

From Cover to Cover

By MAX SHACHTMAN

There was a time when the natives of the South Seas lived in unsophisticated happiness, their culture at about the upper barbaric stage, enjoying their lovely isles and calm lagoons, chanting their plaintive melodies and tranquilly eating the boiled heads of their contemporaries. They were a magnificent people, beautifully developed in physique, as all travelers attested.

But their discovery and the inevitable expansion of industrial countries has brought an ever increasing change. Syphilis and beach combers, pearl traders and priests, military governors and whores, leprosy and authors are now their burden. The variegated sky-pilots, declaring that the Almighty disliked naked bodies (in spite of the Adamian precedent) opened the way for New Jersey cotton manufacturers and made the natives don dungarees and shirts. I suppose that in a generation or two, the South Seas will have produced, or imported, their own Billy Sunday, Irving Berlin, Ku Klux Klan, Dadaism, Kandinsky compositions, Harold Bell Wright, Adolph Ochs, Reno, Others Anthologies, Harlem flats and all the other concomitants of our noble civilization, which will entitle them to a place amongst us! The Apotheosis of the Polynesian!

All this is apropos of Frederick O'Brien's latest book, "Atolls of the Sun," (Century). With a rather sentimental felicity he describes his Odyssey over these sunbaked and sun-cooled atolls. His fine characterization, and the Conrad-like incidents he relates, give a typical touch of Irish loquacity. He wallows, figuratively, in glorious sunsets, limpid lagoons, splendid bodies and flowered pareus. But even so, he speaks of "the rise of imperial industrialism which has destroyed the Polynesian." (Out there: it's good while it lasts; but it won't last long. Where are our own Iroquois, Pawnee, Shawnee and the rest of Cooper's noble savages?)

So, if you like Jack London, Conrad, Cooper and Stevenson; if, in your nonage, you devoured Dana; if you were caught in the flood which carried Melville from out of his undeserved obscurity; if you like the sea and its ineluctable isles and long for vicarious joys—there is every reason for liking Mr. O'Brien's book. I did.