The first thing that struck me about this marvelous addition to the Cambridge History series was the title. There have been many excellent histories of the “Pacific Islands” but this is the first, to my knowledge, consciously to make Pacific islanders its focus. More than thirty years ago, James Davidson launched an attack upon conventional histories that treated islanders as, at most, bit players in the drama of European imperial expansion. This spurred a debate that continues unabated over what an islander-centred history should look like. In Chapter 1, Jocelyn Linnekin provides an insightful essay on the sometimes acrimonious disputes that have erupted between historians, anthropologists, nationalists and others as they have sought in their own ways to connect ever-diversifying pictures of the past with a turbulent present. The editors and contributors draw insights from these debates but nevertheless adopt a moderate stance. They do not attempt a radical break with former treatments. Instead, they nudge our understanding of Pacific islands history in new directions by including more indigenous voices (significantly more of them female) and by giving sensitive attention to indigenous cultures, innovations and initiatives, as well as reactions to invaders. Readers familiar with the colonial history of the islands will find much of value here that enhances rather than discards older understandings. Newcomers to Pacific history are in for a treat.
The twelve substantive chapters are arranged in rough chronological order. The first juxtaposes different styles of portraying “prehistory” – oral traditions, archaeology and historical linguistics among them – in an account of the original settlement of the Pacific islands. Expressing a theme that runs through most of the essays, Chapter 3 reviews pre-contact productive systems and exchange networks to demonstrate that Pacific islanders were not as insulated from each other as has been commonly assumed. All the same, Pacific islanders faced a supreme challenge to their cosmologies and social systems when European intruders began to appear upon their shores. Threats as well as opportunities expanded as more Europeans arrived, bent on exploiting the natural resources of the area, expanding empire or saving souls for Christianity. In the early stages of contact, islanders took the lead in reshaping their societies in the face of the challenge. Chapter 5 discusses early social and economic adjustments; while chapter 6 looks at innovations in indigenous political structures. As the European powers increased their presence, informal linkages were replaced by more constraining colonial laws and economic systems, usually to the detriment of islanders. The colonial impact varied tremendously across the islands, as shown in Chapter 7, ranging from severe population declines and dispossession of land in settler states like New Zealand and Hawai‘i, to situations as in Papua or the New Hebrides where the colonial management was much less direct and most islanders retained control of their lands and a considerable degree of local autonomy. Chapter 8 considers the guiding ideologies of the colonial states and the reach and limitations of their programs. The authors show that, even in the most repressive situations, islanders continued to shape their own histories.
The second part of the *Cambridge History* deals with modern Pacific history from the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, triggering the Pacific war. Areas in which the fiercest fighting took place were devastated; but as Chapter 9 shows the war had significant ideological and political consequences even for those most insulated from the battles and privation. One consequence was a stepped up military presence in several areas and the associated nuclear testing programs, explored in Chapter 10. Chapter 11 attends to the accelerating integration of Pacific island economies into the world economic system and the consequences of this both for those territories well-endowed with marketable natural resources and those without. The war triggered shifts in relations between Pacific islanders and the metropolitan powers, leading to decolonization in most places; adjustments elsewhere where the colonial powers had continuing military interests; and, in the case of Irian Jaya, the substitution of an old colonial master for a new. Chapter 12 investigates the challenges of nationhood for the emerging class of political leaders as well as for ordinary islanders who often retain strong loyalties to local customs and traditions. Chapter 13 looks at the diverse linkages and movements across the region today and questions whether islanders should be perceived as emerging from an insular world or instead be understood in terms of their deep historical linkages with each other and the outside world.

Given the complexities of Pacific island history, the editors of this volume faced a daunting task of balancing a comprehensive treatment of regional variations and more focused narratives developing particular examples to make more general points. Wisely, I believe, they tend to favour the latter. As a result, most of the chapters avoid the encyclopaedic quality so typical of this genre. The editors have done a superb job of
melding contributions from a large number of scholars into a narrative that is mostly lively, interesting and free of academic jargon and pretensions. Each chapter ends with a short but comprehensive bibliographic essay providing expert guidance for those who wish to delve deeper. Maritime themes permeate the book, although they do not form the focus of any chapter or sub-section. The history gives especially good treatment of inter-island trade and migration, before and after colonization, as well as the impact of industrial fisheries.

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