The Disciplinary Terrain of Pacific History: Origins, Issues and Views

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ABSTRACT

In the 1950s, J. W. Davidson took up the Chair of Pacific History at the Australian National University and delivered his inaugural lecture in which he suggested that history writing in the Pacific could no longer be seen from metropolitan capitals and that the focus should shift to the islands. Despite Davidson’s claim to have decolonised Pacific history, critics argued that he did not offer any new direction or vision. It is the contention of this paper that it is not just Davidson’s island-oriented History, but history writing in the Pacific in general that has suffered from progressive antiquation. There has been little or no theorizing in terms of the direction Pacific History should move towards. The consequence of all this is that Pacific historiography has become a methodologically and stylistically conservative discipline. New Pacific history needs to learn from writers in other disciplines, in particular literary studies that have been rejuvenated through the infusion of theory, philosophy and the styles and methodologies offered by other disciplines. This would be a primary step in decolonising the discipline that has remained for too long in the quagmire of conformity.

KEYWORDS: History, Pacific, historiography, island-oriented history, literary studies