Pacific Romanticism: Tahiti and the European Imagination, Alexander Bolyanatz - Review

Jon D. Carlson, University of California, Merced
With the fifth, we entered the area of sea-charts, beginning with a very rarely seen manuscript chart from the Library of Congress, commented by Richard Pflueger. A page from the Jean Rotz atlas in the British Library was there, and was followed by a sequence of printed charts, ending with Felipe Bauza's chart. Sections six, seven and eight contained more familiar material, but then chapter nine contained plates from the 1832 *Atlas guatemaltico* of Rivera Maestre, a 19th-century polymath who served the government of the new state in a variety of ways. Chapter 10 reproduces maps from the middle and later 19th century, when the topography of the country came to be better known, together with information about communications and volcanic activity.

Jens Bornholt, a member of our Society, is to be congratulated on producing this atlas. Most of the maps are reproduced in such a way that their lettering can be read, and this should make the atlas a precious resource for those undertaking studies in the history of Guatemala. Moreover, the inclusion of manuscript material from European collections, reproduced with great care, means that we have a very complete record of the mapping of Guatemala. This book would serve as an example for many other parts of the world.

David Buissere

*The Newberry Library*


I must admit to approaching the topic of this volume with more than a few of the Romanticist notions that the author seeks to address: the dominant European view of Tahiti as a natural utopia inhabited by compliant, sexually available and scantily clad natives, which serves as a window into the realm of a hypothetical Romantic 'state of nature,' Indeed, Bolyanatz's premise is to reevaluate the stereotypical notion of Tahitian friendliness not as 'natural' or necessarily dominant behavior toward 'others,' but rather as a calculated, rational strategy for dealing with more powerful interlopers armed with muskets and cannons. Notably, Bolyanatz argues that the first European contact with Tahitians was vastly different from that which has become accepted.

The dominant image of Tahiti that took hold in the European imagination was one as experienced by the French in 1768 under Louis-Antoine de Bougainville. This included published accounts "renowned for their idyllic images of paradise in which work is minimal, while friendship, food, and sex are delights to be had simply for the asking" (p. 25). Indeed, this is the mainstream, common-knowledge vision of Tahitian contact. The true strength of Bolyanatz's work is the juxtaposition of this French experience—the 'accepted' mainstream experience—with the real first-contact, which occurred less than a year prior to the French experience.

Bolyanatz argues that this first contact—by the British ship *Dolphin* under the command of Samuel Wallis—is not just at odds with the reception given the French,
but also the likely cause of why the French were greeted in a non-hostile fashion. Indeed, by examining the oft overlooked British-Tahitian interaction, Bolmanatz does a credible job developing his argument that it was the British experience that shaped future Tahitian 'rules of the game' with Europeans. It is only after a series of overtly conflictual encounters, during which the Tahitians suffered considerable numbers of casualties at the hands of the British, that more friendly relations emerge. Only then did the Tahitian 'defensive strategem' of offering women to the British crew in exchange for iron and security come into play. This stratagem was then repeated when the French arrived, which the French took to be 'natural behavior' on the part of the Tahitians. The British were greeted with aggressive behavior while the French were not; the British had to use cannons and muskets, while the French never had need to display their firepower; the British experienced a significant military event, whereas the French did not; women were displayed prominently and immediately to the French, but only belatedly to the British; the French were generally greeted in what they took to be friendly terms, whereas the British were not.

The stated objectives of Bolmanatz's work are to debunk the dominant strand of 'first contact' with regard to the role Tahiti played in the minds of Europeans. This goal he achieves compellingly. In doing so, he attempts to address a larger problem with Romanticism in European thought, and the subsidiary problem of romanticism in the discipline of anthropology. The philosophical environment of Europe in the 18th century was such that the French Tahitian experience played into an existing Zeitgeist with regard to notions of the Noble Savage and Natural Man and his (or especially her!) role in the state of nature. This timing and Tahitian image is helped by the French being the first to publish accounts of their contact—some written even before they returned. So we are presented with yet another cautionary tale of the dangers of objectifying the 'other,' along the lines of Edward Said's Orientalism (which the author engages). Certainly objective reality should matter, but often it does not. And one is left wondering: if not Tahiti, would Natural Man (and Woman) have merely been 'discovered' somewhere else? The sentiment in Europe was so strong that one finds it hard to believe that a Romantic ideal would not have been "found" (or imposed) elsewhere.

The strength of Bolmanatz's work is in his careful reappraisal of first contact with the Tahitians, and the subsequent role this played in the imaginations of Europeans. Certainly his carefully crafted historical juxtaposing is worth the read. His disciplinary-specific chapter on Pacific romanticism in anthropology is likely to be of interest to anthropologists, but may have less interest to those who are not social scientists. Though it does serve as a reminder that initial "wrongness" has a rather nasty habit of being perpetuated, especially as "the Pacific retains its romanticist pride of place even now"(p.119). This pride of place is a product of timing and social context, both the context of the Europeans and the context of the Tahitians. And it is a product of a rather crafty, calculated, ultimately rational
response taken by Tahitians when confronted with more powerful potential foes: if you cannot defeat the enemy, perhaps distracting them with sex as a means of achieving one's goals is not such a bad fall-back strategy. It is evidence of its success that we are still taken in by it to this day.

Jon D. Carlson
University of California, Merced


This is not the kind of book that one can cuddle up with in an easy chair. Rather, a sturdy table is needed. Its dimensions are 11.4 x 10.5 inches, and because it is printed on heavy paper, it weighs in at 4.2 lbs. This certainly is not a standard publication. The volume’s format is double gatefold with a unique pagination. It is organized by individual subject, therefore one actually finds only 56 marked sections, yet after counting the pages in the foldouts, preface, contents, bibliography, and index, the number totals 172. It may be eccentrically produced, but the contents are a delight for any reader who is interested in geographical exploration. Enhancing the narrative are some of the most interesting (sometimes stunning) photographs I have ever seen.

The reason De Porti begins his book with mid-19th-century expeditions is that his short narratives are all accompanied with photographs. Many of the 56 explorers and exploration expeditions he discusses are quite famous (David Livingstone, Gertrude Bell, Ernest Shackleton, and the voyage of the *Challenger* are examples), but in my opinion, the most interesting sections are those of the lesser-known, but rather accomplished explorers and travelers. Included in this group are Nikolai Przhevalsky, Timothy O’Sullivan, John William Lindt, Teobart Maler, Vittorio Bottego, Cândido Rondon, Katherine Routledge, André Citroen, Théodore Monod, Jean Baptiste Charcot, Aimone di Savoia, Ardito Desio, Rosita Forbes and Ahmed Hassanein Bey.

Every entry is a jewel, but my personal favorite is Vittorio Sella (1859-1943), an Italian mountaineer and photographer extraordinaire. Sella climbed in the Alps, the Caucasus, the Ruwenzori in central Africa, Mount St. Elias in Alaska, and in the Karakorum, during which he produced some of the most extraordinary photographs ever taken. Included in De Porti’s book is a foldout photo (52 x 8 inches) taken by Sella in the Caucasus that is both astonishing and breathtaking. Sella accompanied Douglas Freshfield in Sikkim, but it was with several of Luigi Abruzzi’s expeditions that he provided awesome, majestic views of places not seen before in the Western World.

Another favorite entry concerns Rosita Forbes (1893-1967) and Ahmed Hassanein (1889-1946), who traveled together in 1920 to the isolated and dangerous Kufrah oasis in Libya. Forbes, recently divorced and traveling in disguise, and Hassanein, an Oxford-educated Egyptian government official, followed the earlier route taken into the Libyan Desert by Gerhard Rohlfs. Their stay in this hostile and dangerous land lasted ten days, but their journey to and from Kufrah was harrowing. Although not mentioned by De