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Robert Dean Frisbie : Writer of *the South Seas*: His Contribution to Pacific Literature

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Abstract :

The vision of Pacific literature in this article is based on my research on the Cook Islands and in the U.S.A. about the American writer Robert Dean Frisbie who lived and wrote in the South Pacific in the first half of the 20th century.

Robert Dean Frisbie (1896–1948), a former journalist from California, 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 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.

Keywords : Pacific literature; F. O'Brien, J. N. Hall, C. B. Nordhoff, R. D. Frisbie; Robert Dean Frisbie's life and short stories; R. D. Frisbie's contribution to the South Pacific

1. The Pacific Literature

The Pacific has a great diversity of cultures and languages and is rich in oral and written literature. People have been living in some parts of the region for at least 45,000 years. During that enormous span of time they explored the whole Pacific and settled most of it. As soon as written languages were introduced into the Pacific in the nineteenth century, literacy spread rapidly through the region and was primarily used by missionaries to convert the people to Christianity.

Up till the 1960s, most of the written literature about Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia was by outsiders (explorers, missionaries and others). Only a few literary works by Pacific Islands writers had been published.

In 1919 Frederick O'Brien's *White Shadows in the South Seas* was published.

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Encouraged by its enthusiastic reception, he quickly produced two other books about the beauties of the South Pacific. The three books won considerable contemporary eminence for their author and were instrumental in reviving a general interest in the South Pacific. This interest impelled other writers to conjure up visions of the paradise. Among them were W. Somerset Maugham with his work *Moon and Sixpence* (1919), and two other writers soon appeared, the two young American war veterans James Norman Hall (1887–1951) and Charles Bernard Nordhoff (1887–1947). At about the same time another American writer, Robert Dean Frisbie (1896–1948), a former journalist from California, arrived in Papeete with all sorts of plans - to start a plantation, to write periodical articles, to produce illustrations for O'Brien's forthcoming *Atolls of the Sun*. He materialized some of his plans and published six books between 1929 and his death in 1948. He adored Polynesia and became a veritable legend among Polynesians. Despite its popularity his work has not been given sufficient critical attention and also for this very reason it represents the topic of my research.

O'Brien, Hall and Frisbie were somehow united by several attitudes which pervade most of their literary works. They shared an almost unswerving commitment to a vision of a Polynesian paradise, an antipathy towards the commercial civilization of Europe and America, a distrust of authority. They yearned for solitude and most of all longed for tranquility. Hall and Frisbie were close friends who corresponded frequently with each other. They read, criticized, and advised each other on their work. They did not have personal contact with O'Brien who wrote highly favorable book reviews of Nordhoff and Hall's *Faery Lands of the South Seas* and Frisbie's *The Book of Puka-Puka* [Roulston 1965: 3].

These were not the only writers in the period between the two world wars to turn their attention to Polynesia. A great deal of material was written about the South Seas, but much of this material never found its way into print. O'Brien, Nordhoff, Hall and Frisbie, however, all enjoyed some measure of success. Their books were favorably reviewed and their articles appeared in fairly sophisticated and respectable journals like *The American Mercury*, the *Yale Review*, *The Atlantic Monthly*. The writers have been praised by the critics and widely read for the beauty of their language and the vigor of their narrative. They were highly popular, and two of them, Nordhoff and Hall, still are.

Many have dreamed of a beautiful life in the South Pacific where life must be a pleasure, it must be simple. Western society imposes heavy demands upon the individual. It is necessary to work, to strain one's body and barter one's principles, simply to have food, clothing and shelter. There must be a better way, and where better to seek it than in the fabled South Seas? All the ingredients are there, natural resources, a tropical climate, pleasant surroundings, and other comforts. A minimum of

effort is necessary to provide one with sustenance, and beautiful women who make no demands, like others do, are there for the asking. Who would need all the effort and fuss demanded by western civilization? [Wolfram 1982: 1].

2. Robert Dean Frisbie, the American Writer of the South Seas

Only a few, of course, actually did depart the western world for a try at the primitivist dream and one of them was Robert Dean Frisbie, an American from California. Frisbie expected to settle down in the islands for life. Frisbie wanted to write a book like Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, which would tell the absolute truth about one man's innermost thoughts and feelings. He once explained his goal to James Norman Hall, another American writer (co-author of the book *Mutiny on the Bounty*) who settled in Tahiti and who first met Robert Dean Frisbie at the steamer landing in Papeete one day in 1920. Frisbie came ashore with a portable typewriter in one hand and a camera in the other and said to his new friend James Norman Hall:

I suppose one could go anywhere from here. I could load my boat with trade goods and sail from island to island, making enough to live on and writing out my ponderings, the way old Montaigne did in his French castle [Frisbie 1957: vii].

Robert Dean Frisbie was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on 16th of April 1896, as the second son of Arthur Grazly Frisbie and Florence Benson Frisbie. His father had a leaning toward religion and send Robert, who was twelve at that time and his brother Charles to a school called the Raja Yoga Academy at Point Loma in California. The school was stern and ascetic with militaristic overtones. The strict order at this monastic institution was too unbearable for Robert and he resented the strict discipline. He revolted against religious authority, tried to run away twice and once he even tried to burn down a school building. Later on he was allowed to leave the Academy, but he found public high school uninteresting.

Even as a young boy, Robert was naturally quiet and shy and tended to be non-social. He read a great deal from the books in the family library and often wrote long poems in friendly competition with his brother. Many of these poems were dedicated to his mother, whom he loved very deeply. She seemed to understand the thoughts and ambitions of her son much better than did her strict and unbending husband. Robert was never very fond of his father, who later left the family and created a new one, but, as I mentioned, was devoted to his warm, understanding mother, with whom he maintained a regular correspondence until her death in 1942. Later, his letters to his mother reveal the deep obligation he felt for her encouragement and support of his

work, which was painfully slow in being accepted by the public. Of her letters to him there is no record, as they were destroyed in the great hurricane on Suvarrow in the year of her death.

After holding various jobs, young Frisbie enlisted in the U. S. Army toward the end of World War I. While stationed with the United States 8th Cavalry in Texas, he wrote a lengthy free verse poem to his mother. He was tall and thin like her, and particularly susceptible to respiratory illness. His health was not very good. He had been frail as a child, and now it was apparent that he had contracted tuberculosis. At his last medical examination in the Army, the doctor told him that he would not be able to live out another winter in the United States. The doctor advised him a complete change of climate, and he was medically discharged from the Army in 1918 with a monthly pension of \$45. He knew he needed a change for his health's sake, and he had a yearning for adventure. He read everything he could find about the South Seas, and Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894) was his idol. Frisbie, in general, was largely by his own efforts, a well-educated man. His desire to leave America became an obsession, and he bent every effort in that direction. He cared little about his friends and lost all interest in advancing his education. He saved enough money to make his dream reality and 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 to start his new life. Like Robert Louis Stevenson before him, he took doctor's advice and sailed to the South Seas, the place of his dreams. In *My Tahiti* he wrote of his thoughts before sailing:

... I close my eyes for the moment and forget the colorlessness of civilized life ... and seem to hear even the distant mutter of the surf pounding along the barrier reef! An island attracts one strangely and inexplicably ... The charm may be engendered by the knowledge that here is something one might acquire in its entirety [Frisbie 1937: 4].

His departure astonished his friends and family, who had not thought he was serious in his ambition of becoming a beachcomber.

In Tahiti, Frisbie had big writing plans he shared with James Norman Hall who also came to Tahiti to live and work as a writer, and who has left a memorable portrait of Frisbie in *The Forgotten One and Other True Tales of the South Seas* (1952). Frisbie also made friends with Nordhoff who took a deep interest in him. Frisbie bought a plantation and built himself a native style house of bamboo there. His neighbors were simple Polynesian folk who liked Robert. They called him Ropati, a Polynesian variant

of Robert. He quickly learned their language with a Tahitian girl Terii and tried to escape civilization by sharing their routines. Most of his time he also gathered and consumed the great books of the world (e.g. Montaigne, Villon, Dante, Shakespeare, and others) that he hoped would educate him. He also began to drink a great deal and his friends were worried about him. He became aware of his own situation and began to hike into the mountainous inner part of the island to visit the hideaways of other white men he had heard of as having sought isolation in Tahiti.

Frisbie also found time to travel outside Papeete. From time to time he got a job aboard a schooner. He learned the arts of navigation quickly and well. In this way he had the opportunity to see much of the Pacific, although he never managed to acquire a boat of his own for the purpose, as he has so much wanted to do. But in partnership with other residents who yearned to sail to far islands and other seamen, he visited many of the Pacific islands among them were the Tuamotus, Fiji, Samoa, and the Cook Islands.

In the northern part of the Cooks Frisbie came across an island that would always afterward loom large in his imagination, Suwarrow atoll. Suwarrow had a remarkable history in fact and legend: castaways and pirates, gold and buried treasure. It had been the site of treacheries and murder [Wolfram 1982: 7].

It was inevitable that such tales would appeal to Frisbie. Suwarrow was uninhabited, and Frisbie was looking for an island where he might settle as a village trader.

Back in Tahiti, after his first big voyage, Ropati received the happy news that his first magazine article “Fei-hunting in Polynesia” had been accepted by *Forum* magazine. After four years living in Tahiti, he left his plantation for good early in March 1924 and sailed with the famous Pacific Captain Andy Thomson on the schooner *Avarua* to Rarotonga, capital of the Cook Islands, about 700 miles southwest of Tahiti. In the Cook Islands, he committed the rest of his life and work. At Rarotonga, Ropati took the offer of running a trading station on a small island in the vast Pacific, atoll of Puka-Puka in the northern Cooks for A. B. Donald & Company. So he found a spot that was forever after associated with his name and the place he was able to live in tropical comfort, leaving most of his days free for writing the great book. It was Puka-Puka or “Danger Island,” the place that was to become his home for nearly twenty years.

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" castle [Frisbie 1957: 8].

The job on this atoll gave him a small income, as well as the life he thought he needed to succeed as a writer. Puka-Puka was a lonely, little-known island, with minimum contact with the outside world, it was truly a paradise for a beachcomber. The young man has attained the dream of millions of Americans in the post-war 1920s. He was literally the only white man on this South Sea island, surrounded by beautiful maidens with flowers behind their ears. For a time he was happy. He built several houses for himself; one in each of the villages. He fished, explored the atoll mouts, and caught turtles and birds. He married a local girl Natokorua (Nga), who had all the fine qualities of her heritage, and his new happiness gave him the ability to write. Nga was the fourth child of a native missionary who had sailed 800 miles in a canoe to bring the first Christian mission to Puka-Puka shortly after the turn of the century. Frisbie could not have chosen a more loving and faithful wife, for over the years Nga followed him wherever he roved and was to bear him five half-Polynesian children.

Settled in his trading store, 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*. Almost thirty sketches appeared in the United States in 1929, collected by The Century Company under the title of *The Book of Puka-Puka*, the classic of atoll life. Its publication gave Frisbie courage to persist as a writer hoping for greater achievements. He no longer drank very much. He had reason to be happy because his first book was highly praised. The book is probably the most endearing and perhaps the most original of his works and was the only one that was later reprinted (1957).

It was evident now that Ropati (Frisbie) did have some of the talent he had been so sure was his to give the world. Atoll life brought him success. He was the first trader to open the village store in the past fourteen years, and his easygoing methods of handling sales soon made him a popular figure. When his reading and writing began to pall, he could always join the native fishing trips, bird-catching sport and other games.

After some time he returned to Rarotonga with his pregnant wife Nga, and on that island his first son Charles was born in 1930 who was adopted by a grandaunt Piki-Piki in the Polynesian style while Frisbie was on his brief trip to San Francisco. Charles, later on, did not have many contacts with his father at all, and his comment to me about that was:

... We never did any work together with my dad. I think we might only speak for about five or ten minutes when we met. That was all, see, and I was more concentrated to playing around with my sisters and my brother Jake. I was very

close to my sisters and my brother, but not to my dad. My dad dearly wanted to have me. I think he did mentioned, you know, that he was gonna take me from mama Piki-Piki, and at that very moment when I went back home, I told mama I don't want that man to take me away from her, so when she heard the news that Frisbie was coming to our place in Tupapa, she was prepared to take me in the bush and hide me there castle [Potočnik 1999b].

Frisbie next took his wife to Tahiti where in those days food could be found for \$5 a month. This was the happiest period in Ropati's life. He began writing but destroyed two imperfect autobiographical novels. He was more successful at selling magazine articles and short stories. In Tahiti, Florence, his first daughter whom Frisbie called Whiskey Johnny, was born in 1932. Later on his second son William, nicknamed Jake, was born in Moorea in 1933 where Ropati and Nga went into the poultry business.

More than one of his articles appeared in 1937 as chapters in *My Tahiti*, a volume dedicated to Johnny who was seldom separated from him.

The writer's work continued to appear in *Atlantic Monthly* through the fall of 1943.

But there, in the middle of the paradise, Frisbie seems to have been very ill. He had contracted filarial fever in addition to tuberculosis and his other health problems. He was left with an enlarged leg swollen by elephantiasis. He had become an invalid, and he took to drinking heavily to dull his pain and frustration.

Homesick Nga hoped that their next child would be born back on her beloved atoll of Puka-Puka and in 1934 Frisbie sailed back to Puka-Puka with his family. A high point on the way was a stay on the uninhabited island of Suwarrow, owned by the A. B. Donald firm. Ropati made a note to himself that this might be an even better hideaway for a writer than Matauea Point off Ko Island at Puka-Puka [Day 1986: 50].

Back home in Puka-Puka, Frisbie was sick and distraught. He had a greater need for books and he wrote to his mother and brother in California to provide them for him. Hall also sent him books. Frisbie read everything he could get. He had a pile of half-finished manuscripts and he wrote to Hall asking him of his opinion. *My Tahiti*, a book of memories, was published in 1937, but other efforts did not fare very well. Frisbie was not very productive now, he was ill and he drank a lot.

Nga had given her husband two more daughters, Elaine in 1935, and Nga in 1937. Then personal tragedy struck. 1938 was a bad year. Nga became ill with tuberculosis, and shocked Frisbie wrote frantically in hopes 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), a book he had worked on for many years and was according to Hall's account not really very good. It had the same

characters and scenes used in *The Book of Puka-Puka*. Frisbie's abilities seemed to decline, and he must have been painfully aware of this. The doctors there could do little for his wife and after four months the disease was found to be fatal. Frisbie was shattered. He took Nga against medical advice back home to Puka-Puka to see her children and relatives for one more time and to die there. The young wife died in Ropati's arms and was buried on the atoll. It was January 14, 1939, and he was a widower with four small children to be reared in the South Seas. He, this time also flew from the painful experience:

True to type, I am spending my time trying to escape. Sometimes I wonder if I am spending my life trying to escape from something-myself perhaps. Half my dreams are of running away from an unseen pursurer. ... Never have I seen this pursurer or known what the danger is; but he, or it, is none the less terrifying [Frisbie 1944: 138].

Nga's death affected Frisbie's rather precarious balance. For months he did not seem to realize that she was dead; he drifted in and out of reality.

It was expected that Frisbie would marry again, since the people of the atoll believed that no man could possibly bring up four little children. But stubborn Ropati could not agree. He wrote to James Norman Hall, his main correspondent in his later years:

I fail to see why a man cannot bring up children as well as a woman, and now, after seven months' experience, I know that he can. All this "only a mother knows" is rubbish [Day 1986: 98].

Ropati made his atoll quartet fully reliant in the writings of his eldest daughter Johnny. Along with Hall's essay *Frisbie of Danger Island*, in his book *The Forgotten One* (1952), Johnny's two books are the chief sources for the story of Robert Dean Frisbie's declining years. These are *Miss Ulysses from Puka-Puka* (1948), written with much help from her father when she was only 15 years old, and *The Frisbies of the South Seas* (1959).

After the death of Ropati's beloved wife his goals were to raise up his "four little cowboys". He loved his children dearly and hoped that he could build his "little ship" and travel around the Pacific with his family as a South Seas trader, and to write great literature. He was a great teacher to his children and he was completely devoted to them which somehow helped him to recover from his wife's death. He brought up his

children himself in giving them daily lessons and classes on remote Pacific atolls.

... Robert Dean Frisbie read a lot and he was very keen on taking his children to the movies, because he wanted them to learn about the world as much as possible. He thought this was the easiest way to do it, so every week he picked one particular film and he took all his children to watch it. And this was his way of educating them, of course he had educated them in other ways too, and they were all outstanding kids, really, ... [Potočnik 1999f].

His children got a classical education of considerable quality. Frisbie spent all of his time with them. He was again restless for travel and wanted to take his children on a long cruise among the islands of the South Pacific, but the news that the United States was at war made him change his plan. He decided to offer his services to his country, although by this time Frisbie was seriously ill with filariasis, addicted to alcohol and possibly a user of opium and morphine [Wolfram 1982: 11]. The family packed and left Puka-Puka for Rarotonga. The tragic scene of the farewell to the islanders, friends and the relatives was more than a little death, for they thought the chance that a family with deep roots in this tiny spot in the endless ocean would return was almost zero.

Along way the Frisbies were dropped at Suwarrow to be picked up again when the ship came by on its return voyage. The island was normally uninhabited, except for occasional voyages by islanders from other atolls in search of copra. So the family settled down on that uninhabited Suwarrow that was the island on which Ropati and Nga stayed for three months in 1934. The children collected food from the natural resources available, and Frisbie put up a shack and a tree house, where he could work undisturbed. Life on Suwarrow atoll was very idyllic, but they were not alone on the atoll. The island was also invaded by three surveyors from New Zealand and three Manihikian native helpers. Not long after, two wandering yachtsmen added to the "crowd". It was a disappointment for Frisbie to find that he had so much company, and it may well have interfered with his plans.

Suwarrow's legendary history was based on its having been at one time a base for some South American pirates, and on the stranding there of blackbirder and privateer "Bully" Hayes, who was marooned on the atoll for a year. There are endless tales of the buried treasure to be found there, and several finds (a chest of American dollars, ...) have actually been made. Since there were all sorts of "treasure maps" and "signs" on the island to guide the hopeful treasure hunters, most whites who stopped at Suwarrow dug a few holes. Frisbie had dug on previous trips. This time Frisbie put his hopes of a discovery aside and went to work. He read a good deal from his library, which he had

unpacked, wrote letters to Hall and others, and taught his children their lessons. He had plenty of time left to relax [Wolfram 1982: 13].

In February 1942 Suvarrow atoll was virtually destroyed by one of the most terrible hurricanes ever to hit that part of the Pacific. Suvarrow was at the storm's center, and for twelve hours the tiny atoll's occupants barely managed to stay alive. Thirteen human beings survived by lashing themselves to the trunks of remaining trees. High seas beat for days over the island, and Frisbie's tree house remained, helping a great deal by sheltering the family most of the night, and Frisbie managed to save his children and himself thereafter by tying them all to the tops of the tamanu trees. When the hurricane was over, incredible devastation was to be seen. Fourteen of the atoll's thirty motus had disappeared, and the main islet, where they were living, was half its original size and had been divided into three sections. The survivors managed to collect rainwater and find enough food to survive. They were overwhelmed with flies, mosquitoes, and land crabs. They suffered from sunburn and eye inflammations, and they were miserable. The Frisbies had lost everything, including Frisbie's beloved books and most of the manuscripts. They had only the clothes they had been wearing. Frisbie's typewriter that had been in the tree house had been saved.

The most authentic account of the great Suvarrow hurricane is to be found in Frisbie's book *The Island of Desire* (1944), the fictional autobiographical story that involved lives on two islands, Puka-Puka and Suvarrow. This book deals with Ropati's love of his wife and his children, and love of his country and of native culture. In the second part, the description of the hurricane makes very good reading indeed. Frisbie has written a fascinating, unforgettably vivid account of what it is like to live through a hurricane on a tiny atoll.

About 2 P.M. the wind shifted suddenly from the north to the northwest, and it was then that the awful thing came down on us - but, alas! I have used my superlatives, I have no words left to describe it! When we saw the comber looming out of the rain we were struck dumb with awe. Distinctly I remember bracing myself for death. Its noise could be heard above the shrieking of the wind. It raged toward us, engulfing everything in its path. It seized the fallen tamanu tree and flung it at us. The comber loomed above us, its crest thirty feet high; and I remember closing my eyes tightly, gritting my teeth, holding my breath, feeling every nerve come up taut.

There was a moment of crashing branches, rushing water. My life rope bit into my flesh; The comber gripped me and rolled me under. ... My head struck

something and I nearly lost consciousness. I thought I could hear my children screaming for help which I could not give;

... It was fully a moment before I dared open my eyes. When I did so, I saw Johnny, ... [Frisbie 1944: 223].

His daughter Johnny, who also describes the hurricane in *The Frisbies of the South Seas* (1959), had been having fears and attacks of nerves for a long time as a result of the hurricane.

A New Zealander Tom Neale was inspired by his admiration to go and live on Suvarrow, where he remained alone for eight years. Neale obviously did enjoy his isolated life on the atoll that is described in his book *An Island to Oneself*.

The Frisbies remained on Suvarrow for a while, despite all their problems, and after several weeks the survivors sailed north to Manihiki, which Ropati had visited with his two friends in 1923 for a stay. This atoll claimed to hold the most beautiful women in all Polynesia, and it is there where Ropati found his new wife Esetera. She was about twenty years old, mature and graceful, who won the approval of the “four cowboys” who got a new mother. So long as the family lived on Manihiki, all went like it should, but when Frisbie took his family to Rarotonga and wanted to join the United States Intelligence Service in World War II, Esetera changed radically. The attractions of film theaters and night clubs proved demoralizing and Frisbie, despite her tears, sent her back to Manihiki. Frisbie, at this point, was in rapid decline. He was drinking heavily, and his children went to school for the first time in their lives. Even Rarotonga was too civilized for him.

... He was a loner. He didn't like too many people, he didn't get along with too many people, and he would always take us to different islands to get away, and to write and explore. He was a loving father [Potočnik 1999e].

... He was a very good father and he loved to travel, he liked to read and he liked to be alone a lot of time. He liked to stick to the family and he enjoyed being on islands where there was nobody, so that he could write [Potočnik 1999c].

On the family's next trip, the Frisbies visited Manihiki where they found the divorced second mother Esetera. She had married again and was once more a happy island girl. Ropati and his children went on and settled on the island called Penrhyn.

Frisbie at that time became very ill and began hemorrhaging. He had to be evacuated by a Navy plane to Samoa. Aboard the plane was Lt. James A. Michener (1907-1997), who later became a well-known writer. Michener had heard many stories about Frisbie, the “atoll-man” who had “infuriated governments and encouraged native rebellion.” Michener found on the island a completely emaciated victim of tuberculosis.

Ropati was hospitalized there and required several transfusions. He recovered and took a school-teaching job in a Samoan village. His four children rejoined him later. It was Michener who, one day, found him lying under a pandanus tree, “drinking bush beer while his daughter Johnny taught his classes.” The girl could keep better discipline, Ropati explained, than he could himself. Each night he instructed her in the next day’s lesson and she would do a great job. During his stay in Samoa he visited Tahiti in 1947, hoping to see James Norman Hall. Both had long hoped for a chance to visit again in person after their correspondence of more than twenty years, but it didn’t happen. Frisbie was shocked to find that Hall was in California for the wedding of his daughter. So Ropati and his four children returned to Rarotonga.

While living in Samoa, Frisbie worked hard on two more, and his last, this time fiction books, 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. It is a tale of missionary enslaved pearl-divers, a ghost island and a buried treasure of pearls, and escaped criminals threatened by shark attacks. Frisbie also helped Johnny to write her first book, *Miss Ulysses from Puka-Puka* (1948).

At Pago Pago, Samoa, Ropati was getting to know many Navy men who liked to take him to the local bars, so the family went to live on a ranch in Western Samoa. But his children feared that their father was working too hard on his books. His right leg swelled often, and the fever caused him to lie so motionless that, several times, Johnny thought he might have died. Frisbie understood now how sick he really was. He was dying and he was frantic at the same time for the future of his children, for he had nothing to leave them. He feared for what would become of them when he was gone. In one of his last letters to his friend James Norman Hall he wrote:

Hall, I am so weary and weak. If only I could get my old energy back! [Hall 1949: 61].

The former Cook Islands’s prime-minister Tom Davis who was also a writer and was Robert Dean Frisbie’s personal doctor who took care of him in his last days, said:

... he was a good man, but he had his problems with alcohol and drugs. And I gave him all the medical ... He was a very knowledgeable person, very good and skillful, but his problems with alcohol and drugs tended to interfere, his needs were interfered ... [Potočnik 1999a].

Frisbie died of tetanus in Rarotonga on November 18, 1948, when he was fifty-two. According to the second chapter of Michener's book *Return to Paradise*, Ropati had "used once too often a rusty needle" [Day 1986: 106]. He died penniless and in debt. He never returned to Puka-Puka or his wife's grave, and he never finished building his one-man trading boat. But he had devoted his life to producing Pacific literature. He 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 life story, a tragic hero of the Pacific.

Michener wrote Frisbie's obituary for *Publisher's Weekly*, asking for donations to help all of the five orphans. And it was Michener who wrote Ropati's epitaph in his chapter on atoll men:

I like Frisbie. I respected his basic honesty. If ever I knew a man who destroyed himself through the search for beauty, Frisbie was that man. I can respect the uncompromising artist, and I never once met Frisbie but what I pitied him and liked him, too. There were other atoll men of whom I could not say as much [Michener 1967: 11].

3. Analysis

Frisbie wrote in a vivid, graceful style. His characters and the local scenery, in particular 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 written about their experiences in the Pacific. This little world became his world, for he remained there for the rest of his life and acquired an intimate, almost unique knowledge of these islands.

His books, especially *The Book of Puka-Puka* and *My Tahiti*, deserve a place on every Pacific bookshelf.

The Book of Puka-Puka (1929) is the most original of his works and makes light and entertaining reading. It was written during his lifetime on the atoll Puka-Puka in

the Cook Islands. It is one of the most accurate portrayals of life on an atoll ever written. It is a collection of twenty-nine 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 that was dedicated to the American writer James Norman Hall, his good friend, made the island of Puka-Puka or Danger Island and its inhabitants famous to the world.

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 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 spin 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 the story of his life 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.

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 1957: 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 1957: 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 1957: 107].

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 1965: 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 still 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 1957: 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 another-wise uninhabited island" [Frisbie 1957: 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 1957: 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 (Nga), he is overcome with 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 1957: 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 1957: 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 1957: 356]!

Although *The Book of Puka-Puka* was favorably received by the reviewers of the daily press and by Polynesian enthusiasts like Charles Nordhoff 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, stipplings, 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 1929: 510].

I also 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 [I960] 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: www.amazon].

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*.

The Golden Age of Tahiti had passed many years before the arrival of Robert Dean Frisbie (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 thirty short stories about the author and his living among the 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.

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.

Frisbie 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 foreigners' theft 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) are very funny.

The book is to be welcomed not only for the quality of humor or even sympathy for the native inhabitants but also 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: 35, 36].

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 1965: 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.

The author who is known for his classic work on atoll life, some good articles, and an outstanding description of a hurricane, may not have a very impressive literary record, but is quite unique in his own way. He was very popular during his lifetime, but he has almost been forgotten today because literary critics have not yet reevaluated his work. Has he been overlooked because of the many other authors who have successfully written about the South Seas for years, or did he aim for goals that were too far out of his reach and become frustrated? Or is it simply because, despite his great desire to write, he placed the demands of his life before the needs of his art? Frisbie never avoided his family responsibilities. He was truly a beloved father as his grateful children had cause to remember:

... His personality, you know his soul is still connected to me, to our family, to my sisters and brothers. ... I have all the memories, it is hard to forget them, because he was such a great father, such a great friend. ... He was a very caring, a very dear father ... [Potočnik 1999d].

Robert Dean Frisbie's literary works deserve more attention and should not be forgotten. Today, his books, which are quite rare, are very dear treasures and reflect

the real lives and culture of the South Sea natives. His books, especially *The Book of Puka-Puka* and *My Tahiti*, don't deserve to be neglected but should be reprinted. This is why I decided to examine his work and produce a synthetic study, drawing on original (taped) material collected in the field, attracted by Frisbie's quest for a paradise in which to relish his idyll of solitude:

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 1957: 3].

Robert Dean Frisbie's contribution to the 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, ...). Ropati was one of that rare group of non-native authors who chose the islands as his home, lived side-by-side with the indigenous people, who raised a family and learned the local language, who was a keen observer and recorder of island life and culture, and who was a serious student of island history, traditional canoe building, fishing and celestial navigation. Because of this, he was able to make contributions to various sciences including fish taxonomy, linguistics, anthropology, astronomy, sociology and cartography (*Robert Dean Frisbie Centennial*).

He came. He stayed. He lived the same island life more intensively and honestly than any of us. And, like Becke of Australia, he is the one we salute when we think of the South Pacific [Michener 1967: 6].

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