

'Blackbirding', Peruvian style

Slavers in Paradise: The Peruvian Labour Trade in Polynesia, 1862-1864. By H.E. Maude. Published by Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1981. xxii and 244 (pp.) ISBN 0 7081 1607 8. Price \$A25.

Despite the dustjacket picture and the title, *Slavers in Paradise* is a serious academic study and a most welcome addition to the history of many islands in Polynesia and Kiribati. The offending picture is a crude, garish representation of brown people being herded into boats by armed white villains, while the title across this background suggests little but Hollywood sensationalism.

The 'slavers' part of the title is not inaccurate. The Peruvian Government attempted to regulate the trade, to insist on properly interpreted contracts,

voluntarily signed, and to ensure that the islanders were adequately treated once they reached Peru. But in practice none of the regulations was adhered to. The means of acquiring Pacific islanders and their conditions in Peru were little short of slavery.

The equation of the island world with 'paradise' is more questionable. In contrast to the conditions the islanders endured on the ships and in Peru, undoubtedly home was paradise. But the stereotype of Polynesia as paradise is one most modern Polynesian historians shun as inaccurate and unhelpful, and Maude himself claims that some islanders went on board the slavers' vessels hoping to find food or access to food, which was, at the time of the slavers' visit, so scarce ashore. To my mind *The Peruvian Labour Trade in*

Polynesia 1862-1864 would have been a more appropriate and illuminating title.

But these criticisms are not fundamental. Discard the dustjacket, ignore the title and one has a book impeccably presented, and meticulously and exhaustively researched — qualities for which H.E. Maude is justifiably renowned.

Not surprisingly, over the intervening century, many aspects of the Peruvian labour trade have been exaggerated, as Maude makes clear. For example, there is no evidence to suggest that islanders were 'recruited' for the guano mines on the Chincha Islands off mainland Peru, and very little good evidence that any islander worked there after landing at Callao. Similarly, the claim that 200 men (more than the estimated total population of the island at the time) were taken from Atafu, a Tokelau atoll, is reduced most convincingly by Maude to 37. These and many other legends are carefully explored, the sources of falsification and exaggeration

documented, and the record straightened. This does not, however, mean that the story which is revealed is not grueling and inhumane; it is, as a brief resumé of the facts will establish.

The whole tragedy, from the first islander taken to the last death on the islands due to diseases introduced by the very few islanders who were repatriated, occurred between 1862 and 1864. Approximately 3500 islanders were rounded up, mostly from Easter Island, Niue, the Cook Islands, Tuvalu, Kiribati and the Marquesas. Atoll dwellers were more vulnerable than high-island inhabitants because the former had no means of retreat from the armed slavers, and their isolation left them unprotected and unwarned by missionaries, white officials or other islanders.

Of those 'recruited', 345 died on the voyage to Peru — dysentery being a major killer on the grossly overcrowded ships. Men, women and children to the number of 2116



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were landed in Peru and assigned to work on the rural haciendas, or as domestic servants in the cities. Many of these died of disease, particularly smallpox, malnutrition, overwork and homesickness.

Those who survived proved incapable of the work demanded of them and the Peruvian government finally moved to stop the trade. Newly arrived recruiting vessels were not permitted to land their 'recruits' who were held on board until their repatriation, and that of some of their fellow islanders ashore, could be organised. Of 3125 islanders who reached Peru, 1840 died, while a further 1030 of the 1216 who were to have been repatriated died from smallpox and dysentery before reaching the islands.

The final tragedy of all was that the few islanders who lived long enough to be repatriated, usually not to their island of origin, infected their hosts with the diseases which had been rampant on the repatriation ships and an estimated 2950 further deaths occurred.



Part of Phil Belbin's jacket illustration for *Slavers in Paradise*. Not quite appropriate, suggests Caroline Ralston.

Stripped of all exaggeration, it is still a story of extraordinary brutality and indifference. Not even economic self-interest seems to have tempered the callous inhumanity of the Peruvian captains and landholders.

Maude briefly investigates the measures atoll dwellers took once they had lost substantial

numbers of their community — usually the able-bodied males. Land rights were reallocated, women often performed jobs previously done only by men, laws prohibiting adultery were lifted and techniques of population control such as abortion and infanticide, which were frequently used in atolls, were for a time suspended. In several

islands newly introduced Christianity gained a firm footing and appears to have provided an emotional solace.

The organisation of the first half of the book, which sets out the progress of the trade, ship by ship and island by island, is not easy to follow. But much of the detail is essential for anyone studying particular island histories.

The impact of the second half, which reveals what happened after the initial recruitment and the aftermath on the islands, is profound. Maude has reconstructed this episode in history with extraordinary patience and great compassion. The Polynesian islanders who first asked him about the trade will, I believe, feel their questions have been answered fully and carefully. For anyone, island or foreign, interested in an island or island group hit by the Peruvian slavers, this book is essential reading. — *Caroline Ralston**

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