



One Man is an Island: the speech community William Marsters begat on Palmerston Island

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Book Review

One Man is an Island: the speech community William Marsters begat on Palmerston Island. By Rachel Hendery. London, Battlebridge Publications, 2015. vi + 112 pp., illus., maps, bibliog., index. ISBN 978-1-903292-29-7 (pbk). £12.95stg.

One Man is an Island is the fifth instalment in the Islanders series from Battlebridge Publications. Hendery's short, four-chapter exposé of the history, place, culture and language of Palmerston (or Home) Island, a one-square-kilometre island within the larger Palmerston Atoll in the Cook Islands and up to five days' boat travel from Rarotonga, attests to the effectiveness of the eccentric template that Battlebridge is developing through publishing these informative, aesthetically pleasing and academically rigorous works. Much is on offer for the historian, the linguist and the general Pacific enthusiast alike. It is pleasing to see the Pacific well represented in this expanding corpus of studies, which melds and merges the (contact) linguistics of islands with descriptions of the natural and cultural environments where the languages are spoken.

Chapter 1 gives a sense of the isolation of the island, identifies places of interest on the tiny atoll and sketches the tradition of Palmerston hospitality. Chapter 2 outlines a history of the arrival of Palmerston legend William Marsters and his three Polynesian wives, and the idiosyncratic social happenings and relationships that developed and that persist on the island today. Palmerston history provides an appropriate segue into 'Life on the island today', the topic of chapter 3. Here descriptions of family structure, food, religion, land use and the natural environment form the backdrop to the work's fourth and principal chapter, 'Language'. As a linguist working on contact languages in the Pacific, I shall dedicate the remainder of this review to this section.

Chapter 4 reframes and expands on points made in Hendery's other published works on Palmerston Island English to make them accessible to non-linguists. Marsters, the man of *One Man is an Island*, is our hero, and his arrival in 1860 is described in the context of the development of the dialect that 'arose in a community with a very high proportion of non-native English speakers which led to grammatical changes, some of which resemble those of creole languages' (p. 63). From a historical linguistic perspective, it is Palmerston Island English that provides the essential glue for explaining much of the social and natural history of human inhabitation on the little reef island. When Hendery then describes how 'in terms of its features, Palmerston English also behaves quite differently from most creoles' (ibid.), this raises the question of whether such languages – especially English-lexified pidgins in the Pacific such as Ngatikese Pidgin, the language of the Bonin (Ogasawara) Islands in Japan and the languages of Pitcairn Island and Norfolk Island – require further analysis because they do not fit neatly into existing language types. That these languages resist classification and remain an enigma to creolists and historical linguists suggests that positing a language type as a 'beach community language' might be in order. Although this was not Hendery's brief and is the subject of extensive future research into Pacific contact Englishes, Palmerston Island English exists as a prototypical example of one such beach community language.

Hendery identifies several significant linguistic features of Palmerston Island English that may support the idea of a specific type or group of English–Polynesian beach languages in the Pacific. A notable feature is the use of spatial prepositions. The Islanders distinguish between the smaller third of the island in the south where the 'town' is ('up') and the more vegetated area in the north ('down'). Along with this spatial distinction is a division between 'beachfellas' and 'bush people', depending on which part of the island they live in (pp. 7–8).

While research into language and frames of spatial reference in island languages is not new, what this micro-case of the language of space in Palmerston reflects is a possible melding of English and Polynesian features. Where English would normally have north as 'up' and south as 'down' in accordance with a north-centric cartographic culture, Palmerston shows the opposite. Along with the more formal and expected presentation of word order, pronouns, possession and negation, Hendery's mention of less conventional linguistic curios like 'names of people', 'place names' and 'different ways of speaking' portrays the Palmerston linguistic situation as a distinctive and atypical instance of Pacific Islands cultural quirkiness.

One can always quibble about what is not provided: the absence of a reflection on the future of the language, outsider conceptions of the language across time, some comparison of Palmerston Island English with other beach community languages. An obvious weakness is the sometimes jumpy nature of the presentation of information and the short sections, which often leave the reader hungry for more. Yet this is possibly more a general criticism of the structure of the books in the Battlebridge Islanders series rather than an explicit flaw in this work itself. These omissions and weaknesses pale in significance when, along with other humorous narrations, the author tells about 'Kiss Me Arse Rock', also known as 'Scratch My Arse Rock'. The name of this popular fishing location off the coast of Palmerston Island was reputedly conferred by William Marsters. *One Man is an Island* is an indispensable companion for any reader attracted to unorthodox yet well-executed presentations of Pacific history and language. The few adventurers who will ever cross the large distances of the South Pacific Ocean to reach this tiny speck would do well to procure a copy of this quirky book and take heed of much of the information contained herein.

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