

Imperialism's Proving Grounds

Shoemaker, Nancy. *Pursuing Respect in the Cannibal Isles: Americans in Nineteenth-Century Fiji*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019. 472 pp. \$48.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1501740343.

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In *Pursuing Respect in the Cannibal Isles: Americans in Nineteenth-Century Fiji*, Nancy Shoemaker successfully weaves the history of nineteenth-century Fiji and its extraterritorial Americans into a cohesive story that illuminates the role of Fiji in the “political evolution of the United States” (16). Shoemaker argues that the United States’s extraterritorial machinations began significantly earlier than many think, and the case of Fiji therefore greatly extends the geography of American imperialism and pushes its temporal bounds backward several generations. Equally important, imperialist patterns first practiced in the Cannibal Isles can be used to understand U.S. actions long after its involvement in Fiji: “The value of extraterritoriality and the government protection afforded extraterritorial Americans pushed the United States to enlarge its global scope and power” (17).

Shoemaker’s book contains microhistories of three primary figures: David Whippy, Mary D. Wallis, and John B. Williams. The three anchor the book and Shoemaker argues that such “extraterritorial Americans constituted the vanguard of U.S. global expansion.” (42). Their actions, depicted in straight-forward, linear narrative, not only shaped U.S. relations with Fiji but also sparked political changes in the United States. In shifting American foreign policy, Shoemaker wisely acknowledges their motivations as “being self-serving, not because they were inordinately selfish but because they were human” (18). The use of the three key figures gives major political changes a human aspect and tethers Shoemaker’s story to an inescapable reality.

Chapter one explores American perceptions of Fiji. Knowledge brought home by the first interactions between Americans and Fijians was pragmatic (how to get there) as well as ethnological. This type of knowledge was “fundamental to U.S. global expansion,” Shoemaker argues (27). Chapter two delves into the culture of native Fijians and explores how foreigners living in Fiji were forced to make assimilations and accept some native values, usefully demonstrating subaltern strength. Chapter three looks at Whippy and the community he established at Levuka. Critically, this chapter introduces a gender analysis that approaches shifts in policy and the acceleration of resource extraction on the islands. Chapters four and five focus on Mary Wallis and use her experience in Fiji as a complex

backdrop for a larger discussion of American ideals and issues. Chapter six introduces John Williams and offers perhaps the book's best example of raw self-interest driving American overseas expansion. Chapter seven follows the rest of Williams's incredible story and its relevance to the shifting power structures in Fiji. Specifically, Shoemaker explores political corruption and the appropriation of American warships for gunboat diplomacy not only by Williams but by local elites.

Shoemaker's book pushes back the timeline of America's expansionist empire, and it also takes expansionism across gender lines. Like Amy Kaplan, who wrote about "Manifest Domesticity,"¹ Shoemaker uses Wallis as an example of the "domesticity of empire." Shoemaker shows Wallis indirectly contesting the gender hierarchy of middle America while also serving as a useful comparison point between U.S. and Fijian culture.

Shoemaker's book is an excellent read that captures the importance of a far-flung locale. Superbly researched, it is flush with potent stories and novel facts and rich argumentation. She deftly shows how extraterritorial Americans brought American power to bear on far-flung locales. The Pacific Squadron, for instance, was commissioned to protect such Americans and worked to project American power throughout the Pacific. Shoemaker quotes one British writer who recalled that, "In those days the American Eagle 'screached considerable' throughout the Great South Sea and enforced the demands of its subjects almost indiscriminately" (43).

The largest weakness of the book is also one of its many strengths. By utilizing three primary American figures as the spine of the story, Shoemaker creates a compelling and relatable narrative. In so doing, however, the book perhaps drifts too far into biography and too far from critical analysis. Sections on David Whippy, for instance, are rife with biographical stories but not necessarily the connective strands that might tie his experience to a larger global picture. When Shoemaker approaches her subjects with critical inquiry, they are mostly tied to her treatment of Whippy. A gender analysis, therefore, only enters the narrative in chapter three, although Shoemaker would have been, for example, equally well-suited to explore such questions in her treatment of Wallis elsewhere in the book. The book's analytical bent is insightful, but too often overshadowed by lengthy "microhistories" of the book's three main subjects.

The story of Fiji and how it fit into the machinery of American expansionist dreams is not a well-covered topic. Fiji is often overlooked by scholars, but Shoemaker's book is a compelling and well-written reminder of its importance. In addition to compiling the lives of her main subjects, Shoemaker situates Fiji within the broader international framework of the nineteenth century and within the evolution of American foreign policy. While much of her narrative occurs prior to the proper bounds of the Gilded Age, the book carries its story forward into the 1870s and beyond, demonstrating how questions of territorial expansion, migration, citizenship, and international relationships are entwined within the experiences of individuals whose lives drifted across neatly demarcated historical periods. In so doing, Shoemaker has produced a useful monograph that will be of value for historians of the Gilded Age.

¹Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 23–50.