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No Story, No Myth

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“NO STORY, NO
MYTH”
Jonathan Lamb

Islanders: The Pacific in the Age of Empire by Nicholas Thomas.
New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010. Pp. 336. \$35.00 cloth, \$28.00 paper.

When I started reading *Islanders*, I was surprised at the author’s insistence on two cardinal points. The first was that the entrance of Europeans into the Pacific was an unmitigated disaster for many local populations, nothing short of catastrophic: “Nothing would be the same again” (23). The second followed from the first: along with the destruction of life, culture, memory, and cosmogony went any reliable history of these islands prior to European contact. There are no genealogies, chants, or archives to tell us how many lives were lost or ruined in any given archipelago to venereal disease, measles, *blackbirding* (the kidnapping of natives for forced labor on sugar plantations), and plain old-fashioned violence. Often Thomas will hazard a guess (almost half of the population of the Marquesas was lost, together with the arts of tattooing and tapa), but always with a proviso: for example, “It is hard to put figures to depopulation. . . .” (218) and “It will never be possible to quantify. . . .” (237). And when it comes to what indigenous people felt about all this, the same provisos block our access to the history of their thoughts and emotions: “There is no way of reconstructing the states of mind . . . [of] islanders whose minds and feelings are inaccessible to us” (260).

I was surprised not because I believe otherwise than that European colonization of archipelagos

in the South Seas was a long-term disaster for many communities there, but because the argument has already been made at length in Alan Moorehead's *The Fatal Impact* (1966), a book that had a decisive influence on the first postcolonial studies of Oceania. Moorehead's work was important not only for postcolonial cultural historians such as Peter Hulme and Rod Edmond, but also crucial for Gananath Obeyesekere when he made his astonishing assault on the work of the region's most respected anthropologist, Marshall Sahlins. Where Sahlins had argued for Cook's unwitting inclusion of himself and his vessel in the Hawai'ian Makahiki festival shortly before his death, Moorehead's *Fatal Impact* authorized Obeyesekere to ask how we could possibly be certain of the calendar and sequences of that festival, with traditions so obscured and corrupted, and how we could possibly digest the old colonial chestnut of the European explorer hailed as a god. It is a two-step that became more familiar as postcolonial theory grew stronger: the obliteration of local culture meant that moral outrage displaced any attempt at historical reconstruction; the authentic memorial to the purity of primitive rituals was total amnesia. Cannibalism became the issue of choice, endlessly exposed as an ex post facto lie by the simple device of denying any factual evidence for a custom that indisputably had only

ever existed in the imaginations of horror-hungry Europeans. A plenary allowance for skepticism was drawn from the ruins of cultural continuity, and populations who had lost so much were about to lose a little more to the indignation of their defenders.

Anyone familiar with Thomas's work knows that he has never been friendly towards this slash-and-burn school of pious nostalgia, so why was he introducing its two favorite theses? I think it is clear as one gets further into the book that he is doing the opposite. When he says, "Nothing would be the same again," he doesn't mean that the Oceanic past was forever divorced from the present and the future, but rather that their connections had ceased to be straightforward or predictable: they had *changed*, and not always for the worse. For instance, population levels actually rose on Oahu in the early nineteenth century, and many inland areas of Fiji, New Caledonia, the Solomons, and New Guinea were for a long time free of all incursions, colonial and Christian, and some still are. Where a phenomenon looks like part of an imperial or missionary plot to eradicate the memory of the people, Thomas shows its other side. When John Williams witnessed the spontaneous throwing down of idols at Rurutu, for example, it was evident that he had never anticipated this event, although very pleased by it.

Thomas reminds us that the abolition of *kapu* (i.e., Tahitian for tapu, or the sacred, as opposed to *noa*, indifferent things) on Tahiti was not instigated by missionaries but by the royal house of Kamehameha, and he suggests that it was a deeply political move in response to changes that now confounded spiritual issues with those of traffic and power. Similar impulses fueled cargo cults, a potent system of postcontact belief and insurrectionary activism that troubled many a colonial administration. The question of cultural ruin is addressed in an interesting section on Rapanui (Easter Island), which was laid waste by competition for the resources necessary for political ostentation, a priority that overrode all economic common sense, long before any European set foot upon it. Once European ships started to call, the carvers of Rapanui husbanded every bit of wood they could find in their treeless island to make exquisite ornaments and figures for trade. Instead of the usual descent from the beauty of ritual objects to the tawdriness of commercial ones, the reverse seems to have happened here, particularly with regard to *rongo-rongo*, once mistaken for the sole example of an ancient Polynesian hieroglyphics, but more likely an extraordinarily elaborate imitation of printed paper produced for the new market.

As Thomas negotiates the unexpected loops and loose ends of Pacific history, he accumulates lots of details that are vivid but incoherent. Little-known people such as Tapioi the Tahitian or Kaulelo the Hawai'ian, Sindbads of the South Seas who got as far as London, exhibit a cosmopolitanism that may be consistent with the ancient canoe journeys of the Polynesians, but that is not easily generalized or made historically intelligible in terms of the experience of contact. They stand out as individuals, not as representatives, until there is no more of the story to be told, and it comes to a desultory end. Better-known figures such as Finau, the Tongan chief, or Cakobau, the Fijian, are remarkable for individual feats of bravery or policy, but not for anything more than that. They are heroes without an epic narrative. The same is true of Europeans such as David Porter and Robert Louis Stevenson, who are illuminated for a moment and then fall back into—I was going to say the *stream*—of events, except that it is too confident and totalizing a word for what Thomas is handling. Gingerly he will put a conjecture up against a fact, but that doesn't prevent the fact from standing aloof from cultural patterns and from demonstrating the enigmatic singularity to which he so frequently adverts. He is at first puzzled and then intrigued by particular instances

that never loom as examples or models. George Vason the apostate missionary is interesting on account of his idiosyncrasy, not his typicality.

This can leave the reader searching vainly for a point. When reading of the promising young linguist David Cargill, who worked in the Wesleyan Methodist Mission first in Tonga and then at Fiji, all our expectations are overthrown. Obviously gifted as a pastor and a scholar, Cargill nevertheless succumbed to depression and laudanum after the death of his first wife, finally dying himself of an overdose in 1843. His colleagues did their best to forget a career with such a shameful end, crediting others with Cargill's work and erasing his name from their records. As Thomas says, "Cargill's death sparked no story, no myth" (125). So why, apart from a laudable desire to expose hypocrisy, try to tell it at all? How can it appear other than fragmentary and pointless?

The answer to these questions can be found in two earlier studies published by Thomas: his celebrated *Entangled Objects* (1991) and his very popular *Colonialism's Culture* (1994). The first was a sort of *Wunderkammer*, filled with intriguing objects that had once been commodities for exchange or tools for use, but were now transformed. Suspended from the general history of consumption, they

acquired a kind of glamour because of the absence of any economic or semiotic value in their collection and presentation. The muskets in the house of Iotete the Marquesan chief were like the decayed weapons Tommo comes across in Herman Melville's *Typee* (1846)—objects of contemplation, not of warfare or even of ostentation. Thomas describes the full extent of this metamorphosis by means of the Fijian ceremonial of prestation, where the *iyau* (offering) of pots, whales' teeth, and mats has importance for the moment; but no sooner is the ceremony of the gift complete than "these things move elsewhere, they carry no inscription . . . they are like the stone which makes a splash—for a moment—and then sinks quietly to the bottom of a deep pool."¹ Thomas's eye is fixed on the instant just before the splash. *Colonialism's Culture* is filled with characters like David Cargill, bright young men who came into the Pacific expecting to do great things, but who vanished before they managed to accomplish any of them. He spots them just before they disappear in order to emphasize how adventitious and unsuccessful was much of the colonial activity that these days is represented as symmetrical and inevitable. By combining the unpredictabilities of local and imported objects with the uncertain careers of people, indigenes and settlers alike,

Thomas presents us with a cabinet of historical curiosities.

The issue of narrative still remains, however. What genre is capable of rendering the evanescence and pointlessness of such material? Thomas gives us a hint in his discussion of Kanak engraved bamboos, and one in particular held in a Berlin museum. Divided into two halves, one section of the bamboos tells the story of tribal warfare, with a large house being attacked and booty being carried off; and this is to be viewed horizontally. The other is seen vertically and consists of scenes of colonization that are not narrativized, showing French officers and soldiers as a montage of various uniforms and gestures. Thomas explains this as a polarity forced on the Kanaks by the changes taking place around them, impelling "this particular artist to juxtapose two worlds, two that faced each other, the one threatening to banish the other to the past" (183).

Perhaps the juxtaposition is not quite so stark, in which case the alternating possibilities of narrative and image, story and epiphany, resemble the technique chosen by Thomas for his own book. It is analogous to so much of what he deals with, particularly postcontact cults such as that of the Fijian prophet of the Tuka, Navosavakadua, where the disorderly result of change can nevertheless be harnessed for various kinds of illumination, none of

them long-lasting or significant in the way we would expect a fully formed narrative or history to be, but formally faithful to what was happening. I can think of only one example of history written in this way, and that is Judith Binney's *Redemption Songs* (1995), a biography of the warrior prophet of Aotearoa/New Zealand, Te Kooti. He correctly foretold that his own life would end not heroically but with an absurd accident, and much of his career was formed out of the collision of millenarian dreams of order with the indiscipline of facts, a sort of Art of Sinking in History. The pathos is heightened by the failure of narrative to organize the material into an heroic line, as Binney is aware, making it a very painful story to read, for it will not be told as you feel it ought. Thomas's book is much broader in scope and far less intense, but can claim to have adapted this new kind of historiography to a conspectus of accident, unintended consequence, injustice, greed, iconoclasm, bricolage, cruelty, and flair that could not have been rendered in a more ordered form without becoming false and tendentious. It is a remarkable feat.

Jonathan Lamb is the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of the Humanities at Vanderbilt University. He has published Preserving the Self in the South Seas (University Of Chicago Press, 2001) and has a chapter on Captain Cook in his The Things Things

Say (*Princeton University Press, 2011*). His book on scurvy and imagination, *Scurvy: The Disease of Discovery* (*Princeton University Press, 2016*), was published with the help of a Caird Fellowship from the National Maritime Museum (*Greenwich, London*) and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

NOTE

1. Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 67.