As this work well shows, cross-cultural interactions in the Pacific were complex, imbricated and generally understood differently by the parties involved. In time sequence they varied greatly. To attempt to address this broad scope of imperial interactions and geography, *Islanders* is organized into two broad periods: part 1, “The Bible and the Gun,” addresses events from the late eighteenth century to about 1850; part 2, “The Tribe and the Army,” considers the rest of the nineteenth century, roughly the cusp of territorial acquisition of islands by the European and American powers. Each part consists of five chapters.

While unashamedly a contact history, *Islanders* also gives due emphasis to how the islanders used new means to connect to other islanders, often ancient kin from the time of Polynesian settlement. Many also embraced opportunities to travel to and work well beyond the Pacific in places as far apart as Sydney and London. Some made it home and, like many European travellers, some died on distant shores.

Thomas is concerned with what empire, no matter how nascent, meant in the everyday lives of the islanders and what these intrusions of foreign material objects and new ideas provoked in their imaginations. No less significant is what the newcomers made of these Pacific peoples. The great challenge however, is that few islanders of this time left records of what they thought. Even so, Thomas, while occasionally pushing the speculation envelope a little far, is persuasive in his use of ethnographic insights to reveal the possible, if not probable motivations of the islanders concerned. Events are considered via a series of well-documented cross-cultural vignettes that provide considerable analysis of layered and varied encounters. Several of these are drawn from his earlier published works. Thomas’ prose is clear, readable and often elegant. He is adroit in linking often-disparate places via a traveller or a ship, so transitions are generally well handled.

Similar to several other Pacific contact histories, such as Kerry Howe’s *Where the Waves Fall* (Allen and Unwin, 1984) Thomas begins with Matavai Bay, Tahiti, a late eighteenth-century site of intense London Missionary Society (LMS) and British exploratory interest (Wallis and Cook) and thus well documented. With a few forays into Fiji and mentions of the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, the account moves across Polynesia in part 1. Parts of western Melanesia and Fiji come into focus later in part 2, with consideration of the nineteenth century slave/labour trade and the beginnings of a settler colonial presence in New Caledonia and Fiji. Developments in parts of Polynesia also are considered—some intriguing in their modernity, yet leave the reader wondering. What did Kalakaipa of Hawaii envision in his greater Polynesia—simply a federation or an empire?
The book’s epilogue points to the ambiguity attendant on weighing this engagement of the West with the islanders. Much undoubtedly was lost but a new range of possibilities came too. The human cultural ecology (and indeed the wider ecology) was greatly perturbed but a new, if rearranged one emerged during this period of empire. That re-arrangement is still being played out.

While Thomas gives us rich fare, his seems a Eurocentric Pacific in terms of some basic themes of the work. Other than the exceptional Spanish Guam in the north Pacific in the sixteenth century with its Catholic mission, another proselytizing world religion, Islam, was at work among those considered islanders, as early as the sixteenth century, at least two hundred years before the LMS stepped ashore in Tahiti. As Clive Moore has well shown in *New Guinea; Crossing boundaries and history* (University of Hawaii Press, 2003), many west New Guineans became Muslims; many also were imperial subjects to Asiatic sultan suzerains; many were taken as slaves; many also were involved in trade, supplying commodity chains into Asia. Cosmopolitan intrusions of artefacts and ideas from South Asia occurred here too, including Chinese (Donsong) metal work; indeed some of the coastal New Guineans were the first islanders to learn to work metal. This may be a “fuzzy border” (130) zone with Southeast Asia but was, say, Dore Bay anymore “fuzzy” than Matavai Bay with its successive waves of Europeans? Considering that New Guinea (and the rest of Melanesia), as Thomas states, was “densely populated on almost a continental scale” (110) one wonders why such early contacts here are not given due attention, perhaps because much of their documentation is not available in English? Another gap in Thomas’ Pacific, on his own admission (25), is Micronesia but it is this region where, unlike greater Polynesia, indigenous vessels and voyaging across vast distances kept these Islanders in contact with each other well into the nineteenth century. Paul D’arcy’s *The people of the sea: environment, identity and history in Oceania* (University of Hawaii, 2003) on this and the prominence of the maritime in the Pacific world puts substance to the interconnectedness of the “Sea of Islands” envisioned by Epeli Hau’ofa. Yet Thomas seems not to have cited D’arcy’s seminal work. A few more maps also would have been helpful.

As with most books of this scope a few errors are inevitable. Even Homer nods, it seems. Bishop Epalle died on Santa Isabel, not San Cristobal in the Solomon Islands (161); Noumea is in the southwest of La Grande Terre, not the southeast (179). Which islanders were smoking tobacco “prior to European contact” (179)? Nabutautau and Navatusila in Fiji seem confused (246).

Overall, *Islanders* is a significant work, especially for those new to Pacific history and Pacific studies, but it would have been more accurate to call it a study of the central and eastern Pacific in the age of empire. In fairness though, this Oceanic world may be just too great and too fluid for any historian to contain and capture in one volume.