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## Book review: an Otago storeman in Solomon Islands: the diary of William Crossan, copra trader, 1885–86

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*An Otago Storeman in Solomon Islands: the diary of William Crossan, copra trader, 1885–86*. Edited by Tim Bayliss-Smith and Judith A. Bennett. Canberra, ANU E-Press, 2012. ix + 95 pp., notes, photos, maps, appendices, bibliog., ISBN 9781922144201 (pbk) AUD\$19.95 ISBN 9781922144218 (Online). Citation url: <http://epress.anu.edu.au?p=203571>

Approximately 12 to 20 Euro-American traders are thought to have lived and worked in the Solomons archipelago every year during the last quarter of the 19th century. Pacific Islanders narrate stories about these economic and cultural brokers of the colonial frontier, and they are represented in the writings of missionaries and labour recruiters; but the details of their activities and personal preoccupations have remained largely opaque. Now, with the publication of this text, we have a rare first-hand source for the day-to-day life of one such trader, William Crossan (1861–1936). From September 1885 to March 1886, Crossan worked as a copra trader on Makira, an island also known as San Cristoval, in southeast Solomon Islands. During these months, he kept a diary in the literal sense of the term; that is, he kept a daily record of conditions, transactions and observations.

Editors Tim Bayliss-Smith and Judith Bennett supplement Crossan's text with significant supporting scholarship. Following a brief introduction, they contextualise the diary with three informative chapters covering Crossan's life as a 'storeman', baker, and hotel proprietor in New Zealand before and after his time in the Solomons; Makira in the 19th century; and the complex social and trading relations Crossan engaged in on Makira. Then, in the form of extensive footnotes, they give a running commentary on the transcript, providing annotations that insightfully unpack Crossan's occasionally cryptic entries.

Crossan centred his operations at Hada Bay, an anchorage on the northwest coast of Makira in the area known as Arosi. From there, he sailed his cutter up and down the coast, leaving trade items (mainly sticks of tobacco) with trusted Makiran agents and returning later to collect copra in return. Focused on these inherently repetitive yet highly contingent (weather is a prominent player) ventures, Crossan's diary contains a wealth of data pertaining to the micro-dynamics of colonial encounter and indigenous life at the time. Its publication will, therefore, be of particular interest to historians, anthropologists, and Solomon Islanders.

Crossan clearly depended on the skills and knowledge of local Makirans for food, shelter and protection. Accordingly, he nurtured good relations with the people of Arosi. Early on, he began to learn the Arosi language and described their healing techniques, stating that they ‘may be of some value’ (p. 47). Indeed, the diary, if read with attention to telling details – as the editors do – offers revealing insights into Arosi practices still relevant to people in the area as their ethnohistory and to theoretical debates in the social sciences. These include, in addition to healing: yam gardening, taboo observances, vengeance killings, canoe launchings, and cannibalism.

Of particular interest is Crossan’s relationship with the man he called Johnstone, an important Arosi chief also known as Johnson or Sono. A highlight of the diary is Crossan’s moving account of the death of Johnstone’s young son and the mortuary practices that followed. More generally, Crossan’s appreciation of the hard work he elicited from Johnstone and the other men he employed serves as an important counter to stigmatising representations in the colonial literature of Makirans as lacking initiative.

Bayliss-Smith and Bennett have created an excellent critical apparatus essential to the reader’s appreciation of Crossan’s distinctive position, voice, and idiosyncrasies. To this already thorough set of annotations, I would add the following observations.

The editors might have referred readers to the publications of Léopold Verguet, one of the Marist missionaries at Makira Harbour in the 1840s, who produced both an account of the mission and the earliest ethnography of the region (see his reprinted *Histoire de la première mission catholique au Vicariat de Mélanésie*, Montpellier: Art et Traditions Rurales, 2012 [1854]). Similarly, they might have consulted Shelley Sayes’s master’s thesis ‘The Ethnohistory of Arosi, San Cristobal’ (University of Auckland, 1976). From Sayes they would have learned, for example, that ‘Wassinghou’ (p. 76) is described in other sources as the influential ‘chief’ of Onehatare village. The writings of members of the Melanesian Mission, who paid regular visits to west Arosi (c.1856–c.1877), also seem under-exploited. From these, the editors could have gleaned evidence that ‘Freeman’ (p. 41) was an African-American ‘whiteman’ long settled in Arosi and married to a Malaitan woman. That said, the editors make impressive use of newspapers from the period.

The editors tend to treat socio-geographic interfaces as the natural boundaries of cultural difference and hostility, abrogated only by exception. They assume, for example, that any person visiting Arosi from Guadalcanal would automatically have been in danger, because ‘[a] man from Guadalcanal would have had no kinship connections on Makira’ (p. 43). This is an assertion that the oral traditions of present-day Arosi would challenge.

The tendency to equate spaces with quasi-cultural groups is also apparent in the editors' descriptions of tension between 'bush' and 'coastal' or 'saltwater' people in Arosi. Arguably, the editors impose a uniform regional model of such an opposition where they might have asked whether Crossan's notes recommend elaboration of this model into one that recognizes significant local variations. Furthermore, the term 'saltwater people' (pp. 30, 32) seems infelicitous when applied to coastal Arosi, as it usually connotes sea-oriented people living on reefs and islets, as in parts of Malaita, Marovo lagoon, and just off Buka.

On the whole, however, this is a highly valuable tool to be welcomed as a model for and incentive to bringing other such texts to light.

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