Mildewed elegance, houses and servants

Spearline is away again about 200 miles away at a place that is never visited by anyone—he is doing a survey for a mission & will be 6 weeks away. We are not so nervous this time. We all sleep in one room (my niece, my son & myself) & so feel more courageous! My 6 shooter & a police man on the beat add to our satisfaction.

— Jessie Wilson, Tulagi, 18 August 1930

Mildewed elegance

Tulagi, like most of Solomon Islands, is often unmercifully hot, with the temperature reaching the high 30s Celsius in the middle of the day. Rainfall is also high and the humidity is as debilitating as the heat. From March to September or October is called the *Ara*—the south-east season when there are good breezes during the day. By nightfall the wind usually dies, although sometimes wind continues to blow. In the north-east season that follows—the *Komburu*, from November to February—humidity remains high and the evenings are hot. These months can be marked by windless days, but at the end of the year storms and cyclones are common and seas are rough and dangerous.

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1 UQFL, Wilson Papers and Photographs, J.A. Wilson to Mary, 18 August 1930.
Some descriptions of early Tulagi give an impression of tropical elegance, while others describe a down-at-heel mildewed stub of the British Raj. Anthropologist Ian Hogbin passed through Tulagi regularly in the late 1920s and early 1930s. He was surprised at the level of sartorial elegance required. He said Tulagi was

quite one of the places one reads of as an out-post-of-the-British-Empire. Yet strange to say the fashions are quite Bond Street. All wear bow ties, starched shirts and walking sticks.2

Xavier Herbert was also resident about this time. Commenting on his short stay in 1928, Herbert was scathing about the pomp and pretension of British life:

You had to wear white clothes, and you always wore a coat—you couldn’t go coatless—and you carried a walking stick and it was like a uniform, and you had to do that. So too the topee, the white suit and the walking stick.3

When American filmmakers Martin and Osa Johnson passed through Tulagi 10 years earlier, they were not impressed by the seedy elegance. The following description is of the Resident Commissioner—possibly Woodford’s temporary replacement, Frank Barnett, already a long-term resident:

His white suit had shrunk noticeably and, although the shorts were severely creased, their colour was on the jaundiced side and they were considerably the worse for wear. The coat was short at the sleeves and looked as though the house-boy had stopped pressing after he finished the lapels. His white helmet was scuffed, but freshly whitened. He wore brown brogues, highly polished, and heavy brown socks that had obviously been mended several times. His starched collar and polka-dotted tie, done into a fixed knot, and his neatly cropped moustache were thoroughly respectable. And his Malacca cane, with a beautiful tortoise-shell handle, was the official touch.4

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2 University of Sydney Archives, A.P. Elkin Papers, Box 159, File 4/1/49, H.I.P. Hogbin to A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, 31 July 1927.
3 Keesing and Corris 1980, 208.
4 Johnson 1945, 106.
Dick Horton arrived in 1937 wearing his newly purchased (ex-Suez) white suit and pith helmet. He was met by Peter Colley, secretary to resident commissioner Ashley. Colley was decked out in a sports shirt, shorts, long socks and tennis shoes, with a small towel around his neck to wipe away perspiration and flies. Horton said that he never needed his white suit again, which indicates either a relaxation in dress standards over a decade or perhaps that Herbert and Johnson were exaggerating (as the Johnsons so often did). If we rely on photographs from the 1920s and 1930s, they show a preponderance of men in light-weight white suits, and pith helmets continued to be used. Red Sea or Gulf Rig—a British dress code for semiformal evening events in regions of high heat and humidity—remained in vogue at the residency. Males wore black formal trousers, a white starched shirt and a black bow tie, but with a cummerbund in compensation for being allowed to remove their coats. Female guests wore long evening dresses, strangely but sensibly augmented with mosquito-proof leggings. After dinner, the ladies retired and the men gathered to drink port. British etiquette is that port circulates clockwise, always received with the right hand and passed to the left. You poured a glass for your neighbour on your right then passed on the decanter.5 This was the style at the residency. Makambo, Gavutu and Taroaniara also had small European populations who observed a similar social hierarchy and the same standards of dress and etiquette.

Houses and social construction of space

Colonial Pacific historical writing is inclined to be very male oriented, since expatriate males far outnumbered females and gender has not been high on research agendas related to the colonial Pacific. Very little has been written about expatriate women living and working in the Pacific colonial environment, let alone in urban areas, although in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a spate of analysis of moral panic, sexuality, gender and empire, which continued into the 2000s.6 The few important sources on

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5 Horton 1965, 5. This was still the custom at Government House in Honiara in the 1950s. Information from Alan Lindley, Adelaide, August 2010.
the role of expatriate women in colonial Solomon Islands—particularly those by James Boutilier, Judith Bennett, Hugh and Eugénie Laracy and Graeme Golden—have been useful as background. I have also been able to tap into the lives of expatriate women in colonial Papua New Guinea to augment deficiencies in the Solomons material.

Domestic space tells us a great deal about social processes. Over time, houses are modified, expanded, renovated and rebuilt. Wooden houses in the tropics need constant maintenance: they rot, termites devour them and they need constant painting to preserve the wood. Houses have material forms, but their uses are socially constructed. Different occupants put different amounts of effort into maintenance and style, and gardens are an extension of the personalities of the occupants. Among the markers of Tulagi status were the size of one’s house, its contents and its position—and the beauty of the garden. All houses had a tropical ambiance, with wide verandahs.

Plate 5.1 The second residency in the 1910s
Source: PMB, AU PMB PHOTO 58-175 (ANUA 481-337-175).
5. MILDEWED ELEGANCE, HOUSES AND SERVANTS

Plate 5.2 Florrie Woodford at the back gate of the residency
Source: ANUA, 481-337-073.

Plate 5.3 Florrie and Charles Woodford having tea on the residency verandah in the 1910s
The cane chairs are typical of Pacific and Australian tropical furniture in the twentieth century. They are using a silver teapot and fine china, while their pet parrot watches.
Source: PMB, AU PMB PHOTO 56-216 (ANUA 481-1C-216).
The houses were all Queenslander-style—an adaptation of Indian colonial architecture.\(^7\) In southern Melanesia, there were more substantial houses, but in the Solomons all were made from timber, sometimes with split-bamboo plaited feature walls.\(^8\) The best Tulagi houses were commodious but never grand. Life in ‘Queenslanders’ was lived on the verandahs and people often slept there as well, using the bedrooms only for dressing and storage. There was no reticulated water supply up on Tulagi’s residential ridge and each house had several water tanks. The toilet was usually a pan in a small outhouse, which was changed once a week. By 1927, water-flushed toilets that emptied into the sea had been installed at the Tulagi Club and the single officers’ quarters, and there was one house with its own septic tank.\(^9\) Showers usually ran off water tanks or, if primitive, consisted of a kerosene tin with holes punched in the base, suspended on pulleys. Small galvanised iron bath tubs and kerosene heaters were available for those who required a hint of luxury.

Houses were often hot, particularly in areas such as the verandahs, which had unlined galvanised ripple-iron roofs. There were no punkahs (fans) swinging from the ceilings with a small boy to pull the cord, as in India. During heavy rain, which was common, the noise on the iron roofs was deafening. Electricity came very late to the settlement, so for many years there were not even primitive electric fans. The best houses were high on the central ridge, where they caught the breezes. The residency was central and dominant. In the 1930s, the home of the Treasurer was close by, with the Judicial Commissioner further down the ridge on the other side of The Cut. The doctors and nurses and the Commandant lived close to their respective workplaces on the outer side of the island, but still on the ridge. The disadvantage of living on the ridge, of course, was that one had to walk up and down steep paths to gain access, although the view over the harbour (and for the medical staff and commandant, over to Savo and Guadalcanal) made it all worthwhile. There were two ways across the island: ‘up and over’ and, starting in late 1918, via The Cut. Even after The Cut was open, people still sometimes took the scenic route across the ridge. Charles Weetman did this in 1937:

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7 Bell 1984.
8 Lagarde 2016.
We climbed one of the steep paths that led through flowering shrubs and palms across the ridge, past the bungalows whose verandahs were so wide that there seemed to be little ‘house’ left; past the Commissioner’s residence, where a police ‘boy’, clad in brown lap-lap, scarlet cummerbund, and white belt, and armed with a rifle with fixed bayonet, marched up and down on guard; down-hill again past the golf-links, where a notice, alongside one tee, attracted our attention by the unusual wording, ‘Wait until the 6th brown and 7th tee are clear’; and on to the path that runs along the shore at the opposite side of the island, a distance in all of about a quarter of a mile.¹⁰

Houses were perched on concrete posts to allow air flow underneath to keep them cool; they were kept safe from termites by placing tin lids on top of the posts and were designed to be as earthquake-proof as possible. Solomon Islands lies in one of the world’s most active seismic areas. Earthquakes of widely varying severity occur throughout the islands and there are several volcanoes. As a consequence, tsunamis occur, which leave coastal areas uninhabitable for long periods, and reefs can be raised several metres out of the water by tectonic movements. On 3 October 1931, a severe earthquake was felt all through the central and eastern islands, with the tremors continuing spasmodically for a month. On Makira, a tsunami following the initial earthquake destroyed 18 villages and killed 48 people. On Santa Catalina (Owa Riki) Island, the quake badly damaged the reef. Christians thought Judgement Day had come while others decided that their ancestral spirits were angry.¹¹ Jessie Wilson recorded:

It was quite a bad one … There must have been many casualties. As it is, most of those who lost their lives were the victims of the tidal wave which in some places went 2 miles inland. There are a few broken legs etc. in hospital (not whites) & about 20 natives dead. We were terrified & my husband was away on a job on another island. I gathered Ann out of her cot & ran shrieking to find Michael who was by this time out of the house—carried by the cook. After it passed we came in again & were no sooner settled than another ‘quake’ came … Really for 10 days we had tremors every now & then but not enough to make us leave the house. You can imagine the noise which goes on with the rattling of everything that can rattle in the house & the falling of everything that can fall. Brass trays, bottles, lamps etc. make a lot of noise.¹²

¹⁰ Weetman 1937, 35.
¹² UQFL, Wilson Papers and Photographs, J.A. Wilson, 20 October 1931.
At Tulagi, the bottom of the harbour rose by around 3 metres. Stores had their stock damaged, Carpenters’ wharf was damaged and left in shallow water, preventing ships from berthing, and the decking on BP’s wharf at Makambo subsided.\textsuperscript{13}

The Resident Commissioner’s home had progressed from a shack on the beach to a pleasant, substantial structure with a guard house and flagpole. It was a public reception area as well as a private residence. The other houses were smaller. Spearline and Jessie Wilson’s house was medium in size, commensurate with his position (as Government Surveyor). There was one large bedroom (6.7 metres by 3.6 metres) and two smaller bedrooms for their children. It was positioned on the ridge above Chinatown. All the rooms had polished floors and were screened against mosquitoes.\textsuperscript{14} Often the front verandahs of Tulagi’s houses were completely screened or had a section enclosed as a mosquito-proof room. Kitchens were semidetached at the rear, to limit the risk from fires. After 20 years, the Wilsons took over Knibbs’s house, which was bigger and in a more central position on the ridge, just above the offices on the shore. Designated for the Commissioner for Lands, the house was painted white inside and out, with the usual red galvanised ripple-iron roof. It had deep verandahs with dark-green shutters and was furnished with cream-painted and lacquered cane chairs. The internal floors were polished and there were also polished wooden tables. Curtains on the windows of the two large central rooms and floor mats in the formal rooms and on the verandahs completed the pleasant tropical style. Beds were decked out with nets. The Wilsons imported curtain materials from Australia and had them made up in Chinatown. The servants kept the brass knickknacks polished and everything clean and tidy.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} PIM, 23 November 1931.
\textsuperscript{14} UQFL, Wilson Papers and Photographs, J.A. Wilson to Mary, February 1925[?].
\textsuperscript{15} ibid., J.A. Wilson to Mary, 14 December 1933.
Residents had furniture shipped in from Australia or purchased items from the big companies or the Chinese merchants. Utility items such as small tables, shelves and cupboards were sometimes made from packing cases, particularly boxes that once held cans of kerosene. Borers attacked rattan, cane and other furniture; these were killed by dunking the items in salt water or soaking them with linseed oil. Timber floors were polished
TuLAGI

in a very Pacific way. The grease-cutting properties of bush limes were used and floors were re-oiled and polished using the flesh of young coconuts.\(^{16}\) Woodford, Johnson and Wilson family photographs show comfortable casual furniture very similar to that found on Queensland verandahs in the same period: cane and canvas chairs, including ‘squatters’ chairs with leg extensions. Colourful talking parrots were kept on verandahs, in cages or using the method still common in Solomons villages today—a wooden ‘lock’ on the bird’s leg attached to a tough vine cord. I have located no photographs of living room interiors at Tulagi, but there are some from the government station on Malaita during the first half of the 1910s, which we can safely presume was similar in style. Silver services, fine bone china and family photographs in ornate frames all made their way to the Solomons. Photographs from the Bignells’ Fulakora plantation on Isabel from the 1930s show polished floors and gracious furniture and a combination of Solomons shields, turtle shells, cane and ornately carved furniture, the last made by the talented Kathleen Bignell.\(^{17}\)

Plate 5.6 Pop and Agnes Johnson’s home, 1930s
Source: Suzanne Ellis Collection.

\(^{16}\) The same methods were used in Papua New Guinea. Keays 1995, 53–54.

\(^{17}\) Clarence 1982, 34, 85. At Auki, the Edge-Partingtons had brought with them formal furniture, silver items and heavy framed photographs. The contents of the best Tulagi enclave houses would have been similar. Photographs taken by Thomas Edge-Partington are held by the British Museum.
A variety of photographs from the Solomons show that concrete stumps were the preferred foundations for buildings, presumably to combat attacks from termites, although Woodford’s first residency was on high wooden stumps. One crucial consideration in house design was the risk of cyclones; houses needed to be able to be closed against strong winds and driving rain. The Tulagi houses for which details remain were all government-owned, which limited the alterations occupants could make.
to the fabric of the building and required the Treasury to authorise any changes. In the New Hebrides, sections of verandahs were enclosed for bedrooms and offices and verandahs were insulated to lower the level of heat radiating from exposed iron roofs. Louvres were added to reduce the glare from the water, to keep out the rain and to circulate the breeze. Photographs of early Tulagi houses show little sign of louvres, rollup wooden blinds or plantation shutters capable of being tilted to deflect light and rain. Light metal mesh mosquitio screens and pushout wooden shutters seem to have been the main mechanisms of protection. In the 1930s, these were used at Pop and Agnes Johnson’s home, although an early photograph shows open verandahs on three sides with no shutters. A photograph of one large house on Gavutu shows a screened verandah and canvas sheeting that could be let down on one of the outside walls to give protection from heavy rain. Another photograph, from Makambo, shows heavy shutters on the verandah and windows. The houses were well designed for the tropics and were altered over the years to improve living standards.

**Domestic ingenuity**

Many women were uneasy about being colonial wives, dealing with servants and living the life of an isolated white ‘misis’. As well, life on Tulagi required domestic ingenuity. Although there were no dangerous wild animals, smaller varieties still tested the residents. Flying foxes (fruit bats) lived in huge colonies, hanging upside down in trees and issuing forth at night to raid all kinds of fruit. Possums were everywhere and unless households took care to close off access, they moved into roof cavities, keeping the humans awake at night with their strange hissing calls, and all too often urinating down the walls. One the great challenges was dealing with vermin and insects. Rats were common and were caught with traps or poisoned. Frogs, lizards, snakes and centipedes were also plentiful and invaded the houses. Lizards, particularly small geckoes, became almost domestic pets. People kept cats and dogs for company and to keep wild creatures at bay.

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18  Rodman 2001, 209.  
19  Pop and Agnes Johnson family photos, in Suzanne Ellis Collection; Johnson 1945, 49.  
20  SINA, BSIP Photographs, bungalow on Gavutu; NBAC, N115–520.
Plate 5.8 Spearline and Jessie Wilson and their Irish setter
Source: UQFL, Wilson Papers and Photographs.
Plate 5.9 This living room is in the district officer’s house at Auki, Malaita, in the 1910s, during the tenancy of Thomas and Mary Edge-Partington. The furnishings show pictures and other accoutrements from England. The table legs are sitting in bowls that would have contained water to stop ants and cockroaches climbing up. No interior photographs from Tulagi houses have survived. Tulagi living rooms would have been similar to this one at Auki.

Source: BM, Thomas Edge-Partington Photographic Collection.

Dry foods such as rice and flour were difficult to keep fresh in the high humidity. Residents learnt to sift the weevils out of flour and rice and to inspect slices of bread to dislodge them. Cockroach infestations of houses and boats were another domestic hazard, battled against with poison baits and out-and-out domestic warfare. Boats were often home to a particular small variety by the thousands, scurrying about like a liquid plague that flowed from every crack and crevice. Large cockroaches lived in houses and, when pursued, withdrew to safety between loose boards and cracks in floors and joints. Their feral comrades flew in for visits from the surrounding undergrowth. Toilets were favourite cockroach breeding grounds. Cockroaches might crawl out of one’s clothing at the most inopportune times and, if you forgot to pour water into the containers in which each bedpost sat, you might wake itching with cockroach bites. Before sipping a bedside glass of water, one checked first for swimming cockroaches. 21 Book covers were varnished to make them less palatable.

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21 This is based on my personal experience and descriptions by R.H. Standley, headmaster of All Hallows’ Senior School at Pawa on Uki Island in the late 1950s and the first half of the 1960s. Standley 1981, 7–8.
to cockroaches. Ants abounded, too, and were controlled with poison powder or (like the beds) by sitting the legs of kitchen and dining room furniture in containers of water. Before gauze and wire mesh screens arrived, residents had to live with the incessant mosquitoes and other flying insects.

Cupboards and drawers had to be aired regularly and cloth items put out in the sun to kill off mould and insects. Keeping food fresh was difficult. People preserved vegetables and fruits in bottles. Refrigeration was a luxury before World War II. The lucky few had their own Hallstrom ‘Icy Ball’, a refrigeration device patented in 1923 that consisted of two large metal balls joined by a pipe and a large insulated box. The machine was cheap to run since it used about one cup of kerosene a day. One ball contained pressurised ammonia and the gas escaped through a valve to cool the contents of the box. The cycle lasted 24 hours, then the ammonia was reheated and performed the process again. The disadvantages were that the devices were apt to explode and, although useful for cooling drinks, they did not keep meat fresh for long.22 By the late 1930s, the wealthier residents possessed safer Electrolux ‘ice machines’ (kerosene-fuelled refrigerators), which cost about £50.23 Other residents made do with ‘Coolgardie safes’ (an Australian invention)24 and regular supplies from the iceworks, stored in an insulated box. Lighting depended on kerosene lamps, candles and torches and, from the 1940s, Coleman and Aladdin kerosene pressure lamps. Another household accoutrement that sometimes exploded was carbide lighting, which, provided residents were willing to take the risk, gave out a bright flame. People cooked on wood-burning stoves. All of these domestic devices made life in the Pacific Islands comfortable, with a great improvement once electricity arrived.

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24 ‘Coolgardie safes’ were invented in the Western Australian mining town of Coolgardie in the 1890s. They were made from wire mesh on a wooden frame and were covered with hessian (made from woven jute or sisal fibres, which was called burlap in Canada and the United States), with a galvanised iron tray on top filled with water. The water dripped on to the hessian sides; breezes evaporated the water and cooled the contents. A metal tray at the base collected excess water. The life of perishable foods was extended by using the safes. They were usually placed on verandahs to catch the breeze. A simpler version, with a wooden frame and wire mesh sides, was also used in Australia, and is still used in many houses in Solomon Islands. The safe relies on a breeze to keep its contents cool and the wire keeps flies away from the food.
Plate 5.10 BP’s Makambo Island, 1930s
Source: NBAC, N115-520-2.

Plate 5.11 A staff cottage on Makambo Island
Source: NBAC, N115-520-3b.
Living costs were high, particularly for imported foods. At the beginning of the 1930s, 1 pound (450 grams) of fresh meat cost 1/5- and the best joints cost 2/3- for the same amount. Ice cost 1/6- for a large block, bread was 9 pence per 2-pound (900-gram) loaf and eggs cost 3 pence each.\textsuperscript{25} Residents clung to using imported foods—tinned, bottled, dried and frozen. Wives and servants learned how to make delectable meals using variations of recipes based on tinned fish and ‘bully beef’. They became connoisseurs of different brands and swapped recipes using curry powder, chillies, ginger root, turmeric and coconut milk as the bases for new delicacies.

Residents received food parcels from home containing luxury items such as honey, cheese, peanut butter, Vegemite and sweet biscuits. When imported supplies ran out, people were left with plenty of local food choices. The main requirement was a willingness to adapt to local foodstuffs and to learn how to use them. Once this was done, tropical banquets could be prepared. Servants scraped the flesh from halved coconut kernels using the point of a machete clapped between the legs or with a serrated piece of metal attached to a stool. The shredded coconut fell into a container below and water was added to make a creamy fluid to use in cooking.\textsuperscript{26} The fragrant water from green coconuts became a standard drink, as did the juice of bush limes in water, tempered with a little sugar. The meat supply arrived mostly in cans or frozen, brought in on the steamers from Sydney. There were a few cattle on Tulagi and large herds on the nearby Guadalcanal plantations, which occasionally put fresh beef on the menu. Most residents kept fowls for a ready supply of eggs and meat.\textsuperscript{27} Marine life abounded and house staff needed little urging to take the afternoon off and go fishing to provide the evening meal. Usually fish and crustaceans were speared: \textit{bonito} (tuna or kingfish) and rock cod were the favourites, although many varieties of reef fish, crabs, lobsters and prawns were available. \textit{Soup-soup} was the name given to fish or \textit{kumara} (sweet potato) soups cooked with plenty of juice from desiccated coconut added to the water. In the final analysis, the hankering for non-local cuisine was mere habit since excellent local foods were available.

\textsuperscript{25} BSIP AR 1931, 11, 1934, 13.
\textsuperscript{26} The grating sounds of this process are still common around most Solomon Islands homes in the late afternoon.
\textsuperscript{27} UQFL, Wilson Papers and Photographs, A.H. Wilson to J.A. Wilson, 6 October 1939.
An enormous range of tropical fruit grew in house gardens: Cavendish bananas and local cooking (plantain) and sweet (lady finger) bananas, pineapples, pawpaws, citrus fruits (bush limes, oranges, grapefruits and mandarins), star fruits (carambola), custard apples, Brazilian cherries, avocados, passionfruit and granadillas, soursops and mangoes. Residents also grew European vegetables (especially cabbages, tomatoes, cucumbers, beans and pumpkins) and Chinese green vegetables. Woodford was proud of his tomato patch and photographs show that he had a substantial garden, which was tended by two prisoners.

29 There are photographs of Woodford’s vegetable garden and of pumpkins grown on Tulagi. PMB, Photo 38, 81, 105–07.
Small bush mushrooms were also on the menu, for those who could differentiate them from poisonous fungi. Residents also learnt to use and appreciate local produce, which they both grew and acquired from around the Gela Group. Even today, foreign residents in the Solomons take a while to adapt to using the very nutritious ‘slippery cabbage’—the leaves of *Abelmoschus manihot* (an edible hibiscus plant)—which is like spinach. Taro, yams and sweet potatoes soon replaced English potatoes and grated coconut kernels became the major subtle flavour in meals, replacing milk and cream. The eggs of megapodes (bush turkeys) made huge omelettes. Ngali (*Canarium*) nuts—an almond-like delicacy produced from large trees—were harvested locally and also brought in from surrounding villages. The Wilsons’ correspondence mentions sending bottles of these nuts to their children at school in Sydney. Cushions, pillows and the occasional mattress were stuffed with the fluffy contents of seed pods from tall kapok trees. Coconut fibre was the more usual stuffing for mattresses.

People on Tulagi spent their spare time in domesticity, sport, drinking or enjoying the natural beauty of the surroundings. Reading was a standard pastime, as were playing cards, listening to gramophones and radios, playing musical instruments, singing and games such as charades. Women knitted, embroidered, crocheted and made and repaired clothes. Starting
in the mid-1920s, many residents listened to radios, mainly in the early mornings or evenings when atmospheric conditions were best. The wireless radio system opened new avenues for communication, domestic pleasure and relaxation. Once telephonic ‘listening-in’ sets became available, a world of news, music and entertainment reached Solomon Islands. Australian commercial and government (the Australian Broadcasting Commission, or ABC) broadcasts began in the 1920s and 1930s. Solomon Islands residents could receive medium-wave signals from stations on the NSW and Queensland coasts. They also listened to shortwave through the AWA Ltd broadcasts (from 1931) from Sydney and the British Broadcasting Commission (BBC) through the Empire Service (from 1932). Broadcasts from the US mainland and Hawai‘i were also audible. ‘Listening-in’, as it was known, became a favourite local pastime. The first ‘listening-in’ licence was issued to Fred Campbell at Waimamura plantation on Makira in 1925 and the second to Major William V. Jardine Blake, the accountant in the BSIP Treasury and Customs Department on Tulagi. Those with radios invited their friends to visit and ‘listen-in’. Owners of private wireless sets had to pay a government licence fee, but they gained a new medium of entertainment that linked them to the outside world. Tall coconut palms were useful for stringing up antennas.31

Using and supervising gardens formed another enjoyable pastime. Spaces under large trees in gardens were often cooler than the houses and were used as social places to serve tea or gin and tonics, or to while away the hours listening to music on a gramophone. House and garden servants did most of the work of clearing land and carrying water, but there was still room for planning and imposing personal touches. Spearline Wilson wrote to his daughter at school in Australia in 1939, after he had taken over Knibbs’s job and house. It was much larger than his old house and more comfortable:

I am sorry you don’t like Mr. Knibbs’ house. It is really quite nice. Much nicer now that I am living in it. I cut some of the trees down that were smothering the house and attracting mosquitoes, and later on I will make a nice garden. At present I have a garden in six boxes up on a stand. I have some nice lettuce, radishes, and tomatoes, but the weather is very dry, and it is hard work to make things grow. Eric and my new boy Bennie have to carry water every afternoon for the garden. Next year I am going to have a big rose garden.32

31 My thanks to Martin Hadlow, Brisbane, 11 February 2017, for this information.
Domestic and social life on Tulagi

Woodford was cited earlier saying that on his first trip to the archipelago in 1886 there were two other foreigners living ashore. His memory of 30-plus years earlier was faulty; although the number was small, it was closer to a dozen.³³ When he arrived a decade later as Deputy Commissioner, there were 50 Europeans living in the new protectorate—almost all of them men. By 1919, there were 349 expatriates, of whom only 95 were women, most of them wives of plantation managers or missionaries, although some missionaries were single. Only six European women lived on Tulagi in 1914, the wives of administrative staff whose status varied according to their husband’s position.³⁴ Few European women on Tulagi worked in paid positions, the exceptions being May Elkington at the hotel, Mrs Boyle at her boarding house and the nurses at the hospital. They contrasted starkly with missionary or plantation wives, who usually assisted in running those enterprises and often ran them single-handed for months at a time. Tulagi’s women ran their households and entertained for their own pleasure and to advance their husbands’ careers.

Tulagi was a town ‘born modern’ in the sense that it did not really begin in any substantial way until the 1900s and 1910s. There was no sense of a nineteenth-century past, no rough beginning in dirt-floor and thatched-roof shanties as had existed at Levuka in Fiji or Port Moresby in British New Guinea. Tulagi was built to regulation standards, except for structures in Chinatown or out of sight in the Sasape fringe settlement, where standards were lower. The other ‘modern’ aspect was the residents. Most were born in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, a period when the family structure was reorganised to be more ‘modern’, based on the nuclear family. The best houses had labour-saving devices—such as they were at the time: stoves, sewing machines and refrigeration³⁵—and political rights for women were being discussed.³⁶ A great leveller on Tulagi was that, regardless of rank and aside from a few who owned bicycles or horses, everyone had to walk. Just like anyone else, the Resident Commissioner trudged up and down the ridge tracks.

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³³ Bennett (1987, 59) suggests seven in 1870, four in 1875, six in 1880, 10 in 1885 and 14 in 1890.
³⁴ WPHCA, No. 800 of 1914, RC C.M. Woodford to HC WPHC, 3 April 1914.
³⁶ On Empire Day in 1914, the pork pies were festooned on top with ‘Votes for Women’ picked out in green peas. SCL, November 1914, 168–70.
While the resident commissioners expected to receive respect, vestiges of the British upper class were few. This was in contrast to Suva, where the High Commissioner was a vice-regal governor, usually a knight, and ‘calling’ was limited to the first and third Thursdays of each month.37 The etiquette of leaving a calling card at the residency in hopes of being invited to visit existed in the early days on Tulagi, but this custom had been abandoned by the 1930s. Most of Tulagi’s resident commissioners were single and lived a bachelor’s existence. If they had wives, they were mostly ‘grass widows’ living overseas and their children attended school in Australia or Britain. Woodford’s wife, Florrie, and their children visited Tulagi regularly, although she chose to live in Sydney most of the time, rather than face Tulagi’s heat and humidity and diseases such as malaria. This was also usual practice in Australian Papua, where lieutenant-governor Sir Hubert Murray’s wives (he married twice) and family did the same, seldom visiting Port Moresby. Joseph Dickinson described Florrie Woodford as ‘charming … and gracious to the few scattered settlers in the group, but a very natural lady amongst the native women and children’.38 Kate Barnett, who was married to Woodford’s deputy, Frank Barnett, had several children. Their two sons were born in New Zealand and Frank moved to Wellington in the final months of his life—an indication that his family maintained links there.39

Agnes Johnson, married to treasurer Pop Johnson, was a perfect fit for Pacific urban life. Born in the New Hebrides, she married Pop in 1911 and the couple moved to Tulagi in 1919. Two of their daughters were born in the New Hebrides and one in Sydney, and all three attended school in Sydney, where the family had a house in the suburb of Lindfield. Agnes lived both on Tulagi and in Sydney, and Pop usually spent his holidays in Sydney with his family. The children visited Tulagi regularly. Although it was expensive to maintain two households, it was the best way of keeping a family together and the children educated, while the breadwinner worked in the Solomons.

38 Dickinson 1927, 98.
It was not easy to maintain a household, particularly at the lower end of the salary scale. Table 3.2 illustrates the range of government salaries in 1925–26, from the Resident Commissioner on £1,000 to a hospital nurse on £120. In 1925, a delegation of senior public servants met with the High Commissioner to request higher salaries. Judicial commissioner N.W.P. De Heveningham provided a breakdown of his expenses (Table 5.1). As one of the highest-paid officials, his salary, bonus and allowance came to £647. He claimed his living expenses were £586, leaving him only £61 for all other expenses and savings.

Table 5.1 The Judicial Commissioner's living expenses, 1925

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cost (£)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>House servants (x 2) at 30/- a month</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House servants’ food and clothing</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerosene</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groceries, wine, beer, etc.</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food (from Chinese restaurant)</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family allowance</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widows and Orphans Fund</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>586</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salary, bonus and allowance</td>
<td>647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Balance</strong></td>
<td><strong>61</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Colonial Office, 225/209, Meeting with Representatives of Protectorate Civil Servants, 29 September 1925.

De Heveningham’s justification of his alcohol bill was that the ‘Colonial Office says that a little alcohol is beneficial in the tropics’.

Managing servants

Dealing with domestic servants was a necessary part of life on Tulagi. Every European and Chinese household had Solomon Islander servants, and most had four or five.40 Haus-bois (teenage or adult male servants), not house girls, were the usual Tulagi domestic servants, even though there

40 Rodman 2001, 210; Boutilier 1984a, 179, 188–90; Collinson 1926, 21–22.
were fears expressed over having adult Solomon Islander males as part of the household.\textsuperscript{41} There is some evidence of Chinese domestic servants in early decades and the Tulagi Club had a Chinese barman in the 1930s.

Prisoners crossed the line between controlled unfree labour and domestic labour; they were part of the regular labour force on Tulagi and were allowed access to houses, gardens and surrounding paths. They did most of the maintenance, including house painting, and worked loading and unloading supplies at the government wharf. One story about Woodford is that he had a convicted murderer on his permanent garden staff.\textsuperscript{42} Even the single officers had a servant each to do their washing. Eustace Sandars was faced with the need for servants when he arrived in 1928:

\begin{quote}
Having taken over Turner’s house I found myself with a servant problem on my hands but was fortunate in obtaining the services of one Kanda, a native of Ysabel, as a cook, a very excellent cook too. Captain Swanson brought me a Polynesian piccininny [sic] named Tubo. He was even lighter skinned than I am. His main aim and object seemed to be to sleep under the kitchen table all day and go fishing at night. He wasn’t a very useful member of the staff for some months. Tubo was a delightful fellow and he remained with me for the whole of my time in the Solomons some 20 years. Later he married a very nice girl from his home island of Sikiana [Sikaiana] some 150 miles to the north of Malaita.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

Sandars also mentions his servant Willie Hoeler, part-Polynesian and part-German, who was well-educated, read cookbooks and loved cooking. Hoeler was capable of making out a grocery order to be filled in Sydney, which needed calculation six weeks ahead to cover three months of supplies—no small feat for anyone. Like Tubo, Hoeler stayed with Sandars for the rest of his time in the protectorate.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{41} Rodman (2001) suggests that female servants were the norm in the colonial New Hebrides, which was not the case in Solomon Islands or Papua New Guinea. Keays 1995, 71–73.
\textsuperscript{42} Richards 2012, Diary of Graham Officer, Melbourne Museum, 28 January 1901, 137.
\textsuperscript{43} Captain Ernest Nelson Turner was the police commander. PMB, Sandars, Papers on the Solomon Islands, 10–11.
\textsuperscript{44} ibid., 20.
White women and girls had some freedom in moving around Tulagi, although there were always servants available to accompany them. The Wilsons had Jessie’s teenage niece Edna Campbell staying with them for several months during 1930. Her diary shows an innocent domestic and social life, with freedom to wander along the beaches collecting shells, swimming, visiting Chinatown and socialising with the various leading families on Tulagi, Makambo and Gavutu. Swimming was only undertaken in the shark-proof enclosure at the Tulagi Club—for good reasons. In 1924, Edna’s aunt, Jessie, described a scene that must have been typical over decades:

“We’ve all just rushed down to the water to see a cheeky big shark that came right up close. Everybody including about 40 natives always rush down to see a ‘crocodile’ or shark or any of the sea creatures that inhabit the waters here.”

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45 UQFL, Wilson Papers and Photographs, J.A. Watt to Mary, 3 September 1924.
The lives of European women on Tulagi revolved around supervising servants, doing personal washing, baking cakes, biscuits and bread, sewing and mending, knitting, doing ‘fancy work’ and reading. Some women enjoyed making their own clothes, while others had to do so to save money. Many households had Singer treadle sewing machines, although sewing and washing services were also available in Chinatown. Women soon learnt to stop wearing wool undergarments. Heavy corsets and tight dresses were likewise abandoned as unsuitable for the climate. Looser, lighter garments were much more sensible apparel. Photographs from the 1920s and 1930s show women in stylish light dresses.

Residents lent each other books, newspapers and magazines. A number of the men were highly educated and some had read Greek and Latin at university. Many of the women, depending on their level of education, had studied both languages at private schools or at least Latin at government schools. A great variety of English-language books was available, and they were passed from house to house. Jessie Wilson recorded reading Countess Margaret Asquith’s autobiography, a two-volume life of Christ and a book on life after death—all lent to her by Captain Turner, who was just back from England in 1933. A few years earlier, A.A. Milne’s Winnie-the-Pooh (1926) had done the rounds. Resident commissioner Ashley claimed friendship with Milne from when they were at school together. Milne’s Peace with Honour (1934) also circulated, as did Francis Ratcliffe’s Flying Fox and Drifting Sand: The Adventures of a Biologist in Australia (1938). Gerald Elliot of Taronne pastoral station, at Lomead in Queensland, who was mentioned in the latter book, had a brother who worked as a plantation manager at Russell Islands. Many Europeans in the Solomons escaped everyday life through reading and, if books were unavailable, mail-order catalogues or almost anything printed would do. Jack McLaren, a long-term resident from the 1920s, read everything he could find, including a copy of Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason.46

Wealthier residents subscribed, while others had periodicals sent in batches by friends and relatives. Newspapers and magazines arrived months after they were published but were nonetheless welcome. They were read and then passed on to neighbours or were made available at the club. The main British periodicals consumed were the Weekly Times, Tattler, Punch and the Illustrated London News. Australians favoured Sunday papers and weekly

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46 McLaren 1923, 77.
and monthly digests such as the *Bulletin, Sydney Mail, The Queenslander, Pacific Islands Monthly* (from 1930 on) and the *Australian Women’s Weekly* (from 1933). Mail-order catalogues were also circulated, as this was the main way to purchase new clothes and domestic equipment. Women swapped pattern books, which were used as templates for making clothes. There was a sense that Tulagi was clinging to the fringe of another world through periodic literature and mail-order catalogues.

Due to the heat, people typically changed clothes two or three times a day, which increased the amount of washing for households. Clothes were washed in cast concrete or galvanised iron tubs set against the back wall of the house or tucked away underneath. Sheets and large items were boiled in ‘coppers’ (open vats set in brick furnaces) or in half of a 44-gallon drum. When the water was hot, a lather was created by agitating a cake of soap kept in a meshed container with a handle. The equipment was completed by having a flat concrete surface on which to knead washing, plus a furrowed board on which to soap and scrub dirty garments. Wringers were used to remove excess water. The clean clothes, towels and sheets were pegged on metal clothes lines supported by timber props. Ironing was done with flat irons heated on the wood stove. Not everyone had an ironing board and those without spread a blanket on the kitchen table to create a suitable surface. Women usually washed their own underwear rather than give the task to servants, and it was probably safer to deal with fragile items oneself.

Visitors, male and female, came for morning or afternoon tea, and often stayed for lunch or dinner. Rainy days, of which there were many, meant staying at home. Small card parties and dinner parties were constant events. People often danced on the verandahs to music from wind-up gramophones after dinner. As Edna Campbell recorded in her diary:

> Monday 14 July 1930: Mrs Knibbs & Miss Croan called in the morning … I went down to Chinatown in the afternoon & purchased a present for Uncle’s birthday. Still windy. We all received invitations to attend a dance at the Residency on the 23rd inst.

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47 Sandars, PMB, Papers on the Solomon Islands, 173.
48 UQFL, Wilson Papers and Photographs, J.A. Wilson to Mary, 1933, 8 January 1937; Boutilier 1984a, 189.
49 Keays 1995, 64–65; CO, 225/209, Revision of Salaries, 14 April 1926.
Tuesday 15 July 1930: It rained in the morning. I did some washing. A very windy day. Major Blake, Mr Masterman & Mr Lotze came for dinner at night.

Wednesday 16 1930: I did some ironing & Aunty made a cake. Mrs Hewitt came for lunch. Uncle & I played singles tennis in the afternoon. Still windy.

Thursday 17 July 1930: Aunty, Mike & I went to Mrs Hewitts in the Gavutu launch for the day. Uncle & Mr Masterman came over about 4 p.m. Still windy & rained during the night.50

Surviving evidence is silent on where the servants lived. The main houses were of average size with no space upstairs for servants’ quarters, and this would not have aided privacy. The stumps were sometimes too low to allow accommodation underneath or the underfloor space could only be part-used. They most likely lived in separate servants’ quarters nearby, in small houses made from local materials. Servants kept the households functioning and were wonderful support, if occasionally frustrating. Finding and training servants were always issues. Soon after she married, Jessie Wilson complained to a friend back in Australia—and although a little entertaining storytelling was involved, there is a core of truth here. We can also unpack some of her ingrained racist and condescending views about Solomon Islanders, which were typical of other expatriates:

I’ve had a bit of trouble breaking in house boys. First I had ‘Gideon’ and ‘Luke’—I forget what state of efficiency their namesakes reached in the bible, but these two nearly drove me crazy. They didn’t ‘savvy’ anything at all, & actually made jelly out of Lux instead of jelly crystals & boiled Spearline’s best silk shirt & got tar into the copper amongst the boiling clothes. So Spearline boxed their ears & swore at them & has given us two of his survey boys. They are making a much better fist of things. One of them Johnnie Aliang is the son of a chief & has been the Theodolyte [sic] bearer for Spearline. He owns a sewing machine, a mouth organ & a pair of trousers (shorts).

50  UQFL, Wilson Papers and Photographs, Diary of Edna Campbell.
… The other boy is only 14 & named ‘Aloysius’. He’s a bit mad I think, but willing, & Johnnie Aliang being the son of a chief is priveledged [sic] to spank him & that saves me doing it. Then we have ‘Malamu’ who does the washing & ironing & is a good old thing & irons beautifully. He saw me washing some of my own things one day & said to me: ‘Me Savvy clothes belong Missus Too much’. So Missus was glad to hear it. They each get 5/- per week & rice and tobacco.51

Regardless of the dramatisation, the account is revealing of Europeans’ infantilising attitudes towards Solomon Islanders. It also illustrates the difficulties involved in teaching villagers to operate in European domestic surroundings.

In 1925, the minimum pay rate for adult domestic servants was £1 a month, although the average rate was 30/-, and well-trained servants received £2. Knibbs paid his staff monthly: his laundry-boy received £2, the cook-boy 25/- and a younger boy who assisted received 20/-. Food and clothing were also provided, at an estimated cost of £18 a year for each servant.52 The Wilsons employed five male servants. They were bare chested, dressed in lap-laps with coloured cummerbunds and white belts.53 Europeans discouraged or often outright forbade Solomon Islanders from wearing clothes above the waist.

Religious divisions among the servants occasionally caused issues. In 1936, two of the Wilsons’ servants were Catholics, one was a Methodist from the Western Solomons and one ‘belonged wicked’ (worshipped his ancestors). The Methodist came to Jessie Wilson asking to leave because one of the Catholics had accused him of being lazy. The conflict was resolved, but Jessie said she made a mental note to try to employ servants from only one denomination in future.54 Once more, Jessie Wilson is revealing in her simplistic understanding, as there may well have been other reasons for the dispute.

51 ibid., J.A. Wilson to Mary, February 1925[?].
52 CO, 225/209, Meeting with Representatives of Protectorate Civil Servants, 29 September 1925.
53 UQFL, Wilson Papers and Photographs, Photograph 54.
54 ibid., J.A. Wilson to Mary, 14 February 1932.
By 1932, Jessie Wilson's cook had been with the family for seven years and was an excellent employee. Jessie does not seem to have worried about male servants washing her undergarments. Two years later, however, the Wilson household experienced some staffing changes:

I’m glad your domestic affairs are so good. Mine have never been so bad. My old cook—who was with me all my married life & was in the house 3 years before that, has at last gone home to stay. He said he was very tired & who can blame him! & my house boy who was here 8 years has gone to be a policeman & so I’m left with 3 raw recruits who at first don’t know the difference between a spoon and a shovel & cant even light a stove & they look so sad & forlorn that I know they want to go home but they cant for 2 years. When I told them they look at me with their great big brown eyes & I just cant help seeing their point of view & agreeing that really all this fuss about spoons and table linen is very silly.

Even my wash-boy who has had a little experience & should know better, puts starch in the handkerchiefs & pillow slips & leaves it out of the table napkins & the brute boiled a pair of my silk stockings. He says he has never washed ‘calico’ belong missus
before. His last master was a bachelor. Of course they wont be any good really for about 2 years & it takes about 6 months to get them to wash themselves properly with soap, & to keep their hair short & clean. I just seem to be turning into a cross old woman & just at present I work really hard—but of course I get many a laugh out of it too!\textsuperscript{55}

Jessie makes mention of Spearline ‘boxing’ a servant’s ears. Corporal punishment was often meted out to Islanders in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands plantation and domestic labour settings. They might be beaten with a strap or cane or luxuries were docked from their rations. Castor oil was a standard purgative: expatriate adults used it on themselves and their children. It also seems to have been administered to servants as a purgative and sometimes as a punishment.\textsuperscript{56}

For many Europeans, this was their first experience having multiple servants and some gloried in showing off their stylish domestic assistants. The higher a European’s status and income, the more servants they had and the better their servants were expected to dress. In 1927, at Levers’ manager’s house on Gavutu, American visitor Caroline Mytinger described the following:

[T]wo Malaitan house-boys, spotless in blue-bordered sarongs (called \textit{lap-lap} here), with even the monogram of the house appliquéd on the opening flap, were shimmering noiselessly about serving tea like a couple of Jeeveses. There was not a hair out of place in the perfectly round black ball of their coiffures, and each had a red hibiscus blossom stuck in the very top centre of his mop. Their hands were clean and beautiful. Their fingers were the long tapering bony spatulates of the aesthete … The finger-nails were unusually long, though cut to the end of the finger, and they were a pale-lilac colour (because there was no pigment under the nail). And these delicate hands were handling the fragile china with the elegance of a Ming poet.\textsuperscript{57}

At the same time as observing the perfect servants, Mytinger was told that ‘Malaitamen were insolent, untrustworthy, filthy, stupid, lazy, cunning, ungrateful’.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{55} ibid., 13 November 1936.
\textsuperscript{56} Keays 1995, 266–70.
\textsuperscript{57} Mytinger 1943, 26.
\textsuperscript{58} ibid.
The pattern of discrete and well-groomed house servants was duplicated on Tulagi and Makambo. At one Tulagi house in the 1920s: ‘Two little boys waited at table. They wore scarlet loin-cloths, which contrasted pleasantly with the beautiful bronze of their skins.’59 ‘The emphasis in descriptions was often on how quickly the ‘savages’ had been transformed into compliant servants. There is also a clear appreciation of physical beauty, often bordering on eroticism, such as this description of a ‘boat-boy’ by Lieutenant G.H.P. Muhlhauser, author of the haus‑boi description above:

In fact it is extraordinary what progress the natives have made. For instance we went over to Makambo in a launch which was run single-handed by a native clad in a loin-cloth and a necklace, with a comb in his mop of woolly hair. His muscular body was a joy to see. He ran the engine, steered, and made fast or cast off all by himself, yet a few years ago he must have been a pure savage, who had never seen or imagined such a devilish thing as an engine, or had any idea of mechanics.60

Mentions of acts of violence against servants are hard to find, although they plainly occurred. Spearline Wilson boxing the ears of his staff is proof enough. The most substantial account by a Solomon Islander of life on Tulagi is by Jonathan Fifi’i, later a Maasina Rule leader and parliamentarian. Born in 1921, he moved from the Kwaio bush to a Seventh-day Adventist village and then worked as a house servant for sister H.M. Cleaver, a hospital nurse and later matron who had arrived in Tulagi in 1929. Fifi’i was just a child when he began work in 1930. His memory of Tulagi does much to balance the syrupy views of the Europeans. Although he continued to work for Cleaver, his early years were difficult. His job was to polish the floors with coconut kernel, to polish household items and to carry food and serve at the table. He had no experience of working for Europeans and, although he tried his best, it was not good enough. As he described: ‘She used to beat me—whip me with a broom. Sometimes she’d slap me.’61 The worst occasion was when Cleaver threw a hot boiled egg at him, scalding him badly:

59  Muhlhauser 1924, 204.
60  ibid., 203. See also Boutilier (1984a, 191), who provides a similar appreciative comment of physiques, by a woman.
61  Fifi’i 1989, 32.
I’ll always remember the day when I brought her a three-minute boiled egg from the kitchen and served it. I served her egg from the right side, instead of the left. She picked up the boiling egg and threw it into my face. The boiling egg exploded, just under my eye.

My face was badly hurt, where that egg had exploded under the eye. I still have a scar there under my eye to remind me. My face was split open and swollen. I went to the hospital in tears—Sister Cleaver must have been too ashamed of what she had done to take me to the hospital herself.62

Dr Hetherington examined Fifi`i and patched him up, advising him to go back to work rather than quit. Hetherington then went to Cleaver and arranged for her to pay Fifi`i 15 shillings in compensation, which was about three months’ wages. We do not know what Hetherington said, but the size of the compensation payment is an indication of the severity with which he regarded the matter, and Cleaver changed her manner of behaviour:

After she had injured me, Sister Cleaver felt sorry for me, and treated me much more nicely. She ordered two schoolbooks for me. One was called ‘Primer’ and the other was called ‘Cat’. That had stories about a cat. I taught myself to read with those books. She would drill me: ‘train’, ‘engine’, ‘top’. She helped me to learn to read. I can still remember that. She taught me to speak Pijin clearly and properly, not the way I had learned to speak it in the bush.

She took me into the kitchen and taught me to cook. We worked together in the kitchen, and she taught me figures and arithmetic. She taught me to make sponge cakes. She looked after me. Sister Cleaver and Sister [L.D.] Collins had been the two nurses there when I first went. After that, Sister White and Sister [I.] Svensen and Sister Frost came as well. They all looked after me and took care of me.63

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62 ibid.
63 ibid., 33.
There is no way of knowing how many Tulagi residents had experience of servants back in Britain, Australia, New Zealand or Fiji, although given the middle-class origins of a good number of them, it seems likely that quite a few came from homes where there were servants. For others, particularly the younger men, it was their first time being in a colonial master and servant domestic relationship. Some employers had prior experience with indigenous servants. Agnes Johnson, born in the New Hebrides in 1893 and resident on Tulagi for 23 years, was certainly one of these. What the servants thought of the ‘masta’ and ‘misis’ is also hard to know, except that some very long relationships developed. The rules of a household were those of the employer. Servants were bound under indenture contracts and could not leave of their own volition. It must have been hard for new servants to get used to foreign customs. Europeans breached Solomon Islands pollution taboos by allowing menstruating women to stay in the same house as men, which would have been difficult for Islanders to accept, and the servants would have been in the situation of having a woman walk over their heads in the house above if they were working or living downstairs (which is not acceptable even today to some Malaitans).

In 1901, Graham Officer reported an incident involving Woodford’s wife, Florrie:

> Women must not pass in front of a tambu house. A man must not stand beneath a woman, or beneath where a woman has been e.g. at Tulagi ([according to] Mahaffy) while Mrs. Woodford was there and for a long time after she had left, no native would go beneath the house.  

In Solomon Islander communities, male and female spheres were separated to varying degrees and they often lived in separate houses. On some islands, menstruating women were separated from men. Childbirth, blood and bodily secretions had to be confined and compensation paid for breaches of pollution taboos. As anthropologist David Akin notes, for Kwaio Malaitans, older principles existed for ‘adjusting, mitigating, or waiving ancestral taboos at home, in ways that allowed men to live a normal life when away’. The first time that Malaitan men and women faced breaking these taboos in circumstances

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64 Robinson 2008; Robinson 2015.
65 Richards 2012, Graham Officer Diary, 16 June 1901, 176.
66 Akin 2013, 23.
beyond their control was on labour recruiting vessels, where men had to share life close to women or have them walking about on the decks when they were below. Akin records how people

negotiated with their ancestors new ground rules for proper behaviour abroad, to follow taboos when possible but to waive them when necessary. Like so many other things, taboo observation, and taboos themselves, changed over time and varied from person to person.67

Eventually, modifications were made to make living in an urban community possible; nevertheless, some things were always extreme and difficult for many Solomon Islander males. Emptying latrine cans used by women or dealing with females’ garments or towels used during menstruation would also have caused issues since these were extreme violations of customs relating to female pollution.68 Europeans feared that their servants were incapable of washing fine silks and undergarments and that close access to these clothes would ignite unwelcome passions. This was fortuitous because they likely would have interpreted a male servant’s refusal to touch female garments as dereliction of duty rather than as adhering to their culture’s religious rules.

In villages, Solomon Islanders, both men and women, were often naked or wore only small pubic covers. Foreigners soon got used to this, although around missions and government stations it was usual for Europeans or Melanesian church teachers to insist people cover their genitals. The issue of ‘native’ nakedness was addressed in Australian Papua when, in 1906, the first regulation passed by the new Australian administration was for all ‘natives’ (other than children) to be clothed in at least a loin-cloth while in public in Port Moresby. In 1920, due to fears that Papuans were suffering health issues from wearing wet clothes, a new regulation (which remained in force until 1941) forbade males and females in villages and labour lines from wearing clothes on the upper parts of their bodies. There were exemptions for those living in urban or mission station areas, police and village constables.69 The Solomon Islands Government did not have similar regulations. Urban servants were sometimes dressed only in

67 ibid., 23; see also 204.
68 Interviews conducted in the 2010s by Christopher Chevalier with Solomon Islander men who were youths in the 1950s indicate their extreme discomfort with having to empty latrine cans used by women.
lap-laps or sulus, although there are also photographs of males wearing shirts and women in full ‘Mother Hubbard’–style dresses. Few indigenous males wore shorts or trousers; they were more expensive than lap-laps and the simpler garments were used to differentiate between ‘natives’ and Europeans. The ban on Solomon Islander males wearing shorts continued for a long time. Jonathan Fifi‘i was angry because during the war members of the defence force, which was run by British officers and planters, could only wear khaki lap-laps, never trousers or shirts. And in his biography Sir Peter Kenilorea mentioned a dispute at King George VI School on Malaita in the early 1960s when students protested that they wanted to wear shorts, not lap-laps. They were not issued with shorts and shirts until 1964.70

Employers had to communicate with their servants in Pijin, which could easily degenerate into simplified English, which was used by European employers as though it were Pijin, although, unlike Pijin, it was not based on a Melanesian grammatical structure.71 There would have been a great deal of miscommunication with newcomers, even if both parties eventually would have reached some linguistic understanding. It seems probable that some of the problems with servants experienced by Jessie Wilson and others related to their inability to communicate clearly in Pijin. Becoming fluent in Pijin was part of the process of learning to live in Solomon Islands. Dick Horton recounted an incident with Pijin from soon after he arrived:

I’d not been in Tulagi for very long when I was invited up to dinner by the local doctor. In those days we had to be very pukka—black tie, black cummerbund, long mosquito boots and all the rest of it. Afterwards he suggested we had coffee outside on the lawn, and he told his boy to bring it. No coffee turned up, so he called him again. ‘Simeon, where is fella coffee?’ And he answered, ‘Oh master, me sorry too much, arse piece belong coffee pot im e bugger-up finis’.

This shook me rigid. I thought, ‘Good lord, does he really use this language to his master?’ But all he said was, ‘I’m very sorry, the bottom of the coffee pot has burnt out’.72

71  Mühlhäusler 1981.
72  Knox-Mawer 1986, 70.
Solomon Islanders had their own ways of dealing with illnesses, whether cuts or wounds, diarrhoea or chest infections, back pain, sprains or eye problems. Many had detailed knowledge of medicinal plants and Westerners are only now beginning to understand their abilities to deal with medical issues. There is no evidence that they shared this ability in domestic circumstances on Tulagi, but logic suggests that they did, and that some of the foreigners would have learnt local cures using various plants. Others would no doubt have scoffed at and rejected ‘native’ remedies. We are on firmer ground in the Pacific War, during which we know Solomon Islanders sometimes used indigenous remedies to assist American servicemen. They very likely also passed some of their medical knowledge on to their domestic employers.

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While undoubtedly many servants were kept very separate, close and abiding relationships seen to have develop between servants and their employers. Even Jonathan Fifi’i, who was physically injured by his employer, seems to have forgiven her and later appreciated her efforts to make him literate. Nevertheless, Fifi’i’s overall assessment of the British era is extremely negative.

He gives several examples of the behaviour of the Inspector of Labour, Monty Masterman—the worst type of colonial officer—who was pompous, incompetent and brutal. In one incident, Masterman supposedly got his comeuppance. The story concerns Masterman and Sau Beriboo, a strong, tough Kwaio man who worked for Dick Laycock on Tulagi. There had been a public holiday and Laycock had made his staff work through it. Sau asked for the next day off in lieu; Laycock refused and sent him off to Masterman with a note explaining Sau’s effrontery. Masterman read it and is said to have slapped Sau. Fifi’i recounted that Sau grabbed Masterman’s forearm and pulled him across the desk, pushing his face into the desk. Sau made his feelings very clear: ‘You, Mr. Masterman, aren’t half the man I am. I’d like to kill you.’ Fifi’i recalled the incident:

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73 Henderson and Hancock 1988, 271–73. Also based on conversations with David Akin, Brisbane, August 2016, and films of the customary use of plants from Kwaio, Malaita.

74 Fifi’i 1989, 32–33.
Masterman gasped, with his face flattened onto the table: ‘It’s all right, son. It’s all right. Don’t tell anyone what’s happened between us. I won’t tell anyone. Don’t tell anyone I hit you, and don’t tell anyone you hit me. I can see how strong you are. Let’s just keep it between us. You go back’. Masterman sat down and wrote a letter to Dick Leacock [sic]. Sau took it back. Dick Leacock read and said: ‘All right, all you men have a holiday today. The Master said you are to have a holiday today’. Of course, by nightfall every Solomon Islander in Tulagi knew it.75

It seems unlikely that this was true, although it is typical of the tales of bravado that circulated. Masterman would more likely have used the police to deal with Sau, quietly having him beaten up, although we can never know the dynamics of relationships between Solomon Islanders. If the Sau Beriboo story has any truth in it, the main reasons Masterman would have been conciliatory is probably that he did not want to lose face or he had a genuine fear of being hurt badly, then or later. We are on safer ground in predicting how the administration would react to inappropriate violence by a colonial official. In 1935, Masterman was investigated for brutally beating a prisoner who had ‘grinned in a manner that is objectionable in a certain type of native’. Masterman said: ‘I think very few of us are willing to tolerate direct impertinence from natives’.76 Resident commissioner Ashley mildly admonished Masterman, saying:

I am sure you regret your action and I realise that you did it in a fit of temper when, in this climate, it is not always easy to have under control, but I trust you will be more careful in future.77

In most cases, we have only the employer’s versions, which are inclined to stress good-natured relationships between employers and their staff, with Solomon Islanders kept in line with an occasional cuff over the ears. Both the Wilsons and Sandars mention keeping their servants for long periods and Spearline Wilson reemployed two of his Tulagi servants at Honiara during 1945–46. The Wilsons’ servants wrote letters to the Wilson children when they were away in Australia at school and the fondness was reciprocated. But we need to balance this against the examples of sister Cleaver and Monty Masterman, who feature so strongly in Jonathan Fifi`i’s memories. My conclusion is that Pacific colonial households were

75 ibid., 35–36.
76 Akin 2013, 288.
77 ibid.
different from those in the surrounding settler societies, but similar elements of paternalism, racism and brutality were found in both. There is, I think, a difference between a settler society where there is an almost total takeover of land and power from the indigenous people and a Pacific society such as Solomon Islands, where, despite large-scale land alienation in some areas, the foreign population was only ever a small minority who maintained their power largely through ‘smoke and mirrors’—a classic magical technique of illusions with no substance. Solomon Islanders always had the ability to withdraw back to their villages, as they did with effectiveness during Maasina Rule.

Fifi`i deserves the last word:

> The rest of them were just as bad, acting as if they were a superior caste, and as if we were just animals, here in our own country—acting as if they were the rulers and we were the slaves.78

Europeans were never willing to surrender their dominant position or control over Pacific Islanders. It was part of the way they ruled colonies. The term ‘invasion’ is seldom used in the Pacific Islands to describe the colonial years, because in some areas the indigenous people never saw themselves as forced to relinquish control of their land or cultures. Nevertheless, a system of superiority was maintained by racist policies and intimidation. There was always a presumption of superiority. Certainly, this was the situation in Solomon Islands. There also were other aspects of these colonial relationships—sexual and racial attitudes—that fed into wider interpretations of imperialism and the prewar culture of the Tulagi enclave. These aspects will be discussed in the next chapter.

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78 Fifi`i 1989, 35.