

The Boar's Tooth: Bali Ha'I May Call You (One Soandso Fool)¹

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"I wish I could tell you about the South Pacific."

Those are the opening words of James A. Michener's novel, *Tales of the South Pacific*. This essay is not about Michener, however. It is about what many Americans think they know about the South Pacific, and what I believe has been the fate and accomplishments of American authors who ventured there to describe and interpret Oceania. I am going to use Michener's *Tales* because, outside of World War Two memories and maybe mai tais, this might be the most important touchstone for American knowledge of the South Pacific. I make that confident but unproven claim for two reasons:

First, no other book on the South Pacific has come close to approaching the millions of copies of *Tales* that have been sold. One might even lay claim to it being *the* American novel of World War Two, while certainly acknowledging the superior artistry of Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* and appreciating Hemingway's *Across the River and into the Trees*. It won the Pulitzer Prize in its year of publication, 1947, beating books by John Steinbeck, Sinclair Lewis, and Theodore Dreiser. That wasn't a bad start for a first novel, published in the author's 40th year. His previous book, from 1940, was *The Unit in Social Studies*.

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Second, and more important, are the stage and screen adaptations of this episodic novel. Joshua Logan produced the stupendously successful play with scores by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. Opening in April, 1949, and starring Mary Martin and Ezio Pinza, it ran for 1,925 performances winning every prize, and every heart, that there was to be won. Since then, the play *South Pacific* has been presented more than 25,000 times. In 1958, it was made into a garish film with Mitzi Gaynor and Rossano Brazzi. As late as 2001, an ABC-TV film starred a most effective Glenn Close as Ensign Nellie Forbush falling in love with the expatriate Frenchman Emile DeBecque. It played on stage in London in 2002; in fact, it is always playing somewhere. I begin my essay with this description in hopeful confidence that it is a touchstone for readers outside of America also, because everyone has seen the play, seen the film (or films), heard the music, or all three.

And I'll bet you know where the play takes place: Polynesia, right? Sorry if you guessed wrong. It all happens in Melanesia, which is even more remote in the American conception of Paradise than Micronesia. And even at that, the main native characters are Tonkinese and not Melanesian. That does not damage my point. I believe it enhances it because the common, almost universal perception of the play and films is that the dual love affairs illustrate the allure and the hazards of romance in Polynesia.

I recite this background as my preface to a central thesis: the South Pacific in America is usually misconstrued to mean Polynesia; furthermore, the American view of Polynesia has been distorted, confused, ill-informed, and almost always over-romanticized ever since Herman Melville jumped ship at Nuku Hiva in 1842, and later created his first works from those experiences, *Typee* and *Omoo*. To Americans, the South Pacific is primarily Polynesia and Polynesia means pleasure. And what conjoining of words could be more seductive than French Polynesia?

I know a talented writer who came to Polynesia to tell its story – and his story as well. He wrote a bit and published a little. As his reputation started to grow in the island clusters of the Pacific, a few of the old hands began to tell him to look up a particular person in the next port who was sure to have a good yarn. Many times the yarns were not good, but the trip to the island was, and so my author sailed. Frequently someone

sought him out to relate a new tale, but he could rarely use one of those stories so easily volunteered. It was not that he had scruples against borrowing. It was just that people with the best stories to tell protected them because a fresh tale engagingly told is negotiable in Polynesia, and it might buy a room or a drink or even a week in the beach house. Even better, in a region where friends are easily made, storytelling always leads to new friendships, especially if the stories are good. Tales are not given away cheaply; that might demean the friendship. There is a propriety to telling stories, and the good friend observes it.

I tried to be a good friend to my author. I visited and asked where I could find the "real" Polynesia for myself. I had visited the hotels and the tourist beaches and the libraries. I had even looked in the archives of the old territorial governments, but scholars there seemed too intent on ancient customs for my taste. I had not found Polynesia, or rather I should say that I had not found enough of it. I knew there was more because I had read the same standard and indispensable authors my friend had: Melville, Twain, London, Henry Adams, James Norman Hall, and James Michener, as well as Charles Warren Stoddard, Lloyd Osbourne, Robert Dean Frisbie, Eugene Burdick, and many, many more. I asked him where Polynesia hid from me.

He told me to ride my bicycle to the edge of the poorest village on the island, let the air out of a tire, and then walk the bicycle to the first house I would encounter. I did what he suggested and was met quickly with smiling curiosity as well as offers of help. In half an hour I had a dozen new friends, a pareau wrapped around my waist, guava juice in a coconut shell in my hand, and an invitation to hunt squid along the rocks by the sea. And dance the tamure later.

It was three days before I rejoined my friend, and I returned only because I was worn to pleasant exhaustion. I had finally found a bit of the Polynesia that had escaped me except for my readings, and it was a close enough approximation of Paradise to satisfy me. Certainly here was the best environment for an author, and before the palms whispered me to sleep on that first night back at my friend's house, I resolved that I had to ask the question none of us likes to hear: "How's your writing going?"

A day on the beach and another searching for reef fish among the coral refreshed me enough to begin my inquiries about his career.

"It is finished," he replied quickly, and then he continued with an almost indulgent smile, as if he had so often been asked the same series of questions that were certain to follow that he wanted to shortcut the inevitable delicacies of decorum and diction and get immediately to the explanation. The sun threatened to go behind a cloud in a few minutes, and we had not fished out our dinner yet.

"I've made it. I'm not a writer anymore, and if I were, I would likely be a failure. There is no room for any writer in the Pacific but a genius, and I've read enough and written enough to know I'll never fit that category. Only a genius can sustain himself against the constant beauty of Polynesia. The beauty can blind you, and the repetition of beauty, the sameness of one gorgeous, unimprovable day after another blunts your imagination. There seems to be nothing to improve upon, nothing to interpret because there are so few faults and so little variation. None but the very best can write even about his or her home island without being defeated by the island itself. Unless you write in short spurts, an anecdote at a time, perhaps a chapter or three during the rainy season, your talent will be consumed by the beauty and perfection of the place. There's almost no room left for the artist. There's nothing left to imagine, or so it appears. The land and the people are complete without me.

"I know I can write well enough to make an ordinary living if I limited myself to mainland, continental concerns. I could be like Robert Louis Stevenson, sit in the sun, and write of a castle in Scotland, and perhaps I too could make a romance live on the other side of the world from my keyboard. But that's not why I came here. I came to write of Polynesia, and I learned it didn't need me. I couldn't waste my life writing travelogues and I couldn't improve on Paradise. Those who read what I wrote looked for the place to be portrayed, not the author's mind. I found myself writing about sparkling waterfalls and pellucid streams. I tried not to over-use a word like pellucid, but it seems to be in every account I read of the South Pacific. Some of the best authors use the word, too, of course. Pellucid describes every Polynesian stream I've ever seen with absolute precision. The streams haven't changed since the first Westerner saw them. That's the trouble. There's nothing new I can think of to say about them, no fresh manner in describing the scenery. Maybe the area outdistances even such a rich language as English. Perhaps we have too few English words to describe the

astounding physical beauty that is everywhere in Polynesia. English was not molded in such a setting.

"So I know the Pacific style of writing. Until recently, it has been as regular, as monotonous as life on an atoll. Just as the incessant pounding of waves on a beach has driven more than one author mad by deceiving him into believing that the whole world throbbed to his heartbeat, just that way the Pacific's stories seem to cry to be told in the same monotonous style. Someone said of Jack London, 'He held the pen like a marlinspike.' That was fine for a century ago, but now the region needs to be painted with a lighter, more delicate and incisive brush stroke. For too long authors have lavished their attention on the land and the sea, assuming the people were simply and easily described, or even assumed. But I know the strength of the Pacific is the people. Believe it or not, this is a recent discovery, and only a few fine authors are now starting to make use of this information.

"You see, there are two ways of looking at this. As a writer, I quit. It wasn't as hard as you might think, because I stopped at the top of my game, so my ego was satisfied, and some people even look upon me as a romantic hero, although I'm not. For virtually all Westerners, there is the inescapable imperative to look at anything in the Pacific with a romantic eye.

"As a man, I've just begun. All the others who came and wanted to write – and did – almost all of them found they had to escape the Paradise of Polynesia to do their best work. Our Western civilizations provide the necessary irritations to foment that vital creative itch. Of course the Pacific societies can do that as well, but very few writers penetrated those cultures sufficiently to realize that the same irritations can as well be found in the islands.

"Those authors who preceded me did the work I would have had to do in an earlier generation, but now it has been done for me. I can live comfortably in the literary houses they built, just as surely as I can live on what the missionaries and the plantations and the governments have built, and therefore I can continue to stay here. So many of the rest found that Paradise was evanescent because they put it under glass to preserve it by dissection without understanding it. That act froze the moment of freshness which lasts only an instant or two, and when that most fragrant odor of discovery slipped away and turned stale all too fast, then Paradise slipped out of their grasp.

"I have the advantage over the earlier writers. I read the romances and the adventures and the war stories, just like you. If you want, you can rightly call me a complacent Adam. My reading, and my experience, have taught me the boundaries of Paradise, and I realize that to cross that line means destruction, except for the very greatest talent. Only rarely has that talent seen the true Pacific. Herman Melville touched it lightly, but he really discovered his own ocean later. Remember what he wrote in his first novel, *Typee*. He said he found Paradise in the Marquesas, and he couldn't wait to escape, not four weeks after he landed. He longed for home and its irritations. The two words he taught the natives were 'home' and 'mother,' and he showed them how to build a popgun. Twain's 'Letters from the Sandwich Islands' in *Roughing It* are mostly tourist descriptions, though very pleasing ones. Of all the Polynesian books by American authors, few are more informed and insightful, or – despite the fame of its author – more obscure than Henry Adams' *Tahiti*, subtitled *The Memoirs of Arii Taimai*. Brilliant Adams understood the culture of the Society Islands from the inside out, a stupendous achievement, and then, having written about it, chose to sail on, just like Melville and Twain and almost all who followed in the 20th century. Even Michener.

"I think they were right. They went back to home and mother and popguns, and back is where they did their best work. You'd be amazed at how many authors started in the Pacific and then returned to the familiar irritations of America to achieve their fame. I might go back, too, someday. The big jets are here.

"In the meantime, I've made it. It won't be literature, but it will be life, and so far the Pacific seems too big for both. Someday, though, maybe not. Mature literary greatness must come sometime. Not yet, because excepting for the Pasteurized Polynesia of Hawaii, we exist in a kind of tourist colonialism that places little value on writing more distinguished than that which appears in brochures. Perhaps we'll wait for the next tragedy and then the best writing will come. Just after the big jets get old, that's my guess.

"While I wait for that moment, I intend to live right here, and now and then go into the capital, and occasionally up to Honolulu. I'll talk and fish with people like you, but I'll feel no need to write. This is the best life a man has ever lived. There's no creative itch, and habit tells me to miss that, but the life . . . well, the life. I've made it."

And so I left my friend, and I worked his thinking into mine, and arrived at these conclusions:

The American author usually goes to Polynesia to find Paradise. His reasons for going are as diverse and sometimes inexplicable as the man himself. He may seek escape, inspiration, or simply a vacation interlude. He (and I'm sorry to keep using "he," but the unhappy fact is that there simply weren't many "shes") may be more intent on meeting travel expenses, justifying an advance, or establishing tax credits than creating the Great Pacific Novel. Whatever the cause of the journey to Oceania, every author goes hoping to find Eden, Elysium, the lost Hesperides. No author went with gritted teeth to the islands of the South Pacific; to the ocean itself, perhaps yes, but not to the islands which dot the sea with Darwinian frugality. The author may be depraved or exultant when he returns. He may be shocked out of romanticism (and realize there are some islands you *should* head toward with a clenched jaw and gritted teeth) or he may be lulled into it, incapable of not much more than sentimental maundering. He may remain a romantic and still become capable of the best the region has yet seen.

Some authors go to Polynesia to find confirmation of Rousseau's Noble Savage theory. To the untrained or inexperienced eye Polynesia appears to be a place of gentleness, absolute and languorous freedom from the constricting inhibitions and the constant threat of national and international disaster. Polynesia appears to many to be the end of one world and the beginning of a new. It seems the perfect setting to mingle the refinements of Western civilization – manners, science, religion, the arts, popguns – with Polynesia's unrefined virtues. It appears to be the only remaining place where the natural man can accept the blessings of civilization without its concomitant curses.

The appearance is deceptive. Careful authors find civilizations as carefully structured as their own. They learn that malice, evil, and terror can be found in man and nature the world over, that endless repetition of the earth's finest beauties can corrode all but the most resilient talents, and, perhaps worst, that pollution and eventual destruction of the seemingly ideal, thriving, organically sound island cultures is inevitable. This is the fatal embrace. The cruelest moment comes when the American author realizes that his own presence represents the corrupting influence which must eventually spoil that which he has come so far to use in his

life and writing. The primitive remains so only when it is not popularized. Most authors have been distraught to learn what Henry James knew in "The Pupil," that "ignorance, at the instant one touched it, was already flushing faintly into knowledge." That phrase emphasizes the thought of my author friend who knew the result of knowledge in the Garden of Eden.

Like my friend, the typical American author will write a bit while in the Pacific. He will listen raptly to island tales and then re-work them. Quite likely he will be subjected to almost endless anecdotes about Polynesia, and soon his writings will unconsciously reflect the Polynesian manner of storytelling. He will abandon any plans for a long novel (even Michener's *Hawaii* is a group of stories clustered around the central theme of peopling the Hawaiian archipelago) and concentrate on short stories, usually held together by a tenuous thread in a preface saying something like, "Here are some amusing stories I heard in a faraway and beautiful land." That is not necessarily bad, of course. Usually the stories are worth the retelling, especially with the author's improvements. Quite probably, the American author will concentrate on Polynesian mythology. Almost always, the stories he tells will be twice-told tales in one form or another. And then, having told their stories, the authors come back home. The greatest and almost unique exception is James Norman Hall, co-author of *Mutiny on the Bounty* fame and more than a dozen other books of the Pacific he wrote alone. By the way, his co-author of the *Bounty* trilogy, Charles Nordhoff, did go back home, and nothing good was ever heard from him again, personally or professionally.

If no author has yet gone to Polynesia and been perfectly satisfied that the islands represented the ideal condition for writing, so few writers have come back empty-handed either. There are new stories to repeat, foreign and exotic and somewhat sinful images to display before a willing reader's eyes. Authors tell stories; so do Polynesians, who relied on oral tradition since they had no written language. To "talk stories" is a treasured island pastime. Some authors try to repay their debt to Polynesia by recording the finest moments of a culture swiftly decaying. Others seek to give the Polynesian back the lost innocence of childhood that was snatched from him. In fact, the Pacific is a storyteller's domain. In Oceania the myth always seems to run before the fact. Generally the myths and legends are more attractive than the facts, easier to believe,

and perhaps even more real. In Polynesia, fact and myth usually merge and course together. For an easy example, the fact of Polynesia's beauty seems mythical, especially if you live in the Nordic countries in winter, yet the fact confirms the myth. Since Everyman seeks Paradise and thus seeks substantiation for the dream, very likely the author's Pacific tales will be written confirmation of his preconceptions.

Sometimes, though, the facts will not submit to the distortion required to fit the dream, and so the author will lose Paradise, but probably not after he has had a tantalizing glimpse – or more than a glimpse – an experience, an adventure, an epiphany, maybe an interlude with a *wahine* in a grass hut, an initiation into supreme pleasures which are destined to last for only that one brief shining moment in his life.

For most American authors, the lesson must be that a mortal Paradise is marked as separate from the genuine article by the fact of time. The Paradise of religion exists partly because we cannot fathom its eternity in the slightest. It remains permanently puzzling and so even more alluring. Paradise experienced on this side of the angels is transient, because this is the real world. That is a most painful lesson.

I urge the reader not to allow this mature awareness to thwart her/his dream. Yield to the vision across the lagoon or across the oceans. Find your Fayaway or Emile DeBecque. Submit with great joy to the call of Bali Ha'i, but understand the dangers as well of the delights of your special island. Otherwise, it might as well be you that *South Pacific's* Bloody Mary spoke about: "One soandso fool."

When you pack, don't forget your irritations. They won't seem too large on your Bali Ha'i, but you'll need them anyway. Let me give you two examples.

Eugene Burdick is best known as the co-author of *The Ugly American* and *Fail-Safe*, but he also wrote a fine Pacific book alone titled *The Blue of Capricorn*, and the best short story in it – of course a short story – "The Black and the White," is one of the clearest statements about the boredom and lack of irritation which ruins life in Polynesia for many Westerners. The protagonist of the story is a well-educated and realistic Frenchman named Zola who lives what appears to be a perfect life with his lovely Polynesian wife on an idyllic atoll. Zola is not a romantic; he understood as much as extensive reading in his carefully selected library could teach him about the hazards of island living before he went to the Pacific. Vir-

tually plotless, "The Black and the White" is more of a character study, but its conclusion contains a dramatic climax. Zola intentionally disturbs a flower arrangement, then asks his wife to reassemble it. He wants to show the narrator, who to this point has been impressed with Zola's intelligently lived atoll life, how the woman puts the flowers back in precisely the same arrangement. The narrator at once understands all the usual activities of Polynesian life, singing, cooking, dancing, making love, are done in only one way. Burdick writes that Zola "was a prisoner not of a dream, but of those faded years in France which had instilled into his nerves and brain and soul an interest in questions beyond himself and beyond the day in which he existed."

One of the best stories in *Tales of the South Pacific* is "A Boar's Tooth." It illustrates Michener's view that however painful or irrational some cultural habits seem, they serve a purpose. The boar's tusks are valuable as religious symbols only when they circle around into the jawbone, so for years the animal is protected while the tusks curve and grow back into his face. The boar is agonized by the process, and the villagers, having no other real irritants in their lives except this artificial one, face constant stress in insuring that the tusks remain unbroken, even chewing the boar's food before feeding it to him. Like the Hawaiian missionaries who courted tuberculosis by donning long underwear in September and wearing it until May because that was the habit in Boston, the specific act is senseless, but one result is admirable. Both the missionaries and the villagers through their blind adherence to tradition provided a system of values for their societies. Michener's view is typically optimistic. Though, like the boar, man may be fettered by "a three-foot chain to the stake of custom," most are comforted by the unity of habit, while only a few find the tether so restrictive they dare to make imaginative leaps that beneficially alter their societies.

These irritations are not without their substantial rewards, and they go well beyond imposed stability. The delights of discovery and the experience of magnificent beauty are chief among them but there is one more to note most seriously. The traveler should be ready to accept the challenge of accommodating the many different races and cultures of the islands that dot Oceania. That is the central theme of the *South Pacific* play and the films that followed. Ensign Nellie Forbush of Arkansas finally realizes that she could not "wash that man right outta her hair," and so she

accepts the cultural compromise of living with a sophisticated Frenchman, Emile DeBecque, and his mixed-race children. I trust they lived happily ever after, "younger than springtime."

Lieutenant Joe Cable's passion for a modern Fayaway named Liat (the daughter of Bloody Mary) is just as powerful, but because he must face the more difficult prejudice, racial intermarriage, his fate is much less happy than Nellie's. Cable's love for Liat is so intense that he cannot continue to write his fiancée on Philadelphia's Main Line, yet his cultural conditioning is too strong to allow him to contemplate a permanent union with a Tonkinese girl. As Michener expressed it, "He felt involved in a net of two colors." Unable to escape, Cable's death during the invasion represents the dilemma's only solution. Michener makes the most of this tragedy, emphasizing its senselessness by saying of Cable and Liat, "Their skins were almost identical." Remember that it was 1947 when Michener published *Tales*, a year or two before he switched his allegiance to Random House because when he visited its office he saw that they employed an African-American receptionist. In 1949, Oscar Hammerstein wrote this lyric for the play *South Pacific*, to be sung by Joe Cable as he felt trapped by that net of two colors:

You've got to be taught to hate and fear,
 You've got to be taught from year to year,
 It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear —
 You've got to be carefully taught!

You've got to be taught to be afraid
 Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
 And people whose skin is a different shade —
 You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught before it's too late,
 Before you are six or seven or eight,
 To hate all the people your relatives hate —
 You've got to be carefully taught!

That was heady stuff in America at mid-century. I have a report, which I am unable to confirm, that this song, all 73 seconds of it, was cut out of the 1958 film in some southern cities in America. The Boar's Tooth. The three-foot chain to the stake of custom. One soandso fool. Maybe I'm a cockeyed optimist, but I enjoyed the role of Emile DeBecque in the 2001

film played by a Croatian (Rade Sherbedgia), and the Tonkinese Liat was Natalie Mendoza. The racial stereotypes blur. Perhaps there is hope.

So there is much to learn, and that much learning to pass along in writing for an author before he declares he has found Paradise and then flees home. If the typical American author stays in Polynesia, like my friend, probably he will not create much quality writing. He will be lost to us, the scholars, but if he stops writing, probably he will not be lost to himself. The Pacific will teach him of his fragility and relative insignificance, and likely allow him more racial and cultural toleration than he knew before. He may live on too humble and too cowed to be bold enough to create. If he writes, he will write in snatches, and his work will find some audience who cares more for the region than for him. Probably his art will decline, and so might his character as well, if he stays. If he returns to America and is fortunate, he will be able to use the irritations of the Occident for creativity. He will understand that he cannot be a Westerner and a Polynesian as well. Ignorance of that simple fact has caused the destruction of more artistic talent than any other single circumstance in the Pacific. A functioning American author of the first rank finds that he cannot stay in Polynesia for too long, perhaps not long at all. There are remarkably few exceptions. If an American author stays in the Pacific and attempts to lose his cultural patterns by "going native," almost certainly the psychological disruption will be unbearable and he will find his Paradise turned into hell.

If the author stays and avoids this trap, likely he will define his task to be more sociological and anthropological than artistic. He will be drawn to examining old cultures and recording the values of existing ones before they vanish. Adventures will give way to academics, and that has been the modern movement. Knowledge, gained through our discipline of close and time-consuming study and given impetus by American military participation in Pacific affairs, has provided a useful jolt out of the worst romanticism. The best modern authors see, with the help of earlier noble efforts – and failures – that any attempt at the absolute in explaining or using Polynesia is bound to fail. Mature societies now see many factors more critical than isolation and escape, since there is none today, and it was the hope for those, isolation and escape, that spawned so many earlier mis-readings of Polynesia and the Pacific, and thus limited artistic achievement in the region. The question now is not: How can I

escape *from* the world (since that isn't possible)? Rather, the question is: How can I live well in *this* world?

As the literature and understanding of the Pacific improves, slowly to be certain, the realization grows that the white man is neither god nor devil. Modern American stories of Polynesia show the white man there as respectful to the cultures. We, the polite intruders, are uncomfortable because we understand that the price of acculturation and absolute beauty is too often exile from it. The current realization is the necessity of cultural compromise. The haven is no longer a lonely island but a society where one can live beautifully with acceptable challenges and inevitable problems without getting stuck in the snow or commuting more than 25 minutes to work.

Paradise is not perfect anymore, so I'm sorry to say it isn't Paradise. But then, it never actually was, really.

If the author is very good and if he is doubly blessed by perception and by the knowledge of what has been written in the past 170 years, he will see the traps. He will avoid pretending to capture Paradise, and he will live simultaneously in three worlds: Occidental, Oriental, and Oceanic. He will become Michener's Golden Man, an amalgam of many cultures, owing ultimate allegiance to none but the one he creates. She and he will be a new person, and that person is being born today.

"I wish I could tell you about the South Pacific," Michener began. The preceding pages echo that wish. I end my meditations with one final quotation from the author's classic *Tales*, this one from the second paragraph: "Whenever I start to talk about the South Pacific, people intervene." That, ultimately, is the message I want to convey – that the Pacific at last is not about reefs and atolls and volcanoes and palms and eternal sunshine. It is about the people of the islands – those who live there, those who will come there – with irritations.