EUROPEAN TRANSCULTURISTS IN POLYNESIA,
1789-ca.1840

by

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SUMMARY

The mainstremms of historical change are almost always accompanied by eddies and minor countercurrents. In the history of European imperial expansion the mainstream may be characterized as a process of territorial acquisition and dispossession, and economic, political and ideological domination and alienation. In the contact of different cultural traditions the onus of adaptation has lain with the non-European partner. The counter-current is represented by individuals on the frontier of expansion who became detached from the European mainstream and became assimilated to the culture of the people who were being colonized. The term 'transculturite' or 'transculturist' has been coined to describe these people.

In the Pacific islands, transculturists became known as beachcombers, and were composed mainly of deserters from the commercial shipping which touched at the various islands. To deserters were added a sprinkling of castaways and a leaven of escaped convicts.

Assimilation into Island cultures was a difficult process for most beachcombers. Its difficulty was due partly to the fact that thorough assimilation requires a fundamental personality adjustment and is not simply an enormous learning task. Most beachcombers were unable to make the necessary degree of adjustment because of a lack of motivation to do so, and because of an underlying hostility towards Polynesians and Polynesian society. The lack of motivation
is explained by the fact that most beachcombers saw themselves as only short-term residents in island society; the underlying hostility is explained by prevailing European attitudes towards non-European peoples of which the 'Noble Savage' fashion was but one aspect of an ambivalent and complex response.

Because of this lack of complete membership of island societies and also because of the continued independence and integrity of those societies, the beachcombers played no major part in political, social or cultural change during a period which is notable for the extremity of change. In this they were unique: other occupational categories in the Pacific had a vested interest in change and actively fostered it as a matter of policy. In their roles in island society the beachcombers were totally under the control of indigenous authority systems.

As mediators in culture-contact relationships the beachcombers had only a minor role to play, but their performance was subject to other variables over which they had no control. They dominated neither the relationships nor the parties involved. Nor could they enlighten either Polynesians or Europeans to any great extent about the cultural attributes of each other.

This relatively harmless, inactive role for the beachcombers and their inadequate assimilation is contrary to the views of their European contemporaries about them. Such views were in general and almost without exception, derogatory. The gap between contemporaries' attitudes and the reality is attributable to the unconscious repressions and fantasies about life in the 'state of nature' and about civilization which were current at the time.
Imperialism, the most powerful and fastest acting means of cultural (in a very broad sense) change, and at the same time the most respectable of policies in the eyes of members of the expanding society, was therefore almost totally denied by those who appear to have been its vanguard.