

a challenge for the next Dutch-Indonesian project in Irian Jaya.

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Across the Great Divide: Journeys in History and Anthropology, by Bronwen Douglas. *Studies in History and Anthropology*, 24. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998. ISBN 90-5702-306-7; xviii + 358 pages, maps, illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography, index. US\$52; A\$94.

Specialists in Pacific studies should make room on their shelves for this book; I would place it in the same section as holds Marshall Sahlins, Gayannath Obeyesekere, and Greg Denning.

Douglas hails from the Melbourne school of island-centered history. During the past thirty years she has written numerous authoritative essays on the Melanesian Islanders of French New Caledonia. These have ranged in focus from Kanak interaction with the early (1840s) Catholic missionaries to reflections on current politicking for independence (or at least increased Kanak rule in the islands).

I greeted *Across the Great Divide* with great enthusiasm, as will other followers of Douglas's work. I was happy at the prospect of Douglas presenting a bigger picture of New Caledonian history and relieved that this picture would be easily available in a book—no more tracking down numerous articles in a wide variety of journals. My anticipation was richly rewarded, yet not quite in the manner I'd anticipated. *Across the Great*

Divide is a retrospective presentation of Douglas's career as a historian. Most of the chapters have appeared previously as essays in journals. Theoretical reflections and developments provide the unifying framework for the book. Those who anticipate a coherent historical narrative—a type of Islander-centered, anticolonial history of nineteenth and twentieth century New Caledonia—will be disappointed. On the other hand, this book will appeal to the theoretically inclined among historians and anthropologists; Douglas delves deep into the epistemological problems of recuperating an authentically Kanak perspective on nineteenth (and some twentieth) century events. She strives to “denaturalize conventional categorical boundaries, anchor abstractions and mediate oppositions; to explore ways of knowing indigenous pasts and identifying indigenous agency through critical readings of colonial texts” (1).

A historian by training, Douglas nonetheless presents this book in terms of her own engagement with anthropology. Her intellectual travels began in the 1960s, when Aboriginal struggles for rights inspired her scholarship, continued through the 1970s with engagement in Geertzian ethnography, then proceeded through the discovery of how to “read” documents for hegemonic narratives (of racism and conquest) and conquered voices (of the Kanak), until finally reaching the climax, in the late 1990s, of a deeply nonrealist, anti-objectivist, multivocal postmodernism. This testimony of intellectual voyaging is its own form of history that will prove valuable for those interested in the history of Pacific studies. The most

trenchant theoretical claim Douglas makes, in my estimation, is her rejection of “realist” history—by which she means history that strives to present a coherent narrative of how the past looked and felt, of the passions that stirred men and women and the fights they undertook, and how these events led to the present. Douglas rejects such “realist” history based on her claim that the debris of any “present” takes on “historical” meaning only retrospectively, and hence that historical narrative inherently falsifies “the present” by imposing a retrospective closure (entailing order, meaning, and wholeness). In a sense, Douglas as historian proclaims a commitment to the ethnographic present—however, not in order to recuperate a whole cultural system, but in order to attend to the smothered voices of a conquered people.

The most sweeping example of such distorting closures is the presentation of nineteenth-century Kanak history in terms of the triumph of French colonization. Such narratives unfairly privilege French activities as meaningful while ignoring Kanak actions; moreover, according to Douglas, the possibility that many or even most of the Kanak might have had little or no real interest in the French colonial presence escapes most scholars altogether. For example, Douglas argues that the French historian Alain Saussol, in his book on the French expropriations of Kanak land, “subsumes a wide range of locally significant actions . . . as linear reflexes [to] European initiatives” (186). In Douglas’s assessment Saussol, although well intentioned, is Eurocentric (or ethnocentric) and anachronistic. This

is a good point, especially in so far as it contributes to uprooting the assumption that prior to the 1880s French colonization was assured of success. However, Saussol’s writing most likely was guided, in a conscious sense, by his interests and his judgment of the historically important. It must be admitted that his judgment is worthy of respect; his detailed legal and political accounting of the expropriation of Kanak land is useful knowledge in relation to the post-Matignon Accord redistribution of lands away from Caldoche (people of European descent) and back to Kanak.

Recuperating Kanak agency is Douglas’s chosen goal in this book. One would hope that these people will indeed seize the historical stage. However, this particular instance of recuperation is so hedged with invocations of “self-reflexivity” and keyed to the hidden meaning carried in culturally and historically locatable voices, that no larger coherence emerges from the mass of critically analyzed colonial texts. Chapter 4, “Reading Indigenous Pasts,” is so intent on breaking down supposed truth claims that any clear claim about its ostensible topic, the Wagap Affair of 1862—that is, who started the conflict, for what goals, and with what result?—becomes completely lost. However, other chapters offer rich rewards to ardent readers. How did the Kanak conceive of Christianity? How did they cope with the diseases and deaths brought by Europeans? How did they conceive and pursue warfare? What was the role of Kanak women in war? Douglas’s innovative scholarship has much to offer on these topics.

Overall this is an impressive book. Neither easy to read, nor without shortcomings, the sheer cumulative impact of Douglas's struggles to achieve an intellectual perspective she respects and to wrest information from her nineteenth-century documents amounts to an epic battle in its own right. It is only regrettable that the reader is launched into the midst of these battles, to suffer their contusioning tangle of bodies and barbs, rather than being kept at a readerly perspective where bold outlines combine to narrate events. Finally, it remains unclear whether Douglas believes no such broad outlines are defensible (her antirealist position) or if she has simply not yet deigned to describe them.

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Gutsini Posa (Rough seas), by Regis Stella. Suva: Mana Publications, 1999. ISBN 982-02-0145-4; 153 pages. Paper, US\$15. Available from Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, Suva.

I found myself thinking about Penagi, the protagonist of Regis Stella's *Gutsini Posa* (Rough seas), as a cross between a Joycean breed of Bloom and Camus's *Messault*, the two unlikely friends of western literature. Penagi reconciles the difference between idealism and practice when he takes to the street and participates in the demonstration like any good Sartrean individual who believes in a humane society. Penagi fulfills the function crafted by the author of having the idealists participate in a collec-

tive struggle, even if at a cost. In the process of achieving reconciliation of the conflicting self between idealism and practice, Penagi must pass through a series of denials, sacrifices, and transformations. In some sense Stella's extended metaphor is that literature too must be transformed from an idealist and trivial pursuit to one that is political in order to intervene in the national crisis and identity questions.

Far from its existentialist value, *Gutsini Posa* is a novel that has two achievements: First, it is an important literary representation of the struggle of the Bougainville people to come to terms with a crisis that has completely devastated their moral and physical strength. The crippling condition of the society is a sadness that cannot be washed away by tears or with organized guerrilla resistance, but with strategic negotiations. Rape, senseless killing, and torture are not confrontations but the wounds of conflict in the lives of those who have to live through crisis: "None of you know how I feel, the anguish in my soul! How can I ever tell you the agony of my mind? Torogegai has been devastated. Your mates have destroyed villages, raped our women and massacred people. People talk about human rights violations—they happen continuously. Where is justice for my people? Laws define rights but do they also define justice?" (42).

Hope comes only with the reminder that divine intervention comes only after a people have proven that collectively their spirit has not been broken but is consolidated. It is precisely this that Stella represents by the use of a volcano metaphor, a force mightier than and devastating to both