Parts of this book will prove slow-going for those unfamiliar with linguistic analyses. However anyone with a serious interest in the concrete realities of Pacific island life should thoroughly enjoy it. And social scientists of many stripes, along with their students, have much to learn from this comprehensive account of the complex functionality of gossip, the subtle conversational strategies that enable it, and the social ramifications that accompany it in this one Pacific island community.

Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

ALAN JONES


In his opening chapter Michael Waterhouse quotes a report that the German governor of New Guinea in 1907 considered Australian gold prospectors “the best men for opening up new country.” The colonial view that the country required “opening up” for resource extraction by white men has in some respects persisted for over a century, as major mining interests continue to be owned by foreign companies. On a much grander scale, white men still lead the exploration and development of mineral resources in Papua New Guinea. The reasons for the persistence of these arrangements for more than a century are set out early in this book: it is a hard place to work, few Papua New Guineans have the knowledge or qualifications to take up managerial or senior technical positions (although this is changing slowly), and transport and communications are difficult and costly. Malaria, which took the lives of local workers at least as often as it did those of the white miners in the last century, remains a major health risk in the country. However, today large mining companies are likely to have better health facilities for employees than exist in many of the towns and treatment is more guaranteed.

The coffee-table format of the book and its sponsorship by contemporary mining companies initially made me wary of its content. But this is a work of serious scholarship. Waterhouse has consulted an extraordinary range of primary materials—letters, memoirs, private papers, reports, government documents—and has managed to encompass an impressive range of perspectives on the history of the Morobe goldfields. The technical and engineering feats; the physical hardships; the harshness of the terrain and the difficulties that the first miners had to overcome, trekking the mountainous region to mine alluvial gold and bring it out, are graphically described. There are numerous contemporary photographs illustrating conditions and events.

This book is much more than a history of a colonial industry. Waterhouse elaborates the ways that policies of the PNG administration and the Australian
government combined both to facilitate and to hinder the development of a mining industry. The era of the Morobe goldfields coincided with Australia’s most xenophobic political period, when the White Australia Policy held sway. Then as now, the problems of governance had a major effect on the way that mining projects operated. In the early period much of the region was “uncontrolled” and conflicts with tribes were common. If the “natives” were uncontrolled, so too were the prospectors, and the records of armed conflicts involving numerous deaths make for alarming reading. Miners went armed and seemed never to question their right to walk through villagers’ land and respond violently when opposed. The labour recruitment system was oppressive and often inefficient; the wages paid and the working conditions of New Guineans were poor. Recruits absconded; many died of contagious disease in the overcrowded and insanitary living conditions. Mining was dangerous and safety regulations minimal, so black and white men alike sustained injuries and death from landslides, cave-ins and equipment failures.

The lack of transport facilities hampered smooth operations and demanded considerable capital investment from companies. While numerous historians have observed the significance of air transportation for economic development in PNG, Waterhouse’s careful analysis of the mining industry’s dependence on it brings the point home very specifically. He also provides interesting insights into the policies of the Australian Government of the Mandated Territory and in particular, its financial arrangements.

The strength of the book is the scope of its social history. Gold miners, gold rushes and frontier towns make good subjects. The first prospectors seem always to include tough men who combine traits of roguishness, physical courage, tenacity and ingenuity, working in conditions that are inhospitable and unpredictable. The history of gold mining in Papua New Guinea is populated by many such men (and a few women). But Waterhouse goes beyond the evocative stories of everyday life and critically explores the social milieu, the town that emerged as the industry flourished and the attitudes that shaped social relations. He examines the prevailing racism that characterized interactions and regulated daily life, especially for the labour recruits and the Chinese tradesmen.

Waterhouse’s attention to the social world extends to the New Guinean labourers and the people of Morobe themselves, the people who lived in the villages and were in many respects those most affected by mining in the long term. Drawing on contemporary accounts, anthropological research into the people of the region, reports and interviews, he gives well-grounded insights into their experience of the introduction of mining and the encounter with colonialism.