



# **South Sea Maidens: Western Fantasy and Sexual Politics in the South Pacific (Contributions to the Study of World History)**

*Michael Sturma*

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From the first European contact with Tahiti in 1767, the myth of the South Sea maiden has endured through many incarnations. Although the maiden frequently provided an idealized antidote to Western women's self-assertion, the South Pacific also afforded a space where boundaries between the sexes could be relaxed and transgressed. From James Cook and Captain Bligh to James Michener and Margaret Mead, the Island girl has occupied a special place in the erotic imagination of the West. In a sweeping study that embraces history, literature, visual arts, anthropology and film, this study gives fresh insight into the myths and reality of a Western icon.

While women from far off lands have always been presented as exotic and alluring, the South Sea maiden has come to symbolize feminine sexuality, as an integral part of the adventure, sensuality, and romance of the South Pacific. Everyone from early explorers to 19th century writers and artists to latter day anthropologists, film makers, and tourism promoters have extolled their virtues and their bodies. Sturma looks behind the popular clichés to reveal how the myth-making process reflected not only Western desires, but the cut and thrust of changing sexual politics. The result is an intriguing look at both South Sea image-makers and the women whom they found so seductive.

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