The great exploring expeditions through the Pacific islands have long furnished scholars with rich materials for examining pre-colonial indigenous cultures, cross-cultural communications shaping the encounters between Europeans and islanders, and the evolution of anthropological treatments of humankind. Coming towards the end of the heroic exploratory period, the United States Exploring Expedition, now generally known as the Wilkes expedition, has not received nearly as much attention as others, particularly the three Cook voyages. Yet, by almost any measure, it was important. Authorized and financed by the United States government, Lieutenant Charles Wilkes led a small squadron of six ships manned by more than seven hundred men on a four-year voyage around the world. The main purpose of the expedition was to insure US commercial interests, particularly in the rich whaling grounds of the Pacific Ocean. This was combined with an ambitious scientific and exploratory program. The Wilkes Expedition charted many of the Pacific islands, sighted the Antarctic continent for the first time and examined the hinterlands of the Pacific Northwest, among much else. The expedition brought back a wealth of botanical, zoological and ethnological specimens, which made up a large part of the founding collection of the Smithsonian Institution, and furnished an enormously rich archive of documentation for American scientists to study and ponder. The Expedition came at a particularly critical juncture in the development of American anthropology. In 1839, Samuel Morton published *Crania Americana*, the founding document of the racist “American School” of anthropology. Inevitably, the findings of the expedition scientists, particularly those
of the naturalist Charles Pickering and philologist Horatio Hale, weighed into the ensuing battles
between the monogenetic and polygenetic interpretations of human history.

Joyce presents a lively narrative of the Wilkes expedition, focusing especially on “the
process by which Americans on this expedition filtered their observations of the world’s
indigenous people through the lens of their peculiar constructions of ‘savagery’ as shaped by the
American experience” (p. 1). He makes good use of an exceptionally rich body of primary
resources, most importantly the daily journals the officers and scientists were required to
maintain. The book opens with an economic examination of the background of the expedition,
including its politics and organization, current anthropological assumptions and the backgrounds
of the main officers and scientists. The central chapters trace the interactions between the
expedition and the various indigenous peoples it encountered, principally in Tierra del Fuego,
Peru, the Tuamotu group, Tahiti, Samoa, Australia, New Zealand, Tonga, Fiji, Hawai’i and
Oregon. Joyce’s account is more selective than other modern historians such as William Stanton
and David B. Tyler. Not surprisingly he does not deal with the exploration of the Antarctic
coastline and the long voyage home from the North American west coast via the Cape of Good
Hope. But oddly Joyce also leaves out the independent cruises undertaken by support ships
through the Pacific islands, although these also involved important interactions with indigenes,
resulted in the first written accounts of several islands, notably Tokelau, and contributed to
Hale’s survey of Pacific island ethnology and linguistics. Even so, Joyce devotes more than two-
thirds of his narrative of the voyage, and a third of the book as a whole, to encounters with
Pacific islanders, with the (then) still unmissionized Fiji, where the expedition spent an eventful
three months in 1840, receiving the most attention. The book concludes with an account of the
messy aftermath of the expedition, including a fascinating description of the major publications produced by Wilkes, Pickering and Hale and their differing receptions.

The fortunes of many of the Pacific islanders visited by Wilkes had altered drastically in the sixty years since Cook’s death. United kingdoms under native ruling families had emerged in Tahiti and Hawai‘i and would soon in Tonga as well. Protestant missions were now firmly established in most of the large islands of Polynesia and beginning to win converts in Fiji. Whalers and trading vessels from North America and Europe were exploiting the resources of the region, leaving behind products of their own countries including cloth, guns, alcohol and venereal disease, with predictable results. For all this, little was known about the indigenous people who, with the exception of the Aborigines around the Australian penal settlements, still remained politically independent. The officers and scientists of the expedition expressed a wide range of opinion concerning indigenous peoples, drawing upon direct observation, personal religious viewpoints, knowledge of earlier reports, and opinions of other Europeans in the area, particularly missionaries. Pickering and Hale in particular also referred to the scientific consensus of the day that categorized humans into five “races” and associated racial types with moral predilections. In some of the more fascinating passages in the book, Joyce examines how the encounter with flesh and blood Maori, Fijians and other “savages” forced Pickering and Hale to modify and adjust the contemporary model of race, without abandoning it. The key point of reference in the expedition records, Joyce argues, was entirely homegrown: popular assumptions about race in America focused upon the supposed contrasts between whites, African Americans and Indians. While complicating this model, the Wilkes expedition served to reinforce its major premise, that white American domination was both natural and predestined.
The then popular image of the “wild Indian” was especially central. There was some irony to this because as New Englanders few members of the expedition had personal experience of Native Americans prior to the voyage and were startled by the reality when they first observed actual Indians in Oregon in 1841. Joyce assiduously documents points at which members use the term “Indian” or language that suggests this comparison. Unfortunately, he does not provide a systematic discussion of what the concept of the “Indian” might have meant to different participants in the voyage. “Indian” appears, in fact, to have been a rather ambiguous term. It was still commonly used as a general term for “savage” or “native,” a usage that the Wilkes expedition members would have come across in the publications of earlier Pacific expeditions. In the absence of such a discussion, Joyce’s comments on the influence of the Indian stereotype upon the expedition members sometimes appear fairly speculative and even forced (see, for instance, his discussion of Wilkes’ response to the Treaty of Waitangi on pp. 80-81). His assessment of the reception of the publications written by Wilkes, Pickering and Hale upon the scientific (and political) community is better –his revisionist treatment of Pickering’s *The Races of Man and Their Geographical Distribution* (1848) is especially suggestive. But even this discussion is surprisingly brief. In the end, Joyce fails to provide more than a vague picture of how the Wilkes expedition contributed to mid-century anthropology in the United States.

Joyce’s narrative of the voyage is more successful. He presents a colorful, richly textured account that provides readers unfamiliar with the expedition a good sense of its character and accomplishments. Regional specialists in the Pacific islands and perhaps elsewhere, however, will be troubled by some aspects. Most of the problems are merely annoying, such as the absence of a good map and Joyce’s inconsistency in providing contemporary names for the islands Wilkes visited (why give the contemporary name for the tiny
island of Reao but not for the archipelago of which it is a part?). Joyce’s grasp of geography is sometimes shaky as when he grossly inflates the number of islands making up Tonga and Fiji (pp. 82, 88) or places “Arramanga” (Erromango) in New Guinea rather than in the New Hebrides (p. 85); and he slips in the occasional historical howler such as his statement that William Bligh “literally drifted” through the Fijian islands during his epic voyage across the Pacific in an open boat following the Bounty mutiny (p. 88). I found Joyce’s treatment of the Protestant missionaries the expedition encountered almost everywhere more problematic. While acknowledging that members of the expedition had a wide range of reactions to the missionaries, Joyce clearly favors the most caustic accusations of missionary excesses. He tends to take these at face value, ignoring the obvious tensions between the missionaries and an expedition that included hundreds of randy sailors. More importantly, by giving credence to the more negative assessments of missionary “tyranny” in places like Tahiti, Tonga, Fiji and Hawai’i, Joyce appears to endorse the old stereotype of Pacific islanders as the passive victims of European intruders (see especially his comments on the Tongan civil war, p. 83). Regional scholars have long noted the empirical weaknesses of Eurocentric “fatal impact” versions of Pacific history, pointing in particular to the active and essential role islanders played in spreading Christianity across the Pacific. In this instant, among others, I felt that Joyce would have strengthened his account of the motivations and imaginings of the expedition members with references to the rich literature on the early contact period in Pacific islands history – a literature he mostly ignores.

Even if it does not quite rise to its full promise, *The Making of American Ethnography* is an important and welcome contribution. Joyce tells a complicated story very well indeed and points the way to several potentially rich areas for further exploration concerning a period of anthropological history that has for too long been neglected.