Introduction

A SEAFARING PERSPECTIVE

Writing in the American Historical Review of June 2006, Kären Wigen reminds readers that the sea is “swinging into view” and is “being given a history, even as the history of the world is being retold from the perspective of the sea.” 1 When we consider the millennia of exploration and settlement of the islands of the Pacific, and the continuum of maritime activities in the region, it would not be much of an exaggeration to define the history of the Pacific as “a history of seafaring.” It is the role of indigenous seafarers and related traders in Pacific history that is the main theme of this book.

Centuries before the Pacific was revealed to Europeans, flotillas of vessels carried thousands of men, women, and children, together with plants and animals, to virtually every island in a vast ocean that covers about one-third of the surface of the globe. They settled in homelands with considerable diversity, ranging from the high islands of Papua New Guinea to small volcanic peaks that rise from the deep seabed, and a myriad of coral atolls and reef islands.

In recent times the islands of the Pacific have been grouped into twenty-two political entities. Ten are independent states, six are variously associated with former colonial administrations, and six are politically parts of distant countries (France, three; United States, two; and New Zealand, one). Their aggregate population is about nine million, of which over five million are in the mainland and islands of Papua New Guinea. These figures do not include the indigenous peoples in Hawai‘i and New Zealand.

When the Europeans gradually “discovered” these lands widely distributed in an ocean on the other side of the world, they saw the inhabitants as isolated and insular. It was a view not shared by island people. Their oral traditions in stories, songs, and creation myths told of great voyages. They were anything but insular, as the navigator Tupaia from Ra‘iatea demonstrated to Cook in 1769. His map showed seventy-four islands he could name, and he related many others he had knowledge of. Tupaia’s
map extends over an area of the Pacific equivalent to a region of Europe encompassing Ireland and Spain in the west, Denmark in the north, Italy to the south, and beyond to the Caspian Sea and Russia to the east.\(^2\)

The scope of this book lies in the continuity of seafaring from the ancient ancestors of Tupaia to the modern Pacific sailor.\(^3\) The purposes of this introduction are to provide a perspective of the various cross sections in time and to emphasize that there are several common features in the shipboard work and lifestyles of mariners that constitute a form of “ship culture.”

Chapter 1 makes comparisons between the traditions of Pacific sailors and others. The similarities are important because they help explain the ease of crew mobility between ships regardless of national and ethnic diversity. This is not to say that seafarers the world over have more in common with each other than with people in the societies from which they were drawn; nor would it be entirely true that maritime traditions on board do not vary between national and ethnic groups. What is observable is that there are traditions, terminology, and even modes of dress that are common to sailors at various periods and cut across national and ethnic differences. These distinctive common components of the seafaring way of life arise from the dangers of the sea, living and working in an enclosed and inescapable ship space, separation from families, continuous travel, the ease of adjustment to multiethnic settings on board and in “sailor town” enclaves when ashore, and exposure to exotic diseases.

Sailors similarly share experiences of alienation from society on shore. They acquire outlooks on life that differ from those of their land-based contemporaries. It was said of sixteenth-century Spanish mariners that “sailor’s eyes would carry engraved on their retinas images of a diverse and exotic world, which made events and landscapes of daily life on land seem insufferably monotonous.”\(^4\) This is still true of Pacific sailors returning to remote island villages after international voyages.

The more chronological sequences in the book start with the second chapter, which goes back into the mists of time to identify characteristics of the first Pacific seafarers. This endeavor is attempted through what Eric Sager calls “intuitive perception, the facility that allows us, with varying degrees of success, to recreate in the mind experiences from the past that are otherwise unrecoverable.”\(^5\) I have approached aspects of prehistoric seamanship in this way from the point of view of a professional mariner with experience in island trading and Pacific island crews. Other material includes the observations of researchers sailing with indigenous navigators, including those on replica vessels; archaeological and DNA data;
and the decoding of ancient myths and metaphors by Pacific scholars. It has likewise been assumed that contemporary indigenous trading systems embody some spatial and ceremonial components from the distant past. Descriptions of such components are derived from publications, port surveys, and personal experience.

The period of the first arrival of the Europeans is considered in terms of the relationships between foreign sailors and the maritime communities of the islands. Regarding this, only the records of the Europeans are available. The journal of George Robertson of HMS *Dolphin* in 1767 reveals the attitudes of sailors. The journals of Cook and others from 1768 are primary documents in many respects, including descriptions of the use of sea power by chiefs in interisland conflicts. The points of view of island people are more difficult to ascertain, but there is some help in the accounts of James Morrison, bosun’s mate of the *Bounty* who lived eighteen months in Tahiti from 1789, and of young William Mariner, brought up as a Tongan from 1806 to 1810.

There were more widespread and intrusive arrivals by commercial trading and whaling ships. Particularly useful are the accounts of voyages by the English supercargo John Turnbull (1800–1804) and the American sailor Stephen Reynolds (1810–1813). Their records afford brief views of the changes in Tahiti and Hawai‘i, the recruitment of islanders, and trading with the coastal and island peoples of the Pacific region of the American Northwest. Such commercial contacts were accompanied by a remarkably rapid adoption by island rulers, chiefs, and the Maori communities of European designs of vessels and adjustments to commercial trade. For a short time they successfully competed as shipowners in seaborne trade with the Europeans and Americans.

The Pacific seafarers who sailed vessels owned by island chiefs went on to crew the enormous fleets of foreign merchant ships and whalers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This return to the sea in a different capacity by Pacific islanders lasted for only a few decades. Captains were encouraged by authorities in New South Wales to recruit “native crews” from New Zealand and Polynesia. Many of these crewmen, like their European and America shipmates, suffered abuses. They responded by desertion and mutiny. Records of such events are from court cases and also from accounts by Europeans who recorded at first hand the experiences of a few Pacific sailors.

By the late nineteenth century, bigger foreign merchant companies with steamships were dominant. This accelerated the pace of colonization. Among other effects were the actions by Australasian and American
maritime trade unions in defense of their members against the use by shipowners of cheap labor on their national flag vessels. This saw most Pacific seafarers confined to employment on small interisland traders within specific colonial territories. Continuous attempts by Pacific people to usurp foreign dominance over trade and shipping took the form of obtaining more local craft, protest movements and boycotts, as well as the temporary rise of a few island-based maritime trade unions and related strike actions in port towns.

As is shown in several chapters, the Pacific islanders clearly were never simply observers of the colonization of their lands or the total domination of their seas. Indigenous noncommercial maritime trade also continued, and ceremonial events were carried along, entwined with commercial ventures on island- and foreign-owned vessels.

In the early twentieth century when the values of island resources fell, some of the foreign commercial companies withdrew. The island mariners and shipowners now included mixed-race descendants of sailors and settlers. The role of this sector is examined for its importance in local trades. The second half of the century was a period of political independence for most islands, the founding of national shipping lines, and the regional Pacific Forum Line. These were accompanied by considerable technological change, and the book focuses on the impacts of such developments on the skills, training, and welfare of seafarers, as well as new attitudes toward women at sea. In order to deal with this multiplicity of issues a case study of the interisland shipping of Fiji is presented. Similarly, the complexity of the modern international employment of Pacific Island seafarers is examined through an analysis of one hundred crew lists of foreign ships on which Pacific sailors served. This likewise leads to an in-depth case study of Kiribati, chosen because it is the major Pacific source of seafarers engaged on foreign ships. This study includes life at sea, impacts of homecoming, gender issues, family stresses, and problems of disease.

This book differs from most others in the history of the Pacific by its emphasis on sailors and related traders. Apart from novels, there has not been much of a focus in the past on merchant seafarers in Pacific literature. In academic publications there have always been references to the importance of the sea—not least in the concepts of Epeli Hau‘ofa.6 When it comes to sailors, however, they have usually been relegated to mere ciphers, as “ships crews” in commerce, and generalized as operational adjuncts in traditional exchange voyages. In practice the safety and success of these ventures were literally in the hands of sailors. This tendency to ignore the reality of the life of a sailor is partly due to the lack of writ-
ten accounts by sailors, a sparseness of observers at sea, and land-oriented officials who never thought it necessary to keep crew records. Even in Britain it was only in the mid-nineteenth century that official statistics began to be kept on ages, places of origin, and deaths at sea of merchant seamen.

There are exceptions to the total anonymity of Pacific sailors. References are made in major studies of historical events, whaling, and trade, in which Pacific sailors feature. These are referred to in several chapters and are listed in the bibliography. Only three volumes focus specifically on indigenous sailors. Paul D’Arcy has carefully analyzed the information for many interisland contacts in Polynesia and Micronesia between 1770 and 1870. He shows these as agents of social and technical change, independent of European activities. David Chappell, in the absence of statistics, has dedicatedly drawn together statements and anecdotes on the employment of Pacific seafarers on foreign ships during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Richard Feinberg has brought together very detailed accounts of the sea life of people in a group of small island communities in the Polynesian outliers during the modern period. *Sailors and Traders* provides perspective for these and other studies by extending over a wider compass of space and time in order to record more of the remarkable heritage of the modern Pacific sailor.