Introduction

A few years ago I met a Tahitian writer at a workshop on contemporary Pacific literature. Celestine Hitiura Vaite had recently published a novel, titled *Breadfruit*. Breadfruit had a lot of significance in Tahiti, she said. I told her about my research into Captain Bligh’s breadfruit voyages and she told me about the huge breadfruit tree in her mother’s garden on the island, planted by her great-grandfather. It was, like all breadfruit trees, a reliable producer of large, useful fruits. Ever bountiful, it had been bearing fruit, season after season, as her family’s generations passed. In 1983, after a major cyclone hit, Celestine’s family came out of their shelter and found everything—the house, the garden—was gone. Except the breadfruit tree, which was standing there still. Celestine also told me the old legend of the creation of breadfruit. Long ago, in a time of famine, a father decided he could not bear to see his family go hungry anymore. He went outside in the middle of the night and turned himself into a breadfruit tree, saying, “I will always be there for you.”

By the late eighteenth century, this understanding of breadfruit as a reliable stand-by in times of need had been carried beyond the Pacific, to take root in Britain. Captain Bligh’s breadfruit saga, the most widely recognized episode in Tahitian history, began when British plantation owners in the Caribbean, desperate for cheap, dependable food for their starving slaves, settled on breadfruit as the solution. With the support of the British scientific establishment, they successfully lobbied the Admiralty for an expedition of transplantation from Tahiti. The image on this book’s front cover is a 1796 tribute to the successful breadfruit transfer that had been initiated on the shores of Matavai Bay four years earlier. A Tahitian is directing operations, wearing the barkcloth robes that Ma’i (“Omai”) wore when Reynolds painted his portrait in London. The project of transplantation brought Captain Bligh to the island twice, brought a Tahitian chief, Tu, a large quantity of European goods and weapons, brought mutineers to settle on the island and embroil themselves in local politics, and carried
two Tahitian gardeners to the Caribbean. The breadfruit project prompted just some of the many exchanges of ideas, relationships, and goods moving back and forth between Pacific islanders and Europeans at the time. It was only one of a series of visits by Europeans during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries directed at making use of the resources contained within Tahiti’s natural environment. The implications of all these visits for Tahitians and their island were extraordinary.

This book is an exploration of the exchanges between Tahitians, Europeans, and their natural worlds. It is based on the premise that the natural environment is inextricably woven into the unfolding fabric of human histories. As Geoff Park has said, “the ecology of a stretch of country and its history are far from unrelated. They work on one another. . . . If you go in search of one, you are led to the other.” Seeing nature as separate to human culture is a deeply rooted Western habit of mind, and, as William Cronon has said, it is a false dualism; nature is “much less natural than we think,” being perpetually reshaped by us as well as being seen through “the lens of our own conceptions.” The landscape and its living ecology are integral to the physical context, the daily lives, spiritual relationships, conflicts, economies, political machinations, mythologies, and imaginings of human communities. Plants, animals, and other aspects of a natural environment do not only have a presence in the perceptions, decisions, and actions of societies—plants and animals are themselves historical agents.

The story begins with the first meeting between Tahitians and Europeans: the arrival of Captain Samuel Wallis and the crew of HMS Dolphin in 1767. It ends in 1827, with the bedding down of a series of major political, social, and religious changes on the island. 1827 marks the end of a particularly volatile period of ecologically significant trade with the Australian colonies, the first year of the reign of the young, chiefly woman Aimata, and the start of a new era in which French colonial rule radically altered the Tahitians’ ability to control their environment. Tahiti is the focus of this book, but the story includes other islands, primarily the other Society Islands: neighboring Mo’orea, the Leeward Islands to the west—Huahine, Ra’iatea, Taha’a, Porapora (“Borabora”)—and a set of islets and atolls: Tetiaroa, Maupiti, Me’etia, and others. The people who occupy these islands are the Maohi, the “people of the land.”

This book focuses on the point at which cross-cultural relations and environmental relations coincide. It is first and foremost a historical project, centering on historical texts and using historical frameworks to explain the dynamics of a particular human and environmental conjunction. Environmental history is an important part of our ability to create
nuanced, dynamic understandings of how humans have shaped and have been shaped by their natural world. These understandings, and the stories we tell about them, are crucial for addressing our current global need for greater environmental intelligence.6

The project also focuses on the point of intersection between two culturally distinct groups. It is at such intersections that especially dynamic, influential, often unexpected events and relationships occur. Around the world and throughout history, it is the meeting of cultural groups that has caused changes to many of the world’s ecologies. Whether in the context of traveling, trading, colonizing, or warring, cross-cultural encounters carry a burden of ecological impact.

A focus on cross-cultural engagement is a relatively recent development in the scholarship of the Pacific.7 Early histories of the Pacific were narratives of triumphal European exploration and empire. These were overturned from the 1960s by the mournful exposés of the damage of European impact, from A. Grenfell Price’s Western Invasions of the Pacific (1963) and Alan Moorehead’s well-known Fatal Impact: An Account of the Invasion of the South Pacific (1966, 1967, 1987), to A. Mitchell’s The Fragile South Pacific (1989). The Pacific has also featured in this mode within global environmental histories, such as in Alfred Crosby’s Ecological Imperialism (1986), which looks to early European colonizers taking over the environment of the New World with their exploitative appetites and invasive “portmanteau biota.”8 By these domineering practices, Crosby argues, the Old World weeds, viruses, and herds engulfed those ecologies and created “Neo-Europes” in the southern hemisphere. As K. R. Howe has said, after telling the history of the era of Enlightenment voyages, the “single most dominant metaphor for the subsequent history of the islands, and Tahiti in particular as a symbol of all others, is ‘paradise lost’.”9 This perspective perseveres in many popular conceptions of the Pacific today. Both the “imperial” and “fatal impact” historians present an image of powerful European actions being brought to bear upon a passive Pacific.10

Since the 1980s, historical anthropologists and ethnohistorians—most notably Greg Dening, Nicholas Thomas, Anne Salmond, Douglas Oliver, and Marshall Sahlins—have been addressing the active engagement between Pacific islanders and Europeans. They have sought evidence of indigenous metaphors, ritual practices, oral histories, and material culture, through which islanders made sense of the eighteenth-century newcomers. K. R. Howe and historians at the Australian National University have been providing Pacific-centric histories that recognize the more dynamic, islander-driven stories of continuity and change in Oceania.11 Their research
Map I.2. Tahiti and Mo‘orea, showing political districts, political groupings and key sites. © Mark Gunning (AHHAdesign.com), 2009.
into indigenous perspectives combines with rigorous examination of European documents to return to the historical actors a sense of the uncertainties and complexities of the engagements on the beach, achieving credible insights into the meanings of those experiences for those on both sides of the encounter.12

Importantly, historians and writers such as Albert Wendt, Epeli Hau’ofa, Vilsoni Hereniko, and Teresia and Katerina Teaiwa have opened up new, ocean-centric perspectives to their more landlocked colleagues. Their histories are often centered on a nexus of place and identity, and they employ storytelling, theater, dance, and film, modes of communicating and commenting on the past that draw on long traditions of oration and staged performance of historical narratives.13 These academics have often worked with the same impetus that inspired Epeli Hau’ofa’s influential essay “Our Sea of Islands” (1994). Hau’ofa calls for the Pacific to be conceived of as Oceania, a region of islands interconnected, rather than isolated, by their ocean. Recognizing this, says Hau’ofa, can galvanize the overturning of colonial narratives of division and dependency.14 Greater historical understandings are needed of the world of the ancestors, Hau’ofa states, “in which peoples and cultures moved and mingled, unhindered by boundaries of the kind erected much later by imperial powers.”15

This project joins with the impetus of these scholars (both within and beyond Oceania) in underlining the mutuality of agency across the cultural divide. Neither islanders or Europeans had a monopoly on action, authority, competency, sensibility, or moral high ground. Across that cultural divide, Europeans and islanders communicated, traded, challenged, inspired, entertained, alarmed, teased, supported, and defrauded each other. They were, in fundamental ways, changed by one another.

As Tahitians and Europeans began meeting each other, they tried to establish some shared words and communicative gestures, tried to find out how the other did things, which gods they lived under. They traded for the intriguing and useful things the other made. They negotiated with each other for special assistance: Tahitian chiefs asked to borrow European manpower and ammunition to assist in wars against neighboring islands; European captains asked for islander navigators and translators. There was also plenty of sexual contact between the European crews and island women.16 These exchanges proceeded at a rapid pace, between members of all classes of Tahitian society and at all levels of each ship’s crew. Despite the cultural differences, all their physical contact, bartering, and giving of gifts ran relatively easily, especially when compared to other Pacific islands where less value was placed on connections to the visitors and their possessions.
During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, most of the meetings between Tahitians and Europeans took place on the island itself. However, Society Islanders also traveled on British and French ships around the Pacific and, in some instances, visited Europe. The high priest and navigator Tupaia (c.1725–1770) guided and translated for Cook on the *Endeavour*. Ahutoru (c.1733–1771) voyaged with Bougainville to Paris, and Ma’i (c.1753–c.1780) became a celebrity in London before returning to the Societies with a collection of British weapons and technological curiosities. It was an era of mutual fascination and experimentation.

Among these interactions, there was a particular type of exchange that involved specific kinds of material. The Europeans were asking the Tahitians each day, repeatedly, for things from the island’s natural environment. The crews wanted fruit, coconuts, fish, shellfish, tubers, chicken, and pork. They wanted fresh water from the island’s streams and timber from groves of trees. The islanders were generally willing to supply these things. They traded and gave them away in surprisingly large quantities.

It is particularly intriguing that the Europeans wanted not only to take plants and animals away from the island, but that they wanted to leave their own. When Captain Samuel Wallis became the first European to land at Tahiti in June 1767, he left a British flag on shore. He also gave Purea (chiefess of the Teva-i-uta people, Papara, in the island’s southwest) three guinea hens, a pair of turkeys, a pregnant cat, and a garden planted with peas. Captain Louis-Antoine Bougainville of France, Captain Cook of England, and Commandante Boenechea of Spain all planted vegetables, grains, and fruit and gave breeding pairs of cattle, goats, sheep, and poultry to the local chiefs.

What goal could have been so important that these captains were prepared to share the ships’ limited spaces and resources with livestock for six to twelve months before reaching their island destination, only to give the animals away? On the other side of the shoreline, what was prompting the islanders to give up great quantities of important resources, including their immensely valuable, often spiritually significant, pigs, trees, and fish to the visiting strangers?

When reading accounts of the decisions, statements, and actions made by those involved in the meetings across the beach, one can at times founder for an explanation of their motivations. Whether looking at the phenomenal effort a captain expended to carry cattle to a remote Pacific island or a chief’s apparently casual trading away of a previously sacred animal, the rationale is often opaque. As Robert Darnton has shown, it is at these points of opacity, when we as contemporary readers cannot find our way
into a past worldview, cannot explain the actions or get the joke, that are most valuable to the historian. They indicate the greatest conceptual distance between the historian and the historical subject. It is at these points that the historian of mentalities starts to question most actively and tries to uncover the traces of a past mental world. The decisions and actions taken by Tahitians and Europeans during the last half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries over the treatment and trade of ecological elements is one such point of fruitful perplexity.

As plants and animals were passed between people, there were ripples of impact on the surrounding people, conceptual frameworks, and environments. Moving plants and animals across cultural and environmental borders had exceptionally deep and wide-ranging impacts on Pacific islands. I call this set of exchanges “ecological exchange.”

**Introducing Ecological Exchange**

I define an exchange as “ecological” if it encompasses an exchange of species—living or once living—which has the capacity to impact, however slightly, the ecosystems those species are entering or leaving. So an islander providing a pig to a ship’s officer in return for an iron nail is an ecological exchange even though an ecological element forms only half of the exchange. Taking the pig out of the local system removes that animal’s foraging, predating, and breeding functions from the system. The impact is especially clear when a single exchange of a food, animal, or plant is multiplied to many such transactions in a day in a small geographical area. The crew of British ships, anchored in Matavai Bay for several months, routinely consumed a thousand coconuts a day.

The passing of animals and plants between islanders and Europeans during the Pacific voyaging era has been mentioned by various writers of Pacific history. The most considered and detailed treatment of the topic to date has been Nicholas Thomas’ discussion of James Cook’s fascination with the introduction of animals to the Pacific. However, no sustained attention has previously been given to how these transactions operated as a powerful, cohesive, and ongoing context of exchange. The broader implications of ecological exchange for the individuals, communities, conceptual frameworks, and ecologies involved have been largely unconsidered.

I have come to three central conclusions about ecological exchange. First, and most fundamentally, the exchange of plants and animals is a process that contributes to the course of human histories. Ecological exchange has extensive cultural and environmental consequences. Second, ecologi-
cal exchange is shaped by and contributes to the operation of cross-cultural relationships. Finally, one of the dynamics that operates within ecological exchange in a cross-cultural environment is that the inhabitants of a landscape retain substantial control over the exchange. In Tahiti, islanders, particularly islanders of high rank, managed the import and export of plants and animals to their own ends. Europeans who engaged with the island held a greater battery of weapons, but they did not hold the greater portion of power.

The history of Tahiti is one that has been particularly shaped by its living environment. This is not because the island’s inhabitants were more or less “at one” with their natural world than members of other societies were. Since Pacific islanders occupied the islands of the eastern Pacific, moving from Samoa into the Marquesas, Society Islands, Hawaiian archipelago, and Easter Island from about 200 BC to AD 800, they established a range of socially codified means for ensuring sustainability of the flora and fauna upon which they relied. They also overexploited natural resources for short-term purposes and caused extinctions, habitat loss, and soil erosion. There is nothing essential in indigenous communities that renders them environmentally enlightened. The Maohi of the Society Islands did live lives closely intertwined with the physical world on a conceptual, practical, and ceremonial level. This meant that ecological changes tended to have broader and more immediate implications for paradigms, social practices, spirituality, politics, and economics than usually experienced by urban or industrialized societies.

To fully understand the history of a place and its people, we need to trace specific histories of ecological exchange. Histories of ecological exchange allow us to see the mechanisms by which an environment has come to be constituted. The continued introduction of exotic species and overconsumption of existing resources remain among the greatest challenges facing Pacific islands.

Observing Islands

On an island, people generally bring in and take out plants and livestock on clearly observed occasions. Islands have long been used by scientists and anthropologists as testing grounds for theories. Researchers from Johann Reinhold Forster to Charles Darwin to Margaret Mead have found islands useful sites for observing environments and societies. They are ideal locations for discerning how societies work within and against their environments. As Richard Grove, J. R. McNeill, Patrick Nunn, and others have ably
demonstrated, islands are ideal sites for the work of environmental historians. Small and specific, cut off from the leveling effects of broad continental processes, the workings of islands are more visible. On a continental land mass, plants and animals can migrate, self-sow, move gradually into new territory. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, seeds, roots, seedlings, cuttings, cages of birds, and animals of all sorts could be transported, traded, and smuggled on foot or by cart, carriage, train, or boat. By contrast, the species reaching Tahiti during the same period included sea birds and plants blown or flown in as seeds, but those brought by human agency were carried by the sole medium of ships.

Because of this, the flow of plants and animals in and out of Tahiti was easily witnessed. European naval officers and the missionaries who came soon afterwards were both institutionally required by their various admiralties and missionary societies to carefully, regularly, and precisely document what they experienced and transacted.

Exchange Systems in a Cross-Cultural Context

Exchange relations seem to be the substance of social life.
—Nicholas Thomas, Entangled Objects

Exchange is a powerful analytical category. A social operation that encompasses communication, gift giving, and trade, exchange relations do not just allow economic systems to turn—they are the fundamental means by which relationships between individuals and between groups are formed and maintained. As Nicholas Thomas has said, they can be seen to constitute social life. In a cross-cultural context such as Tahiti in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, exchanges between Europeans and islanders gave shape to the social life of both groups. The giving and trading of plants and animals operated within this broad and active context of exchanges. The difficulties that ran through the broader context of their meetings—the expectations of fair returns that went unmet, the asking for more than the other deemed just, the unwitting insults given—were difficulties that also complicated ecological exchanges.

At first, the Europeans and islanders who met on Pacific beaches made connections across the cultural divide by offering food and objects. The acts of offering and accepting created links when there were few words in common and minimal comprehension of each others’ intentions, priorities, or beliefs. Through these first transactions of food and goods, tentative relationships were established. More fully developed relationships were
established from the 1770s as more involved exchanges of property became routine. A familiar pattern settled over the trade for plants and animals as these things were translated into scientific specimens and commodities. Both sides knew basically what the other side wanted and expected. The trade was, nevertheless, troubled by persistent discord.

For Europeans of the eighteenth century, gifts were marked out clearly from items used in trade. In their eyes, gifts were precious items, presented with specific etiquette and suitable ceremony on a particular, clear occasion for maximum impact. Certain morés surrounded how these gifts could be spoken about, a delicacy surrounding the unvoiced but integral bond of obligation created by the gift. The trade of food for provisions on island shores, on the other hand, was a commercial proposition and was conceived of as barter, involving an overt discussion of value. The Polynesian practice of gift giving and trading was not so clear-cut. It operated as a continuum rather than as a distinction. Gifts were given frequently, casually, and with an open expectation of a gift to be given in return. Douglas Oliver has suggested that particular forms of gift exchange within Maohi society were a way of managing the surpluses of fish, fruit, and other produce that an individual would acquire from time to time. The receiver was under a social obligation to accept the gift, and a return could be called in later, when the giver was in need. There were subtle graduations defining the value of plant and animal products as property. Greater or lesser exchange value attached to these depending on how much labor was required to produce them. The needs and resources of the parties involved were also taken into account when determining an exchange, rather than just the value of the goods. Europeans initially discerned very little of this hierarchy of values.

The disjunction between values placed on property and definitions of gift and trade were a frequent source of tension in Matavai Bay. Captains were affronted by the “forwardness” of the chiefs asking for presents. The Tahitians were frustrated when the usual, fluid play of goods between associates became mired. James Morrison, after living on the island for months following the *Bounty* mutiny, stated that Tahitians considered it “no disgrace for a Man to be poor . . . but to be Rich and Covetous is a disgrace to Human Nature”:

should a Man betray such a sign and not freely part with what He has, His Neighbours would soon put Him on a level with the Poor-est of themselves, by laying his possessions waste and hardly leave him a house to live in—a Man of such a discription [sic] would be accounted a hateful Person.
The Maohi would have noted the Europeans’ apparent stinginess and seen their failures of reciprocity as flawed generosity or, more significantly, as an unwillingness to enter fully into a relationship. Tahitians found European property attractive, considered most of the Europeans’ possessions as fair game, and would seek the assistance of Hiro, the god of thieves, in acquiring it. British captains and officers dealt severely with Tahitians who breached the British code of legitimate exchange: they were shot at, hauled out of the water with boat hooks, flogged, had their ears lopped on Captain Cook’s order, or their district’s canoes and houses set alight. Property, as Jonathan Lamb has argued, underpinned virtually everything in British experience. Civility itself was founded in the notion of property. Captain Cook’s increasingly violent fury over the Tahitians’ light-fingered approach to his ships’ tools and fittings sprang partly from anxiety over his ability to properly carry out his expeditions, partly from the affront it represented from a people with whom he thought he had established a friendly bond, and partly from the necessity he felt to protect the property of his majesty’s ships, the only means by which the authority and civility of British voyagers was maintained.

Figure I.2. William Hodges, “HMS Resolution and Adventure with Fishing Craft in Matavai Bay.” 1776. Oil on canvas, 54 x 76 in. (137.2 x 193.2 cm). Painted for the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London (BHC1932).
Tahitians, in turn, were affronted and alarmed by the British freely taking fruit out of groves, fishing in privately owned locations, or cutting down trees without permission from the owners. Some Tahitian men attacked one of Cook’s crew when they saw him picking flowers from a sacred plant at a marae. It was a serious, shocking breach of the laws of respect for sacred property, with severe repercussions for the people of the district, and the crewman was lucky to escape with only a blow to the head. When islanders and Europeans met, they were accompanied by their conceptions of the living world around them, and these conceptions shaped much of their encounter.

Meetings of Ecologies and Cultures

Human beings are inextricably bound to the natural world, travel with more of it than they know, and often underestimate its independent historical influence.

—Tom Griffiths, *Ecology and Empire*  

The “classic” exchanges that we are used to reading about in connection with the eighteenth-century Pacific—exchanges of ideas and knowledge, of manufactured goods, of labor, of sexual contact—all had social, cultural, economic, and political implications. Ecological exchanges carried these implications too. But they had the additional potential for permanent repercussions for the environments involved, and this in turn had implications for the people who lived within them. The offspring of the cats Wallis and Cook gave to Tahitian chiefs as diplomatic presents ate several of the island’s bird species to extinction. Bligh and others took pains to plant guava bushes at Matavai Bay, and the plants soon became, and remain, one of the Pacific’s most invasive weeds. When Cook sailed up to the coast of Taiarapu on his second voyage, the islanders could be seen running up into the hills to hide their pigs. But by the early 1800s chiefs were ordering their people to trade away pigs by the shipful.

Historians of the world’s natural environments have long been demonstrating the crucial, historically determining operation of interactions between people and their land. However, there are as yet few studies of the Pacific that recognize the dialectic between ecological elements and human histories, and even fewer that address the recent, rather than archaeological, past. Geoff Park’s *Ngā Uruora, The Groves of Life: Ecology and History in a New Zealand Landscape* is a powerful exploration of the intertwined history of people and ecology in particular forests, rivers, and valleys, telling
stories that matter, often about landscapes that are no longer there.37 Paul D’Arcy’s *People of the Sea* is an insightful study of the role of the ocean in shaping the lives of Pacific islanders. D’Arcy focuses on “Remote Oceania” (the region of widely spaced islands roughly analogous to the regions classified by nineteenth-century Europeans as “Polynesia” and “Micronesia”).38 His project is a contribution toward Hau’ofa’s vision for greater historical understandings of the interconnections within the world of the ancestors.39 As Hau’ofa says, “we cannot read our histories without knowing how to read our landscapes (and seascapes).”40 D’Arcy demonstrates the extent to which the ocean has bound islanders together across great distances and formed the medium of so much of everyday conceptual and spiritual existence. It is a work that recognizes, as Anne Salmond and Douglas Oliver have in reference to Tahiti, that for most of their history, Pacific islanders conceived of a world in which the substance and actions of people, animals, plants, insects, fish, gods, ancestors, rivers, rocks, and sea intermingled. The border between people and nature was less significant than the flow across boundaries between worlds of the living and dead. These nuances are important but illusive.

When I was one year into my research project I traveled to Tahiti to obtain not just archival records but a sense of the place about which I would be writing, to better ground my approach to the Tahitian past through the present landscape and living inhabitants. I took a bus to Matavai Bay, walked with mounting anticipation toward Point Venus, where Cook’s observatory had been set up, to view the bay and the setting of so much of the action the voyage journals described. Stepping out from the edging of palm trees, I looked down the bay’s curving stretch of black sand, toward the volcanic peak of Orohena, the waves breaking gently on the reef behind me. Little had visibly changed since it had been described in 1767. It was possible, standing there more than 230 years later, to feel some connection to the vision of the voyagers who formed part of my ancestral heritage, the imagery, language, and stories I had been steeped in all my life. But how was I to make the leap of imagination into how a Tahitian of that era could have seen this bay? It is all very well to look for points of opacity within past mentalities as an entry point, but what to do when it is all opaque? Accessing Maohi chants, oral histories, early records of conversations and actions, descriptions of uses and communication with the world of the living and the dead, have all contributed to my attempt to grasp how Maohi made sense of their world. I remain an outsider, and I remain tantalized by how much more there is to learn.

The chapters of this book focus on key instances of ecological exchange.
In the book’s first part, “New Shores,” I address the formation of the ecological exchange relationship between Europeans and Tahitians. Chapter 1 traces the establishment of an exchange relationship through the provisioning of ships. Chapter 2 examines the way Europeans and Tahitians viewed and valued landscapes. At issue is how these conceptions shaped the way the two groups engaged with each other and each other’s ecological elements. In the book’s second part, “Into Tahiti,” I explore the introduction of plants and animals to Tahiti. Chapter 3 addresses the motivations behind these introductions, how the islanders managed them, and the impacts they had. Taking the example of a specific introduction, chapter 4 compares the importation of cattle into Tahiti and Hawai‘i. Finally, “Out of Tahiti” investigates ecological exports from the island. The motivations, management, and impact of exporting Tahitian plants and animals are explored through two examples: the British project of transplanting breadfruit seedlings from Tahiti to the Caribbean (chapter 5), and the unsettling consequences of nineteenth-century trade of Tahitian pork to New South Wales (chapter 6). The chapters are arranged in an approximate chronology. Appendix A provides a compact chronology of events, ships’ visits, and the reigns of key chiefs. Appendix B lists instances of species introduction to Tahiti.

**Roots of Maohi Ecological Exchange**

A long tradition informed the Maohi’s practices and proprieties of exchange. The exchange of plants and animals operated between islands of the Pacific from the first launching of oceangoing canoes. As small groups moved out from Southeast Asia, across the western Pacific, and eventually through to the islands in the eastern Pacific, settlers took on board carefully wrapped tubers and breadfruit seedlings, live chickens (mo‘a), dogs (uri), and pigs (pua‘a). They established these plants and animals on new shores. Once settlements, stocks, and crops were flourishing, trade routes were developed between islands. Many people on coral atolls established trade relations with a more fertile volcanic island group within a few days or few weeks’ sailing in order to secure food plants and soil for gardens. Inhabitants of high islands relied on other islands and atolls to supply the particular foods, timbers, cloth dyes, and pearls and other specialist commodities. Long-lasting social and cultural links accompanied these trades.

Trade kept island groups in contact, encouraging the mutual inspiration of artistic styles, religions, technologies of food production, and the exchange of kin through marriage. As we shall see, trade with the Europeans was equally creative. However, as powerful as the new experiences of the
eighteenth century were and as influential as the exchanges with Europeans became, it is important to keep sight of the islanders’ beliefs, processes, and products that did not change. Among all the new contacts, new species, new opportunities, and pressures arriving in Tahiti during the voyaging era, there was still a framework that chiefs, priests, landowners, and commoners worked within and kept in place. A large proportion of everyday life, systems of trade, relations of power, and sacred practices persisted. Some practices only changed in their outward form. The red feathers that were traditionally attached to the woven coconut fiber cover of a *to'o*—a figure designed to attract and contain a god⁴¹—might be replaced or supplemented with red English cloth, but the significance and the potency of the red material remained.

**The Pomare Clan**

Once European ships started arriving, some people benefited more than others from the enhanced trading environment. One of Tahiti’s families in particular, the Pomares, capitalized on the new opportunities. The Pomares were a chiefly lineage based in the northern districts of Pare and ‘Arue. In the years following the first arrival of Europeans they managed to win dominion for a short period over the whole of Tahiti-nui (“Big Tahiti,” the main part of the island, as distinct from the peninsula, “Little Tahiti,” Tahiti-iti or Taiarapu), and later the island as a whole. That the Pomares’ lands were on the northern coast ensured that their fortunes would improve more conspicuously than any other chieftdom on the island. It was there, in the sheltered harbor of Matavai Bay, that the greatest number of ships came to anchor and to trade. Bougainville had landed on the east coast in the Hitia’a district, and the Spanish stopped three times in Vaitepiha Bay on Taiarapu, but the British, who visited the island repeatedly in this period, quickly made Matavai their main port of call. The chiefs (*ari’i*) of each district did what they could to turn these visits to their advantage. From at least the last half of the eighteenth century to the 1840s there were six main tribes on the island (Te Porionu’u, Te Aharoa, Teva-i-tai, Teva-i-uta, Atehuru or Te Oropa’a, and Fa’a’a. See map I.2). Within and between these broad groupings, there were complex rivalries and alliances of *ari’i*, including tussles over the role of paramount chief (*ari’i rahi*). The island was divided up into territories (as many as twenty-one in our period), the boundaries lying largely along topographical boundaries or denoting work groups or areas of cultivation.⁴²
The British met several generations of Pomare ari’i (see appendix A). By the time Wallis arrived, Teu, born around 1728, had established considerable authority in the Pare-‘Arue district. He managed affairs with the assistance of his brother-in-law, the powerful priest Ha‘amanemane. Around 1750 his first son, Tu, was born. The title of ari’i rahi passed to the boy.

Tu was about fifteen when the Dolphin arrived. He was, in adulthood, a tall man, ambitious and rather nervous. Like any chief, he adopted a succession of names. He had received the formal name Tu-nui-e-a’a-i-te-Atua at birth, commonly shortened to Tu. This is the name I will use. By the time Bligh arrived in 1788, Tu had married his primary wife, ‘Itia (formally Tetuanui-reia-i-te-Ra‘iatea), a woman of strong character and intelligence with useful family connections on Tahiti and the nearby island of Mo‘orea.

Figure I.3. John Webber, “King Pomare I of Tahiti.” Portrait of Tu, 1777. Oil on canvas board, 14.2 x 11 in. (36.2 x 28 cm). Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, N.Z. (G-697).
When they had their first son, around 1782 or 1783, Tu gave his title to his child and adopted the name Tina. Another name associated with the chief and his lineage was Pomare (“night cough”). The British used this as a dynastic name. They called Tu’s son Pomare II, the name I will use here. As the embodiment of the lineage’s divine potency, Pomare II’s subjects accorded him all the necessary marks of respect: uncovering their upper bodies when in his presence, surrendering up the support and goods he requested. He was carried on his attendant’s shoulders to avoid his sacred ancestral power (mana) damaging his people’s land and buildings. While he was young, his role in the region was as a spiritual figurehead; his father retained the reins of effective political power. One of the key features of Maohi chiefly rule was the distinction that existed between, on the one hand, an individual’s hereditary right to rule (which in a chiefly lineage stemmed from descent from the gods) and, on the other hand, the right to wield political, operational power, a right which had to be earned.

Early British visitors to Tahiti were confident they had identified the local leaders. Purea, and then Tu and his family, clearly had the authority to call in the trade goods of their region and dispose of them for their own ends. They could give goods as showy gifts to the visitors, make sumptuous feasts, and lay them up in piles on the altars at the island’s sacred, ceremonial sites (marae). A typical gift from the Pomares to a captain comprised pigs or roasted pork, along with breadfruit, plantains, and other fruits, coconuts, taro (Colocasia esculenta, similar to a yam), and lengths of pale, fine cloth made of beaten paper mulberry bark. The Pomares’ ability to command the land’s produce was the kind of expression of power the British could readily recognize and understand. The earliest captains to visit Tahiti assumed the Pomares were monarchs of the island, and referred to them as kings and queens.

Marks on the Landscape

By the end of the eighteenth century, the northern districts of Tahiti were marked by the decades of supplying Europeans with local resources. One can extrapolate from the records of consumption European visitors made while at the island and imagine the resulting prevalence of tree stumps and the reduced populations of many animal species. But it appears there was, then, no deep change to ways of living and working on the land. Alan Moorehead’s presentation of “fatal impacts” on Pacific environments misses the crucial point that despite the introduction of European livestock, plants,
and parasites into islands like Tahiti, for a long time much remained fundamentally unaltered.

This is because Tahitians regulated the introduction of new ecological elements and the heightened levels of consumption. Chiefs set constraints and there were clear boundaries on the use of the natural world. Many of the new species being brought into the island were not valued and were accidentally or deliberately destroyed. There were also controls integral to the Tahitian environment. Local species tended to curb the invasion of exotic species. Tahitian dogs, for instance, attacked and killed introduced livestock, and local pigs rooted up carefully planted European gardens. It was largely because of these controls that the ecology and the cultural roles of many Tahitian plants and animals remained stable. Some of these roles remained in place over the centuries that followed. Walking around Tahiti now, a tall, dark green breadfruit tree stands protectively in the garden of almost every house. Breadfruit trees shade urban pavements and parking lots. The tree is employed visually in print media and in the corporate identities of companies wanting an image of dependable fruitfulness: the Banque Socredo logo is an *uru* branch with leaf and fruit. Despite two hundred years of exotic arrivals and in the face of newer, foreign significances overlaying the fruit’s history, it remains an everyday staple and a symbol of solid reliability.

Along Pape‘ete’s bustling harbor promenade today there are busy flocks of sparrows and loud, strutting mynah birds. Dogs, mostly mangy mongrels, patrol the yards and streets. Gardens sport rose bushes, lilies, tomatoes, potato vines, pumpkins. In the mountains and along fences, silver-bark eucalypts and South African flame trees are common. The miconia bush, an ornamental with heavy green-purple leaves, was introduced to Tahiti’s botanic gardens in 1937 by the American botanist Harrison Smith. Miconia is now ubiquitous, forming a choking forest understory covering more than 60 percent of the island. It continues to spread throughout the Society Islands.47

The casual visitor may find these landscapes attractive, tropical, a little messy, perhaps “spoiled,” yet a pleasant enough backdrop to a beach holiday. People who live in Tahiti—now not just the Maohi but also the long-established Chinese population, the resident French, and recent migrants from Australia, Japan, America—all have their own relationships with and understandings of the environment in which they live and work. Most of the island’s inhabitants can offer some explanations for the current form of Tahiti’s environment. Some know that Captain Cook and Captain Bligh
brought oranges and pineapples to the island. Many are aware that recent avian immigrants such as the mynah and bulbul are aggressively supplanting indigenous birds. People may be conscious of these things, but there is no widespread sense that these bits of information actually matter.

The environmental issues of greatest concern to Tahitians have been pressing and present: primarily the French nuclear tests at Muruora Atoll,
not far east of Tahiti. Pollution of the sea is also a major problem and
receives substantial government and media attention, highlighting the
effects on fishing grounds, the pearl industry, and tourism. The rise of sea
levels is causing rising concern. However, questions about the island’s bio-
diversity—why there is so much guava, or why there are so few Polynesian
pigs compared to other islands—are, for most people, less troubling.

The island’s changing species profile has implications for the health
of the island. Ecological exchange continues in modern-day Tahiti and
continues to have broad-ranging cultural, social, economic, political, and
ecological consequences for the island. The continued trade and transplan-
tation of species in and out of the island profoundly affects the ability of
Tahitians to fish profitably, to maintain an environment tourists still find
appealing, and to retain the birds, food plants, fruits, and flowers that are
integral to Tahitian life and Tahitian identity. Although there are increasing
governmental controls, ecological exchange will continue. The importa-
tion of seeds, plants, and livestock continues to be used to assist agricultural
development. The island’s main export industries, of cultured pearls and
horticultural products such as vanilla, will continue to be important sources
of revenue.49

In recent years the Ministère de l’Environnement of French Polyne-
sia has raised awareness of the problems caused by introduced species.
Pamphlets picturing noxious weeds have been distributed. High-profile
campaigns about curbing the miconia plant appear frequently in newspa-
pers and on television. Competitions run by the Ministère capture popular
attention: a feature in Dépêche in 2003 highlighted for each day for a month
ways to protect the Tahitian environment. One of the double-page spreads
pointed out that the Society Islands has 825 indigenous plant species and
more than 1,700 introduced species, many of which are highly invasive.50
The experiment of introducing the red-vented bulbul at the end of the
1970s to tackle the fly population has been recognized as a disaster for
the island’s indigenous birds.51 The government is unlikely to make fur-
ther attempts at this type of biological control.52 When anyone travels to
French Polynesia by airplane they are warned before touchdown of bans on
bringing in seeds, bulbs, roots, flowers, and animals into the island. There
is a growing acknowledgment that moving plants and animals from one
ecology to another is a serious act. Understanding histories of ecological
exchange highlights the necessity of carefully managing the human trans-
fer of species, particularly into and out of islands. Such histories reveal how
intimately people and ecologies are entangled.