You are to protect British interests in the colonies of New South Wales, New Zealand and the Islands adjacent and also to visit or detach a ship to visit the Feejee, Navigators and Friendly Islands, and it will be your object to give to the natives an impression of the power and of the friendly disposition of the British nation and whilst giving due weight to the representatives of the British consuls and missionaries and to strengthen their hand for good, you will repress any tendency to undue interference or encroachments on the rights of the chiefs and natives.

So read the Admiralty’s instructions to Captain Fremantle of 18 February 1854, and these were the sort of breezy generalities of the imperial dictum that was to guide a generation or more of British naval officers like Fremantle who at mid-century were sailing half a world away from the home islands and quite out of direct communication with Whitehall. As such, the Captain Freemantles of the age had to read into the future: they had to imagine whether they would receive a note of congratulations or a severe reprimand for whatever actions they took among the islands of the vast Pacific Ocean. Quarterdeck diplomacy was the hallmark of the Victorian Navy, and no place gave it wider scope than the South Pacific, unheralded sphere of empire-making and the European scramble for territorial and strategic advantage.¹

At the outset of the age it was science that drove the British, save for whaling, sealing and other interests of trade, much of it connected with Latin American ports or China. For the first 15 years after 1815, the myriad island clusters of the Pacific held little fascination for the British. A lack of geographical unity gave the islands and peoples of the Pacific no favourable place in British imperial plans. “Showing the flag” in the Central and South Pacific was only an incidental circumstance of keeping a more narrow watch on the evolving Spanish American republics as far north as Mexico. The same was true of exploring
The Imperial Web in the South Pacific

... the Bering Sea, where Russians posed as rivals to the British search for the Northwest Passage, as described elsewhere in these pages. The Society Islands were the first to command attention: although missionaries had been sent to Tahiti as early as the 1790s, the commercial prospects of these Pacific islands afforded no opportunities to British investors. The Pacific offered few inducements to British trade and was a business backwater. It is true that whaling interests sought a base in the Galapagos and the Bonin Islands, and surveying expeditions had been sent there and elsewhere with good effect. The Pacific offered a fine field for hunting whales, and here the British competed with the Americans, the French and others. The Hawaiian Islands attracted the liveliest attention, not least because of the immortal Captain Cook’s connection with them. He had pointed out the archipelago’s essential strategic value. It was a focal point of rivalry and concern by the 1820s but held no attraction for British statesman as a place for permanent empire.

As for the southwestern Pacific, men-of-war were dispatched on surveillance duties only on occasion. In the meantime, New South Wales on the basis of convict origins and later the development of sheep stations had become a secure base for trade, another anchor of empire. Australia’s place in what Vincent Harlow called “the swing to the east” has fascinated many historians, and it is now clear that more than just convict settlement lay behind the Botany Bay scheme. Naval stores for British activities in the East Indies is one such meritorious line of fascination to which can be added an interest in trading posts, commercial expansion and strategic position. Sydney offered a convenient port of call for ships destined for or returning from the Pacific Ocean. Settlers, missionaries and traders who ventured to Melanesia and Polynesia used Sydney as their supply base and shipping centre. Missionaries proved to be of importance in the sociopolitical organization of Pacific Islanders, and their actions plus those of the traders, beachcombers, sealers, bootleggers and others induced turbulence – and, much to London’s regret, forced the British to take a more active role in showing the flag. Taken together, these were incidental events of an imperial progression. At the outset of our epoch, the Pacific held no unity to official thinking, but rather offered a number of interlocking problems of policing and control. The British desired no empire of the South Pacific, and they fought diligently against any such possibility. Whether they liked it or not, the British were being drawn into the Pacific vortex, and, try though they might, they could not resist its entanglements. It was empire by default.

Governors of New South Wales watched developments in the Pacific Islands with concern, for British subjects were active in the processes of coercion and despoliation, lawlessness and kidnapping. The British had no intention of extending territorial control, but by a statute of 1817 they made it clear that an end had come to any vague claims that British governors enjoyed jurisdiction there though, at the same time, the rule of British law as it related to