

Terror in the South Seas: Violence, Relationships and the Works of Louis Becke

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For recent scholars of nineteenth-century British fiction, Robert Louis Stevenson and Joseph Conrad are the canonical figures that best represent Edwardian depictions of Pacific islands. However, the short sketches of Australian-born Louis Becke (1855–1913) were better known and admired at the turn of the century than those of his now more famous contemporaries. The absence of Becke’s work from the literature of the Pacific leaves an unfortunate gap in our understanding of the period, for Becke specifically links trade in the Pacific with violence, especially towards women. Becke connects commercial interests with the general decline of “civility” and the rise of “savage” behaviour among whites in the South Seas. In Becke’s fiction, behaviour rather than birth or race delineated the savage from the civilised islander, and neither native islanders nor white visitors could avoid corruption in the shockingly brutal islands of his imagination.

Biographer A. Grove Day describes Becke as an adventurer whose contemporaries hailed him “as the ‘Rudyard Kipling of the Pacific’ and admired his antipodean habit of shouting for drinks for all hands. They pictured him as slight and sinewy, and surrounded by clouds of plutonian tobacco smoke from the plug in his pipe” (Day, “By Reef and Tide” 20). Unlike Stevenson and Conrad, who spent relatively little time actually living in the Pacific, Becke spent a large portion of his life working and travelling in the islands of Australia, Melanesia and Micronesia. Not only was Becke more familiar with the islands, but he was also more quickly accepted in the literary world than the young Conrad (who would find his fame with his later works). Anne Lane Bradshaw lists his achievements in literary networking:

Becke had managed to persuade the 13th Earl of Pembroke, a fellow traveler in the South Seas ... to write an introduction to *By Reef and Palm*. Arthur Conan Doyle sponsored Becke for the London Author’s Club. Rudyard Kipling invited Becke to visit him at his home in Sussex in 1897 ... Becke was introduced as well to Mark Twain, who, like Kipling, knew Becke’s work already and in fact had commented favourably on it in an interview he had given in 1895 in Sydney while on a lecture tour there. (Bradshaw 211)

Bradshaw also notes that “Becke was published in [English] magazines such as *The Pall Mall Gazette*, *English Illustrated*, *Sketch*, *Illustrated London News*, and *New Review*” (211). The ability to publish successfully in such well-circulated periodicals earned Becke a strong reputation in Europe, America, and the Pacific.

Like his characters, Becke’s identity in the Pacific seemed eternally in flux as he navigated between heroism and villainy, wealth and poverty, and colonialism and anti-colonialism. Like his stories, Becke’s biography offers an intriguing mix of verifiable facts and entertaining fictions. He struggled in his own life with the harsh realities of imperial trade in the Pacific and his gradual realisation that behaviour, not birth, was the marker of “civilised” behaviour in the Pacific. Born in Australia in 1855, George Lewis Becke claimed to have quickly tired of life in

Sydney. As a boy, he “dreamed not of a literary career; he dreamed of being a pirate” (Day, *Louis Becke* 23). While separating Becke’s actual life events from his vivid imaginings has proved difficult, biographers have established that he boarded a ship from Sydney to San Francisco when he was fourteen and that he spent the next six years on ships in the Pacific, living with a variety of traders, adventurers and natives. At nineteen, Becke was arrested for piracy in the company of Bully Hayes, “blackbirder, buccaneer, and notorious bully of the South Seas” (25). After being acquitted of these charges, Becke held various jobs before signing up to work at a trading station in the Ellice Islands¹ in Polynesia. During his time as a trader for several companies from 1880 to 1882, Becke wrote a number of letters to his mother that provide a narrative of his life in the small islands, containing as much adventure and tragedy as any of his later fictionalised accounts. On 11 April 1880, he reported that he was settling on the island of Nanumaga, “a small island with about 200 people on it—and no white men ... The king and chiefs have made a law that only one white man is to live on the island and that has decided me to remain as I think I will do very well here ... I have about three thousand dollars \$3000 of trade and I am busy getting it on shore” (Thomas and Eves 93). While Becke seemed to be living the Pacific fantasy of the successful trader, his optimism was short-lived; on 8 July he recorded, “I have had a serious dispute with the natives or rather with a chief here and his people and I have closed my trade house and do not now buy any copra and unless they pay me ten thousand cocoanuts I will leave the island with my trade as to remain would be a great loss to De Wolf and Sons” (98). Becke fears the repercussions of the British colonial government’s potential involvement in his affairs, explaining:

I don’t want to be taken to Fiji in a man-o-war to make the acquaintance of the estimable Chief Justice Corrie, the High Commissioner for Polynesia, for in all disputes now with natives especially if there is any blood-shed an *Englishman* is run up with a rope with little compunction—a man in the South Seas now might as well be a Chinaman as an Englishman for all the protection he will receive—the first chance I get I will naturalize myself as a citizen of the United States. (98)

Becke’s comments reveal his often contradictory view of colonialism in the Pacific. In this letter, Becke vents his frustration with the British government’s perceived commitment to protecting the rights of islanders over Englishmen. He almost always disagrees with the government’s strict regulation of economic policy, or as he states later in the same letter, “If I was an American or a German I could make the natives pay me about \$2500 in copra but as I am an Englishman I can not” (Thomas and Eves 100). His later letters and stories, however, would champion British colonialism as more “civilised” than that of the Germans, and as editors Nicholas Thomas and Richard Eves note, Becke himself applied three years later “to the Western Pacific High Commission to become resident commissioner of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands” (101). Despite his occasional expression of concern for the islanders, Becke more often acted in the interest of personal profit than principles. Needless to say, Becke’s experiences in the Ellice Islands intimately acquainted him with the delicacy of navigating colonial policy while maintaining a viable trading post. These adventures underpin the moral ambiguity of Becke’s stories, which both support trade in the Pacific and constantly recognise the dark realities of the imperial project.

Full of opinions about British commercialism, Becke’s letters do not simply record the daily operations of his trading post: they provide lively commentary on the various “characters” that

populate the islands of the South Seas, and analysis of the precarious position that each one faces in the dangerous world of the islands. Becke presents the inhabitants of the Pacific as deeply flawed individuals; however, he argues that it is their behaviour, not their occupation, that defines their status as “civilised” or “savage.” Like many of his contemporaries, Becke has a great deal to say about the missionaries living on his island of Nanumaga. He writes, “I want to go further to the northward where the people are free from that curse of the islands the missionary element, the missionaries have only been here about five years and they have as usual succeeded in rendering the natives less ferocious but ten thousand times more cunning, lying, avaricious and hypocritical than they were in their natural state” (Thomas and Eves 99). In this passage Becke’s rhetoric is reminiscent of a darker character of Pacific fiction: the pirate personified by R. M. Ballantyne’s Bloody Bill in *The Coral Island* (1858), who only appreciates missionaries in so far as they can advance colonial trade, or as he notoriously states, “I don’t know and I don’t care what the gospel does to them, but I know that when any o’ the islands chance to get it, trade goes all smooth and easy” (Ballantyne 243). Thomas and Eves have explained, “There is nostalgia for times past when the Pacific islanders were easy prey to the beachcombers, castaways, and traders living beyond the administrative governance of the European powers or the moral governance of missionaries ... Becke seeks Pacific islanders uncorrupted—in their ‘natural state’—not for study, but for exploitation” (Thomas and Eves 102). Yet I would posit that Becke’s vision of the missionaries, as with all inhabitants of the islands, is more subtle. While Becke is annoyed with the missionaries for hindering trade, in other writings he champions the moral guidance they bring to the islands, such as when he praises the Samoan teacher who lives on Nanumaga (102). Becke also believes that some of the missionaries’ dislike and distrust of independent traders like himself is justified. Describing a fellow trader, Geo Winchcombe, Becke explains:

He is a fair sample of too many island traders fond of liquor and never happy without some grievance to relate against the natives, these are the men that give the missionaries such a pull over *all* traders—they are no better than the natives—they let their children run about wild and devote all their energies to the gin-bottle, but still at this present time the general island trader is as a rule a respectable and fairly educated man, there are few left of the old class, the dissolute whaler or escaped convict. (109–10)

Becke acknowledges that traders negotiate a thin line in the islands between the degenerate beachcombers who still populate the real islands of Pacific, as well as the pages of fiction, and the brave and respectable men of adventure.

Becke’s view of heroic, but potentially flawed, traders reflects a shift in Pacific fiction away from the portrayal of heroic traders. The boys in Ballantyne’s Pacific fiction, from *The Coral Island* to *Gascoyne, the Sandal-wood Trader*, demonstrate their unquestionable status as heroic colonisers of uncivilised islands. As Paulette Michel-Michot has neatly summarised, “Ballantyne’s children are free of evil ... They fear nothing and behave like ‘gentlemen’ towards one another. They embody the sense of superiority, the blind optimism, the self-assurance and complacency of the mid-nineteenth-century British empire” (Michel-Michot 39). In Frederick Marryat’s *Masterman Ready* (1841), the boys follow a similar pattern and, by defeating the savage islanders, they reveal their readiness to become young men of empire. By the end of the narrative, all the boys have found their role in the emerging empire, with William inheriting his

father's flocks in Sydney, Tommy joining the army and Albert becoming a commander in the navy. In both Ballantyne and Marryat's fictions, the role of imperialism is always demonstrated by young white boys developing into men of empire by conquering the "savages" on Pacific islands. While earlier adventure fictions, such as those of Marryat and Ballantyne, saw British heroism as an inherent quality, Becke's writings contain far more doubt about the status of British outsiders as "civilised heroes." Becke's stories and letters continually question whether even the most noble traders can remain so for long without succumbing to their inner "savagery."

Becke's ambivalence extends also to the islanders who appear alternately as brave teachers, useful trading partners and violent aggressors. In a letter from Beru written on 24 September 1881, Becke records an attack on a trading ship where "the natives plundered and pillaged the vessell [*sic*], we were without arms and I had the maddening sensation of seeing myself robbed and dared not raise my hand else we would all have lost our lives" (Thomas and Eves 120). Becke acknowledges the precarious nature of the trading relationship between the colonial outsiders and the native islanders. This precariousness is a feature of many of Becke's letters, and there is always a sense that the boundaries between "civilised" and "savage," hero and villain, successful trader and failed beachcomber all exist in a delicate balance, which can disappear in a matter of moments.

With such a colourful cast of characters to draw on, Becke produced a number of successful works. His first collection of stories, *By Reef and Palm* (1894), "was printed three times in its first year, was translated into French, went through a number of later editions, and was reprinted in Sydney as late as 1955" (60). Published by Unwin's "Autonym Library," the book appeared the year before Conrad's first novel, *Almayer's Folly*. Becke's novel made an impression on Conrad and he wrote in a letter to Unwin:

I was sorry to miss making the acquaintance of Mr Becke. Strangely enough I have been, only the other day, reading again his *Reef and Palm*. Apart from the great interest of the stories what I admire most is his perfect unselfishness in the telling of them. The sacrifice of his individuality in the interest of the work. He stands magnificently aloof from the poignancy and humour of his stories. A thing I could never do—and which I envy him. (Karl and Davies 1: 298)

Conrad initially praises Becke's distance from his subject; however, he criticises this quality in later letters, noting, "It is not Mr Becke who disappoints me. The trouble is that I cannot find Mr Becke in the book" (1: 302). By 1917, after he had written the bulk of his own Pacific fiction, Conrad returns to the topic of Becke with much less enthusiasm, "I saw L. Becke once in 1895 or six in a publisher's office and I must say I wasn't favourably impressed then. I haven't read many of his books. Reef & Palm was the last I looked at I think" (6:19). Conrad viewed Becke's stories as overly commercial and catering to popular rather than literary tastes.²

While exceedingly popular, Becke's stories challenged the limits of canonical Pacific narratives, pushing the boundaries of commerce, civility and gender that traditionally separated whites from natives. Though characters like Ballantyne's Bloody Bill may have questioned white behaviour in Pacific trade, the civilised nature of whites in comparison to the savage nature of islanders is never in dispute. Stevenson and Conrad are far more explicit in their interrogation of white supremacy in the islands, but their narratives focus far more on the inability of white men (from

Almayer and Heyst in Conrad's Malay trilogy to Wiltshire and Attwater in Stevenson's "The Beach of Falesá" and "The Ebb Tide") to resist "going native" than the impact such men had on native islanders. As Robert Dixon argues of late-nineteenth-century adventure fiction, "Although the Pacific is still the space of adventure of a kind, adventure itself has been redefined, implying moral decadence, physical decay, and the greed and corruption of white men" (184). In Becke's Pacific, trade compromises British identity: his characters—like Becke in his letters—find themselves at the intersections of "civilised" and "savage" behaviour.

George Robert Charles Herbert, the thirteenth Earl of Pembroke, outlines the problems inherent in attempting to describe the British experience in the Pacific in his introduction to Becke's *By Reef and Palm*. Despite suffering from ill health, Pembroke made two journeys to the South Seas in his youth, the second of which saw the crew shipwrecked on an uncharted island off the coast of Fiji for over a week. Pembroke and his fellow traveller George Henry Kingsley, brother to esteemed Victorian author Charles Kingsley, would publish their experiences as a book in 1872 entitled *South Sea Bubbles by the Earl and the Doctor* (Maxwell). Pembroke opens *By Reef and Palm* with two stories, both told to him by Becke: the first, about the pirate "Bully" Hayes; the second, an account of Becke's life. Although both stories concern real people who travelled and had adventures in the islands, Becke's constructions of characters show that a proper code of behaviour is very difficult to discern. While newspaper accounts of Hayes support Pembroke's description of a dashing—if not particularly honourable—character, the details of Hayes's "violent hatred" of, and possible escape with, fellow pirate Mr Pease in Samoa are harder to validate.³ Pembroke's account of Becke's early life is also an invention based on, or perhaps condensed from, actual events. While Becke did stow away on a ship to Samoa at sixteen, many of the details—such as the ship's mutiny in Rurutu—are either imaginative creations or from a later period in Becke's life (23–24). For Becke, the Pacific was a place where boundaries begin to disintegrate, and where heroism and villainy begin to break down. Along with the examples I provide in this essay, *By Reef and Palm* alone contains the stories "Pallou's Taloi," "Enderby's Courtship," "The Doctor's Wife," "The Fate of the Alida" and "Brantley of Vahitahi," all of which provide additional examples of "degenerate whites" displaying uncivilised behaviours, such as physical violence, rape, incest and bigamy. Unable to reconcile their European values with those of their new native lives, the men in Becke's stories often find themselves both the victims and perpetrators of violence and tragedy in the Pacific. Pembroke's introduction also comments on the "barbarous" nature of these tales, arguing "all that goes to make up the wild life in the face of Nature or among primitive races, far and free from the artificial conditions of an elaborate civilisation, form an element in the world, the loss of which would be bitterly felt by many a man who has never set foot outside his native land" (18–19). Yet Pembroke is also quick to point out that the lack of civilisation can not only contribute to the nobility of man but also lead to his downfall. He notes, "The loves of white men and brown women, often cynical and brutal, sometimes exquisitely tender and pathetic, necessarily fill a large space in any true picture of the South Sea Islands" (19–20). As Pembroke's comments suggest, Becke's stories feature hybrids—racial, literary, and cultural—that undermine the assumption that British identity is an inviolable and immutable truth.

As Pembroke observes, these conflicting views of heroism and villainy in Becke's *By Reef and Palm* contributed to the novel's popularity. This slippage of identity was not limited only to male characters, however, and by featuring the unique position of women in the islands of the Pacific, Becke depicted the South Seas as less a tropical paradise than a social nightmare. In "The

Revenge of Macy O'Shea: A Story of the Marquesas," Becke uses a half-caste protagonist, Sera, to explore the ever-fluctuating definitions of "civilised" and "savage" behaviour that work across both gender and racial differences. The story opens with the funeral of Macy O'Shea, who is described as "sometime member of the chain-gang of Port Arthur, in Van Dieman's Land, and subsequently runaway convict, beachcomber, cutter-off of whaleships, and Gentleman of Leisure in Eastern Polynesia. And of his many known crimes the deed done in this isolated spot was the darkest of all" (Becke, "The Revenge" 54) These types of traders, whom historian Nicholas Thomas has described as "degenerate whites who have assumed the savagery but not the nobility of island warriors," populate a great many of Becke's fictions (Thomas 56). Having announced that "of his many known crimes the deed done in this isolated spot was the darkest of all" (Becke, "The Revenge" 54), the story turns to Macy O'Shea's wife Sera, born of a Portuguese father and Tahitian half-caste mother, who, like many island women, finds herself completely in the power of an abusive husband. She angrily utters, "I would kill him—kill him, if there was but a ship here in which I could get away! I would sell myself over and over again to the worst whaler's crew that ever sailed the Pacific if it would bring me freedom from this cruel, cold-blooded devil!" (Becke, "The Revenge" 45) Sera restrains her murderous impulse not out of a sense of justice, but from the knowledge that "if I ran a knife into his fat throat, these natives would make me work in the taro-fields, unless one wanted me for himself" (46). Sera finds herself in an impossible position: she is married to a criminal but unable to escape without prostituting herself to a passing ship or becoming the wife of a native islander—fates that are equally degrading in Sera's mindset. While Sera's rage marks her as a "savage," the story is initially unclear as to whether her anger develops from her degraded status as a white woman or her lingering connection to her Tahitian "islander" roots. As with the male traders that Becke refers to in his letters, the "savagery" of Pacific women depends on their actions, not just their racial heritage. Sera is neither mindless brute nor seductive temptress; rather, she is a newly identified island woman whose actions and emotions denote a more complicated interiority.

Sera's anger rises to a fever pitch when O'Shea informs her that he is taking an additional wife, the half-caste daughter of another trader, "gentleman" Carl Ristow. At this point in the story, Sera clarifies that her anger stems not from jealousy but pride, threatening to kill the new girl "not for love of you, but because of the white blood in me. I can't—I won't be degraded by you bringing another woman here" (48). On the one hand, Sera's response marks her as "civilised," unwilling to accept the "free love" that the British associated with island women. On the other hand, her extreme anger and threats of violence mark her as an islander, one who is unable to control her passionate emotions. Sera's characterisation as a half-caste thus points to not only her racial ambiguity but also her ambiguous status as both civilised and savage, a position that earlier adventure writers had relegated almost entirely to male characters. In Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, for example, Jack savagely attacks a band of islanders, killing their chief, under the guise of protecting his friends and eliminating cannibalism and infanticide (203). Though boys could display problematic acts of savagery, Ballantyne displayed women as gatekeepers of civility, such as with Pauline in *The Island Queen* who continually breaks up fights between the men on the island. While Conrad and Stevenson introduced highly manipulative female characters, earlier writers from Johann David Wyss to Ballantyne to Marryat relegated women to the roles of peacekeepers, usually as wives or mothers (as is the case in *The Swiss Family Robinson* [1812], *The Island Queen* and *Masterman Ready*). In contrast, Becke presents Sera as a departure from these prototypical female characters, endowing her with an agency usually reserved for only male adventurers.

O'Shea succeeds in acquiring his new wife Malia, much as he would acquire any other wanted property, by using his position as a trader. Becke informs the reader that "the transaction was a perfectly legitimate one, and Malia did not allow any inconvenient feeling of modesty to interfere with such a lucrative arrangement as this, whereby her father became possessed of a tun of oil and a bag of Chilian dollars, and she of much finery" (Becke, "The Revenge" 49). While Sera retains a certain independence, Malia exists only as a valuable trade good. This distinction is made apparent when Sera stabs the new wife moments after her arrival in their house; Becke states, "the value of a tun of oil and a bag of Chilian dollars gasped out its life upon the matted floor" (50). Becke's story does not clarify which woman is more "civilised"—the overly passionate wife or the overly accepting daughter. In the story, the only way to retain a sense of autonomy as a woman is to behave "savagely" by either acting violently or disobeying male authority. Sera's actions, however, are not seen as heroic by her husband or the native island women who "in that one thing . . . resemble Christians—the deadly hatred with which some women hate those of their sex whom they know to be better and more pure than themselves" (51). Like Sera, the island women hunger for vengeance; however, unlike Sera, their hate is irrational, predicated on their dislike of Sera's outsider status. While Becke categorises the island women as "savage" because of their implacable hatred for a "better and more pure" woman, his assessment of Sera is far more ambiguous. Becke shows that female as well as male characters suffer from the cultural breakdown of "civilised" and "savage" behaviour that life in the Pacific precipitates.

Sera's punishment for her crime is swift and graphically violent, revealing a brutal realism rarely seen in canonical Pacific fiction. Her shirt is removed and she is placed over the keel of a boat while O'Shea walks over, "drawing through his hands the long, heavy, and serrated tail of the *fai*—the gigantic stinging-ray of Oceana. He would have liked to wield it himself, but then he would have missed part of his revenge—he could not have seen her face. So he gave it to a native, and watched, with the smile of a fiend, the white back turn black and then into bloody red as it was cut to pieces with the tail of the *fai*" (52–53). In these final moments, Becke brings O'Shea's utter disregard for all civilised behaviour to a climax. Even worse than carrying out his wife's death sentence, O'Shea takes a sadistic joy in watching her suffering. Such an action places him on a rung of savagery below that of the natives, and Becke finishes the account of the death of Sera by stating, "The sight of the inanimate thing that had given no sign of its agony beyond the shuddering and twitching of torn and mutilated flesh was, perhaps, disappointing to the tiger who stood and watched the dark stream that flowed down on both sides of the boat" (53). Sera accepts her punishment bravely and without complaint, a sign of European stoicism usually associated with masculine strength,⁴ whereas O'Shea degenerates into animal passion, thriving on the brutality of the scene. It is in fact a native, Loloku the Boar Hunter, who stays O'Shea's hand, warning that continual punishment will kill her. Ever practical, O'Shea remarks, "Ah . . . that would be a pity; for with one hand shall she live to plant taro" (53). Again, Becke links commerce with savagery: it is only O'Shea's desire for her labour that overcomes his lust for vengeance. In "The Revenge of Macy O'Shea," Becke complicates the definition of violence to act both as a defining moment of heroism and as a maker of the worst sort of villainy and savagery. For both male and female characters, the Pacific is a place of testing and always contains the potential for moral degeneration that no character, no matter how heroic, can fully escape.

Though many of Becke's stories explore the intersections of trade, violence, and savagery, he also occasionally connects these issues with the geographic peculiarities of certain Pacific islands. In "The Chilean Bluejacket: A Tale of Easter Island," Becke examines Victorian science and the complications of gender boundaries by setting the story on an island synonymous with mystery and superstition. The story sets up Rapanui, or Easter Island, as unique, a place where early explorer Roggewein:⁵

wondered at the mysteries of the strange island, so this day do the cunning men of science, who, perhaps once in thirty years, go thither in the vain effort to read the secret of an all-but-perished race. And they can tell us but vaguely that the stupendous existing evidences of past glories are of immense and untold age, and show their designers to have been coeval with the builders of the buried cities of Mexico and Peru; beyond that, they can tell us nothing. (Becke, "Chilean Bluejacket" 162)

Becke's reflections echo the scholarly and public interest throughout the nineteenth century in exploring the ethnographic mysteries of the Pacific peoples, especially those of Easter Island, as illustrated by the British Museum display in 1868 of a statue from Easter Island.⁶ Yet the specific allure of Easter Island, as Becke notes, is the unknown circumstances that turned the original islanders into "an all-but-perished race." While Becke states that the people of Easter Island are some of the handsomest in the Pacific, he also relates:

They are the survivors of a race doomed—doomed from the day that Roggewein in his clumsy, high-pooed frigate first saw their land, and marvelled [*sic*] at the imperishable relics of a dead greatness. With smiling faces they welcomed him—a stranger from an unknown outside world, with cutlass at waist and pistol in hand—as a god; he left them a legacy of civilisation—a hideous and cruel disease that swept through the amiable and suspicious race as an epidemic, and slew its thousands, and sealed with the hand of Death and Silence the eager life that had then filled the square houses of lava in many a town from the wave-beaten cliffs of Terano Kau to Ounipu in the west. (163–64)

In many of his texts, Becke champions the adventurers of the Pacific as brave and noble explorers, but he also recognises the damaging effects they have had on the local population.⁷ More importantly for the story, however, is the recognition that the islands are places of not only mystery and excitement but also death and destruction wrought by the incursion of "civilised" peoples and their unknown illnesses.

By opening his Easter Island story this way, Becke prepares his readers for a story of inevitable doom in which scientific investigation alone is unable to provide sufficient answers. Becke expands the Easter Island narrative to embrace a more subtle dynamic, moving the story from whites killing Pacific islanders with disease to invaders dooming islanders (specifically women) with neglect. The focus in the latter part of "The Chilean Bluejacket" is on the mysterious disappearance of the newest islander: English scientist Dr Francis who is "sent there to examine and report on the colossal statues and mysterious terraces of that lonely island" (167). The Englishman was forgotten for two years, unable to return to his post in the Chilean service as America was fighting Peru.⁸ When a Chilean officer arrives to pick up Dr Francis, he finds that

the doctor has left in a “passing whale-ship” (169). The officer also relates that, on the journey to the island, one of his company, a young cabin boy who was rather useless and often ill, jumped ship and hid among the natives on Easter Island. On hearing the tale, the American captain decides to capture the escapee to serve on board his ship, only to discover that the boy has died on the island (the boy later turns out to be a young white Spanish girl in disguise). Again, Becke describes Easter Island as a place of mystery and death, writing of the gravesite, “The strange unearthly stillness of the place, the low whispers of the women, the array of colossal figures with sphinx-like faces set to the sea, and the unutterable air of sadness that enwrapped the whole scene, overawed even the unimaginative mind of the rough whaling captain” (174). Even for the “unimaginative” captain, the primitive nature of the place has the ability to create a sense of dread and wonder. Historian Brian Street argues:

All explanations of the ‘supernatural,’ it was assumed, were ‘simple’ to those with the ability to reason. ‘Primitive’ man’s fear of the ‘supernatural’ was thus assumed to stem from an inability to reason. Popular writers by arguing their point so forcefully and with such concrete examples, are engaging in an academic debate, the theoretical suppositions of which they have accepted as given ‘fact’. (163)

Like the “primitive” islanders, the whaler finds his reason and scepticism overwhelmed by the “unearthly” graveyard. Once again, Becke’s stories break down established boundaries, showing that “civilised” reason and “savage” superstition are not so easily divorced from one another.

Invaders to Easter Island continue to have profound and devastating consequences, though this time for the island’s female inhabitants, both European and native. One of the English-speaking natives tells the captain that another captain landed during the Chilean conflict and that the natives welcomed him without fear. Becke notes that the islanders would have had good reason to fear whites as “in 1862 . . . three Peruvian slave-ships took away over three hundred islanders to perish on the guano-fields of the Chincha islands” (“Chilean Bluejacket” 177). The “little man” explained he was looking for a white man named Frank, or Farani in the native language. The native remembers Farani and tells the sailor, “He was rich, and had with him chests filled with presents for us of Rapa-nui; and he told us that he came to live a while among us, and look upon the houses of stone and the Faces of the Silent that gaze out upon the sea. For a year he dwelt with us and became as one of ourselves, and we loved him” (178) Eventually, Farani tired of the isolation of island life and boarded a whaling ship. In this way, Becke presents Farani as a European “man of the islands” who enjoys his time with the islanders and then quickly moves on to new adventures without considering the cost to those he leaves behind. Farani is neither desperate nor ill-educated; he simply does not count the cost to the islanders—or does not consider that cost important.

Farani never appears in “The Chilean Bluejacket,” moving Becke’s interrogation of the Pacific to focus not on the lives of white men, but on the devastation that those lives cause to both a white and a native woman. The “little man” discovers that Farani has left behind “a young girl named Temeteri, whom when Farani had been with us for two months, he had taken for a wife; and she bore him a son” (180). Though she receives a marriage offer from a fellow islander, Temeteri refuses, insisting Farani will return for her. It is after these revelations that the “little man” reveals that one of his crew has run away. The islanders eventually find the runaway, who turns out to be the mysterious cabin boy/Spanish girl. When the Spanish girl reveals that one of her

possessions is a miniature of Farani, it is clear that both women—the lost runaway “cabin boy” and Temeteri—are abandoned wives of the Englishman. When the Spanish girl learns of Farani’s island wife, she dies grieving for her lost love. Temeteri is far less forgiving and as the storyteller relates, “Even when she who is now silent was not yet cold, Temeteri came to the door of the house where she lay and spat twice on the ground, and taking up gravel in her hand cast it at her, and cursed her in the name of our old heathen gods” (189). As in “The Revenge of Macy O’Shea,” the morally problematic actions of a European man have profound ramifications for the women of the islands. Farani’s white wife abandons the conventions of Victorian modesty, dressing as a man and sailing with a Chilean corvette. Despite her heroic actions to find her husband, the girl dies a melodramatic death, literally from a broken heart. In contrast, Farani’s island wife Temeteri is equally devoted to her husband, but rages against the female foreign invader who destabilises both her marriage and her son’s parentage. Bruce Bennett illuminates Becke’s position, arguing:

Becke presents himself as a skeptical, unillusioned author who seems unlikely to be deceived ... by simplistic notions of a South Pacific world of playful promiscuity or “free love” without consequences. The cost of casual sexual relationships between white men and women of the Pacific islands in Becke’s stories is often jealousy, anger, physical violence and sometimes death. (153)

Thomas agrees, noting that Becke does not “present [women] statically as exotic-erotic objects, but tells the story of the entanglement that follows from the white man’s desire” (57). Becke imbues his female characters with the same potential for heroism or moral degeneration that mark his male leads. While women in Becke’s stories are also victims of male manipulation, they show a range of emotions and actions: from accepting their fates with resignation to planning elaborate revenges. As in “The Revenge of Macy O’Shea,” it is unclear which woman can claim the greater wrong in “The Chilean Bluejacket”: both suffer and both respond to suffering with destruction. While earlier adventure writers examined the influence of trade and violence on men and their lovers, Becke’s stories present female characters as agents, not mere objects for male desire. He also embraces the notion that as women participate in island culture, they become victims of Pacific degeneration, just as much as their male counterparts.

While “The Revenge of the Macy O’Shea” and “The Chilean Bluejacket” both concern the relationships between white men and island women who are often their equals in daring and cruelty, Becke’s 1904 story “A Memory of the Southern Seas” looks at the uneasy relationship between traders and missionaries, focusing largely on the notorious pirate “Bully” Hayes. Similar to his earlier tales, Becke breaks down established boundaries—this time between morality and villainy—to expose the inherent biases in assumed English identity. Hayes features in many of Becke’s tales primarily because “every one who sailed the Austral seas between the ‘fifties’ and ‘seventies,’ and thousands who had not, knew of him and had heard tales of him” (Becke, “A Memory” 233). This particular story frames Hayes as a specific type of Pacific anti-hero: a villainous but charming pirate. Hayes exemplifies the trader/ruffian character, a man whom Becke contrasts with the ever-present island missionaries. In this story, however, Becke undercuts the notion that to be a “hero” of the Pacific one must be completely honourable or even moral.

Becke begins his short story by recognising Hayes's reputation as a "big-bearded, heavy-handed ... alleged 'terror of the South Seas'" (234). Yet Becke explains that his time spent sailing with Hayes in 1875 revealed a very different character, "who, with all his faults, was never the cold-blooded murderer whose fictitious atrocities once formed the theme of a highly blood-curdling melodrama staged in the old Victoria Theatre, in Pitt Street, Sydney, under the title of 'The Pirate of the Pacific'" (234–35). Becke denounces this theatrical version of Hayes's life as overly fictionalised, even while writing his own account of the pirate in a collection of fictional stories. Instead of drawing on his own memories to refute the Sydney theatre community's portrayal of Hayes, Becke turns to a more "reliable" source: the story of a New Guinea missionary named James Chalmers, written by biographer Richard Lovett.⁹ When Chalmers and his fellow missionaries aboard the *John Williams*¹⁰ are cast away on Nine Island after a shipwreck, Hayes escorts them to Samoa and then is "chartered" or hired for further voyages. Becke uses the rescue of Chalmers to portray Hayes in a more positive light as a trader with a good heart. Hayes allows the missionaries to hold services on board his ship, and Chalmers relates that Hayes "was a perfect host and a thorough gentleman. His wife and children were on board" (236). Becke draws on the associations of his readership between mission efforts and good works, knowing that Hayes's kindness to the missionaries would soften his harsh reputation and align him with the popular rhetoric of the "civilising" mission associated with missionary efforts in the South Seas.

While Becke's story presents Hayes as a good-hearted but misunderstood soul, he consistently undermines this interpretation by interpolating less laudable incidents into the account given by Chalmers to Lovett. Chalmers's story is not all positive and his account records, "Hayes several times lost his temper and did very queer things, acting now and then more like a madman than a sane man. Much of his past life he related to us at table, especially of things (he did) to cheat Governments" (236). Hayes's dinner stories contrast with his kindly, almost paternalistic, behaviour towards the missionaries. Becke records Hayes's dubious sense of honour as "he certainly did like to 'cheat Governments,' although he despised cheating private individuals—unless it was for a large amount" (236). Not only does Hayes act like a pirate, thieving for fun, but Becke records that he also acts as a "bully." While Hayes grants permission for the missionaries to hold services, he states his crew *will* attend and "if they had shirked it, the redoubtable 'Bully' would have made attendance compulsory with a belaying pin," a position that seems to shock the gentle Chalmers (236). Even Hayes's choice to rescue the missionaries is motivated by money rather than Christian charity:

No doubt he charged them a pretty stiff price, for he always said that missionaries "were teaching Kanakas the degrading doctrine that even if a man killed his enemy and cut out and ate his heart in public, and otherwise misconducted himself, he could yet secure a front seat in the Kingdom of Heaven if he said he was sorry and was then baptized." (234)

Not only does Hayes dislike the Protestant missionaries' doctrine of forgiving and forgetting sin, but he also despises the religious superstition he associates with Catholicism. When on one voyage, his ship endures a horrible electrical storm, during which one of his Portuguese crewmen begins kissing his crucifix for protection, inspiring his countrymen to follow suit. The action "so enraged Hayes that, seizing the first offender, he tore the crucifix from his hand, and, rolling it into a lump, thrust it into his mouth *and made him swallow it* ... 'If that bit of lead is good

externally it ought to be a darned sight better when taken internally” (236–37). While Becke argues that Hayes is not as bad as the Sydney theatre proclaims, his story includes a vast array of proof that, at the very least, Hayes deserves the title “Bully” and his reputation as a wild rogue, if not an outright villain for his extreme and violent behaviour.

The question remains as to why Becke chose to combine two very different views of Hayes in the same story. As he shows in other stories, Becke was clearly aware of the violent nature of Pacific trade and the effect it had on the men and women who lived on the small islands. For example, it is O’Shea’s brutality, not his polygamy, that marks him as a villain rather than simply an adventurous philanderer. Becke includes Chalmers’s account to explain that Hayes has not broken the unspoken rules of true villainy in the South Seas. At the same time, Becke does not wish to imply that Hayes is a dull, average Victorian man; he represents instead the spirit of untamed adventure and wild liberty that categorises the “heroes” of Becke’s fiction. As Sumangala Bhattacharya has argued, “The adoption of native customs implicitly critiques the conventions of Western civilised behaviour for stifling a more ‘authentic’ expression of masculine selfhood” (83). For Becke, the unwritten code of honour in the South Seas was as binding as that of a gentleman in London or Sydney. While the culture of “adventurous” men allowed for a myriad of sins, Becke’s fluid code of honour usually criticised extreme violence and harming missionaries. His fiction often punished gruesome violence with dishonour, death and/or suicide. Thus Becke ends “A Memory of the Southern Seas” by proclaiming Hayes to be one of the true men of the Pacific: a soldier who served the British in the Sudan and China, a man who made a fool of himself over a woman, and a man who “died—in his sea-boots—from a blow on his big, bald head, superinduced by his attention to a lady who was ‘no better than she ought to have been,’ even for the islands of the North Pacific” (237). Becke must walk a thin line between celebrating Hayes as the boisterous and ill-tempered pirate king of the Pacific without turning him into a violent and murderous villain. In Becke’s Pacific, the line between daring deeds and criminal behaviour is constantly shifting, and it is only by constructing and reconstructing themselves that British men are able to navigate their often conflicting roles. For both the men and women of Becke’s tales, heroism requires continual action and reaction as the potential to slip across the narrow boundary and degenerate into villainy is an ever-present concern.

Becke’s Pacific stories are striking in the canon of adventure fiction both for their graphic presentation of violence and their moral ambiguity. Becke’s Pacific is a place of continually shifting boundaries, where identity changes on a daily basis. Becke is always torn between presenting the South Seas as place of adventure and true liberty, and recognising that this lifestyle without law has profound and often violent consequences for men and women, white and islander. He bases social identity less on the characters’ country of origin and more on their actions; it is behaviour, not geography, that separates the “civilised” man or woman from the “savage.” His stories depict a morally complex Pacific, where adventurers must navigate an unwritten and ever-changing code of honour. By giving agency to the wide variety of characters in the Pacific, regardless of gender or race, Becke redefined the general conception of what it meant to be a civilised person in the islands, breaking with the standard conventions of both fiction and society.

Notes

¹ The Ellice Islands would officially become a British protectorate in 1892 and a British colony in 1916. The islands separated from the Gilbert Islands (now Kiribati) in 1975 to form a separate colony called Tuvalu. Tuvalu gained full independence in October 1978. See Campbell.

² For a detailed look at Becke's connection to Conrad's early fiction, see Bradshaw and Staple.

³ Stories about William "Bully" Hayes appeared in a variety of contemporary newspapers, including the *Cleveland Midweek Review Pictorial*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Queensland Government Gazette*. A number of biographies provide a more complete picture of Hayes's life. See, for example, Clune, Lubbock, and Saunders.

⁴ Victorians associated the ability to endure a flogging without complaint as a sign of masculine self-control. Natalie Rose notes, "Flogging bears the cultural weight of converting savage boyhood into civilised manliness" (507).

⁵ Becke is referring to Jacob Roggeveen, a Dutch explorer who gave the island its name on Easter Sunday, 17 March 1772. For more on his voyage, see Sharp. Roggeveen was not the only explorer to comment on the island. Other explorers include Felipe González de Haedo of Spain in 1770, James Cook of England in 1774, and Jean-François de Galaup de La Pérouse of France in 1786. For more on the explorers and their connection to Easter Island, see Dos Passos. For an account of the connection between the explorers and the fate of the people of Easter Island, see Englert and Fischer.

⁶ In 1868, HMS *Topaze* landed on Easter Island and returned to England with a statue named Hoa Hakananai'a (meaning 'stolen/hidden friend'), which was put on display in the British Museum. For more on the statue's history, see Tilburg.

⁷ While Becke is correct in pointing out the devastating effects that connection with Europeans could have on local populations, more recent histories have resisted the implication that Pacific islanders passively accepted their fate. For more on the debate, see Howe, Leckie, MacDonald, Moorehead, Munro and Lals, and Shineberg.

⁸ Becke is referring to the War of the Pacific, also known as the Saltpeter War and the Guano War, where Chile fought against Bolivia and Peru from 1879 to 1884 over valuable land in the Atacama desert. Britain assisted Chile in order to protect its economic relationship and its control over the desert's nitrate deposits. See Kaufman and Macpherson, and Sater.

⁹ Becke is rather hazy on the details of which sketch he is using, though he records that his source "appeared in the January number of a popular religious magazine." Richard Lovett published a biography of James Chalmers in 1902 for the Religious Tract Society, which includes Chalmers's account of meeting Hayes that Becke quotes in the story. See Lovett.

¹⁰ Becke clarifies that this was the second steamer to be named *John Williams* and that the current *John Williams* is the fourth. The ships were named for the popular and charismatic member of the London Missionary Society who was martyred in Melanesia in 1839.

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