
Robert F Rogers introduces the reader to Ferdinand Magellan’s 1521 fated encounter on Guam. Never straying from this revelatory path, Destiny’s Landfall: A History of Guam approaches its subject matter through methodologies entrenched in the canon of Guam history texts, best exemplified in the works of Charles Beardsley, Earl Pomeroy, Paul Caraño, and Pedro Sanchez. In Rogers’ version, fifteen chronologically ordered chapters further frame the history of Guam as a record of its four consecutive colonial administrations—those of Spain, the United States, Japan, and the returning United States. Beginning with the story of Magellan’s landing and followed by one alien landfall after another, each contributor to the canon has repeated the linear formula without deviation, simply adding supplementary details in order to more enumeratively repaint the same historical picture. Beneath an abundance of cumbersome diplomatic details, the indigenous Chamorro people fall victim to the historian’s pen as much as to historical circumstance.

Rogers, a retired University of Guam professor of political science, defines Guam’s importance in terms of global politics, continuing the canonical practice of tokenizing Guam as a pawn of its Spanish, American, and Japanese colonizers. Unequivocally stated by Rogers, “Guam is important because of the enduring imperatives of geopolitics, an enormous and underestimated force in the histories of small, strategically located islands, straits, and canals” (1). Further undercutting the potential to understand the significance of Guam’s history in its own right, Rogers asserts that “the postcontact history of the island has been—and continues to be—determined primarily by strategic political and military factors beyond the control or even the significant influence of the local people. Guam, in short, was destined after Magellan to be a pawn in the realpolitik of foreign powers” (2). Understood and restrained within the bounds of international politics, Guam’s history rarely reads as anything more than the valiant struggles of alien protagonists. The island of Guam serves merely as the stage on which their gallantry is acted out.

Beyond affirming the island’s relative insignificance in the exigencies of global politics, Rogers also denies the Chamorro people their role as agents of historical action. His consistent subversion of local history reveals itself in the privileging of alien voices, actors, and motives, but also in his dismissal of Chamorro activity. For example, Rogers espouses the conventional belief that after Spanish conquest in the seventeenth century, the Mariana Islands “entered a twilight period of 200 years of solitude until the next invasion, when new conquerors would make Guam part of a different empire” (73). Roger’s solitude—read as historical inactivity—is perforated only by the acts of foreign agents, subjugating his Chamorro
subjects to the victimage of another's causality.

Besides the circumscribed ways in which Rogers frames his findings, his underlying theme is equally disconcerting. The motif of Chamorro powerlessness against omnipotent foreign powers permeates the text, most conspicuously in the “parable of the tribes” thesis, described as that in which “political power under whatever guise is like a contaminant disease that once introduced among peoples will inexorably become universal in a system of competing societies” (40). Through the application of this theory, Rogers demonstrates the ostensible inevitability of Chamorro demise against aggressive industrialized powers. After the Chamorro wars against Spain in the 1600s, for example, “the destiny of Guam was fixed as a small outpost in the worldwide empire of faraway masters. The parable of the tribes was fulfilled for the Chamorro people” (73). Colonialism, in general, “imposed the Western concept . . . of the sovereignty of politics, the implacable conquering impulse of the parable of the tribes, over culture in human affairs” (289). Inevitably, Rogers locates Guam as the predestined subject of the global superpowers’ predatory aggressions, but just as he engulfs Guam in maneuvers of political darwinism, so does his version of history become enveloped in conventions of historiographical recapitulation and lethargy.

To Rogers’ credit, his book teems with exceedingly more detail than any other text of Guam history. His penchant for anecdote and minutiae will indisputably enhance the popularity of this book. The first golf course, the first official local holiday, the first Chamorro millionaire, the first cats and dogs introduced to the island, and more, await the trivia-buff in this lucid and often-entertaining text. Rogers’ mastery of the archival material commands respect, as does his obvious commitment and dedication to the subject matter.

Rogers’ discussion of the post-liberation period on Guam contains much of general interest, and he especially excels in discussions of contemporary politics, including informative summaries of the 1950 Organic Act of Guam and the proposed Commonwealth Act. His historical analysis incorporates economic information, as well as tidbits on the environment, culture, politics, religion, and more. For his attempt to incorporate Chamorro language concepts into the historical analysis, Rogers certainly merits credit. Issuing forth from ideas previously articulated by historians such as Robert Underwood, Laura Souder, and Guam’s Political Status Education Coordinating Commission (which produces the Hale’-ta series of Guam history texts), Rogers at times ambivalently demarginalizes the role of culture in discussions of history.

Destiny’s Landfall clearly required substantial effort and investment, and certainly teachers of Guam history will appreciate Rogers’ contribution to the field. The fifteen-chapter breakdown will make the book especially useful to university instructors, and undoubtedly some of Guam’s high schools will make use of this source as well. It is not an unwelcome resource, but its unwillingness to depart from the staid,
deficient conventions of Guam’s canonical historiography prevent it from providing much more illumination than any of the battery of its elder texts. Perhaps Rogers’ natural impulse to write within the parameters of the long-entrenched canon is understandable. One can only hope that future histories of Guam will not be able to circumvent consideration of the innumerable historical representations and interpretations that the Chamorro people have performed in their history.

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Doris Byer, an Austrian ethnologist teaching at the universities of Vienna and Graz, has produced a remarkable ethnographic history of Owa Raha (literally “Big Island”)—also known as Santa Ana, located in the southeastern corner of the Solomon Islands. Although the book purports to reveal the coping strategies of an island community dealing with mostly European influences (such as missionaries, colonial officials, and traders), it turns out to be much more than the dust-cover may reveal. Indeed, Byer’s account reveals much about the resilience of the Owa Rahans (numbering roughly two thousand in 1991), who weathered through their tight-knit matrilineal descent system many of the changes affecting their island—an argument that sits well with a number of recent scholarly monographs that focus on the interplay of anthropology and history in the Pacific Islands. Byer, however, seeks to establish her reputation by proposing an unconventional method—biographies—to collect, conceptualize, and ultimately write about the past in the Pacific Islands. Additionally, her work provides a unique angle on the self-reflexive vogue of recent anthropological studies. What could be considered, on one hand, a restudy of the ethnologist Hugo Bernatzik’s fieldwork experience on the island in the 1930s, intrigues by the very fact that Bernatzik was her father. Her inquiries into the Owa Rahan histories also result in an inquiry into her own past.

Byer’s self-ascribed methodological intervention attempts to tackle the perceived shortcomings of prior Anglo-American analyses of oral histories (and presumably oral traditions). Historians trained in the Davidsonian mode of history at the Australian National University department, while bringing to the forefront the indigenous experience in the Euro-American encounter, still remain deeply rooted in western historiography. Echoing recent and not-so-recent criticism, Byer argues that this school turned highly recruited Pacific Island students into western-educated homo academici.

Equally problematic, in her view,
This history of Guam is intended for general readers and students of the history, politics, and government of the Pacific region. Its narrative spans more than 450 years, beginning with the initial written records of Guam by members of Magellan's 1521 expedition and concluding with the impact of the recent global recession on Guam's fragile economy.