of Youth*: ‘One had wanted to build so much into a book, the fire of youth, smokelike dreams, and the creeping shadows of final darkness’.¹⁰ John Fraser completed his account before departing for war and noted that:

Many threads go to weave the fabric of memory, and I have found the unravelling of these, during odd times of leisure, so absorbing a pastime that I have to go on and on like the Ancient Mariner who *had* to tell all he knew.¹¹

For these Australians, it was a reflection on their personal journey rather than the physical voyage that brought their accounts to a close.

These personal reflections—hidden among the sterile observations and predictable tourist tropes of the overwhelming majority of Australian travel writing—are much more difficult to find. Few travellers wrote reflections about themselves or how their experiences of the Islands changed their worldview. This is not to say that travel to the Pacific did not prompt introspection, but perhaps that it was not articulated openly in the literature. Travel writing provided a sense of escapism, and travellers were reluctant to disturb the exotic fantasy by revealing personal anxieties or conflicted feelings. Racialised scientific language was a convenient tool to disguise the heightened emotional state of travellers during human encounters. Such responses reinforced popular and misguided notions of the Pacific that were peddled by the accounts of government officials, missionaries and residents—who possessed vested interests that prevailed in the discussion of broader issues relating to Australia and the Pacific Islands. As racist views of the Pacific

7 Dickinson, *A Trader in the Savage Solomons*, 206–7.

8 Safroni-Middleton, *Wine-Dark Seas and Tropic Skies*, 12.

9 Mordaunt, *The Venture Book*, vi.

10 Muspratt, *Fire of Youth*, 189.

11 Fraser, *Gold Dish and Kava Bowl*, 252.

progressively hardened in Australian public discourse, so too did travellers struggle to reconcile such judgements with the realities they faced during close encounters with Pacific Islanders.

The emotional power of human encounters can be observed in some accounts in which Australians expressed deeper sentiment than simply disillusionment. In some cases, the experience of travel destabilised certain conventional assumptions while leaving others intact. Jack McLaren was one such example. He retained a colonial view of Islanders and used colonialist language, yet recognised their basic equality:

And I, watching, concluded that in the matters of superstition, tradition and, above all, keen sensibility to scorn the man of the Palaeolithic Wild and the man of the Civilized Wild were brothers all the while.¹²

Ralph Stock maintained racialised and essentialised views of Pacific Islanders, yet recognised that Islanders must have regarded European practices as ‘equally ludicrous to them’.¹³ Henley was also moved by empathy during his travels, noting that, ‘something may be said or written which will make for a better understanding of our relations one with the other. To that end we must work’.¹⁴ This compassionate view must also be weighed against his belief that the British Empire had a ‘divine’ responsibility to the Pacific.

Occasionally in face-to-face human encounters, the expected stereotype of savage or primitive was deeply unsettled. Aletta Lewis endeavoured to abandon her European-ness in American Samoa completely but was dismayed to find that task impossible.¹⁵ Alan John Marshall was critical about the influence of European colonialism in the Pacific:

In all my writings and lectures I have been a friend of the native, and nobody is more interested in his cultural and physical welfare than I am. I loathe that spreading rash of civilisation which is smashing the slow sure rhythm of stone.¹⁶

12 McLaren, *My Odyssey*, 256.

13 Stock, *The Cruise of the Dream Ship*, 222.

14 Henley, *A Pacific Cruise*, 174.

15 Lewis, *They Call Them Savages*.

16 Marshall, *The Men and Birds of Paradise*, 130.

Muspratt's account vividly described his shock when he returned home:

Returning to civilization was a painful experience. Again one felt the unpleasantness and the unfairness of the money standard and all the meannesses it involves. Hurt by these things I retired into quiet corners, and withdrew into myself, ashamed of myself and ashamed of humanity. Once I had belonged quite splendidly in the scheme of things but now I belonged quite badly. And so the whole scheme seemed to be bad because I had lost my place in it. It was the first taste of bitterness of life for a young man hitherto rather successful, rather self-satisfied, and rather arrogant.¹⁷

These are rare and brief glimpses of the emotional vulnerability of travellers when they are placed in foreign environments and face the potential for disillusionment with notions of a supposedly 'superior' European or Australian society.

For a historian sifting through a vast catalogue of texts, these particular voices stand out. This is not due to their progressive views of Pacific Islanders, nor their willingness to challenge the mainstream assumptions of the time. Rather, these Australians are notable because they openly admitted the uncertainties and fragilities of travel abroad. We can learn more from those whose assumptions were unsettled by the travel experience than from travellers who were utterly convinced before and after their voyage. These ambiguous accounts more accurately reflect the feelings of temporary uncertainty and flux that travel provokes. This is evident in not only these travellers' physical mobility between two different worlds but also the fluid nature of the texts that they write, which blend fact and fiction, imagination and reality, and emotion and reason.

The travellers studied here were products of different times to our own. Assumptions and expectations have dramatically shifted and the 'lure' of the Pacific Islands, with its myths of hidden riches, lost tribes and pristine utopias, has long been debunked. Yet, there were also many similarities for all these differences. Their journeys have often followed the same process of anticipation, encounter and reflection that all travellers undergo. Some stereotypes persist today, despite the condensing of time and space by ships and planes. Images of vastness, distance, isolation and timelessness continue to challenge contemporary notions of a globalised world. The Pacific Islands remain a place of sojourn or transit for Australians,

17 Muspratt, *My South Sea Island*, 256.

rather than a place in which to live. The promise of adventure and freedom lingers because these Islands remain largely unknown to their Australian neighbours.

Through travel writing, this book attempted to address the lack of historical memory regarding Australia's close and sustained relationship with the Pacific Islands. The vast archive of Australian travel accounts reveals that Australians were more closely connected to and aware of the Pacific Islands than previous studies have acknowledged. By recognising the historical legacy of the encounters and exchanges between Australians and Pacific Islanders, we can better understand and critically evaluate former and contemporary Australian attitudes and policies to the Pacific. This is not only important because Australian officials continue to express their role in the Pacific region today, whether in the 'Arc of Instability' or as part of a broader recognition of the 'Asia-Pacific Century'; it is crucial because Australians continue to travel to the Pacific Islands. This means that Pacific Islanders continue to grow as a visible feature of our cultural landscape. Rather than considering these two regions as separate entities, future studies of this relationship must wholly acknowledge the complexities and diversities of peoples in Australia and in the Islands, their mobility within Oceania and the historical connections that bind them.

This text is taken from *Australian Travellers in the South Seas*,
by Nicholas Halter, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian
National University, Canberra, Australia.