

Book review

**Verguet's Sketchbook: A Marist
Missionary Artist in 1840s Oceania.**

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In this photograph, I am placing two small cowrie shells from Makira (Solomon Islands) on the tomb of Léopold Verguet (1817-1914), a Catholic missionary who made the first extensive ethnographic study of the people of Makira. With this gesture I was, or so I imagined, reuniting old friends, as well as paying my respects to this remarkable figure, whose life and work took Europe into the Pacific and brought the Pacific back to Europe.

I feel I have known Verguet for many years. We 'met' in the University of Chicago library where, as a post-graduate preparing for anthropological fieldwork on Makira, I discovered his 1885 article in a musty old number of *Revue d'Ethnographie*. This led me on to the slim but invaluable extent of his wider corpus, which includes the oldest substantial European record of the Arosi—the very people among whom I was planning to do my research. Now, nearly thirty years on, Verguet's work remains for me a rich source of information and pleasure, comprising not only detailed descriptions of mid-nineteenth century village life, feasting, dancing, fishing, craftsmanship, and mortuary practices, but also a collection of vivid sketches and watercolour illustrations, extensively annotated with local language terms.

Although Verguet has long been a fascination of mine, I have tended to assume that I am the extent of his following in the Anglophone world. I am delighted, therefore, to draw PISUKI members' attention to *Verguet's Sketchbook*, an English-language publication that introduces Verguet to a wider audience.

Between 1845 and 1847, Verguet served as a member of the first Catholic mission to Melanesia, travelling among and living at diverse locations in Australia, Solomon Islands, New Zealand, and New Caledonia. *Verguet's Sketchbook* tells the story of this mission, often through lively and moving extracts from Verguet's letters, but as the title suggests, the book's main purpose is to showcase Verguet's pictorial travelogue. The volume includes reproductions of Verguet's maps and his



Michael Scott at St Michel Cemetery, Carcassonne, France, January 2015. (K. L. Ovist photo)

captivating sketches of artefacts, events, landscapes, and bird life. Its presentation of Verguet's sympathetic portraits of individuals is its greatest strength, however, we meet named Pacific Islanders face to face.

Verguet spent no more than two years in the Pacific, but as the authors observe, he continued to reflect on his experiences, especially his year among the Arosi, for decades. When he returned to his native Carcassonne in the late 1840s, he brought back examples of the kinds of objects he had sketched—stone axes, spears, war clubs and so on. He donated some of these to museums, but he also kept a collection around him all his life, and it has been speculated that some of Verguet's Pacific artefacts made their way into the hands of the surrealists in the 1920s.

Ancestral forms from the Pacific have worked their way into European cultural heritage, and the exchange continues. When I visited France earlier this year, I went to Verguet's ancestral home, thinking of Arosi, and when I laid my shells on his resting place, Makira and Carcassonne came together again.

Verguet's Sketchbook is published by ATF Press, 2014. 96 pp. paperback, AU\$35.95
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