Preface

To westerners over the centuries, the tiny islands of the Carolines and Marshalls, lying across the western Pacific a little north of the equator, have always been a stopover on the way to somewhere else. These bits of land were scarcely more than navigational hazards to early European and American voyagers bound for the Orient. By the mid-nineteenth century, the islands had attained a certain commercial value for traders and whalers, but even then they were way stations to more lucrative destinations, whether the northern whaling grounds or the ports of China, where produce gathered in the islands could be parlayed for more precious cargo. Near the end of that century, as the European colonial powers were carving up the globe, these Micronesian islands seemed as suitable as any to serve as ornaments of empire. Way stations they remained to those who seized them, and even more so to their later masters, who regarded them as a strategic maritime roadway to more vital lands. For the Japanese they were stepping-stones to the riches of Southeast Asia; for the United States after the Second World War they were a span in the military bridge that stretched across the Pacific to Asia.

What of the people who made their home in these islands? By the time the first colonial powers planted their flags in Micronesian soil, the islanders were no longer strangers to western society. A new economic system introduced by early beachcombers and extended by copra traders, one that cut across traditional value systems, was operating throughout island Micronesia, and Christianity had reached the hearts and imaginations of thousands of people in eastern Micronesia. Western law, with its foundational concepts of individual rights and equality before the law, was becoming a force in the lives of local people, and not always an unattractive one. The tale of the cultural revolution that preceded colonial rule and prepared the ground for it has been told in my previous volume, *The First Taint of Civilization*.

The conventional view of colonial rule is that, outgunned and overawed by superior might, islanders simply submitted to the inevitable
and bowed before their conquerors. The truth is more complex. Certain factions in these island societies, even if they had no direct hand in the political takeover, welcomed the new colonial masters and saw to it that their own interests were served and their power enhanced under a foreign flag. These facilitators were not a rabble of malcontents; often enough their number included elements of the chiefly stratum of society. The greatest supporter of Catholic Spanish rule on Protestant Kosrae, for instance, was the paramount chief, who quickly learned that the foreign government might protect him against his people and their pastors. Something similar occurred in Palau when the paramount chief of Koror sided with the German government in supporting a modernization program against the influential spirit mediums of northern Babeldao.

Micronesia’s colonial rulers—Spain, Germany, Japan, and the United States—all regarded themselves as benefactors of the people whose islands they appropriated. Whatever inconvenience the islanders may have been forced to endure was, in the judgment of the ruling power, more than adequately compensated by the “blessings of civilization” it bestowed—whether in the form of increased copra production, elimination of intestinal parasites, democratic elections, or a few years of formal education. What colonial governments touted as blessings often were, from the islanders’ perspective, nothing more than unjustifiable encroachments on their way of life. In such cases, Micronesians showed a genius for appearing to comply with the demands of their foreign government while advancing their own agenda and pursuing their own aims. Resistance of Micronesians to colonial initiatives was usually well masked and often very effective.

Yet, this is not the whole of the story. Colonized islanders may not have been simply passive victims, but neither were they the masters of the game. The strategies Micronesians employed successfully at times in checking the initiatives of foreign governments, while providing for their own interests, may have given them an exaggerated confidence in their ability to manipulate people and events to their own purpose. As island people continued to use colonial rule to advance their own short-term aims, they found themselves slowly being sucked out by strong cultural currents into very deep and dangerous waters. Subjected to acculturative forces that they never really understood, Micronesians were forced to confront changes in their cultural landscape, and perhaps even in themselves, that they could not have anticipated. For this reason, more than because of loss of political power, Micronesians throughout much of their colonial period came to be strangers in their own land.

This book, carrying forward the story of Micronesian contact with the west presented in The First Taint of Civilization, presents the drama
of social change under four successive colonial powers. As a social history rather than a political chronicle of colonial rule, *Strangers in Their Own Land* is a tale of the transformation of the Micronesian people during a century of cultural upheaval that was probably unequaled in their history. To this end, I have chosen as my point of departure the colonial government itself, provided the necessary background for an understanding of how that system functioned in the islands, and tried to capture something of its impact on island society. A generation or two ago it would have been unnecessary to apologize for the emphasis on the apparatus of colonial government that appears to dominate this volume, but expectations of Pacific historians have changed. Let me plead that the story of the remaking of Micronesia can best be presented by using a broad canvas, by presenting colonial policies and programs as a background against which to sketch at least the bare outlines of the dynamics of the intercultural relationship between foreigner and islander. This may be a much more indirect approach to local history than some would like, but it at least spares the reader the jumble of allusions to local chieftains, minor figures, and island customs that could present an impenetrable thicket for those inclined to pick up this book.

The term *Micronesia*, as used in this book, has been appropriated to refer only to the Caroline and Marshall Islands. These two archipelagoes, although admittedly an artificial geographical and political unit, have been linked with one another and the Northern Marianas during the century of colonization. Their colonial experience differed considerably from that of Guam, Nauru, and Kiribati—other islands that are usually regarded as falling within the boundaries of Micronesia. The Northern Marianas has been excluded from this history because its colonial history extends back another two hundred years and its pre-twentieth-century past was very different from that of the Carolines and Marshalls.

When colonial rule ended, so did the political unity of these two archipelagoes. The area here referred to as Micronesia fragmented into three new nation-states: the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands. Although the political dissolution of Micronesia may suggest the transience of all political units created by colonial rulers, the vestige of the imposed political unity that survived across four culturally distinct areas in the Federated States of Micronesia might be a salutary caution not to regard colonial impositions as necessarily ephemeral. If this is true of geographical boundaries, it is equally true of chronological ones. The division of this book into chapters according to periods of colonial rule is neither a matter of mere convenience nor a mark of ethnocentrism. Micronesians themselves, as an American journalist once noted, “cus-
tomarily refer to their region’s most recent phases as the Spanish Period, the German Period, the Japanese Period, and the American Period.” Even islander historians do the same, as Ruepong’s delineation of historical eras in Yap and Luelan Bernart’s history of Pohnpei clearly indicate. So significant was the impact of colonial administrations on villagers, however distant from the centers of colonial power, that their reigns have become principal time markers in recent history.

It is tempting to regard the colonial era as an unwanted but temporary intrusion on island societies—a period of political disenfranchisement under foreign powers that ended when islanders regained political power through self-government. What was done by foreign masters can be undone by island leaders once they assume their rightful authority, we sometimes think. In truth, however, each successive rule reshaped the island population in ways large and small. The genetic effects, which are all too obvious to anyone who visits Micronesia, are but one dimension of the impact. If this book helps the people of these islands to grow in their understanding and appreciation of a colonial experience that is still largely un plumbed and often unintegrated, it will have served a useful purpose.

To those who seek an exciting new historiography, this book will be a disappointment. It breaks no new methodological ground, offers no stunning reflections on how history should be done, no formulas on what to include and why. This is not to say that what follows is completely insensitive to the legitimate concerns of today’s Pacific historians and their readers, much less a throwback to a style of history that was done fifty or a hundred years ago. Micronesian voices, often mere whispers, have been heard, recorded, and woven into this tale of a century under foreign rule. Whether they have been caught accurately or distorted, whether they project loudly enough, is left to the reader to judge.