

## DAVID ARMITAGE

Simon Winchester  
PACIFIC

The Ocean of the Future  
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The Pacific has long had a great future. Starting in the 1850s, American and Japanese commentators hailed it as “the chief theatre of events in the world’s hereafter”. The climax of a great three-act drama was arriving: a “Pacific Age” to follow humanity’s “Mediterranean” and “Atlantic” phases. Prognoses about the Pacific rose and fell with the fates of Asian powers. In 1984, with Japan on his mind, Ronald Reagan thought the Pacific “where the future of the world lies”. In 2011, with China to the fore, Barack Obama agreed: “Here we see the future.” As 60 per cent of world GDP comes from the region and more than 50 per cent of global trade crosses the ocean, “the Pacific Age has now clearly arrived”, the *Economist* recently concluded.

Simon Winchester has followed the Pacific’s fortunes for more than twenty years. In *The Pacific* (1991), he tracked thickening connections in technology and transport, arms and entertainment, and discerned a rising “spirit of the Ocean” across the region. Only a year later, he offered a darker vision in *Pacific Nightmare*, a future fiction in which an American tactical nuclear strike narrowly averts a Third World War precipitated by the 1997 Hong Kong handover and Japanese intervention in an ensuing Chinese civil war. In *Pacific: The ocean of the future*, Winchester splits the difference. He fears geopolitical meltdown in the South China Sea but imagines more a convergence of cultures than a clash of civilizations. The Pacific may still be “the inland sea of Tomorrow’s World”. But what future, or futures, does it portend?

To get his arms around that question, Winchester has to shrink the world’s largest, oldest, deepest and most turbulent ocean to manageable proportions. He spans from 1950 and the start of nuclear testing, a date others have proposed as the onset of the Anthropocene, to the USS *Kitty Hawk*’s encounter with a Chinese submarine in 2006. He then picks ten key moments in the making of the modern Pacific, among them the takeoff of the Sony corporation and the spread of surfing from Hawaii; the arbitrary American division of the Korean peninsula and the beginnings of Sino-American naval rivalry; the impact of cyclones and the bleaching of coral; the rise of Australia and the ending of empires. His model is Stefan Zweig’s *Sternstunden der Menschheit* (1938), an eclectic array of ten “historical miniatures” such as Balboa’s first view of the Pacific, Handel’s Messiah and Dostoevsky’s death. It is not often a book contains its own review, but Winchester’s description of Zweig’s collection – “a tumbling mélange”, “quite charming” but “perhaps lacking in academic rigour” – could neatly sum up *Pacific*’s own virtues and shortcomings.

Winchester’s choice of episodes is idiosyncratic and unsystematic. There is much about the former outposts of empire (on which Winchester has written engagingly elsewhere), especially Hong Kong and Pitcairn.

The anglophone Pacific also bulks large: even committed Australophiles might wonder why the lucky country merits three chapters, on Cyclone Tracy (and world weather), the dismissal of Gough Whitlam (and Australia’s national character) and the Great Barrier Reef (harbinger of climate change). *Pacific* does cast its net wide to capture “silicon chips and surfboards, coral reefs and atom bombs, brutal dictators, fading empires, and the coming collision of the world’s superpowers”, as the subtitle of the American edition has it. Yet it lacks space for much that has shaped the present-day Pacific, from the Vietnam War to containerisation, as well as much that will form its future, including climate refugees, claims to native title and the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

*Pacific*’s great strength lies in Winchester’s reportage. What the book lacks in academic rigour – footnotes, for example – it makes up for in vigour. Winchester is an old Pacific hand and seems to have visited every locale in the book, save for the hydrothermal vents on the ocean floor. His breeziness will charm many readers but the politically sensitive will balk at the image of the Japanese electronics industry’s “tentacles” “slithering into existence”, with its echoes of Yellow Peril racism. They should also avoid the book’s conclusion hymning the alleged ameliorative effects of the East’s “ancient calming cultures” on brash Western modernity which should, nonetheless, “be sought after by all”. Such an imperious – even imperial – tone strikes a false note in a book that strives for sympathy with all the Pacific’s peoples, if not quite all its non-human inhabitants. “Maybe no anchovies will ever again be caught off Peru. Maybe the forests of Sarawak will be consumed by fire”, he muses before imagining the ocean as “the world’s pacifier”, soaking up its greenhouse gases. Or perhaps it will be the theatre of American and Chinese armageddon, a truly unpacific Pacific? In the end, Winchester’s conclusions point in as many directions as his disparate case studies. As the science-fiction writer William Gibson might say, the Pacific’s future is already here: it’s just not evenly distributed.