

South Pacific Books and the Concept of Rarity

SHARON DELL

In the Western European tradition of scholarly librarianship rare book collections generally comprise pre-1801 publications, first and special editions, association or other special copies and the products of fine printing presses. If this tradition was followed in the Pacific it would exclude most South Pacific books. Although documentation of the South Pacific began with Magellan's exploration in 1521, it was not until the arrival of missionary presses in the early 1800s that printing in the area commenced, especially in the languages of the South Pacific. Increasingly, rare book collections in Australia and New Zealand are being expanded to include parts of the early national and regional printing output.

Since the prototype South Sea Island, described by Wallis, Cook, Bougainville and others, took hold of the Western world's imagination, documentation and interpretation of the region have flowed from the presses of the world. Generations now have studied in the natural laboratory which geographical and cultural fragmentation have created in the Pacific. In this they have been supported by the collections of the great research libraries and notably, by Pacific research libraries. These were established comparatively recently, with the aim of creating comprehensive collections relating to Oceania as a basis for research work by the many universities and organisations engaged in Pacific studies. The University of Hawaii Library, B.P. Bishop Museum Library, Mitchell Library, National Library of Australia, and Alexander Turnbull Library share with an increasing number of local libraries and museums the task of preserving and promoting the documentary heritage of the South Pacific region.

The conditions under which material is published in the Pacific have always conspired against the systematic collection, preservation, and documentation of the region's publications, and contributed to their rarity.¹ It is an area renowned for its cultural diversity. Geographically, the Pacific Ocean comprises one third of the earth's surface, yet, excluding Papua New Guinea, its total land mass is only that of Cuba. Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands share among 3.5 million

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