

---

# REVIEW

Hendery, Rachel. 2015. *One man is an island: The speech community William Marsters begat on Palmerston Island*. UK: Battlebridge Publications.

Sally Akevai Te Namu Nicholas: *School of Language and Culture, Auckland University of Technology* <sally.nicholas@aut.ac.nz>

---

Rachel Hendery's *One man is an island: The speech community William Marsters begat on Palmerston Island* is the fifth in the *Islanders Series* from Battlebridge Publications. The book is 112 pages (including a very thorough index) and covers the history of the settlement of Palmerston Island, in the Cook Islands, by William Marsters, his family, and their descendants, as well as giving a brief description of Palmerston Island English.

Since 1860, Palmerston Island has been occupied by the descendants of William Marsters, an Englishman of uncertain origin, and his three Cook Islands Māori wives Akakaingara, Tepou Tinioi and Matavia. Due to its remote and inaccessible nature, Palmerston Island has always been very isolated, and as a result, an interesting linguistic landscape has evolved there. It is this linguistic situation that provides the inspiration for this book, as Hendery is the linguist who has contributed most of the scholarly work on Palmerston Island English to date. However, the work reviewed here is not technical, and would be of interest to the general reader.

The first chapter addresses the issue of how to get to and from Palmerston Island, which she describes as 'one of the more isolated places in the modern world' (Hendery 2015: 58), as well as describing it physically as it is today.

The next two chapters provide historical and contemporary descriptions of the settlement and continued occupation of the island by William Marsters and his descendants. From the reviewer's point of view, as a non-Palmerston Cook Islander, this history is pleasingly clear, and dispels many misapprehensions commonly held about the settlement of Palmerston Island. For a reader unfamiliar with the folk history of Palmerston Island, it presents an interesting and respectful account of the history and contemporary lives of the people of Palmerston. Hendery draws generously on descriptions from contemporaneous writings, both in English and Cook Islands Māori, which provide colourful illustrations of life on Palmerston throughout the years. She does not shy away from admitting that the precise details of these stories are probably not recoverable from the many varied accounts that are available. However, she provides good evidence for any claims she does make.

The final chapter, which reaches 40 pages, and constitutes nearly half of the book, focuses on Palmerston Island English as spoken by the people of Palmerston, and some of the Palmerston diaspora. The lack of technical language, for example the use of IPA, made this chapter a little unsatisfying for this reviewer as a linguist. However, this is not the target audience for this book, and the technical angle is available elsewhere (Hendery, 2012; Hendery, 2013; Hendery, 2015; Hendery, 2016; Hendery, Mühlhäusler, and Nash, 2015). Hendery wisely declines to make a claim on the question of *what kind of language* Palmerston Island English is, suggesting, rather, that it shows properties both of a dialect (of English), and of a creole, as well as enormous variation between speakers. In the context of discussing this question, she incidentally provides a nice, simple description of the nature of creole languages more generally.

Hendery provides a good overview of the socio-linguistic situation, as well as some phonological, grammatical and lexical features. Notably, she offers good evidence here to refute the widely promulgated claim that English has been the only language spoken on Palmerston Island, suggesting that for most of its history the people of Palmerston have been bilingual in Palmerston Island English and Cook Islands Māori. She dates the shift towards Palmerston Island English monolingualism to the mid twentieth century. The author also discusses the attitudes of Palmerston Island people to their language and their particular pride in their Englishness. This section offers some interesting insights into attitudes about “standard varieties” of English generally.

In the later part of the chapter Hendery discusses some of the phonetic and grammatical features of Palmerston Island English, and makes comments on

the likely origins of these features. The general trend here is that most of the notable features of Palmerston Island English are not likely to have originated from whichever variety of English William Marsters spoke, but, rather, from Cook Islands Māori, or other local Pacific Englishes, both historical (e.g. various nineteenth century “ship Englishes” and Pacific creoles) and contemporary varieties (e.g. New Zealand English, Cook Islands English, Samoan English). She suggests that the influence of whichever variety of English William Marsters spoke is limited to some vowel sounds, and some vocabulary. This claim is counter to the widely held folk linguistic belief of many Cook Islanders, that the people of Palmerston speak nineteenth century Gloucestershire English.

One small criticism: in the discussion of the vocabulary the author makes note of a few items that if she was more familiar with Cook Islands English or Cook Islands Māori she would not have found remarkable. However, the scholarship behind this work is generally sound, and Hendery has provided a very interesting and accessible history of this little known corner of the Realm of New Zealand, and the unique variety of English spoken by its people.

## References

- Hendery, R. 2012. ‘The relationship between language ideology and language change in a small, isolated community: the case of Palmerston Island’. *Te Reo* 55: 25–49
- Hendery, R. 2013. ‘Early documents from Palmerston Island and their implications for the origins of Palmerston English’. *The Journal of Pacific History*, 48(3): 309–322.
- Hendery, R. 2015. *One Man is an Island: The Speech Community William Marsters Begat on Palmerston Island*. Battlebridge Publications, U.K.
- Hendery, R. 2016. ‘Untangling synchronic and diachronic variation: verb agreement in Palmerston English’. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 36(3): 429–450.
- Hendery, R., Mühlhäusler, P., and Nash, J. 2015. ‘Sometime is lies’. In Gounder, F., editor, *Narrative and Identity Construction in the Pacific Islands*, volume 21 of *Studies in Narrative*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam ; Philadelphia. 101–116

