Introduction:
The All-encompassing Sea

This study examines the influence of the sea on the actions and outlooks of the inhabitants of those Pacific islands that lie within a truly oceanic domain. This area, sometimes referred to as Remote Oceania, is characterized by large sea gaps between islands and archipelagos and by a relatively limited area of land within a vast expanse of ocean. It broadly coincides with the older conceptual divisions of Polynesia and Micronesia.

This book covers the maritime dimension of Remote Oceania’s history for the period from 1770 until 1870. The study emphasizes Pacific Islanders’ varied relationships with the sea as evolving processes during a crucial transitional era. Particular attention is paid to the flux in the natural marine environment, how such a state instilled an expectation and openness toward outside influences, and, accordingly, the rapidity with which cultural change could occur in relations between various groups in this era. This runs counter to the dominant paradigms of recent Pacific Islands’ historiography.

Although this is one of the few truly oceanic habitats occupied permanently by humankind, surprisingly little research has been conducted on the maritime dimension of the region’s history. Most studies of island communities with a maritime theme are oriented toward the initial exploration and colonization of the region. They speculate on the nautical technology and navigational ability of these early explorers by examining the vessels and sea knowledge of Oceania’s cultures at the time of first encounters with Western/European outsiders. They also examine this issue by studying communities in the twentieth century whose maritime practices were partially preserved by relative isolation from Western influences during the colonial period. A host of ethnographies consider the use of the sea as a food source, often as part of a wider analysis of the total
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subsistence base. These studies emphasize longer-term continuities rather than short-term change, so there is little historically specific detail in them.

Pacific historians have been more focused on instances of rapid change in the period of sustained Western contact from the 1770s onward. However, they usually emphasize Western influences as the main reasons behind the transformation of Islander communities in this period. Indigenous relations with Europeans receive the lion’s share of attention, while ongoing and new interactions between local communities tend to be neglected. Such studies rarely examine the degree to which the realities of living in an oceanic environment promulgated openness to external influences among Islanders. As a result, the impact of Westerners is perhaps exaggerated.

This work attempts to fill these gaps by combining hitherto uncoordinated studies of various maritime topics, and by using neglected historical material from the period under review. The book uses a combination of detailed case studies and region-wide surveys, depending on the availability of sources and the intention of each section. The focus is fairly evenly divided between high island and low-lying coral island communities. The case study in chapter 7 concentrates on the Caroline Islands in Micronesia, while the remainder of the book has a slightly more Polynesian than Micronesian focus. Primary material is used, although financial and time constraints meant that this was not always possible. The Human Relations Area Files’ (HRAF) English translations of French, German, Russian, and Spanish sources provided an invaluable first point of reference for continental European sources. All have been subsequently checked against the original sources with the assistance of the translators noted in the acknowledgments. Footnotes cite both HRAF translations and original sources. Information that is not specific to the 1770–1870 period is identified as such. It is usually included only to fill lacunae in the historical evidence, or because it is particularly germane to the topic.

Both imperial and metric measurements are used in keeping with the sources from which they were obtained to avoid messy, poorly rounded conversion measurements. For readers unfamiliar with one of the two systems, one mile equals 1.609 kilometers, one nautical mile equals 1.852 kilometers, one fathom equals 1.828 meters, one acre equals 0.0404 of a hectare, one pound equates to 0.453 kilograms, and one ton is equivalent to 1.016 metric tons.

Chapter 1 examines the ways in which modern studies have characterized the region. It first looks at approaches to the sea among the disciplines involved in Pacific Studies. The Western scientific vision of Oceania
is then traced. Modern scientific data on the maritime environments of the region are reviewed to set the stage for an examination of the people who made their homes there and to suggest ways in which these environments may have influenced them.

The major part of this study consists of a comprehensive survey of the ways in which living in this great expanse of ocean shaped societies between 1770 and 1870. It is organized into five chapters around the theme of cultural spaces within the sea. Beginning with what was near and familiar in the sea world of Remote Oceania, the chapters move outward to the increasingly distant and unfamiliar realms of the sea. No single narrative encompasses all aspects of Islanders’ relations with the sea. General patterns of sea use are examined from a variety of perspectives to flesh out ways of exploring the maritime dimension of Pacific history. Previous neglect of the topic means that much of this study is dedicated to constructing an extended and detailed conceptual framework. This conceptual framework is outlined in chapters 1 to 6. Chapter 7 then applies these concepts by exploring the influence of the sea on the history of the western Caroline Islands.

Islander actions and narratives reveal the importance of the sea. Chapter 2 examines the sea in the day-to-day life of Islanders. This chapter’s environmental focus is the near-shore environment around settlements where most Islanders had the majority of their interactions with the sea. Chapter 3 explores peaceful interactions between communities involving sea travel. Chapter 4 outlines the infrastructure necessary for sea travel. Sea travel was also influenced by the ways in which Islanders resolved conflicting interests over access to the sea. Chapter 5 examines how maritime boundaries were decided. Principles and forms of tenure are reviewed, and the degree to which communities could protect or contest tenure is discussed. Chapter 6 examines Islanders’ attitudes to unheralded arrivals from beyond the horizon. The chapter also outlines Islanders’ conception of the world beyond their usual voyaging spheres, and their willingness to travel to such areas when opportunities arose.

The study concludes by examining the influence of the sea on historical processes in Oceania from 1770 until the present. Chapter 7 is a regional case study whose history is reevaluated in light of the conceptual framework already outlined. This chapter examines inter-island exchanges in the western Caroline Islands, particularly the sauei system. This is followed by the conclusion, which begins by tracing how Islanders’ relationships with the sea were profoundly altered during colonial rule. Only recently have many inhabitants of the region begun to redis-
cover and reestablish the ties that bound their ancestors to this great expanse of ocean. It then discusses the implications of its findings for Pacific Studies. By focusing on the sea and its place in the lives of Islanders, the way is opened for new explorations of the region and its inhabitants. Oceania was, and still is, one of the few places on earth where the sea figures so prominently in human activities and thoughts. Dissatisfaction with neglect of the maritime dimension of Pacific history has risen in recent years. The time has come to reevaluate the influence of the sea on Oceanic history.