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The Man Who Was Reputed to Be King: David Dean O'Keefe

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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

The Man Who Was Reputed to be King

David Dean O'Keefe

David Dean O'Keefe, a tall, burly Irishman with a temper to match his flaming hair, was a successful 19th-century copra merchant based in Yap, with a trade circle that encompassed western Micronesia. In the eyes of many Westerners, however, he was much more: he was reputed to be a king. Even before his death in 1901, after 30 years of commercial dominance in the area, the man had begun to assume mythic proportions. Georg Hoff, a Norwegian fortune-seeker whom O'Keefe hired just before his death at sea, wrote with awe of his employer that he 'has gradually taken possession of one island after the other, so by now they are his property and no one can take them from him. He has unlimited favour down there and is called "The King of the Cannibal Islands"'.¹

The fictionalised biography by Klingman and Green a half century later, *His Majesty O'Keefe*, echoes these tales while colouring the popular understanding of the man ever since.² True to its title, this book presents O'Keefe as ruler of the Micronesian islands in which he traded — 'King of Yap, Monarch of Mapia, Sovereign of Sonsorol'.³ An article in a New York newspaper two years after his death assured its readers that 'O'Keefe was the ruler of thousands of people. They were untutored and savage, but they revered him, and his law was theirs'.⁴ If monarchs require thrones, O'Keefe had one 'and enjoyed all the privileges and pleasures that properly appertain to royalty', not to mention a 'standing army of twelve naked savages'.⁵ His wealth may have been due in great measure to his success as a merchant, but it was steadily increasing 'through the gifts of his half-savage subjects'.⁶ With press notices like these, small wonder that O'Keefe's descendants were visiting Yap to claim his fortune for 50 years after his death.⁷

The island of Yap, the headquarters of his trading emporium, was a confluence of Western and Asian commercial interests and political aspirations in the last quarter of the 19th century. According to Klingman and Green, O'Keefe dominated these interests as easily as he did his 'half-savage subjects'.

¹ George Hoff to parents, 25 Apr. 1901; correspondence is preserved in Historic Preservation Office, Yap.

² Lawrence Klingman and Gerald Green, *His Majesty O'Keefe* (New York 1950). The book, which was based on such factual information as the authors had available but heavily fictionalised, was turned into a movie of the same name, filmed in Fiji and released in 1953.

³ Mapia and Sonsorol are small atolls in the area. Klingman and Green, *His Majesty O'Keefe*, vii.

⁴ 'An Irishman Who Became King', *New York Daily Tribune*, 19 Apr. 1903.

⁵ *New York Daily Tribune*, 10 Oct. 1903. For further fantasies see Lawrence R. Maner, 'Stranger than Robinson Crusoe', syndicated article for Hearst Publications, 6 Feb. 1903.

⁶ *Savannah Morning News*, 24 Jul. 1904.

⁷ I acknowledge the assistance of two individuals who for years have researched O'Keefe's life: Don Evans, a longtime resident of Yap, who has memorialised the Irish trader by designing and constructing three commercial buildings that are throwbacks to O'Keefe's era; and Janet Butler, married to the great grandson of O'Keefe's daughter in Savannah, who spent years collecting material on O'Keefe and did a dissertation on the subject.

The Dutch were dumbfounded by him; the Spaniards feared him; the Germans hated him; the British mistrusted him; the Japanese blackguarded him. His own country, the United States, ignored him until after his death; had it not, the history of the late Pacific war might have been vastly different.⁸

O'Keefe was in his own day well known in Pacific trading circles, but he gained legendary status following his death.⁹ The myth has eclipsed the man. Because many details of his life remain obscure, I was obliged to refer to Klingman and Green's half-fictional account 25 years ago as I was writing my history of precolonial Micronesia.¹⁰ This article, then, is an attempt to rescue O'Keefe from the tangle of legends and half-truths that grew up around him, often the result of his own artifices, and to recover the man who played such a central role in the early Micronesian copra trade.

David Dean O'Keefe was born in southern Ireland in 1824, according to the US immigration document.¹¹ Like many of his compatriots who struggled through the potato famine, he looked across the Atlantic for the opportunities that were denied him in his own country. Soon after his arrival in New York in March 1848 aboard the *Sir Robert Peel*, he moved to southern Georgia, where he took a job laying railroad ties. Soon tiring of this, he turned to the sea as his livelihood, working his way up from an apprentice seaman aboard windjammers to a captain's berth on a Savannah coastal steamer. Rumour had it that he was engaged in blockade running during the Civil War when Union ships cordoned off Southern ports.¹² Was it to mislead the victorious forces and obscure his shady past that in 1867, just two years after the war, he claimed in an affidavit that he was only 24 years old — supposedly too young to have held command of a hostile vessel?¹³ Whatever the reason, this was just the first of many self-serving fabrications.

O'Keefe continued to skipper cargo ships out of Savannah — as master of the trading schooner *Anna Sims* in early 1866, and a year later as skipper of a British schooner engaged in three-way trade with Nassau and Matanzas, a province of Cuba.¹⁴ His cargo was rum and sugar in a trade cycle that would, in an earlier day, have included slaves from West Africa. O'Keefe's shipping run would have brought him to semi-tropical islands covered with coconut palms, a harbinger of and perhaps an enticement to the life that he would soon be living.

A few years later, in April 1869, O'Keefe married Catherine Masters, a slight woman nearly 20 years younger than him, but possessed of a fiery temper, as she is remembered in Savannah. If these recollections are accurate, family life must have been tempestuous for O'Keefe, who was hotheaded and explosive himself. The couple soon produced a daughter whom they named Louisa Veronica. Lulu, as she was called, wore a patch over her right eye because of a childhood accident and reportedly inherited her parents'

⁸ Klingman and Green, *His Majesty O'Keefe*, vii.

⁹ The suggestion has even been made that the popular show tune 'I've got Rings on My Fingers', written in 1909 shortly after the O'Keefe story gained notoriety, is based on O'Keefe; Dave Brezing, "'Queen Kate' Still Rules from Century-old Tale', *St Augustine Record*, 7 Feb. 2003.

¹⁰ Francis X. Hezel, *The First Taint of Civilization: a history of the Caroline and Marshall Islands in pre-colonial days, 1521–1885* (Honolulu 1983).

¹¹ The Passenger Arrival Records, preserved in the US National Archives, Washington, list David O'Keefe, aged 24, as arriving New York on 30 Mar. 1848. An unnamed Dutch account, mentioned by Theo Wettstein (pers. comm., 4 Jun. 1984), gives his birthdate as 1820. In an affidavit sworn by O'Keefe, 1 Jul. 1867, to W.C. Cosins, British Consul, filed in the Georgia Historical Society, he claims to have arrived in the US in 1856 and to have been about 13 years old at the time of his arrival, thus representing 1843 or so as the year of his birth.

¹² Janet Butler, *East meets West: desperately seeking David Dean O'Keefe from Savannah to Yap*, D Ed dissertation, Georgia Southern University (Statesboro GA 2001), 78–9.

¹³ O'Keefe affidavit, 1 Jul. 1967.

¹⁴ *Savannah Daily Herald*, 4 Aug. 1865 and 15 Jan. 1866; *Savannah National Republican*, 9 Dec. 1965; Virginia S Wood, 'Ship Passenger List, Savannah, Georgia, 1820–1868', *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 54 (1966), 2.

choleric disposition. Years later she married a semi-professional baseball player named Frank Butler, who eventually deserted her.¹⁵

Even before his marriage, in February 1866, a disaster occurred that would change the course of O'Keefe's life: the killing of a crew member aboard his ship, *Anna Sims*. As the Savannah papers record the incident (quite differently from the way it is represented by Klingman and Green), an argument broke out after O'Keefe accused the sailor William Geary of some minor infraction and angrily struck him. According to the newspaper accounts, Geary then gave his captain 'a severe thrashing'. O'Keefe picked himself off the deck, rushed to his cabin for his pistol, and as he emerged tried to fire at the offender. Twice the pistol failed to discharge: Geary rushed at O'Keefe before he fired again, but was stopped by a bullet to the forehead.¹⁶ O'Keefe was imprisoned in the county jail, where he remained for eight months before he was acquitted of murder on the grounds of self-defence. The incident made O'Keefe none too popular around the wharves of Savannah, and there was speculation that he was marked as a target of revenge by the family of the sailor he had killed.¹⁷

O'Keefe may have had difficulty getting work after his release. From short notices in the papers, it would appear that he was reduced to ferrying well-to-do townspeople to vacation spots on day-excursions.¹⁸ His finances must have been none too good, for he had lost a considerable sum in a failed investment.¹⁹ He was wary of American law courts, perhaps even disenchanted with the American justice system, as his identification of himself as a British national in his affidavit of 1867 suggests. Overall, life was bleak for O'Keefe in late 1866. He struggled on for a few more years before, in 1871, he decided to leave Savannah and seek his fortune elsewhere.²⁰

With little fanfare, O'Keefe shipped aboard the *Belvidere*, bound for New York and Liverpool, as first mate. He stayed with the ship when it sailed for Manila and might have continued to serve if he had not had differences of opinion with the captain. In Manila, he caught a ship bound for Hong Kong, arriving in September 1871. From Hong Kong, he informed his wife that he planned to return to Savannah very soon and sent her a gold draft for \$167, while mysteriously urging her not to inform people that he had left the *Belvidere*.²¹

According to the story that had gained currency in Savannah, O'Keefe had drifted to Yap, washing up half-dead after the *Belvidere* was wrecked in a storm.²² The truth is less dramatic, but more revealing. O'Keefe sailed from Hong Kong on a trading voyage in early October 1871, but had to return because of a storm and the death of its captain.²³ O'Keefe told his wife that he was planning another short voyage and

¹⁵ Butler, *East meets West*, 79–80, 88–9; Janet Butler, pers. comm., 19 Jun. 1995.

¹⁶ *Savannah Daily Herald*, 12 Feb. 1866, and 13 Feb. 1866.

¹⁷ *Savannah Daily Herald*, 21 Feb. 1866; Butler, *East meets West*, 81–2.

¹⁸ *Savannah Morning News*, 16 Jul. 1869.

¹⁹ Janet Butler, pers. comm., 17 Apr. 1994.

²⁰ In Klingman and Green, *His Majesty O'Keefe*, 14–17, O'Keefe is presented as fearful that an intemperate seaman whom O'Keefe had thrown off his ship after the man had taunted him with murder might have drowned. In other versions, O'Keefe slipped away after he killed a man in a duel, the last one fought in Savannah, or left hurriedly after killing a man in a bar fight outside Piggy McBride's Saloon (see 'Life history of King O'Keefe as I knew him', Feb. 1957, from Walter Hartridge's personal papers, Savannah). There would seem to very little substance to any of these dramatic accounts of O'Keefe's departure.

²¹ O'Keefe to wife, 20 Sept. 1871, in possession of Janet Butler. The last request of his wife is odd. If O'Keefe were making a quick getaway from Savannah to escape the law or his enemies, one might think he would have been careful about letting people know that he had embarked on the ship, not disembarked from it.

²² This story seems to have originated with Klingman and Green's book, although it was later picked up and cited authoritatively by the American press years later at the time of O'Keefe's death.

²³ O'Keefe to wife, 14 Oct. 1871.

had to 'repair some before I start again on our home'.²⁴ In what should have been a hint as to the direction of his thinking, he asked Catherine to send his master's licence. Clearly less homesick than three weeks earlier, he was weighing commercial possibilities in Asia with an eye to making the money there that he could not earn in Savannah.

In June 1872, O'Keefe, employed by an individual named Field, with his headquarters in Hong Kong, wrote to Catherine again, informing her that he was preparing to make a trade run with a cargo of teas and silks on which he stood to make a profit of five or six thousand dollars. He had been given a ship by his employer, the first he had ever owned. If his trading venture was successful, he added, he expected to be home by Christmas.²⁵ In fact, he was home by Christmas or shortly afterwards — not in Savannah, but in the small island of Yap that would be his residence for the next 30 years. By late 1872 or very early 1873, he had arrived there on a Chinese junk named after his wife, to begin trading.²⁶

O'Keefe was not the first white trader on Yap. During the previous decade Andrew Cheyne and Alfred Tetens, trade captains in the China market, frequently visited the island group to gather *bêche-de-mer*. Just a few years before O'Keefe's arrival, in 1869, the German firm of Godeffroy & Son established the first permanent trade station.²⁷ Yap, with a population of 8,000, may have had sporadic outbreaks of hostility in the past but intervillage warfare had ended. There was no single ruler over the entire island; each village had its own chief, but was ranked according to the rigid island-wide caste system that remains in force today. Yapese people, considered some of the most traditional in Micronesia, have always had a reputation for tolerating outsiders while generally disregarding them. They dressed in island apparel, men in loincloths and women in grass skirts, cultivating taro and fishing, and occasionally engaging in social functions that involved the exchange of ceremonial money.

At first, Yap was probably no more than a convenient trade station for O'Keefe. There was abundant copra, to be sure, but competition was growing as German firms established outlets. Now employed by a different firm, the Celebes South Seas Trading Company, O'Keefe seems to have floundered while trying to get business going. In early 1875, seemingly at the request of his employers, he made an exploratory trip to the Hermit Islands to collect *bêche-de-mer* and lost so many of the labourers to sickness that he never afterwards visited Melanesia.²⁸ By the end of 1875, the company for which O'Keefe had been working was disbanded, following the death of a partner from an axe blow to the head during a fight in Palau.²⁹ O'Keefe never again worked for another firm.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ O'Keefe to wife, 7 Jun. 1872. Although O'Keefe sent his wife a draft for \$150 with this letter, he is querulous with her over the accident that resulted in the loss of their daughter's eye and chides her for not informing him of the accident sooner. Had she told him of the accident when it first happened, he claims that he would now be on his way home.

²⁶ All of O'Keefe's later depositions before the British authorities at the visit of HMS *Espiègle* in 1883 suggest that he began working on Yap in late 1872 or very early 1873. He seems to have arrived there first in the junk *Catherine*. See J.R. LeHunte to G.W. DesVoeux, 'Report of the Cruise by HMS *Espiègle*, 10 Oct. 1883', Sydney, Mitchell Library.

²⁷ Francis X. Hezel, *The First Taint of Civilization*, 267–8; Francis X. Hezel, 'A Yankee trader in Yap', *The Journal of Pacific History*, 10 (1975), 5–6.

²⁸ Statement of D.D. O'Keefe, Encl. On Judicial proceedings in J.R. LeHunte to G.W. DesVoeux, 'Report of the Cruise by HMS *Espiègle*, 10 Oct. 1883, Sydney, Mitchell Library.

²⁹ Eduard Hershheim, *South Sea Merchant* (Boroko, PNG 1983), 14–15, 28.

His interests having narrowed exclusively to copra, O'Keefe set about building a web of trade stations on Yap and new posts on Palau and other islands.³⁰ On his runs to Singapore and Hong Kong, he began to recruit agents to man his new trade posts and seamen to staff the string of sailing vessels that he was adding to his fleet: the *Seabird* in 1876, the *Wrecker* in 1877, the *Queen* in 1878, and the *Lilla* in 1880.³¹ The success of O'Keefe's trade in Yap was due to the clever trade stratagem for which he became famous. Motivating Yapese to engage in production for foreign traders had always been a challenge, for the people never exhibited the passionate desire for Western goods (alcohol and tobacco excepted) that people from most other islands displayed. The Yapese were stubbornly proud of their traditions. Recognising this, O'Keefe exploited traditional needs rather than creating new ones. He offered to assist in transporting on his ships the huge limestone discs, some weighing a ton or two and measuring over six feet in diameter, that they quarried in Palau and rafted back to Yap as traditional money. The chiefs eagerly agreed to the terms that O'Keefe laid down — namely, that the stone money would be released to its owners only after full payment was made in copra.³²

A key cog in O'Keefe's network was the tiny island of Mapia, then called St David's Island, at the western extreme of the Carolines, 400 miles south of Palau. Sometime during this period, O'Keefe first visited the island and recognised the commercial potential of the atoll, thickly wooded with coconut palms.³³ There he found Harry Terry, an Englishman in his 60s and a former convict who had lived on Nauru for over 20 years and married there, left under threat of his life to spend a few years on Kosrae, and was brought to Mapia as agent of Capelle & Co.³⁴ With Terry were his wife and daughter and a force of 30 Nauruans who were making copra; there were virtually no native-born Mapians on the island, the result of losses suffered during earlier raids from nearby Ternate.³⁵ The island, although lavishly endowed with coconut trees, lacked a sufficient workforce. In 1878, O'Keefe took out a lease on the island for five years at \$50 annually and brought in Islanders from the nearby atolls of Sonsorol and Puloana to make copra at a regular salary — men receiving six dollars a month and women five.³⁶ The island's productivity increased when O'Keefe struck a new agreement with the Yapese chiefs to step up his ferrying service if a regular supply of Yapese labourers could be procured to serve six months on Mapia. By 1880, this tiny atoll, little more than a sandspit, was producing 400,000 pounds of copra a year, five times as much as the entire high island of Pohnpei.³⁷ Mapia, converted into a coconut plantation, had become the crown jewel of O'Keefe's expanding trade network.

³⁰ O'Keefe apparently made Hong Kong his base of operations until he went into business for himself. He claimed in his testimony before the British in 1883 that he had lived in Yap 'off and on between 8 or 9 years'; statement of D.D. O'Keefe, in 'Report of the Cruise by HMS *Espiègle*'.

³¹ O'Keefe's ships are mentioned in various sources, especially the documents enclosed with J.R. LeHunte, 'Report of the Cruise by HMS *Espiègle*, 10 Oct. 1883'. A compilation of the voyages made by O'Keefe's ships may be found in Francis X. Hezel, *Foreign Ships in Micronesia* (Saipan 1979).

³² Hezel, *The First Taint of Civilization*, 265–6.

³³ In his testimony before the British in 1883, O'Keefe claims that he first visited Mapia in 1878 (statement of O'Keefe, 'Report of the Cruise by HMS *Espiègle*, 10 Oct. 1883'), but Kubary writes that O'Keefe began trading at Mapia in 1875 (J.S. Kubary, 'Notizen über einen Ausflug nach dem westlichen Karolinen', *Ethnographische Beiträge zur Kenntnis des Karolinen Archipels* (Leiden 1889), 83). O'Keefe may not have concluded arrangements for the formal lease of the island until 1878, but it is almost certain that he was visiting Mapia well before that date. His oldest children are thought to have been born in 1874 and 1875, suggesting that he was visiting the island by at least early 1874.

³⁴ Statement of John McGuinness, 'Report of the Cruise by HMS *Espiègle*, 10 Oct. 1883'; James G. Goodenough, 'Proceedings of HMS *Rosario* in the South Sea Islands', *Queensland Government Gazette*, 17: 96 (1871–78).

³⁵ Statement of O'Keefe, 'Report of the Cruise by HMS *Espiègle*, 10 Oct. 1883'; Kubary, *Notizen*, 83.

³⁶ Kubary, *Notizen*, 83.

³⁷ Hezel, *The First Taint of Civilization*, 267.

Although O'Keefe may have been drawn to Mapia for its copra, he found a good deal more there: a couple of additional wives. With Catherine thousands of miles away and now a fading memory, O'Keefe married Harry Terry's daughter Charlotte during an early trip to the island in the mid-1870s. Yet Charlotte remained on Mapia with her father and the Nauruan workforce, sharing time with her husband only on his periodic visits three or four times a year. Meanwhile, O'Keefe — under the influence of magic charms, Yapese say — whisked off Charlotte's aunt, a woman named Dolibu, to Yap and installed her as his public wife and mistress of his estate on Terang, a tiny island near the main harbour at Yap.³⁸ While Dolibu would not tolerate mention of Charlotte in her house, her niece simply had to make the best of her situation and suffer in silence. Harry Terry, Charlotte's father but O'Keefe's employee, was in no position to complain. As O'Keefe raised his families — three children by Charlotte and five by Dolibu — he also sent regular cheques to Savannah for the support of Catherine and Lulu.

O'Keefe's headquarters on Terang was a showpiece of tropical elegance with a two-storey red brick house, a spacious warehouse, living quarters for the workers and a long stone wharf. Over the island, in place of the Union Jack that once flew there, was O'Keefe's own ensign — the initials OK in black on a white background.³⁹ The home was furnished with a large dining room table, silver utensils, elegant bookshelves and a piano.⁴⁰ The house had a well-stocked library, including most of the British and American classics, as O'Keefe enjoyed a reputation, apparently deserved, as an avid reader.⁴¹ Dolibu, very much the mistress of the manor, had two cooks and a houseboy to help her prepare meals and care for the place. O'Keefe, always the hearty and garrulous host, entertained whenever there was a ship in port. On one such occasion, he invited two officers from the *Dona Bartola*, along with Evans Lewis, who had been a resident trader in the outer islands for years before moving to Guam. For dinner, O'Keefe served 'four kinds of meat, tinned peas, beans, asparagus and cabbage', after which they settled in for cards and beer until late. The next evening, they continued the party, 'but this time with singing and music'.⁴² On such occasions, O'Keefe's hearty laugh could be heard far across the bay.⁴³

Around the grounds were the ragtag collection of Chinese, Malaysians, Sonsorlese and other employees.⁴⁴ As often as not, there would be Yapese hanging around, swigging rum in boisterous drinking circles, especially when the ships were loading. Their wages included an ample supply of liquor, O'Keefe's concession to the cost of keeping them on the workforce. 'Each man is paid 50 cents a day besides his grub and some drink', a visitor noted; 'And this same drink means enough rum or stuff to make at least half a dozen of them uselessly drunk every day.'⁴⁵

By the early 1880s, Yap's vigorous copra trade had made it the commercial centre of the Carolines. In less than a decade, Yap had been transformed from a remote

³⁸ Janet Butler, *East Meets West*, 43–5. Dolibu was assumed by many to be the daughter of Harry Terry, O'Keefe's agent on Mapia. Only after the visit by Walter Hartridge to Yap after O'Keefe's death did it become public information that the trader had two island wives in addition to his wife in Savannah. Extensive interviews by Don Evans and Janet Butler have clarified to some extent the relationship between Dolibu and Charlotte as well as the names of the children by each.

³⁹ Entry for 3 July, in John Rabe, *Private Journals, Hawaiian and Pacific Collection*, University of Hawai'i Library, Honolulu (hereinafter Rabe's journals); Hezel, *The First Taint of Civilization*, 266.

⁴⁰ The Terang residence and its nearby buildings is described in Janet Butler, *East meets West*, 63–4.

⁴¹ O'Keefe's reading habit is remarked on by F.W. Christian, *Caroline Islands* (London 1899), 316; see also *New York Daily Tribune*, 10 Oct. 1903.

⁴² Entry for 29 Aug. 1890, in Rabe's journals.

⁴³ Theo Wettstein, pers. comm., 11 Dec. 1976.

⁴⁴ Francis X. Hezel, *Strangers in their own Land: a century of colonial rule in the Caroline and Marshall Islands* (Honolulu 1995), 17.

⁴⁵ Entry for 29 Aug. 1890, Rabe's journals.

outpost to the entrepot of western Micronesia. Between 20 and 30 vessels visited each year, and a large steamer called every two months to pick up copra and discharge trade goods. Yap even had a coaling station to service Spanish steamers on their run from Guam to Manila. Yearly copra exports averaged 1,500 tons, far more than any other island in Micronesia, even Jaluit, the island in the Marshalls that served as the major trading depot in eastern Micronesia. Three major concerns besides O'Keefe's were operating on the island: Deutsche Handels- und Plantagen-Gesellschaft, which had taken over Godeffroy & Son's holdings when the latter was dissolved in 1879; the large German firm of Hensheim with stations throughout the Pacific; and a private operation founded by Crayton Holcomb, an American who had begun operations on Yap a year or two after O'Keefe.⁴⁶ With the rapid expansion of trade, Yap acquired a colony of about a dozen foreigners, most of them traders, with many more moving in and out freely.⁴⁷

Despite the competition, O'Keefe continued to dominate the copra trade in the western Carolines. As often as not, he exported more copra than the other principal firms combined; in 1883, an off year for Yap, he handled 300 tons out of 550.⁴⁸ His monopoly of the stone money trade gave him an enormous advantage, but readiness to adjust to island ways and his tact in dealing with Yapese were, at bottom, responsible for his success. John Rabe, a guest, relates that on one occasion, when he was in a rush to finish loading his copra, he bet his crew that they could not finish by the end of the day. The wager was ten bottles of rum from O'Keefe against two pigs put up by the crew. O'Keefe lost, of course, and got the work done on time, but Rabe's comment is telling: 'Had O'Keefe said that he believed they could finish today, the Yap men would not exert themselves at all.'⁴⁹ With his business rivals, in contrast, he could drive a hard bargain. Once, when a steamer owned by a rival firm arrived to pick up copra and could collect none from its own agents, they asked O'Keefe to sell them his own copra so that they would not have to return empty. O'Keefe agreed, but only on his own terms; he sold his whole stock for 50% higher than the going price of \$30 a ton.⁵⁰

For all his commercial success, O'Keefe suffered reverses, none more serious or better publicised than the loss of his trading schooner *Lilla* when it went aground off northern Babeldaob in Palau in 1880. When the wreck was pillaged by the people of Babeldaob, despite his threats to call in a British warship to effect reprisals, he could only await the British naval authorities. The threatened ship arrived, five months later, and levied damages against the offending parties at the insistence of O'Keefe, who identified himself as a British subject, switching nationalities once again. The indemnity was never paid, even after the return of the same warship the following year. The British captain, enraged at the obstinate refusal of the people to pay their debt, landed troops and blew up 14 of the largest clubhouses. The British may have had the satisfaction of teaching the recalcitrant people a lesson, but O'Keefe never recovered any damages.⁵¹

As his business prospered and his supremacy over the trade was established, O'Keefe attracted envy and hostility. Crayton Holcomb, a fellow American who began trading on Yap about the same time as O'Keefe but enjoyed little success, probably could be counted among the most bitter of his enemies. One of the trading agents on Yap observed

⁴⁶ Holcomb's career is traced in Francis X. Hezel, 'A Yankee trader in Yap'.

⁴⁷ Hezel, *First Taint of Civilization*, 281.

⁴⁸ LeHunte to DesVoeux, 'Report of the Cruise by HMS *Espègle*'.

⁴⁹ Entry for 6 Sept. 1890, Rabe's journals.

⁵⁰ Entry for 23 Aug. 1890, Rabe's journals. Rabe also supplies the market price of copra, bought and sold, in 1890; see entry for 1 May 1890, Rabe's journals.

⁵¹ Hezel, *First Taint of Civilization*, 277-9.

that, although O'Keefe once brought in most of the liquor and supplies for his fellow traders, 'There is now not a white man on the island who speaks to O'Keefe.'⁵² An Australian visitor, the supercargo of a trading vessel that had laid over for a few weeks, put it even more strongly: 'He is at war with all the other whites on the Island, all of whom thoroughly detest him, charging him with diverse heinous sins and shortcomings and abusing him soundly on all occasions.'⁵³

The 'heinous sins' were recorded when another British warship, HMS *Espiègle*, paid a visit in August 1883. O'Keefe, always a target of the foreign community, was named as the defendant in four of the five cases investigated by the British. Holcomb accused him of defrauding a former employee of back pay and of failure to reimburse Holcomb for 25 tons of copra that he had turned over to O'Keefe for shipment. A young British sailor charged him with shooting at Yapese with the intent to kill when a white supercargo was attacked by the brother of a Yapese man he had beaten. The most serious complaint, however, was introduced by a former employee, John McGuiness, who had been aboard the *Lilla* when it was wrecked in Palau. The list of atrocities ascribed to O'Keefe was long: flogging Islanders as they hung by their thumbs, throwing labourers overboard in shark-infested waters, abducting girls and forcing them to become mistresses of his agents, abandoning his labourers on Mapia, where they were shot or beaten to death by drunken agents, and shooting at defecting workers as they tried to swim ashore.⁵⁴

The charges were judged by British authorities to be totally unfounded; their report concluded that O'Keefe had been maliciously wronged by his rivals owing to their 'jealousy at the success of his relations with the natives'.⁵⁵ The British, observing that the rest of O'Keefe's business dealings were above reproach, ended their report with the observation that 'his industry and energy are doing good to the natives and their island as well as himself'.⁵⁶ O'Keefe had his name cleared, but he would have to fight similar charges brought by disgruntled former employees in the courts of Hong Kong.⁵⁷

Not all the white traders were so easily acquitted of charges made against them. In March 1883, a few months before the arrival of the British warship, the white community banded together to make a retaliatory expedition after one of their number, Walter Amery, a trader for one of the German firms, was attacked by Yapese for failing to deliver a rifle he had promised them in payment for copra. The Yapese had dragged the trader to the lagoon and held his head under water until he was half-drowned before releasing him with a warning to make good on his promise. When Amery reported this, the foreign community set out, with Holcomb at their head, on a punitive expedition against the village of the offenders; O'Keefe alone refused. Because the Yapese refused to give up the guilty parties, the whites torched three men's houses and kept up a steady rifle fire into the bush to frighten the people.⁵⁸ In the proceedings aboard the *Espiègle*, the Englishmen involved were found guilty of a felony and fined, while the Americans, although exempt from discipline, received a scolding rebuke. Meanwhile, O'Keefe's refusal to participate in the raid and his testimony against those who did, drove a deeper wedge between him and the other foreign traders. Even so, his unwillingness to take up arms against the villagers only enhanced his reputation for even-handedness among the people with whom he worked.

⁵² LeHunte to DesVoeux, 'Report of the Cruise by HMS *Espiègle*', par. 53.

⁵³ Entry for 11 Mar. 1883, in R.S. Swanston, journals, Australian National University, Division of Pacific and Asian History, Records Room, Canberra.

⁵⁴ LeHunte to DesVoeux, 'Report of the Cruise by HMS *Espiègle*'; Hezel, *First Taint of Civilization*, 283.

⁵⁵ LeHunte to DesVoeux, 'Report of the Cruise by HMS *Espiègle*', par. 52.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, par. 53.

⁵⁷ See, for example, *Hongkong Telegraph*, 17 and 18 Apr. 1885, for further charges lodged against O'Keefe.

⁵⁸ Hezel, *First Taint of Civilization*, 285.

The trade war on Yap intensified in the late 1880s when the Jaluit Company, formed of a merger of Deutsche Handels- und Plantagen-Gesellschaft in 1887, tried to extend its activities to the island. The consolidation had driven out the smaller trading concerns and narrowed the field to two: Jaluit Company and O'Keefe. In an effort to pry trade from O'Keefe, the Jaluit Company matched him move for move. If O'Keefe established a trade station off the islet of Maap in the north, the Jaluit Company opened a larger station on the other side of the island. O'Keefe's success rested on his arrangements with the chiefs to carry stone money, so the Jaluit Company challenged his lease on the quarry sites. As O'Keefe held exclusive trading rights to Mapia, the Jaluit Company contested those rights and made plans to land their own agent.⁵⁹

The Spanish governor, who had assumed office when the Carolines were annexed by Spain in 1886, looked on with concern. Spanish policy, set forth in the agreements giving it formal title to the islands, was to permit trading firms to operate freely as long as they recognised Spanish sovereignty. The two giants on Yap did so, but they also complained about government interference in their trading. O'Keefe and the Jaluit Company both complained that government agents were using their authority to force people to make copra for them; as a result, the people were unable to pay off the copra that was due the firms for goods already received.⁶⁰ The governor retaliated with accusations of his own. Governor Jose Montes de Oca's report of 1892 argued strongly for 'protecting the people against their exploiters'. Traders such as O'Keefe, he contended, were 'shamelessly taking advantage of the submissive temperament of the nations ... even to the point of plundering them'.⁶¹ To counter this 'exploitation', he encouraged a Spanish citizen, Manuel Villazon, to establish a trade station on Yap in partnership with one of the chiefs. The business was short-lived, however; it collapsed for lack of cash reserves within three years.⁶² Perhaps to neutralise future complaints, perhaps to gain preferential terms when the Spanish insisted on local trade involvement, O'Keefe wrote to Manila requesting that he be made an official citizen of Yap.⁶³ His request, however, was never acknowledged.

For all the bickering of the Spanish authorities, they were compelled to seek O'Keefe's assistance in times of crisis. He had advanced the Spanish colony provisions from his own supplies during the first few years when government ships ran twice a year and were often late.⁶⁴ In lieu of an effective Spanish military force, he was summoned to Palau in 1890 to put an end to raids on Angaur that had caused several deaths.⁶⁵ Six years later, he was deputised to arrest and bring back to Yap a Palauan chief who had killed some of the crew of a schooner from Manila.⁶⁶ Even the Capuchin missionaries, who had begun work on Yap in 1886, called on O'Keefe when they decided to expand to Palau. In April 1891, on a run to Palau to quarry stone money, his schooner *Santa Cruz* carried four Capuchins to open the first mission on that island.

Notwithstanding the challenge from the Jaluit Company, O'Keefe's business was doing rather well in the early 1890s. His schooners, *Jenny* and *Santa Cruz*, were making the circuit of the more distant islands at which he collected copra and paying regular visits to

⁵⁹ Hezel, *Strangers in their own Land*, 70–1.

⁶⁰ Abe Webb, US Consul, 30 Jan. 1892, Philippine National Archives, Manila, leg. 5, exp. 16; Hezel, *Strangers in their own Land*, 17.

⁶¹ Jose Montes de Oca, 'Carolinas occidentales: La Isla de Yap', *Boletín de la Sociedad Geográfica de Madrid*, 24 (1893), 256; cited in Hezel, *Strangers in Their own Land*, 71.

⁶² Oca, 'Carolinas occidentales', 256; Hezel, *Strangers in their own Land*, 72.

⁶³ O'Keefe, 27 Dec. 1893, Philippine National Archives, Manila, leg. 5, exp. 24.

⁶⁴ Hezel, *Strangers in their own Land*, 17.

⁶⁵ Christian, *Caroline Islands*, 315; entry for 5 Jun. 1890, Rabe's journals.

⁶⁶ Christian, *ibid.*

Hong Kong and Manila, while 30 smaller boats moved around Yap picking up copra and discharging goods.⁶⁷ He also owned a small retail store called 'The Canteen', built of iron and located on the mainland across the bay from Terang.⁶⁸ There Yapese could buy gin or rum by the beer bottle for five cents.⁶⁹ In an earlier day, O'Keefe stoutly refused to sell alcohol to Yapese, but he had long since abandoned his principles and bowed to necessity. If Jaluit Company traders were selling guns and liquor, he would do the same to save his business.

Even so, his business was in serious trouble by 1895. Copra exports fell from about 1,500 tons a year in 1880 to half that amount 20 years later and, by 1901, Yap was only exporting 100 tons yearly. The principal reason for the decline was the introduction in 1895 of leaf lice, an insect that did serious damage to coconut palms. To compound the problem, Yap was hit by a severe typhoon in that year, another less serious typhoon in 1899, and a bad drought in 1900.⁷⁰ By the turn of the century, the copra trade was all but dead in Yap. Accordingly, O'Keefe's business shifted to general shipping.

Klingman and Green depict the German government, which acquired the Caroline Islands in 1899, as lending unqualified support for the German firms in a death struggle. In the book, O'Keefe is restricted in his trade, fined by German authorities and finally imprisoned. In fact, however, Yap had the most benevolent and capable of district officers in Otto Senfft, whose policies were as enlightened as those anywhere in the Pacific. O'Keefe and the German government were both struggling, in vain, to increase productivity through the last half of the 1890s. But the copra trade was moribund.

Meanwhile, O'Keefe found a new outlet for his boundless energy in the Catholic mission that had opened in 1886 at the arrival of a band of Capuchin priests and brothers. Born a Catholic, O'Keefe returned to his old faith; he, Dolibu and the children attended mass each Sunday, and several of his children were baptised and confirmed, according to parish records. Two of his younger sons attended the mission school, a departure from previous practice for O'Keefe, who provided formal education for his daughters but kept his sons close to his side to help with his business. O'Keefe was generous to the church, at one time donating a bull to the church, on another offering them a small boat, and again buying 200 raffle tickets to support a construction project in another village.⁷¹

Managing his two families — the one by Dolibu on Terang and the other by Charolotte on Mapia — must have required considerable time, not to mention delicacy. O'Keefe had sent his two oldest daughters, Eugenia and Jenny, one from each family, to a convent school in Hong Kong. The next oldest in the Terang family, Daisy, a girl with the reputation as a hellion, was not given the same opportunity until her sisters managed to pay her way to Hong Kong themselves. She almost certainly was not O'Keefe's own child, probably adopted and very likely the natural child of Theodor Weber, a German trader.⁷²

Keeping O'Keefe's children straight is a challenging task. While his three children by Lotte on Mapia — Jennie, Harry and Nellie — are easy to identify, the Terang

⁶⁷ Hezel, *Strangers in their own Land*, 17.

⁶⁸ Entry for 3 May 1890, Rabe's journals.

⁶⁹ Entry for 17 Jun. 1890, Rabe's journals.

⁷⁰ Reichstag, 'Denkschrift über die entwicklung des Schutzgebiets in Afrika und in der Südsee, 1900/01', *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlung des Reichstages. Anlageband* (Berlin 1901), 5307. See also Hezel, *Strangers in their own Land*, 74.

⁷¹ Entries for 3 May and 1 Jun. 1890, Rabe's journals; Butler, *East meets West*, 107–8.

⁷² Don Evans (pers. comm., 28 Sept. 2006) offers information on O'Keefe's older daughters based on an interview he conducted 12 years earlier with Betty Hagenbeck, the daughter of Jenny. It was Betty who suggested that Daisy's real father may have been Theodor Weber, an officer on a German ship.

household is more confusing. Most sources agree that O'Keefe had five children in his Terang family, although the names ascribed to them by different sources vary.⁷³ The most reliable listing, the product of years of research, may be the one in Butler's work: Eugenia, Daisy, Lily, Arthur and David Dean, with perhaps a seven- or eight-year age gap between Lily and Arthur.⁷⁴ Yet a number of other children in the Terang household are unexplained. Parish records in Yap list four more children bearing O'Keefe's name, all confirmed in the church: Joseph (1888), Henrique (1891), and Levia Corinna and Luisa (1902).⁷⁵ Henrique's mother, according to the parish records, was a woman by the name of Sandevath who was living on Mapia.⁷⁶ It is possible that Henrique, like some other children, was O'Keefe's offspring by a Sonsorolese woman living on Mapia. Some of the other children might have been adopted by O'Keefe. Indeed, O'Keefe told a visitor to Terang that he had taken in the neglected son of a friend living in Hong Kong to raise him in Yap.⁷⁷ An alternative explanation, of course, is that some might be O'Keefe's by a Chinese woman in Hong Kong. The confusion of O'Keefe's progeny, then, is compounded by the strong possibility that he had, besides his two local wives, other women in other ports.

O'Keefe left Yap for the last time in April 1901 bound for Hong Kong. After conducting his business there and preparing for his return voyage on the *Santa Cruz*, he was cleared to leave port on 4 May. Last-minute business may have delayed his departure a few days, however. He had to sign as a witness on divorce papers filed by Georg Hoff, a Norwegian who was signing on with O'Keefe as an agent on Yap. Hoff, deserted by his wife a year or two before, complained in a letter home that he was broke and unable to afford living in Hong Kong. In his aspirations to wealth, he had decided, like O'Keefe, to make his fortune in the Islands. Furthermore, he told his parents, he was planning to marry one of O'Keefe's younger daughters, a 'princess', as he put it. The future was bright with promise, he assured his family.⁷⁸

On 7 May 1901, O'Keefe left Hong Kong on his schooner *Santa Cruz*, along with two of his sons, Arthur and David, two crew members, and Georg Hoff. None were seen again; it is presumed that they met their end in a typhoon. That is the judgment of court hearings at Hong Kong regarding his estate.⁷⁹

Nonetheless, a simple conclusion to the story of a man like O'Keefe is incongruous. As there are different accounts of the way in which he reached Yap, so there are various tales of the way in which he departed. A Marine Corps surgeon on Guam between October 1901 and March 1902 testifies that sometime during that time a schooner sailed to Guam and asked permission to bury a body. The man, whom he identifies as O'Keefe, was clinging to the wreck of a vessel, half-dead from starvation and exposure, when he was

⁷³ Different lists of O'Keefe's children by Dolibu are found in various published sources: 'Far outpost of the O'Keefe empire', *Pacific Islands Monthly* (Jul. 1952), 69; 'Saga of a Seaman', *Micronesian Reporter* (Nov.–Dec. 1956), 14; Dean May, 'Captain O'Keefe — the king of Yap', *Argosy* (May 1969), 86. There is considerable variance among these lists and with both the Yap church records and the children mentioned on Terang in 1890 by John Rabe (entry for 20 Sept. 1890, Rabe's journals).

⁷⁴ Janet Butler, *East meets West*, 36. In some of the other sources cited in n. 72, the two youngest are listed as James and John, and Margaret is sometimes substituted for Lily.

⁷⁵ One of them may have been the boy whom is mentioned as living with O'Keefe on Terang at the time of Rabe's visit (entry for 3 May 1890, Rabe's journals). The two girls might be those two younger daughters of O'Keefe, aged 16 and 17, whom Georg Hoff thought of as marital prospects in 1901. No others among the children listed in the Terang or Mapia family fits this age category.

⁷⁶ Parish records, St Mary's Church, Yap.

⁷⁷ Entry for 3 May 1890, Rabe's journals.

⁷⁸ Georg Hoff to parents, 25 Apr. 1901 and 3 May 1901, Historic Preservation Office, Yap, Federated States of Micronesia.

⁷⁹ Undated clipping from a Hong Kong publication giving the court proceedings regarding the O'Keefe will, personal collection of Janet Butler.

picked up. Soon afterwards he died on board the schooner and, with the permission of military authorities, was buried on Guam.⁸⁰ With such an abundance of legends on O'Keefe's life, it is no surprise to come across a few on his disappearance. From a history book comes this version:

Even today some people on Yap say that King O'Keefe did not die in the great typhoon of 1901. The story is told that he went to a place in the Pacific to a secret island. There he made a new kingdom, and his children and grandchildren are sailing the sea to this day.⁸¹

Soon after his disappearance, claims from Savannah were made on 'the king's' estate, 'variously estimated to be worth from \$1,000,000 to \$3,000,000', and sometimes reported as high as \$10,000,000.⁸² O'Keefe had left a will, executed in Hong Kong on 20 February 1890, with two codicils added five years later.⁸³ The will left his house on Terang to Dolibu and bequeathed her an annuity for life; it also provided for six of his children in the Islands, while excluding Daisy, his adopted daughter, and a few of the other children who bore his name.⁸⁴

O'Keefe also included Louisa, his daughter in Savannah, but not his wife Catherine, who, on learning of the terms of the will, hired an attorney to challenge it. German law imposed limits on the disinheritance of a legal spouse, with the spouse entitled to no less than 50% of the estate unless the reason was clearly stated in the will — and there was no such statement. German law, which prevailed in Yap since 1899, also demanded that two years must elapse after the disappearance and presumed death of a person before the estate could be opened.

Walter Cathcart Hartridge, a junior partner in a prominent Savannah law firm and the attorney representing Catherine, made two trips to Yap, in 1903 and in 1904.⁸⁵ Hartridge left on the first visit with a promise to return with \$500,000, half of the imagined estate, for his client.⁸⁶ After his return, following six weeks of extended inquiries on Yap, he was much less ebullient. Little is known of his trip to Yap the following year to pursue the case, but his estimate of the value of the estate had been reduced to \$500,000. More than half of this represented the worth of O'Keefe's holdings in Yap, a Savannah newspaper reported, while the remainder was in Hong Kong.⁸⁷

In the end, Hartridge settled on behalf of this client for \$10,000.⁸⁸ The claimants must have been sorely disappointed. To this day, his descendants in Savannah believe

⁸⁰ *Savannah Morning News*, 8 Jun. 1904.

⁸¹ Marianas Department of Education, *O'Keefe, King of Yap* (Saipan 1971); quoted in Janet Butler, *East Meets West*, 118.

⁸² *New York Daily Tribune*, 19 Apr. 1903.

⁸³ Deacon and Hastings to Judge Henry McAlyin, 1 Jul. 1903, personal collection of Janet Butler, Savannah, GA.

⁸⁴ *New York Daily Tribune*, 6 Aug. 1903. Oddly enough, O'Keefe bequeaths his estate to Lotte rather than Dolibu, but in the appended codicil he states that Lotte is really Dolibu, thus leaving everything to her rather than the woman on Mapia who was the original beneficiary. This may have been an underhanded but clumsy manoeuvre to leave his estate to his preferred though not legal spouse, his partner on Terang.

⁸⁵ A number of clippings from the Savannah newspapers on these two trips may be found in the personal collection of Janet Butler. See also *Savannah Evening Press*, 28 Sept. 1950.

⁸⁶ According to an article in *New York Daily Tribune*, 10 Oct. 1903, 'The estate is said to be worth fully \$1,000,000. There is a trading business valued at \$800,000 and holdings of other kinds make up the other \$200,000'.

⁸⁷ *Savannah Morning News*, 24 Jul. 1904.

⁸⁸ This figure is cited by H.C. Davenport, the son of the attorney who represented Dolibu and her children in their claims; 'More about Mapia', *Pacific Islands Monthly* (Sept. 1952), 69. The figure is also mentioned in an anonymous letter to Walter Hartridge, Jr, that is entitled 'Life history of King O'Keefe as I knew him', in personal collection of Janet Butler.

that their attorney swindled them, and the issue remains sensitive four generations later.⁸⁹

In any case, Catherine was by no means reduced to penury. She had been receiving regular cheques from her husband — ‘twice a year’, according to Savannah newspaper clippings, the last of which was reputed to be a cheque for \$1,500 from Hong Kong just before O’Keefe’s death.⁹⁰ The gentry of Savannah was convinced that she was receiving ‘a substantial check for maintenance ... every year since his absence from this city’.⁹¹ As the bank she used, Hibernia Bank, was liquidated twice and no records survive, it is impossible to verify these remittances. The reports she dispensed regarding her frequent and generous assistance, along with the assurance she gave that O’Keefe had written to say that he was selling his holdings in Yap to join her once again in Savannah, may have been the brave attempts of a proud woman to redeem what remained of her dignity.⁹² We only know that for years afterward Catherine, ‘a tall gaunt woman ... very erect ... always dressed in funereal black’, would show up at the courthouse in the hope of retrieving what she believed was hers.⁹³ She died in January 1928, just two years after Dolibu on Terang.⁹⁴

The struggle for the estate continued for decades. Daisy, the adopted daughter who had been excluded from O’Keefe’s will, made a claim on the property in Terang in 1928. Then, in the 1950s and 1960s, after the publication of Klingman and Green’s book reawakened interest, O’Keefe’s descendants wrote to inquire about his estate in Yap. Meanwhile, the Fleming family from the Marianas — descendants of Thomas Fleming, who had lived with O’Keefe’s daughter Eugenia and her husband for a time — began a succession of legal battles to contest the ownership of Terang that continue to the present.⁹⁵

The remainder of O’Keefe’s business empire, reduced when some assets were sold by Hartridge in 1904, was put in the hands of his oldest daughter, Eugenia, and her husband.⁹⁶ Even after Dolibu’s death in 1926, other members of the family continued to live on Terang until 1937, when the Japanese government commandeered the island. One older Yapese recalls being afraid to visit the island because of the huge dogs that protected the family long after O’Keefe’s death.⁹⁷ During World War II, the island was a Japanese munitions dump and was bombed by US planes in 1944. Terang is now registered as a historical site, but there is little left to see. The distinctive red bricks are gone, taken by Yapese to line their lime ovens for burning coral into the lime that they sprinkle on betelnut. The small island is now a popular picnic spot for Yapese, with only the foundation and a crumbling staircase remaining of O’Keefe’s ‘palace’.⁹⁸

David Dean O’Keefe’s legend lives on, no longer as the sovereign of Yap but as the man who dominated its commerce when the island was one of the key trade centres in the Pacific. He is remembered as a bluff, large-boned man with a loud voice and a hearty laugh, warm and welcoming to all, Yapese or European. Yapese remember him as man who always dealt fairly with them. Never in any of his numerous court cases did any Islander lodge a complaint against him or testify against him; his adversaries were all foreign traders. His magnanimity and generosity — in outfitting his Chinese ship hands in warm clothing at his expense, for instance, or in supplying the best cloth for a funeral

⁸⁹ Janet Butler, pers. comm., 19 June.1995; Christophe Descantes, pers. comm., 9 Jun. 2004.

⁹⁰ *Savannah Morning News*, 7 Sept. 1891 and 7 Dec. 1901.

⁹¹ *Savannah Morning News*, 7 Dec. 1901.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Undated interview with Julia Hartridge, personal collection of Janet Butler.

⁹⁴ John Sutlive, ‘Savannah Man was King’, *Savannah Biography*, 15 Jan. 1928.

⁹⁵ Janet Butler, *East Meets West*, 65.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 46

⁹⁷ Interview with a Yapese man, Janet Butler, 7 Jul. 1999, personal papers.

⁹⁸ Christophe Descantes, pers. comm., 9 Jun. 2004.

shroud in which one of his young workers was buried — drew critical comments from Westerners but attracted the admiration of Islanders.⁹⁹ Just a few years before his death, O’Keefe was exploring the possibility of bringing Yapese to the World Fair — to introduce them to the wider world as well as, of course, to enhance his own status.¹⁰⁰ This would have been vintage O’Keefe. What influence he held over the people of Yap was won by his understanding of their culture and his ability to parlay this into gains for them and himself.

The exuberant O’Keefe, with his extravagant yarns, created a legend in the eyes of the traders in Asian ports and later throughout the US. Even stripped of his faux-monarchical status, however, he remains a remarkable figure. He was a rarity in the late-19th century Pacific, a trader who remained independent even after the large trading firms forced nearly everyone else to affiliate or go out of business. This and his intuitive grasp of the culture, rather than his reputed fortune or the political sway he was believed to hold, are his singular achievements.

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⁹⁹ Entries for 22–4 May 1890, Rabe’s journals.

¹⁰⁰ *Savannah Morning News*, 7 Sept. 1891. Apparently O’Keefe had inquired some years earlier about bringing Yapese to the 1892 World Fair, but never received a response from the organising committee.