This is a delightful and important book. The “houses far from home” are the courtrooms, prisons, offices and, above all, residences constructed by and for British colonial officials in the former Pacific island colony of the New Hebrides (since Independence in 1980, known as Vanuatu). For most of the occupants of these buildings, “home” was far away, usually in Great Britain. The buildings themselves, lovingly described in this book, witnessed many stories in the course of being constructed, modified, re-occupied again and again and eventually, in many cases, demolished. Rodman’s object has been to trace some of these stories, drawing upon extant archival records, interviews with former occupants (most of whom had returned “home” to England) and the surviving physical evidence of the buildings themselves. The narratives related here are rich, deeply personal, often hilarious, nostalgic and very discerning, especially about the inequities, self-deceptions and contradictions of a colonial situation.

With the exception of a handful of relatively grand edifices erected in Port Vila during the hopeful opening years of the New Hebrides colonial experiment, there was nothing special about the buildings themselves. Many were built from kits provisioned by Saxton Islands Homes, an Australian company specializing in residences for missionaries and government officials in the Pacific islands. While usually situated in gorgeous settings, the buildings themselves were plain, small, uncomfortable and inadequate, especially as colonial officers began to be accompanied by their wives and children. Discussions of housing take up a very large amount of space in the colonial archives. Rodman shows vividly that the endless series of
memos over the mundane business of putting a roof over one’s head reveals a great deal of the working assumptions and daily experience of the colonial class in the New Hebrides.

Much of the interest of these stories derives from the peculiar nature of the New Hebrides “Condominium” government itself. In 1906, Britain and France agreed to jointly administer the New Hebrides, responding to the claims of both British and French settlers and missionaries who had settled in the islands. The Condominium government established three separate legal and judicial systems for British, French and indigenous groups, capped by a Joint Court that presided over land issues and matters that lower courts could not resolve. Over the years, the British and French administrations established separate educational and medical systems, although they managed to jointly run basic public services. Not surprisingly given the poverty and remoteness of the New Hebrides, the “Pandemonium” as the Condominium was soon dubbed, provided one of the most cumbersome and inefficient government structures ever devised. Stymied at every turn by a lack of basic resources and by the need to negotiate with their French or British counterparts, colonial administrators had a very limited impact in the islands during the colonial period.

Rodman examines the experiences of colonial officers and their families in two distinct environments: the town of Port Vila and officer residences in the districts. Most of the British never ventured far from Port Vila, from whence they planned and administered a largely imagined administrative system for the whole colony. Separated for the most part from the native population, the white residents of the town spent an inordinate amount of their time and energy fussing over their positions within the colonial hierarchy, as reflected in housing (most obviously in the well-understood rule that the French and British residency’s and flagpoles had to be at equivalent levels). Rodman examines the histories of three settings in Vila: the British
residency on Iririki Island in the harbor, which has survived as part of a tourist resort; the prison, which provided the home for many of the native workers in the town; and the British “paddock”, an enclave of residences that was the site of continuing tensions and negotiations between the British administration and the large contingent of American troops stationed in the New Hebrides during the Second World War.

Moving away from Vila, Rodman provides two marvelously evocative chapters focused upon the histories of the residences of the district officers for the islands of Tanna and Espiritu Santo. The stories she relates involve, among much else, a lonely cottage on Tanna haunted by the mysterious deaths of two of its former residents; a romantically secluded island residence off of Santo; and a colorful cast of native, European and “half-caste” locals engaging in cargo cults, wildly speculative commercial ventures and, towards the end on Santo, open rebellion.

It is very rare one comes across a book that combines an innovative methodology and acute theoretical insight with wonderfully engaging stories. *Houses Far From Home* should appeal to a very wide audience indeed.

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