

## THE SOUTH PACIFIC IN THE WORKS OF ROBERT DEAN FRISBIE

*Nataša Potočnik*

### Abstract

Robert Dean Frisbie (1896-1948) was one of the American writers who came to live in the South Pacific and wrote about his life among the natives. He published six books between 1929 and his death in 1948. Frisbie was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on 16 April 1896. He attended the Raja Yoga Academy at Point Loma in California. Later he enlisted in the U. S. army and was medically discharged from the army in 1918 with a monthly pension. After his work as a newspaper columnist and reporter for an army newspaper in Texas, and later for the Fresno *Morning Republican*, he left for Tahiti in 1920.

In Tahiti he had ambitious writing plans but after four years of living in Tahiti, he left his plantation and sailed to the Cook Islands. He spent the rest of his life in the Cook Islands and married a local girl Ngatokorua. His new happiness gave him the inspiration to write. 29 sketches appeared in the United States in 1929, collected by The Century Company under the title of *The Book of Puka-Puka*. His second book *My Tahiti*, a book of memories, was published in 1937. After the death of Ropati's beloved wife his goals were to bring up his children. But by this time Frisbie was seriously ill. The family left Puka-Puka and settled down on the uninhabited atoll of Suwarrow. Later on they lived on Rarotonga and Samoa where Frisbie was medically treated. Robert Dean Frisbie died of tetanus in Rarotonga on November 18, 1948.

Frisbie wrote in a vivid, graceful style. His characters and particularly the atoll of Puka-Puka are memorably depicted. Gifted with a feeling for language and a sense of humor, he was able to capture on paper the charm, beauty, and serenity of life of the small islands in the South Pacific without exaggerating the stereotypical idyllic context and as such Frisbie's contribution to South Pacific literature went far deeper than that of many writers who have passed through the Pacific and wrote about their experiences.

Frisbie's first book *The Book of Puka-Puka* was published in New York in 1929. It is the most endearing and the most original of his works. It was written during his lifetime on the atoll Puka-Puka in the Cook Islands. It is a collection of 29 short stories, episodic and expressively narrative in style. This is an account of life on Puka-Puka that criticizes European and American commercialism and aggressiveness, and presents the themes of the praise of isolation, the castigation of missionaries, and the commendation of Polynesian economic collectivism and sexual freedom. At the same time, the book presents a portrait of Frisbie himself, a journal of his day-to-day experiences and observations and a vivid description of the natives on the island. Frisbie's unique knowledge of the natives and their daily lives enabled him to create in *The Book of Puka-Puka* an impressive gallery of vivid, amusing, yet very real and plausible Polynesians.

The second book of Robert Dean Frisbie to appear in print was *My Tahiti* (1937), a book of memoirs, published in Boston. *My Tahiti* is a book of 30 short stories about the author and his living among Tahitians. Again, Robert Dean Frisbie is the main hero in the book and as such the book is autobiographical in a sense as well. This book is a personal record which has charm and distinction as it has sincerity, which is in the men, women and children of Tahiti, and which brings an effortless and unpretentious humor to depict a South Seas idyll and a quiet poise to withstand the insidious romance of the tropical islands, too.

One of the American writers who came to live in the South Pacific, among other foreigners who lived there or just visited the region, (Robert L. Stevenson, Frederick O'Brien, James Norman Hall, Charles Bernard Nordhoff, James Michener, Herman Melville, etc.) was also Robert Dean Frisbie (1896-1948), a former journalist from California who first arrived in Papeete to start a new life. He wanted to write a book like Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, and Robert Louis Stevenson (*An Inland Voyage*, *In the South Seas*) was also his idol. He published six books between 1929 and his death in 1948. He adored Polynesia and became a veritable legend among the Polynesians. His work has not been given sufficient critical attention despite its artistic merit and for this very reason it is important to introduce this author and his literary work to the wider public (cf. also my article "Robert Dean Frisbie – An American Writer in the South Pacific" in *Acta Neophilologica* 2000, pp. 93 – 105) .

Robert Dean Frisbie was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on 16 April 1896. He attended the Raja Yoga Academy at Point Loma in California. He read a great deal and wrote long poems which were mostly dedicated to his mother. He did not like his father, who had left the family and created a new one. After holding various jobs, Frisbie enlisted in the U. S. army toward the end of World War I. He was tall, thin, and susceptible to respiratory illness. At his last medical examination the doctor advised him to have a complete change of climate. He was medically discharged from the army in 1918 with a monthly pension. After his work as a newspaper columnist and reporter for an army newspaper in Texas, and later for the Fresno *Morning Republican*, he left for Tahiti in 1920.

In Tahiti, Frisbie bought a plantation and built himself a native-style bamboo house. He lived among simple Polynesian folk who liked Robert, calling him Ropati. He had ambitious writing plans, but he also began to drink a great deal and his friends were worried about him. After living four years for in Tahiti, he left his plantation in 1924 and sailed with the famous Pacific Captain Andy Thomson on the schooner the *Avarua* to Rarotonga, capital of the Cook Islands. He spent the rest of his life in the Cook Islands and took the offer of running a trading station on a small, lonely island, the atoll of Puka-Puka in the northern Cooks. Puka-Puka or "Danger Island" thus became his home for nearly twenty years. He married a local girl Ngatokorua and his new happiness gave him the ability to write. Nga followed him wherever he travelled and was to bear him five half-Polynesian children (cf. "Robert Dean Frisbie – An American Writer in the South Pacific" in *Acta Neophilologica* 2000, pp. 93 – 105).

Frisbie began writing and sending his sketches of life on Puka-Puka to New York. Most of them were accepted by the editors of *Atlantic Monthly*. 29 sketches

appeared in the United States in 1929, collected by The Century Company under the title of *The Book of Puka-Puka*. He had every reason to be happy because his first book was highly praised. But there, in the middle of this idyllic paradise, Frisbie contracted filarial fever in addition to tuberculosis and other health problems. He became an invalid, and took to drinking heavily to dull his pain and frustration.

His second book *My Tahiti*, a book of memories, was published in 1937, but other efforts did not fare very well nor was he very productive. Then personal tragedy struck him. Nga, his wife, became ill with tuberculosis, and Frisbie, shocked by her illness, wrote frantically in hope of earning enough money for her treatment in Western Samoa. He sold some more articles and another book, his first published novel, *Mr. Moonlight's Island* (1939). His young wife died and he became a widower, left to bring up his small children alone in the Pacific.

After the death of Ropati's beloved wife his goals were to bring up his children. He loved them dearly and hoped that he could build his 'little ship' and travel around the Pacific with his family as a South Seas trader, and write great literature. But by this time Frisbie was seriously ill with filariasis, addicted to alcohol and possibly a user of opium and morphine. The family left Puka-Puka and settled down on the uninhabited atoll of Suwarrow. Frisbie read a great deal from his library, had plenty of time left to teach his children and to relax. In February 1942 Suwarrow was virtually destroyed by one of the most terrible hurricanes ever to hit that part of the Pacific. Frisbie managed to save his children and himself by tying them all to the tops of the tamanu trees. The most authentic account of the great Suwarrow hurricane is to be found in Frisbie's book *The Island of Desire* (1944), the autobiographical story that describes Frisbie's life on Puka-Puka and Suwarrow.

Ropati found a new wife, Esetera, but the marriage soon failed. Frisbie at that time became very ill and began hemorrhaging. He had to be evacuated by navy plane to Samoa. Aboard the plane was Lt. James A. Michener (1907-1997), an American, who later became a well-known writer. Ropati recovered and took a schoolteaching job in a Samoan village. His four children joined him later. In 1947 Ropati and his children returned to Rarotonga on the Cook Islands.

While living in Samoa, Frisbie worked hard on his last books, this time fiction: the novels *Dawn Sails North* (1949) and *Amaru* (1945). The first one describes a voyage on a copra schooner, while the second one deals with the adventures of a young American in search of a fortune in pearls on a distant island. *Amaru* represents, according to book reviews, a decline in Frisbie's work. Frisbie also helped Johnny to write her first book, *Miss Ulysses from Puka-Puka* (1948).

Frisbie knew that he was dying and was frantic for the future of his children, because he had nothing to leave them. He died of tetanus in Rarotonga on November 18, 1948 and is buried in the churchyard of the Avarua Cook Islands Christian Church on Rarotonga. He has since become a near-legend himself in the lore of Pacific beachcombing, a position he would surely have enjoyed. He is, with his sad lifestory, considered by many a tragic hero of the Pacific.

Frisbie wrote in a vivid, graceful style. His characters and particularly the atoll of Puka-Puka are memorably depicted. Gifted with a feeling for language and a sense

of humor, he was able to capture on paper the charm, beauty, and serenity of life of the small islands in the South Pacific without exaggerating the stereotypical idyllic context. This little world became his world, as he remained there 28 years and acquired an intimate, almost unique knowledge of these islands.

Robert Dean Frisbie, with his classic work on the Pacific atoll life, some good articles, and an outstanding description of a hurricane, does not have a very impressive writing record, but it is unique in its own way. He was very popular during his lifetime, but he is almost forgotten today, because literary critics have not paid him enough attention. Frisbie never won the battle with the self, he aimed at goals too far out of his reach and so became frustrated. He, with his sad life, was a tragic hero who in his search for beauty, as Michener said, destroyed himself (Wolfram 18). Although he had a great desire to write, he placed the demands of his life before the needs of his art, and it should be added that Frisbie never avoided his family responsibilities.

Frisbie's contribution to South Pacific literature went far deeper than that of many writers who have passed through the Pacific and written about their experiences (Herman Melville, James Michener, Mark Twain, ...). He was one of that rare group of non-native authors who chose the islands as his home. He lived side-by-side with the indigenous people, became a "hybrid" himself, raised a family, learned the local language, was a keen observer and recorder of island life and culture, a serious student of island history, traditional canoe building, fishing and navigation by the stars.

Robert Dean Frisbie's books, especially *The Book of Puka-Puka* (1929) and *My Tahiti* (1937), deserve a place on every Pacific bookshelf. Frisbie's first book, published in New York by The Century Co., a South Seas classic entitled *The Book of Puka-Puka*, is the most endearing and the most original of his works. It was written during his lifetime on the atoll Puka-Puka in the Cook islands. This small tropical island became his second home and it inspired him to write his first great book that is, as his daughter Johnny Frisbie claims in her book *The Frisbies of the South Seas*, "considered to be the most accurate portrayal of life on an atoll ever written" (Frisbie 1961: 41). It is a collection of 29 short stories, episodic and narrative in style. This is an account of life on Puka-Puka that criticizes European and American commercialism and aggressiveness, and presents the themes of the praise of isolation, the castigation of missionaries, and the commendation of Polynesian economic collectivism and sexual freedom. At the same time, the book presents a great portrait of Frisbie himself, a journal of his day-to-day experiences and observations and a vivid description of the natives on the island.

This book was dedicated to the American writer James Norman Hall who was known to be Frisbie's good friend and was, as Johnny told me in one of her interviews, among all of his published books, the only one that was later reprinted (Potočnik 1999: A personal interview with Johnny Frisbie). The publication of this volume gave Frisbie the courage to persist as a writer hoping for greater achievements and made the island of Puka-Puka or Danger Island and its inhabitants famous to the world. This is the account of life which the author enjoys among one of the most highly segregated of the South Pacific island groups, The Cook Islands.

Robert Dean Frisbie in *The Book of Puka-Puka* has succeeded in giving a much-written subject an entertaining twist. While the book adds little to the scientific data about those remote islanders of the Pacific, it makes light reading. Puka-Puka is the native name for Danger island, far removed from tourist routes. Even the traders' ships make it their port of call only a few times a year. It is a small atoll with no passage into the lagoon. The people of Danger Island are brown, handsome, courteous, indolent Polynesians, and little touched by the world so far away even today. Here Frisbie, or Ropati, as the natives called him, came with his books to escape civilization. He took to the native life with joyous abandon, loving the native woman, hunting and fishing with the men and that is what he wrote about in *The Book of Puka-Puka*.

The Puka-Pukans are a singing race. Some of their chants are ancient, others are invented on the spur of the moment. The book is filled with these native songs: a chant precedes every chapter and many are scattered through the intervening pages, the majority being given in both the native language and in English. The narrator is the main character Ropati, Robert Dean Frisbie himself. With the best of humor, Frisbie describes his story among the natives of the atoll in such vivid detail that the reader, while reading the book, can visualize the characters and life on the tropical island, its coral reef, its grass shacks and especially the building which served as the store in which Frisbie worked from time to time. Frisbie lives the native life, he sees the inhabitants with the intimacy which only long residence can impart, and his narrative is at once gay and discerning. Another important theme is the portrait of the author that is strongly present in the book. Frisbie praises the isolation in Polynesia and dislikes American civilization. He enjoys his isolated life on Puka-Puka among friendly, admirable and slightly comic Polynesians.

At Puka-Puka there ... I could be as indolent as I pleased, as lonely as I pleased, never disturbed by the hateful thought that it is my duty to become a useful cog in the clockwork of 'Progress.' (Frisbie 1929: 8)

Puka-Puka is home to the author of the book and as he says: "I hunted long for this sanctuary. Now that I have found it I have no desire, ever to leave it again" (Frisbie 1929: xxvi). Much of the charm of the book is derived from the fact that the author mingled with the interesting people of this island as one of them. He fished and swam with them, entered into the spirit of balmy, carefree days and dreamy exotic nights, learned the native dialect and finally married one of the youthful tribal beauties.

Frisbie's unique knowledge of the natives and their daily lives enabled him in *The Book of Puka-Puka* to create an impressive gallery of vivid, amusing, yet very real and plausible Polynesians. So the scope and purpose of the book are, aside from the author's extensive knowledge of the islanders, the vivid portraits of Polynesians. His natives, in fact, resemble playful children. Sometimes they are naughty, sometimes selfish, but their good spirits usually prevail. Thus, although Ura, the chief of police, out of spite imposes a fine of one shilling on every man in Leeward Village, who had "shamed him by catching more turtles than his own settlement," (Frisbie 1929: 107) no harm is done because, as Frisbie quickly notes, "the fines were a small matter, for at Puka-Puka no one ever pays them" (Frisbie 1929: 107). Even the lecherous old Bones and his sons, the only really evil people on the island, do little or no actual

damage and have their redeeming qualities. The sons, Letter and Table-Salt, are both unable to convert their intentions into action and thus give vent to their unwholesome desires by telling extravagant lies to each other about their exploits. Frisbie's attitude toward them is summed up in the following passage:

They are a sweet family, the Boneses – the salacious-minded old father and his two imbecile sons. But they have helped me to pass many a dreary evening. When I have nothing else to look forward to, I can at least promise myself a few moments' diversion by listening to the nightly altercation of Letter and Table-Salt, standing by to part the brothers when Letter brags about how he has just come from the murder of Table-Salt's favorite mistress. (Frisbie 1929: 214)

The passage is of course ironic, but the irony is too amiable to negate the idyllic tone of the book.

The natives of Puka-Puka have adopted a mode of life without having ever troubled their simple minds about the theories of government. The money received from the sale of copra is divided equally. No one is obliged to work and, aside from the picking of coconuts and the snaring of enough tropical fish to provide for the village, most of the Puka-Pukans confine their activities to lolling on the beach, capturing turtles, swimming in the lagoon and dressing up for Sunday church attendance. The reader becomes well acquainted with Ropati's friends, presented in a vividly human way, and even has a warm affection for many of them. There is Sea Foam, the native missionary who dozes when he is supposed to be teaching in school; William, the shameless heathen, who learned his English from whaling men and whose every other word is a curse; dear old Mama, his wife, who thinks of America as only a slightly bigger Danger island; George, the grandson of Ura, chief-of-police, who loves sonorous-sounding sentences and whose principal garment is an old army coat; the beautiful Little Sea, who buried the calico gown Ropati gave her so that the neighbors would not say she loved him for his money; Old Bones, the island rake, who is also the island wrestling champion, and many others.

Frisbie's characters, even the best of them, are at least a little grotesque. This distortion appears to be a legitimate comic device that makes the faults of the natives charming and their sorrows not too serious. When the natives, for example, go to church on Sunday, they resemble, in their castoff odds and ends of Western clothes, "a crowd of lunatics ... escaped from [a] state asylum" (Roulston 177). These characters, in short, are not saints. Like people everywhere, they can be petty, vindictive, vain, and selfish. As a result, they are not idealized but more human than their counterparts in far too many books about the South Sea Islands. And being more human, yet at the same time essentially good-natured, spontaneous, and generous, they are also more likable. I personally have been delighted by Frisbie's excellent characters and so were O'Brien, Nordhoff, Michener and other numerous reviewers who know that this reality of Polynesian life does not dispel the idyllic atmosphere of the islands.

The Puka-Pukans are simple, indolent, kindly gracious folk. In spite of the fact that their religion is primitive and their ideas of sexual morality likewise, the Puka-Pukans appear ridiculous only when they ape the white man's ways. They are lovable,

amusing people, and the reader leaves them with reluctance, as old William composes the burial chant for his friend Ropati, though the latter is very much alive.

*The Book of Puka-Puka* is a happy book, it is a creation of the author's illusions of being largely at peace with himself. His Puka-Pukan neighbours can both annoy and amuse him. But he is happy to discover the island "as dead asleep as it was before the three-fingered god Maui fished it out of the sea" (Frisbie 1929: 16). He is happy to live among the islanders and to loll about on the verandah of his house where he can „easily imagine [he is] living on anotherwise uninhabited island“ (Frisbie 1929: 33). For Frisbie everything is dreamlike on the island.

Although the prevailing tone of the book is happy, there are some ominous rumbles to disturb the prevailing tranquility. Not merely the storm that strikes Puka-Puka, but also Frisbie's spiritual tempests that rage throughout the pages of his later books, are presented in *The Book of Puka-Puka*. Ropati is dissatisfied because the civilization that he despises, has marked him forever and as such he cannot really live like the natives. At one point he confesses, for example:

When, at length, the coffee gave out I was in a miserable state. In the morning I would fry some rubbery mess; at noon, after eating taro and fish to repletion, I would raise from the table unsatisfied. I felt constantly the need of sugar. (Frisbie 1929: 218)

Frisbie admires Polynesian sexual permissiveness, but he cannot slough off his own prudery and when an unattached native girl walks shamelessly into his house and offers herself to him, he demurs. After his marriage to Little Sea, he is overcome by passion for her cousin Desire, but feelings of guilt plague him and he complains:

For all the fact that I have lived for so many years in the South Sea vestiges of my northern birth and training still remained with me. (Frisbie 1929: 265)

There is vivid evidence of the cruelty of nature presented in the book as well. Frisbie is depressed by it. One of the most striking examples is his account of the plight of the baby turtles that hatch on the beach. With little comment, Frisbie records the appalling waste of life that occurs after they wobble into the sea:

Then the tragedy begins, for there is no morsel daintier than a baby turtle, and every fish seems to be waiting for them. Of the hundred that leave the beach, not more than fifty reach the reef, and in crossing it eight or ten more are gobbled up by spotted eels. ...

How a baby turtle manages to escape its enemies during the first few months of life is a mystery to me. I have seen them hatch only once, and on that occasion, I am sure, not a turtle survived. (Frisbie 1929: 109)

For Frisbie, however, the most dramatically terrifying examples of the destructiveness of nature are storms. The one described in this book is relatively mild in comparison with the one on the Suvarrow atoll described in Frisbie's book *The Island of Desire* (1944). Although the violent and melancholy passages in *The Book of Puka-Puka* are few, the work concludes with an account of Frisbie and the blasphemous

old Heathen William sitting at night in a cemetery discussing native burial practices. William proceeds to point out who is buried where, and this happy book ends with the following chilling passage:

Do you see that blank space to the right? That's for Mama and me. ...  
But there's plenty of room for three, Ropati! We'll leave a place for you.  
Carramba! ... I will now compose the rest of your death chant! (Frisbie  
1929: 336)

Frisbie wrote in a vivid, graceful style. His characters live well in the mind and the atoll of Puka-Puka comes to life. His descriptions of the islanders and the beauty of the island are excellent.

I found her before one of the first houses in the settlement. A tattered dress fell about her shoulders and her face was almost hidden in a great mass of loose hair as she leaned over her task of grating coconuts. ...  
"What a little Cinderella!" I thought, moving toward the firelight vision.  
(Frisbie 1929: 72)

Although *The Book of Puka-Puka* was favorably received by the reviewers of the daily press and by Polynesian enthusiasts like Charles Nordhoff (C. Nordhoff and J. N. Hall wrote the famous *Mutiny on the Bounty* in 1932) and Frederick O'Brien, it did not bring Robert Dean Frisbie the fame that greeted O'Brien and other authors of the South Seas. In spite of Frisbie's own high standards, he never achieved literary success.

In this series of sketches, closely knit, and drawing – with seeming random lines, stippings, and bits of light and shadow – a picture full of art, of a life so remote from that of the world at large as to be almost unintelligible, Mr. Frisbie has shown real originality and skill. ...

The combination of qualities that make such writing possible is rare: imagination, close observation, a feeling for beauty, and a thoroughly pagan point of view are some of them. Add to these a long residence among the natives, and a background of reading and education few South Sea traders have, and it will be perceived that the combination is rare indeed. Mr. Frisbie's writing, done with a light touch, full of gusto and undertones of irony, suits the subject well.

If the reader of this review will follow my example, pick up this book after a judicious dinner, close the door of his study, light a pipe and make sure that a tall amber glass stands where it can be reached without raising his eyes from the page, I will guarantee him and evening clean out of the ordinary. These are, perhaps, strong words, but they are set down deliberately. ...

I found no dull page or paragraph, and when I closed the book at last, I realized that I had bore me a portrait – a portrait done with odd ironical skill and restraint – of a little pagan land, a pagan white man, and a native population still heathen at heart. ...



I have known Mr. Frisbie for many years, that he has lived on Puka-Puka long enough to make himself the only white man, so far as I know, who speaks the language and knows anything about the place, . . . (Nordhoff 510)

Just recently I came across a note by Nuku Rapana, who says that the work of Frisbie is still very much alive among the Cook islanders:

I am the President of the Pukapuka people in New Zealand. I was born [1960] and raised on the island atoll of Pukapuka in the northern group of the Cook Islands. Ropati[Robert], has captured for me a panoramic glimpse of my 'tupuna' [ancestors]. Several of the characters in his book are in my genealogy. In fact William the heathen is actually my great grand father who passed away at the age of 116. Through the genes in my body I am proud to be their link into the future. Ropati, through his marriage to Nga has contributed to the survival of our people which is estimated to be around 5000 worldwide. Our people will always be grateful to Ropati for the part he played in the recording of our culture through his writings. (Rapana 2000)

The second book of Robert Dean Frisbie to appear in print was *My Tahiti* (1937), a book of memoirs, published in Boston by Little, Brown & Co., dedicated to his second child, the first born daughter Florence Johnny Frisbie. This book was favorably reviewed too and with its charm and humor it is as delightful as *The Book of Puka-Puka* (Allen 21, A.C.R. 16, Davis n.p.).

The Golden Age of Tahiti had passed many years before the arrival of Robert Dean Frisbie to Tahiti (1920), but a few lost years remained for him, a few old natives whose dreams retained the glow of the past. And among them Frisbie lived, a wise young man with a liking for solitude that since his arrival in the Pacific had driven him farther and farther to sequestered islands. Here he has returned to those earlier years, to chronicle an idyll that can now be duplicated only, if at all, among the remoter islands of Polynesia.

*My Tahiti* is a book of 30 short stories about the author and his living among Tahitians. Again, Robert Dean Frisbie is the main hero in the book and as such the book is autobiographical in a sense as well. The story is about a young man who arrives in Papeete thirsting for romance and adventure after reading various books about South Pacific written by well-known authors.

Once more I glanced at the pages, this time to read: -  
(He told me that he and two ship captains walked to the sea beach. . . .)  
I rose, dressed slowly, and pack everything I owned in two suitcases. . . .  
I could reflect later – in the moonlight and the shadows of a tropic island.  
(Frisbie 1937: 6)

Papeete delights him with its carefree ways, but soon he begins to yearn for the real Tahiti, which lies somewhere over the mountains. In a remote village he discovers the paradise he has sought, but at the end, he is forced to leave it. With a cast of more

than fifty characters, most of them natives with names not easily assimilated, Frisbie describes the native characteristics and occupations of Tahitians colourfully.

*My Tahiti* resembles in form and to so many other works on Tahiti not because Frisbie lacked imagination, but because he was apparently being faithful to the pattern of his own experiences, which more or less paralleled the experiences of Melville, Gauguin, Stoddard, and O'Brien, all of whom, like Frisbie were mainly autobiographical in their accounts of the island. Frisbie, like the rest, was entranced by the beauty of the place, charmed by the amiability of natives, and delighted by the leisurely pace of life there. He also shared, with at least some of the others, dismay over the decay of Polynesian folkways and anger over the robbing of the natives' land. As a result, *My Tahiti* contains the customary castigations of puritanical missionaries and avaricious Chinese merchants.

This book is again a personal record which has charm and distinction as it has sincerity, which is in men, women and children of Tahiti, and which brings an effortless and unpretentious humor to depict a South Seas idyll and a quiet poise to withstand the insidious romance of the tropical islands.

Frisbie bought a piece of property on the persuasion of the Papeete inn-keeper who needed some money. It was a lovely bit of shore and woodland far out in the country, and he lived there happily for three years. He was happy, too, to become the adopted child of a sturdy islander Tuahu, who boasted that this foster-son of his was as strong a man as any Tahitian, and cheated gaily with the carrying of the plantain loads to make his boasts seem true. Tuahu guided him through the intricacies of life in a native village, taught him to fish expertly, to find and carry the mountain bananas, and to buy land that was usually communally owned by a hundred natives. Little Terii shared his happiness in the bamboo hut, and old Mama-Reretu trusted him literally with her honor, for when he explained that April First was "Lying Day," when lies were venial in America, she bought furniture on false credit and was promptly arrested.

Frisbie had as little use for the Chinese storekeeper of Vaitii as for the rest of his coolie tribe throughout the islands. They were creditors, all of them, "trusting" the naive native until his debts became so great they could seize his land. Nor was the missionary much better. Old Solomon and his sort of automobile, the "lightning wagon," which was usually drawn by Boulgasse, the horse, gave color if nothing else to the little community. And far inland, their houses perched on mountain peaks, their vision restricted by orange beer and a blank horizon, lived the gentle, psychopathic nature men. These, with a few of others, are the characters of a delightful book, and the scenes which Frisbie loved so well that he has drawn and fused them from his experience on other islands, Moorea certainly, and more than likely his own Puka-Puka. But they depict the Tahiti of his time as few books have done.

There are many amusing and generous incidents in these sympathetically written reminiscences, and some of them – especially the movie of Bill Hart, that is according to many the most interesting chapter (Allen 21) – are very funny. There was more gossip than cinema on that famous night; the strangely casual and yet intense spirit of the village swung worshipfully around Frisbie when he was discovered cheek by jowl with William Cowboy on the antique "flicker" film. The ethical problems raised by that movie were and still are real to a people but indifferently Christianized; when the

villain was pushed over the cliff why wasn't the poor man buried, and prayed for, too? Did the hero marry the heroine? One couldn't be sure (Davis n. p.).

The book is to be welcomed not only for the quality of humor or even sympathy, but for a well-roundedness of experience and observation which gives the reader a sense of island life. *My Tahiti* is delightfully written and most pleasingly illustrated (Macdonald) and thoroughly enjoyable.

Although *My Tahiti* is less original than *The Book of Puka-Puka*, because there were many who wrote at that time about Tahiti, but not about Puka-Puka, the book is pleasant reading. Incidents such as the account of how Frisbie becomes a great hero to the natives when the William S. Hart film, in which he played a small part, is shown in Tahiti, or the story of how the author's honor is saved when an aged Tahitian, Tuahu, carries a huge load of bananas down a mountain side for him and thus allows him to bring it into the village are narrated with considerable wit and skill. Frisbie uses rich diction when describing the tranquility of island life so passages like the following are effectively evocative:

For three years I lived on that cool, quiet verandah. There I would sit back in a steamer chair, my feet on the railing, drowsily listening to the distant mutter of reef combers; and sometimes thinking of the restless life I had left, thus better to enjoy my response. My verandah was conducive to laziness. Perhaps it was the mere comfort of the steamer chair, or ... . Or it may have been the sea. She splashed upon the white coral beach, leaping: "This is all I have to do; this is all I have to do." And Tuahu and I, leaning back even more luxuriously, replied: "Yes: but we have nothing at all to do!"

...

Though no one, white or native, lived on that stretch of beach, I could see my brown neighbors fishing patiently in their strange ways, unmindful of the hot sun. Day after day I watched them from my verandah, lazily, sleepily, only half aware that they were there at all, until one of them, hooking a big fish, startled me with his high yodeling call. (Frisbie 1937: 36, 35)

Frisbie, in this book again, praises solitude:

I wonder why this love of bitter-sweet solitude had led me to the mountains, to Mexico, to the sea, and last of all to Tahiti; and I wondered to what distant lands it would lead me in the future. ... solitude would remain a necessary part of my life. (Frisbie 1937: 198)

Frisbie, as it is seen in the book *My Tahiti*, was not only deeply interested in the theories of Sigmund Freud (Roulston 186), but even more in the condition of his own psyche. He analyzes himself, but the focal point of the book is the island and his experiences on it. The book has few of the flashes of self-pity, self-castigation, and defensive boasting that mar Frisbie's later books. When, for example, Frisbie, commenting on a German living alone in the mountains of Tahiti, remarks: "Men living in solitude learn too much about themselves, and it frightens them" (Frisbie 1937: 140), the statement seems obvious and innocent enough.

With the rest of his rich material Robert Dean Frisbie has included myths and legends which are amusingly, if not always strictly, retold. He has presented a round picture of those years lost from the Golden Age, and I could say that this book is a book of understanding and interpretation, where Frisbie's aim was to recapture something of the spirit of native Tahitian life as he knew it during the first three years of the 1920s.

Robert Dean Frisbie's work ranks, with its quality, among the works of some best Pacific authors. Author's contribution to the South Pacific literature was enormous, because Frisbie, as I have said, with his unique knowledge of the Pacific islands and people and with his vivid descriptions in his books, has managed to attract readers and reviewers in the past and also today.

One by one remote islands were left astern, trackless stretches of ocean crossed, storms weathered, and long glassy calms wallowed through. The monotonous sea days wore slowly away and still the schooner moved farther and farther into a lonely sea, visiting islands even more remote from the populous haunts of men. I realized at last that the end of my journey was at hand. (Frisbie 1929: 3)

Maribor

#### WORKS CITED

- A.C.R. "My Tahiti". *Pacific Island Monthly* 8/11 (June 1938): 16.
- Allen, Edward. "People of Tahiti". *New York Times Book Review* September 26 1937: 21.
- Davis, Hassoldt. "My Tahiti". *The Atlantic Monthly* 160/5 (July 1937): n.p.
- Day, A. Grove. "Ropati Frisbie - South Sea Trader". *Honolulu Magazine* 160/4 (October 1986): 44-50, 98-106.
- Frisbie, Johnny. *The Frisbies of the South Seas*. London: The Travel Book Club, 1961.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Robert Dean Frisbie: A Personal View* (unpublished seminar paper). Dunedin, [1994].
- Frisbie, Robert Dean. *My Tahiti*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1937.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Book of Puka-Puka*. Honolulu: Mutual Publishing Company, 1957.
- Hall, James Norman. "Frisbie of the South Seas". *Atlantic Monthly* (October 1949): 60-66.
- Nordhoff, Charles. "Danger Island". *The Saturday Review of Literature* 6/20 (December 1929): 510.
- Potočnik, Nataša. *Južni Pacifik v delih ameriškega pisatelja Roberta Deana Frisbieja* (South Pacific in the Works of the American Writer Robert Dean Frisbie), doctoral thesis. Ljubljana: Univerza v Ljubljani, februar 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. A personal interview with Johnny Frisbie. The recording is kept by the author. Rarotonga, April 1999.
- Rapana, Nuku. »Review«. Auckland, 1999 <<http://www.amazon.com/html>>. (23.12. 2000)

- “Robert Dean Frisbie’s Life in Pukapuka”. *Pacific Islands Monthly* 10/11 (June 1940): 37.
- Roulston, Charles Robert. *Eden and the Lotus-Eaters: A Critical Study of the South Sea Island Writings of Frederick O’Brien, James Norman Hall, and Robert Dean Frisbie*. N.p.: University of Maryland, 1965.
- Wolfram, Betty L. *The White Man of Puka-Puka: Robert Dean Frisbie*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1982.