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0521022983 - Literary Culture and the Pacific: Nineteenth-Century Textual Encounters

Vanessa Smith

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This book examines a range of nineteenth-century European accounts from the Pacific, depicting Polynesian responses to imported metropolitan culture, in particular its technologies of writing and print. Texts designed to present self-affirming images of 'native' wonderment at European culture in fact betray the emergence of more complex modes of appropriation and interrogation by Pacific peoples. Vanessa Smith argues that Pacific islanders called into question the material basis and symbolic capacities of writing, even as they were first being framed in written representations. Examining accounts by beachcombers and missionaries, she suggests that complex modes of self-authorisation informed the transmission of new cultural practices to Pacific peoples. This shift of attention towards reception and appropriation provides the context for a detailed discussion of Robert Louis Stevenson's late Pacific writings. The book argues that these texts can only be properly assessed as the products of a complex, cross-cultural interaction which throws into question assumptions about the unidirectional influence of metropolitan upon peripheral cultures.

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Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organization, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly syntheses and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as 'background', feminist, Foucauldian, and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have reanimated the field.

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LITERARY CULTURE AND THE PACIFIC

Nineteenth-century textual encounters

VANESSA SMITH

King's College, Cambridge



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For Sybil Olsen,
and for Vivian and Sybille Smith

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The impediment of tongues was one that
I particularly over-estimated.

Robert Louis Stevenson, *In the South Seas*

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