

GEORGE WOODCOCK, SOUTH SEA JOURNEY (London: Faber and Faber, 1976, p. 341)

George Woodcock is one of Canada's leading and most prolific men of letters. He is also widely travelled. These credentials brought him an offer in 1971 from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) to join 'in an expedition to the South Pacific to record in films what remained of the traditional cultures and how change had been affecting them for the past two centuries' (p. 15). The visit took place in early 1972. The book under review is a record of that visit: and it is a fine record. Its audience is intended to be, not the transitory tourist, but the amateur student with a more than passing concern in the region.

The organisation of the book is simply chronological. Samoa, Tonga, the Gilbert Islands, New Caledonia, New Hebrides, the Solomons and Fiji were visited and are described in that order. This choice of arrangement is, on the whole, sensible. In theme, Woodcock follows fairly closely the original purpose of the journey. He thus attests to 'the tenacity of certain aspects of traditional life' and 'the durability of South Sea cultures' even in the midst of changes that threaten to overwhelm. In the process, Woodcock displays a commendable sensitivity to tensions between traditional customs, on the one hand, and present political forms and economic realities on the other. This is evident, for instance, in his sympathetic treatment of the Samoan dilemma between 'airline imperialism' attendant upon tourist expansion, and the bleak economic situation that would result if customary ways were sheltered at the cost of tourists. It is equally evident in the willingness to make the effort to understand the matai system, 'A political system based on the traditional patterns of land ownership', as being better suited to Samoan conditions than an uncritical transplant of the Westminster model. But perhaps the author's sensitivity is best demonstrated in the Solomon Islands:

We could not fail to know, as Vouza kept on talking softly and then took off his shirt to show the scars of his bayonet wounds,

that he had told the story often to visitors like ourselves, and yet as he did so the real dignity of the man came through, and the sense that in telling the tale to the best of his ability to mere strangers he was fulfilling the Melanesian sense of hospitality (p. 276).

Where the author is critical, it is with gentleness. A comment on the Samoan love of children, for example, is put in the context of 'destructive passions which take the delusive shape of love' that all peoples have (p.47).

Woodcock's observations range across politics, economics and sociology. The breadth of his vision results in the occasional perceptive comment, as with noting the racial division of functions at Nadi airport. Observations are given added interest by the facility with which the author compares an event or a person in the South Seas to experiences elsewhere. Of particular appeal to me as a Canadian was his discussion of the peoples of the Gilbert Islands in terms of 'the austere marginality' and a specialised and delicate culture characteristic of the Eskimo (and the Bedouin). I could also appreciate his difficulties in trying to describe snow to tropical islanders. There are other examples: Tupuola Efi of Samoa reminding Woodcock of the Dalai Lama in India, the French in the South Pacific in comparison to metropolitan French, the contrast in physique and bearing between Indians in Fiji and India.

Woodcock is good at physical description and narration. I especially enjoyed the 'adventure' of the boat trip through a dangerous opening to Apolima, 'Held in the Palm-of-Your-Hand' (p.59). There is in addition a flair for the apt phrase which catches one with unexpected delight. The Air Pacific flight from Nausori to Tarawa, for example, merits this: 'It was like being on an airborne country bus' (p.128). The absurdities of the New Hebridean condominium receive comic attention in a chapter titled 'Three Fellow Government'. But, in respect of the New Hebrides, Woodcock concludes on a sombre note: 'history seems to suggest that situations where universal discontent meets with universal frustration end usually in tragedy' (p.266).

There are two shortcomings in the book, one major, the other minor. In the prologue, Woodcock writes of the Fijians that 'there was a vitality in their expressions that I found immediately attractive; in the end I learnt to prefer the Fijians in character and even in looks to other Oceanic people of more obvious beauty and more demonstrative charm' (p.22). In conjunction with Fiji's preponderance in the region, one understandably expects a detailed discussion of Fiji. Instead, one gets a cursory treatment that comes as an anti-climax and leaves one dissatisfied. Fiji is disposed of in 14 pages, the shortest of any of the countries covered. Indeed, one is left with the impression that for some reason or other, perhaps space, the narrative was abruptly cut short. The second comment is the uneven interest across the voyages from country to country. A little less attention to some of the other countries, and somewhat more to Fiji, would have resolved both difficulties.

On balance, nonetheless, South Sea Journey remains just the book that I would wish to have read before coming to take up residence in the South Pacific for an extended period. Indeed, having read the book, I would wish to see the film.

Ramesh Thakur