

**ROBERT DEAN FRISBIE - AN AMERICAN WRITER
IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC**

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"We are what we remember."
(Wendt14)

The vision of Pacific literature in this article is based on my research on the Cook Islands and 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.

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. The Pacific ancestors were able to sail for hundreds of miles in different directions, to safely return home before the next journey (cf. *Pacific Writing in English* 1). As soon as written languages were introduced into the Pacific in the nineteenth century, literacy spread rapidly, first through Polynesia, then through the rest of the region. Literacy was used primarily by missionaries to convert the people to Christianity and the first converts were used as missionaries to convert other Pacific countries. Literacy in the indigenous languages also allowed the people to correspond with one another and thereby start a written literature. 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. 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 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 (copra), 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 1).

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 (*The Book of Puka-Puka* 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 12 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 Suwarrow 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 Calvary 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 on strangely and inexplicably ... The charm may be engendered by the knowledge that here is something one might acquire in its entirety (*My Tahiti* 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, Suvarrow atoll. Suvarrow 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 7).

It was inevitable that such tales would appeal to Frisbie. Suvarrow 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, headquarters of A.B. Donald & Company, Frisbie began a new and different adventure that was to become the high point in a life of adventures in the Pacific. Ropati took the offer of running a trading station on a small island, one of the loneliest specks of land 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' (*The Book of Puka-Puka* 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 of 16, Ngatokorua, 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 30 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. In this account of life on Puka-Puka also the complaints against European and American commercialism and aggressiveness, the praise of isolation, the castigation of missionaries, and the commendation of Polynesian economic collectivism and sexual freedom can be found. It is a great portrait of himself and a vivid description of the natives on the island, a journal of his day-to-day experiences and observations.

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 14 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 mention, 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 (*Personal Communications With Charles Frisbie*).

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 waning moon had risen above the coconut trees to cast long shadow patterns on the beach and touch the lagoon with a dull silver sheen. The yellow light shimmered in the loose hair that rippled down Terii's back. She was very beautiful, I thought ... too young and delicate a creature to touch, and yet ... (*My Tahiti* 56).

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. Ropati was in danger of becoming an alcoholic. There are hints of drug use as well.

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 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, the mother of the four children, became so 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 (*Island of Desire* 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 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, who appears in his writings under the name of Desire, 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, the cinema, 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 had educated them in other ways too, and they were all outstanding kids, really, ... (*Personal Communications With Stuart Kingan*).

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 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 13).

In February 1942 Suwarrow atoll was virtually destroyed by one of the most terrible hurricanes ever to hit that part of the Pacific. Suwarrow was at the storm's center, and for twelve hours the tiny atoll's occupants barely managed to stay alive. Thirteen human beings, including three little girls and a little boy 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. Angry confrontations broke out in the little group. 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 Desire, love of 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 completely 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, ... (*The Island of Desire* 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. His two daughters, Nga and Elaine, have told me:

... 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 (*Personal Communications With Ngatokorua Frisbie-West*).

... 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 (*Personal Communications With Elaine Metua Frisbie-Werts*).

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, whom he described:

With his deep eyes and protruding lower jaw he looked like the dying Robert Louis Stevenson (Dave 105).

Ropati was hospitalized there and required several transfusions. He recovered and took a schoolteaching 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. "If she can do that," Michener said, "she can write a book. And if she does, I will get it published" (Dave 105). 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. Both books had been many years in manuscript stage, with the manuscripts supposedly lost in the hurricane. Perhaps Frisbie had memorized them to some degree and it is true that both leave something to be desired. Frisbie has at least tried to get away from Puka-Puka story. He 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 61).

The former Cook Islands's prime minister Tom Davis who is 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 ...
(*Personal Communications With Tom Davis*).

Frisbie died of tetanus in Rarotonga on November 18, 1948, when he was 52. According to the second chapter of Michener's book *Return to Paradise*, Ropati had "used once too often a rusty needle" (Dave 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 lifestory, a tragic hero of the Pacific.

Frisbie wrote in a vivid, graceful style. His characters and particularly the atoll of Puka-Puka, live well in the mind and come well to life. The reader of his books comes to know him well, to experience the force of his personality, the beauty of his vision of tranquility. Gifted with a feeling for language, a sense of humor, and a sympathy for human foibles, he was able to capture on paper the charm, the beauty, and the serenity of life of the small islands in the South 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.

The author with his classic work on atoll life, some good articles, and an outstanding description of a hurricane has not a very impressive record, but is unique in his way. He was very popular during his lifetime, but he is almost forgotten today because literary critics have not paid him enough attention. This is why I decided to examine his work and produce a synthetic study, drawing on field-collected original (taped) material. His books, especially *The Book of Puka-Puka* and *Island of Desire*, deserve a place on every Pacific bookshelf. Unfortunately, Frisbie never won the battle of self, as James Norman Hall did, he aimed at goals too far out of his reach and as such he became frustrated. 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. He was truly a beloved father:

... 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 ... (*Personal Communications With Johnny Frisbie*).

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 11).

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. Ropati was one of that rare group of white authors who chose the islands as his home, lived side-by-side with the indigenous people, 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 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 6).

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