

1. 'The farthest place from England'

North Island, New Zealand 1860

The young Englishman arrived unheralded. He had an urgent question. In the wintry dawn the family watched him gliding across the beaten copper waters of the wide Whaingaroa Harbour in a Māori canoe. He walked up the slope to the mission house, unkempt, shaking river sand from his clothes and speckled with insect bites. The watching family was not offended, even if a little startled. Any traveller from Auckland, they knew, would have been on the track for most of a week, sleeping in the open, paddling in canoes on harbour and rivers, and tramping through rain-soaked bush and fern. The young man had reached the northern shore of the river after dark, nearly in sight of his destination. Unable to find a friendly Māori who would supply a canoe so late, he had half-buried himself in river sand to try to escape the hungry insects and waited for daylight.

He had come, young George Brown said, to ask for the hand of Miss Sarah Lydia Wallis in marriage. If she accepted him, it would mean leaving her missionary family in New Zealand for a missionary life in Samoa. His ship was due to sail soon so he needed her answer—and a wedding—almost immediately. It was July 1860.

If Lydia Wallis hesitated, it would have been understandable. If she said 'yes' then her future would be a mirror of her parents' past. But Lydia was a healthy, happy young woman of twenty-one, active, intelligent and practical, from a family widely known and respected in colonial New Zealand despite their isolation. She would always say that she knew, or at least hoped, that he was the man for her.

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It was not surprising that Lydia Wallis was invited to become a missionary wife. More surprising was that this young man, George Brown, was her suitor. That they ever met at all was remarkable. He was born in the north of England, in a town on a river near the ruins of an ancient fortified castle. She was born in the north of New Zealand, at a lonely mission on a river near a fortified and populated Māori settlement. Still more unlikely was the thought that this young Brown should ever choose to become a missionary.

The two young people first met at the home of mutual friends when a group was holidaying on the west coast out of Auckland, where the rhythm of waves surged in from the Tasman Sea. Lydia Wallis and her older sister Elizabeth visited their parents' close friends and colleagues, Thomas and Sarah Buddle and met Mrs Buddle's nephew, George Brown, who had arrived from England in 1855. Lydia Wallis was seventeen or eighteen at the time, and young Brown's first impression was of 'that little Lyd Wallis that used to be prim and demure.'¹ At first glance, Brown may not have seemed particularly prepossessing himself. He was about twenty-years old, not very tall, quite slight, clean-shaven with gingery hair over his ears, quiet and polite even though a keen observer might have seen a lively gleam in his eye. The nephew came from the Buddles' home town of Barnard Castle in the north of England and, it was whispered, he had run away from home as a youth. Five years ago, his aunt explained, he had abandoned an apprenticeship without his father's or his employer's permission and run away to sea, restlessly travelling with naval transports in the Mediterranean and to Canada. Now he had turned up in New Zealand.

This young man must have seemed quite sophisticated to Lydia Wallis. She had lived her life on an isolated mission station and as a schoolgirl in a colonial town of 7,000 souls. He had travelled around the world. Auckland, so grand in Lydia's eyes, was described by a contemporary observer as 'like a small seaside town, but not so substantially built, nor does it convey the same idea of comfort or wealth.'² Her life seemed confined and mostly domestic. He had known adventures. Her world was centred on a mission and founded on Christian faith. If on arrival in New Zealand he had any religious convictions this was more out of respect for his aunt and uncle than something he owned for himself. Even so, Lydia was aware of the newcomer. They would meet rarely but news and gossip travelled.

The rebellious runaway had found harbour with the colonial community in Auckland. The Buddle family with his nine young cousins welcomed him into their home at Onehunga each weekend and he found work in Auckland town. Onehunga was a small port township on Manukau Harbour on the western side of the narrow isthmus that divided the western coast of the North Island from the eastern coast. He was being absorbed into the community of young men in the town, many of them linked with the churches. The small colonial community of the late 1850s included a number of gifted people; wide interests embraced politics, relationships with the Māori community, education and business affairs, churches and missions as well as experience in the Pacific Island regions of Tonga, Samoa and Fiji. They might be isolated and perhaps insular, but never

1 George Brown, letter to Lizzie Buddle, 1872, Brown, Letter Book, 1871–76, ML A1686-2 CY 2767.

2 John Gutch, *Martyr of the Islands: The Life and Death of John Coleridge Patteson*, London, Auckland, Sydney: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971.

dull. In this circle of society, the people with most influence on young Brown were those of the Christian faith. In the warm Buddle household, he wrote later, 'Every week I experienced the power of sermons which were never spoken.'³ His five years in New Zealand had shaped the young man in ways that he might not have predicted.

Early in 1860 Lydia's father, the Rev. James Wallis reported to his family that George Brown had applied to the Auckland gathering of Methodist ministers, asking to become a minister himself and to serve as a missionary. There had been hesitation among the brethren. A good enough young man, certainly, and there were no problems with his preaching but, they said, 'He is such a meek, mild, young lady-like person that we are sure he has no spirit whatever that would make a missionary. He is utterly devoid of any self-assertion, and we, therefore, do not think he is fit for mission work.' One or two spoke for him, believing that there was more to this young man than met the eye. They took the vote and by a very small majority George Brown was accepted for missionary service.⁴ The church rule was that he must now 'find a wife'. Whether or not he had ever given her any real cause to expect it, when the time came he had no doubts. He would tell a biographer that 'there was nobody else but Lydia Wallis, the bright, comely, capable girl.'⁵ Lydia's intuition had been right.

Two young people now faced a moment of decision. There was much that they still needed to discover about the other. There were questions about the future that they could not answer. There would be time for that. For now, Lydia Wallis placed her hand in the hand of George Brown and agreed to share his future.

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George Brown was born on 7 December 1835 in the town of Barnard Castle, County Durham, in the northeast of England, son of George Brown and his wife Elizabeth, formerly Miss Elizabeth Dixon. The town and district carried memories of generations of those who had gone before; ancient Celts, Roman armies, a succession of invaders and newcomers, lords and serfs, the violent and the oppressed, farmers and factory owners. By the time of the birth of George Brown, the twelfth-century castle on the River Tees had been in ruins for several hundred years. Nineteenth-century industries clustered below the broken castle walls along the banks of the Tees, with the crowded housing of the workers, and a tight web of narrow cobbled streets lay against the steep hillside. Past eras were hinted at through street names—Butter Cross, Horse Market and

3 George Brown, *George Brown, Pioneer Missionary and Explorer: An Autobiography*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908, p. 17.

4 Brown, *Pioneer, Missionary and Explorer*, pp. 18–19.

5 C. Brunson Fletcher, *The Black Knight of the Pacific*, Australasian Publishing Co. Pty. Ltd, Sydney, 1944, p. 51.

Galgate that once led to the gallows on the hill—and solid buildings of grey stone, some showing the craft of masons and others the irregular patterns of dry-stone walls. Beyond the town lay the jade, emerald and sage green of the undulating hills of Teesdale and the North Pennines, the forests and the ordered fields and hay meadows of centuries of rural cultivation, with a scattering of limestone farm houses and barns.

The young George Brown had no memories of his mother, other than a moment when, as a little boy of nearly five, he was lifted to kiss her cold dead cheek. His father, George Brown senior, was the central figure in his life as a child and youth. The older George Brown had arrived in Barnard Castle as an orphaned youth, relying on his own efforts to make a living; and through the years had earned rare respect in the region. A man of many interests, he had risen to the role of solicitor from humble beginnings. He was widely read, fascinated by science, and a skilled amateur botanist and geologist. He collected and lectured on the wildflowers of the region and taught his young son the names of rare flora surviving from the ice age. The older Brown also edited a local newspaper, supported the Mechanics' Institute offering education to workers and the organisation working to bring railway to their region, as well as being a devout and active Christian in his church and community. His son loved and respected him, and no doubt inherited his energy, enthusiasm and broad-ranging interest in many different disciplines.

His mother's parents, William and Hannah Dixon, had died before he was born. His mother's grave was near theirs in the old churchyard behind St Mary's Church, with memorials to uncles and siblings he could not remember.⁶ A few Dixon relatives remained in the district, but around the time of his mother's death at the age of twenty-nine, her older sister Emma had migrated to Canada with her family and the other sister, Sarah, had migrated to the unimaginably distant New Zealand as the bride of missionary Thomas Buddle. Rare letters were the only link.

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Three years after George Brown was born in northern England, Sarah Lydia Wallis was born on 3 December 1838 at Tangiteroria, a remote missionary post on the banks of the Kaipara River on the North Island of New Zealand. In the dense forests, coastlines and waterways of that southern land, legends were told of the ancestors who had come many generations earlier, courageous voyagers venturing over invisible ocean paths from other islands across the wide Pacific to establish a Māori society of tribal chiefs, their communities, artists and slaves. Others had followed more recently; sealers, whalers, traders, tentative settlers,

⁶ Letter from Harry Watson, Barnard Castle, Co. Durham to George Carter, 20 March 1986. Visit to Barnard Castle, and churchyard of St Mary's Church.

land speculators, timber men cutting the fine kauri timber, and missionaries. At that time the people of that region lived beyond the sphere of British or any other colonial power, beyond the rule of law, although many of the settlers and missionaries had sent a plea for intervention to the authorities in Great Britain.

At the time of Lydia's birth, her parents, the Reverend James and Mrs Mary Ann Wallis, were young, lonely and struggling to make sense of what seemed to them a serious error of judgment on the part of their Mission superiors. They had been Londoners themselves before travelling as newly-weds to the ends of the earth as Wesleyan Methodist missionaries to the Māori of New Zealand. But now London seemed very far away. Those who sat in church offices in London streets, deciding what was best for those of their mission staff in other parts of the world, seemed to be blinded by the impossible curve of the earth, unable to see what was beyond their limited horizon. The new baby Sarah Lydia, their third child, arrived just after the fourth anniversary of their arrival in New Zealand. Their frustration was justified; since first entering the Hokianga River on the north-west coast on 1 December 1834, they had worked in three locations and now were being instructed from afar to move yet again.

It had begun well. A number of Māori tribes in the north might have welcomed them, but internal tensions between new and established missionaries had sent Wallis and his friend John Whiteley away from Mangungu to attempt new work further south. They began work at Whaingaroa and Kawhia, on two rivers that cut into the western coastline of the North Island, south of Auckland. They needed courage. It was tough pioneering work, in dense forest 'not easily nor often traveled by the foot of men and never by beast', as Wallis wrote, among a warlike and suspicious people.⁷ Despite the extreme challenges, they were beginning to make progress. Then, to their acute disappointment, their mission officials in London instructed them to leave the region to the Church Missionary Society (CMS). The distant directors of the CMS claimed that they had intended to work in the area where Wallis and Whiteley had begun, and had funding for this. Wallis and Whiteley were to leave immediately.

Obedient but angry, James and Mary Ann Wallis, with their first baby Elizabeth, left Whaingaroa River and everything they had worked to establish over the previous year or so. On 1 June 1836 James wrote in his journal:

Left Whaingaroa this morning with a heart overwhelmed with sorrow and not without some doubts relative to the propriety of the steps we are taking.... When I looked at the chapel, the schoolroom, the dwelling

⁷ James Wallis, letter to Committee of Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, London, 19 February 1845, in *Letters to Mission Secretaries, 1809–1895*, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS), London, written between 15 December 1834 and 10 May 1854. Typescript. Original held at Auckland Institute and Museum, MS # 320, 'Letters and Papers concerning Rev. James Wallis.'

house, the garden, the field, and the station generally I felt desirous to remain in possession of them: but my leaving these are only a light trial compared to the tearing myself away from the weeping natives to whom I had had the honour of presenting the gospel of Christ.⁸

Frustrated and disappointed, the young couple attempted to begin again in a clearing hewn from dense forest, near a centre of Māori population at Tangiteroria on the Kaipara River. Their new neighbours were not interested in anything they might want to offer them and certainly did not welcome them. In a world of violence, slavery, sorcery and treachery, James Wallis struggled. His letters home were filled with memories of the work they had left behind, and after a year in the new location, James wrote bitterly that all the signs suggested that ‘the Lord has nothing for us to do here.’⁹ The whole country was racked with lawlessness; warring tribal groups, unscrupulous whites grabbing land and anarchy in some white settlements. Wallis was grieved to hear that the CMS had still not taken any action at Whaingaroa, the mission he had been forced to abandon.

The turning point came in October 1838, only weeks before the birth of their third child, Sarah Lydia. The Wallis family learned that, in the light of pleas from Māori chiefs from Whaingaroa and the inaction of the CMS, James Wallis and his family could return to the work that had never been far from their hearts. Infant Sarah Lydia Wallis would have no memory of her birthplace yet may have inherited some of the renewed optimism, hope and joy of her parents at that time. A visiting senior missionary, the respected Reverend Nathaniel Turner, baptised baby Sarah Lydia on 21 February 1839. Within days they had sailed, and by 4 March arrived back on the Whaingaroa River. Home again; it would be home for the next twenty-five years.¹⁰

Even in the initial euphoria of returning, things were not simple. The large Māori population, though welcoming, had moved from the northern to the southern side of the river; their original house was not habitable and the land did not belong to the mission. They would have to begin again. Many years later, James Wallis wrote, ‘No settlement being near where the vessel anchored, our goods were landed on the beach where they had to remain some days. Meanwhile we secured shelter by setting up a four post kauri bedstead which we roofed with boards and blankets and which answered the double purpose of drawing room and bedroom.’¹¹

8 Wallis, Journal entry, 1 June 1836, in *Letters to Mission Secretaries, 1809–1895*.

9 Wallis, Journal entry 23 July 1837, quoted in letter to WMMS Committee, London, 4 August 1837.

10 Rev. James Wallis, *Letters to Mission Secretaries, 1809–1895*, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, London, written between 15 December 1834 and 10 May 1854. Original held at Auckland Institute and Museum, MS # 320, ‘Letters and Papers concerning Rev. James Wallis.’

11 Wallis, Narrative written for grandson Rev. T.J. Wallis, p. 6.

Clutching her children around her under the flimsy roof of blankets, Mary Ann Wallis cared for small four-year-old Elizabeth, two-year-old William and three-month-old baby Sarah Lydia on the bedstead until the Māori erected an open-sided building of local material to provide temporary accommodation at one end and a church at the other. As the weather cooled into autumn, with cold winds and then rain, decisions were made to follow the people to the southern side of the wide river, to purchase land on a pleasant rise overlooking the water called Nihinihi and to build a weatherboard house there.¹²

Despite the practical difficulties, they were full of hope. Small Sarah Lydia was too young to be aware of some of the events of her early childhood. The Māori population nearby was beginning to consider the Christian message. Her father was working hard and was often away, leaving his wife and young children alone. Wallis added his signature to the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 as a witness to the mark of a local chief, the Reverend Thomas Buddle and his bride Sarah arrived from the town of Barnard Castle in County Durham, England in 1840 to work beside Wallis; they would become life-long friends. Relations between the Wesleyan Methodists and the CMS caused Lydia's parents much anxiety during the 1840s, with endless debates over baptism, ordination, schisms and lay participation. The sound of the Māori language and the presence of Māori people in their home was natural, the swirling intricacies of facial and body tattoos as familiar as the faces of their parents.

At intervals, significant guests came to stay in the mission house on the river. Governor Hobson and Captain Best arrived in 1842, with the hope of purchasing Māori land for the Crown, for the use of settlers. Already large tracts of land had been obtained in other parts of the island, often amid controversy. James Wallis was not impressed and quoted a Māori leader, 'When you see an island you think you would like, you go and kill the people there and take their land. Where are the people of Port Jackson? They are lost, you white people have destroyed them ... perhaps we shall be lost too. These thoughts tell me not to sell my land.'¹³

Lydia Wallis was a five-year old when the new mission Superintendent, the Reverend Walter Lawry, arrived at their home exhausted; he had made the journey in the winter of 1844 and was appalled at the demands made on his scattered and isolated people— 'such violent and wasting travels,' he wrote.¹⁴ In the same year the artist George French Angas appeared at the mission house. With his party, twenty-two-year old Angas had travelled through 'a succession of flooded fernland, swamps and dripping forests ... through the intricate

12 Ibid.

13 Wallis, Letter to Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, London, July 1842.

14 E.W. Hames, *Walter Lawry and the Wesleyan Mission in the South Seas*, Auckland: Wesley Historical Society, 1967, p. 31.

mazes of which we wound our way over slippery roots, ankle deep in mud.’ He described the magnificent vistas until they saw from a hilltop ‘the many-branched harbour winding amongst the hills,’ the cloud-topped Mount Karioi and the ocean beyond. James Wallis was away, but ‘his wife received us most kindly, surrounded by a group of half a dozen fine rosy-cheeked children who bore testimony in their health and happy countenances, to the salubrity of the New Zealand climate.’¹⁵ Wallis was beginning to record changes in their environment since their first arrival; tribal wars were fewer, there were fewer murders, slaves were being set free and there was less infanticide.¹⁶ Though still a remote and dangerous place, the atmosphere seemed to be lightening.

To a young girl growing up on a slope overlooking the harbour, the world of childhood would have seemed the only world possible. Lydia and her eight siblings all survived the ills of childhood. They had many Māori playmates and spoke the language fluently. It was a busy household linked with the activities of the Māori community, the church and school, set in a place of great scenic beauty. She would have watched the Māori women creating beautiful cloaks of feather, fur and fibre. She would have visited young friends in their homes, stooping to enter through the low doorway and squatting by the smoky fire in the ring of stones on the earthen floor while rain fell on the thatched roof. The elegant curves of carved house posts and lintels of the Māori meeting house echoed the lines of curling fern. Staring eyes and protruding tongues, carved into the design, were frightening, but familiar. The long sweep of canoe and paddle, slicing the water below their house, the glow of greenstone ornament and delicacy of fine feather were all part of the known landscape. There would have been times when her mother called her urgently—‘Come away! Come away *now*’—from sights and sounds that could have led to childhood nightmares, and times when she and her brothers and sisters were kept within the family home but always with Māori companions and house servants. Years later Lydia would tell a friend, ‘I lived among the Maoris [*sic*] as long as I can remember.’¹⁷

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On the far side of the world, the boy George Brown was attending school in Barnard Castle. In later years he was dismissive of the quality of his own education in a small private school. Even so, his education had equipped him with a fluent writing style, a wide vocabulary, flawless spelling and competence with figures. From his father he inherited an active curiosity about science in all its forms and a love for books and self-education. When George Brown was ten-years old, his father remarried. The boy did not take kindly to the firm

15 George French Angas, quoted in C.W. Vennell and Susan Williams, *Raglan County: Hills and Sea 1876–1976*, Auckland: Wilson & Horton, 1976, pp. 50–51.

16 Wallis, Letter to Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, London, 19 February 1845.

17 Fletcher, *The Black Knight of the Pacific*, p. 65.

discipline of his new stepmother, Mrs Jane Brown. Home became an uneasy place, with a strong-willed and rebellious lad, a father who was often absorbed in his many enterprises and a woman of strong character who was attempting to be 'mother' to a boy who resented her presence. It was no easier when a son and then daughters were born to the older Brown and his new wife. As the boy became a youth, he did not make life easy for his stepmother, who declared that he seemed to be heading for the gallows.

The gallows or an early grave due to disease or misadventure were certainly possibilities. As he grew older, he often seemed to skirt perilously close to disaster. As a bright thirteen-year-old, he was sent to work for the Barnard Castle physician, Dr. Isaac Cust, with a view to a possible medical career. He learned some things of practical use during that time, but almost managed to blow up himself and the good doctor, with a misguided chemical experiment. It was decided that he had no special gifts for the medical profession.¹⁸

It was while he was working for Dr. Cust that he had another brush with death. Barnard Castle had attracted an increasing number of industries during the nineteenth century, and the river was polluted from the slaughter house, tanning works and guano warehouse. Town drainage was inadequate and conditions were ripe for disease. In common with most of the rest of world of the time, the connection between contaminated water and cholera had not been made. Cholera struck Barnard Castle in 1849. Nearly half of the town's population of over 4,000 people became ill and many died. Among the survivors was George Brown who later recalled 'a very narrow escape from death.'¹⁹ His father became very active with other citizens in forming a local Board of Health which moved rapidly to provide sewerage and clean water to their town.

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On the banks of the pristine Whaingaroa River, Lydia and the other Wallis children may have been content with the only life they knew. Their parents however were very anxious indeed about the future of their children. They were not Māori, so had no place in the Māori system, nor had they any opportunity to become productive members of European society. James Wallis had raised the question of education for their children with the Mission leadership in London on a number of occasions but with no response. The Wesleyan Methodist missionaries were increasingly distressed. On their behalf, James Wallis wrote to London. He believed that his children should be 'taken away from native scenes and native society or they will be in danger of being ruined. In this part

¹⁸ Brown, *Pioneer, Missionary and Explorer*, p. 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

of the country there is no English society, no not a soul, and all my brethren in the District can testify that I have tried every means within my reach to get my children educated, but in vain.'²⁰

He and his wife were neglecting some of their missionary duties while they tried to educate their children themselves, and would continue to do so 'unless it can be made to appear that we ought to instruct the heathen though our children are allowed to grow up in ignorance and error.' He concluded 'if your Missionaries' children are not taken care of, the sooner you recall your missionaries from New Zealand the better.'²¹

It was a clear warning. The mission superintendent, the Reverend Walter Lawry, took action. Wesleyan College and Seminary was established in Auckland in 1849 with the parents of students becoming shareholders.²² Lawry requested the appointment of 'a thoroughly good school master for the children of my hardworking brethren' and the Reverend Joseph H. Fletcher and his wife Kate were sent. A large building was built on eight and a half acres in Upper Queen Street, Auckland, looking down from a hilltop across the harbour with its traffic of trading canoes, whalers, coastal vessels and brigs sailing for Sydney or San Francisco. At first the school accepted only boys but the parents insisted that their daughters must also have an opportunity. Despite the misgivings of some shareholders, the new school decided to be a rare institution for the period, accepting both boys and girls as students and boarders. When students arrived to begin school in January 1850, travelling from missionary households in Pacific islands regions or from rural New Zealand, eleven-year-old Sarah Lydia Wallis joined siblings Elizabeth, William and Thomas at the new school.²³ The school would report proudly at the end of 1851 that 'we furnish almost the only high-aiming Educational agency in the entire Island. This must be regarded, at least, as a memorable experiment to supply Education to the middle classes under the auspices of unsectarian Christianity.'²⁴

The school Principal, Joseph Fletcher wrote at the end of the first year that the school was indeed greatly needed. Some of the children from the more distant islands could barely speak English and 'it was surprising that the children had imbibed so little poison from the impure Pagan atmosphere which had surrounded them from their birth—the result of an amount of parental vigilance and fidelity which it is not easy to appreciate sufficiently.'²⁵

20 Wallis, Letter to Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, London, 15 October 1847.

21 Ibid.

22 Hames, *Walter Lawry and the Wesleyan Mission in the South Seas*, pp. 33–36.

23 Cash Book 1849–1856, Wesleyan College and Seminary, Auckland.

24 Wesleyan College and Seminary Annual Report, 1851.

25 Rev. Joseph Fletcher to Rev. Dr. Beecham, letter from Wesleyan College and Seminary, Auckland, NZ, 27 December 1850.

While he observed that children from the families in New Zealand were often very healthy and strong, however 'the frequent absences of the father, the abundant occupations of both parents, and the want of Society in many of the Bush Stations, were all unfavourable to mental discipline and systematic instruction or indeed to any successful attempt to qualify young people for active and useful life.'²⁶

Just before the students scattered to their remote homes for summer holidays in December 1852, at the end of Lydia's second year at the school, the annual examination was held before an audience of public and parents. They were grateful for evidence of 'a sound and liberal education based on Christian principles' being offered in their young colony. Around the classrooms, students displayed specimens of their work—writing, drawing, needlework—and girls nervously performed on the piano for admiring parents. The oral examination was exciting as the boys and girls were questioned on mental arithmetic, astronomy, physiology, the classics, general knowledge and the rest. Lydia Wallis had just turned fourteen and was among the girls, including her special friends, the daughters of the Buddle, Whiteley and Buller families, who were commended. The audience was delighted that the girls had participated well in the general questioning. An observer wrote that this 'gave ample assurance that they also had received in full proportion the able and zealous care which had evidently marked the entire course of tuition in the College.'²⁷

Sarah Lydia Wallis was given a small bound autograph book sometime late in 1853. The entries shed light on the people who inhabited her world. On the opening page a family friend wrote:

To Miss S.L. Wallis:

Soft blows the breeze of early Spring
and so does youthful life begin;...
Live, dearest girl, live while you may;
You should enjoy life's fleeting day.

The little book, with pages of religious verse and biblical quotations, captured the signatures of school friends and teacher Mary Fletcher, missionary friends of her parents, residents of Auckland and travellers from distant England and Australia.²⁸ Hinting at the multi-lingual world where Lydia Wallis lived, entries were given in Māori, Tongan, Fijian, French and 'Kaffir' as well as in English.

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²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ 'Wesleyan College and Seminary,' in the *New-Zealander*, December 1852.

²⁸ Autograph Book (entries from 1853–1880) kept by Lydia Brown, is in the keeping of Lydia Brown's great-granddaughter Nancy Joyce, Artarmon, Sydney. Among the signatures are those of William Boyce and Robert Young, commissioners sent by the British Methodist Conference to enquire into Wesleyan Methodist affairs in the Antipodes in 1853.

In 1851, while Lydia Wallis was still a school girl in New Zealand, fifteen-year-old George Brown left his home in Barnard Castle. Perhaps he had just had another confrontation with his stepmother. Much as he loved his father, he seems to have had few regrets as he left his home town. He was not happy at home and the town itself, despite its setting in a beautiful region, was grey, rather grim and unhealthy and described by a contemporary observer as a sink of vice and profligacy. He turned his back on it all, travelling north-east along the ridge with a panorama across the green hills of the Pennines etched with dry-stone walls. On past the bulk of Raby Castle, through the ancient city of Durham, along roads winding north-east through farmland until at last he reached the home of his Uncle Forster. His uncle lived in the town of Sunderland on the River Wear where it enters the North Sea. The wide grey expanse of water, glimpsed through winter fog, was his first sight of the sea, with tantalising hints of the unknown worlds beyond the mist. Uncle Forster lived in a tall, narrow terrace house and found his nephew work with a local wholesale chemist.²⁹ It would be several years before Brown returned to Barnard Castle, and then only briefly. The youth who turned away from his birth place did not know that, though it would remain a mythical Home, it would never truly be 'home' again.

The boy was restless. It was not long before he abandoned any attempt to learn the business with the chemist in Sunderland and moved on to the port town of Hartlepool further down the coast. The lively quayside bustle of sailors and shopkeepers, ships' chandlers, sword smiths, sail makers and smugglers enchanted him. Although he was now apprenticed to a draper in Hartlepool, he was far more interested in the sight of tall sailing ships entering the harbour. The draper soon discovered that young Brown was useful and very willing as a courier of smuggled goods to and from foreign ships. Although he still had a lot to learn about ships, he began the risky business of carrying parcels of English fabric to foreign ships in the middle of the night, and bringing back cigars, tobacco and other dutiable goods. He was almost caught once. As the rowing boat he was in came toward the mooring, he saw a Customs officer watching from the quay. Very aware that he had several hundred contraband cigars packed around his body under his clothes, the youth tried to look innocent. Keeping himself and his aromatic cargo downwind of the officer, he climbed on to the stone-paved quay brazenly talking of the latest news until he was safely away.³⁰

The temptation of a life at sea instead of behind a shop counter became too much. George Brown decided to run away to sea. It was not a wise plan, as it meant breaking his apprenticeship agreement and could lead to prison if caught. Even so, pretending that he was going home for Christmas 1851, he travelled north to Newcastle and took a steerage passage on a ship for London, just after

²⁹ Mr. Forster lived at 3 Park Terrace, Toward Road, Sunderland. He was evidently a man of substance.

³⁰ Fletcher, *The Black Knight of the Pacific*, pp. 29–30.

his sixteenth birthday. It did not begin well. The ship ran into a violent winter storm; the wreckage of six other ships, lost with all hands, tossed around them as they struggled to safety. Arriving in London without friends, funds or experience, he tried to find employment with ships anchored in the Thames. An incompetent attempt at being a ship's cook was a failure and he found himself lurking in dockland streets trying to dodge men sent by his father's solicitors to bring him home. When they caught up with him, his choices were few but the runaway managed to persuade a reluctant father to give permission for him to become a sailor. Uncle Forster, evidently a forgiving man, arranged for him to become a crew-member on a troop-ship, a large East Indiaman the *Santipore*, under the command of a friend of his, ferrying regiments between British locations. His first experiences at sea in winter were difficult. High aloft on the topsail yard he struggled with stiffly frozen sails in a gale on their way to Cork. Then they sailed into the warmer Mediterranean—Corfu, Malta and Gibraltar—and then across the Atlantic, to Quebec. The work was hard and exhausting but he learned much about sailing ships. He also observed the machinery of the British Empire and its influence on the international stage as British troops were located in strategic places and a great navy gathered near Malta.

An accident on the day the troops disembarked in Quebec from the *Santipore* altered, in an instant, the direction of the young sailor's life. While he was on an errand to an upper deck, a ladder was dislodged and the boy found himself plunging down toward the depths of the hold. Crashing across the 'tween-deck hatch, he escaped death but broke his leg badly. The ship sailed without him, to be lost with all hands on their next voyage. He found himself, aged about seventeen, in the large Marine Hospital in Quebec, a stranger in a strange land and was touched by the regular visits to the ward of an old Roman Catholic priest, who showed him kindness even though Brown was a Protestant. On recovery, he set out to explore Canada, passing through Montreal and travelling as a deckhand on a cargo steamer which carried him up the St Lawrence, through the system of canals and across the breadth of Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. His aim was to find his dead mother's older sister, Aunt Emma, who lived with her family in the then small community of New London in Ontario. At last he found his relatives and was welcomed to their home and community.

* * *

Icy winter in Canada and warm summer in New Zealand. At the end of 1853 George Brown was working for a general store in New London, where local farmers and store keepers were taking advantage of the firm snow to transport goods to the farms in a region where there were few made roads. On the far side of the world in early summer Lydia and her sister Elizabeth Wallis left the College and Auckland behind. The journey home was an adventure, in a time before roads for coach or wagon, or railway. After crossing Manukau Harbour

to its southern shore, the Wallis and Whiteley boys and girls walked with their fathers and a number of Māori carriers until they reached the river system that formed a watery highway. Launching their canoes, they paddled south between high banks, shaded by kauri and rimu, bush tangled in supplejack, cabbage tree palms and the vivid scarlet blossom of the summer-flowering pohutukawa. Through the heat of the day on the river they chatted and read, and looked for things to eat in their boxes. As the sun set each evening they made camp, lit fires and prepared a meal. Under the stars of a southern summer sky, they sang and prayed their evening prayers, and slept on the rustle of fern spread with blankets. Some days they left the river to walk along narrow tracks through bush or high fern fronds, until they reached another stretch of river. For most of a week they travelled on, cooled by rain, burnt by sun, torn by prickles, tripped by tree roots, slowed by swamp.³¹ By the time Lydia and the others came at last across the final barrier of Whaingaroa Harbour to the mission house on the slope at Nihinihi, and were embraced by their mother and the little brothers and sisters, she knew that any future visit to Auckland would demand the same journey unless a ship came. At fifteen, she was to stay home to help her missionary parents and care for the younger children.

Lydia and her sister Elizabeth must have been influenced by the way their parents went about their work. There was respect for the people of the place, although the missionaries retained their sense of being a superior race. There was compassion, kindness, spiritual depth and concern for the well-being of the community. Lydia was very familiar with everything that was raw, discouraging, frustrating, frightening and challenging about the life of a pioneer missionary. And she had seen with her own eyes that people could change. She knew that a community with traditions of fear and revenge could be transformed into a people of hope and peace, though not easily, not without cost, and not without the times when they returned to their traditions. James Wallis believed that a missionary to another culture 'must have become acquainted with their customs and manners, not from books merely, but from observation. He must understand their modes of thinking and reasoning.... Ignorance in these matters has often made wise men look ridiculous, and not infrequently exposed them to danger.'³²

He was committed to learning the language of the people and using it, writing at the beginning of his missionary career 'the missionary's object cannot be accomplished until he is able to converse with the people in their own tongue.'³³

31 Rev. Joseph H. Fletcher, quoted in Robert Young, *The Southern World: Journal of a Deputation from the Wesleyan Conference to Australia and Polynesia, including Notices of a Visit to the Goldfields*, London: Mason, 1854, pp. 177–78.

32 Wallis to Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Committee, London, 21 December 1850.

33 Wallis, letter to Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, 27 January 1835.

Many years later, having become fluent, he wrote 'I have had much reason to admire the Maori tongue, it being in some respects more definite and expressive than the English.'³⁴

The Wallis family, although isolated, ('ours is the only house in the place and we are the only English' he wrote in 1852) was self-sufficient, growing their own vegetables, grinding their own grain, keeping sheep, goats, pigs, cows and poultry and only relying on store goods for luxuries like tea and sugar. Mrs Wallis had learned to manage with what she had and taught her daughters to do the same. Mary Ann Wallis came to be known as 'Mother' among the Māori people. When the Wallis family moved at last from Whaingaroa to Auckland in 1863 after twenty-four years, the people lamented; 'O Mother.... We weep for you because you are absent from our homes,' and to James Wallis, 'Farewell, the man through whom peace flourished in the land ... you it was who increased the desire for peace.'³⁵

* * *

Late in 1854, by a slow and circuitous route, George Brown began a journey that would finally bring him to a new life direction and to Lydia Wallis. Despite the kindness of his relatives in New London, Ontario and promotion in the general store, he was still restless. An inconclusive romance that led to bad feelings with a co-worker led to a serious quarrel. Harsh words, quick fists, threats with a knife followed and later an accident with a gun that could have been fatal. A pugnacious but sobered Brown realised that he ought to move on soon; he had come close to being charged with murder.³⁶ Home, England, his father, the beauty of the Pennines and the sound of the local accent of Durham became more and more attractive. Letters from his father had kept him in touch with affairs in Barnard Castle and now George was homesick after three years of travel. Travelling back to Quebec, he found a place as an ordinary seaman on a ship carrying cargo across the Atlantic to Bristol, working with a particularly rough crew. Almost back in England, the ship came close to running aground on cliffs on treacherous Lundy Island in the approach to the Bristol Channel, due to a sleepy watchman—yet another escape from an untimely death for the runaway Brown.

When at last he arrived home in Barnard Castle, he found that home was no longer truly home. The stone houses climbing the steep hill from the river past the hexagonal Market Cross, the ruins of the castle keep on the rocky cliff, the cattle market on Galgate, the churches and chapels of the town, all these were familiar. Some things were changing; among his father's many civic interests

34 Wallis, Narrative written for grandson the Rev. T.J. Wallis.

35 Ibid.

36 Brown, *Pioneer, Missionary and Explorer*, pp. 13–14.

was the new clean water supply in the town and the laying of some miles of sewer pipes (despite some public opposition to the ‘interference’ of the Board of Health), as well as great excitement over the progress toward establishing the Darlington and Stockton Railway Company to bring rail transport to Barnard Castle. In St Mary’s churchyard there were new graves. A year after he had gone to sea, his half-brother Frederick had died, aged five; and Dr. Cust had died, too. A memorial stone now stood at the spot where 143 victims of the 1849 cholera epidemic lay buried: ‘In the midst of life we are in death.’ At home he discovered the difficulty of settling back into old patterns and relationships after several years away. He was now a young man but his relationship with his stepmother was still brittle. His younger half-sisters, Anna and Emma, were pleased to have him home, but he had grown away from them. Even though his father offered to arrange work for him, in his own office or elsewhere, the younger Brown was unwilling to stay. To his father’s disappointment he was determined to travel again—to Central Africa, China, anywhere. Years later he would write that although he could not at the time give any reason for his stubborn pursuit of passage away from his original home, he now believed that God was ‘leading me by a hand which I did not see. I decided to go to New Zealand, I think simply because it was the farthest place from England.’³⁷ George Brown left Barnard Castle for the second time. He sailed from Gravesend on the Thames on 28 March 1855 with the *Duke of Portland*; this time, at the insistence of his father, as a steerage passenger on an emigrant ship rather than as crew. This voyage was to take him to the far side of the world, to other seas and other stars.

* * *

Under the southern stars, in 1855 the Wesleyan Methodists of New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga and the colonies of Australia became an independent Conference linked with British Methodism, an important step for Wallis and his friends. More settlers arrived in the district where once the Wallis family had been the only migrants and the new village was named Raglan. In January 1855 a young man, the tutor William Fletcher from the Wesleyan College in Auckland, came courting twenty-year-old Elizabeth Wallis. Fletcher intended to offer himself as a Wesleyan minister and potential missionary to Fiji. Elizabeth Wallis was in love and would have gone anywhere with William. By the end of that year Fletcher had been accepted as a minister by the Wesleyans. Fletcher wrote in Lydia’s autograph book: ‘To SLW ... may you be a centre whence shall be ever radiating holy and happy influences,’ and Elizabeth squeezed her own entry on to the same page. Elizabeth Wallis and William Fletcher were married at Raglan in 1857, with Lydia Wallis as bridesmaid, and went to Fiji as missionaries that year.

³⁷ Brown, *Pioneer, Missionary and Explorer*, p. 16.

George Brown arrived in the colonial town of Auckland, New Zealand on 5 July 1855. On board ship during the long voyage he met the Anglican Bishop Selwyn and his younger colleague the Reverend J.C. Patteson (later Bishop Patteson of Melanesia). Although he was impressed by the character of Patteson and attended his Bible classes on board ship, he later wrote that 'I cannot remember receiving any great spiritual benefit at that time.'³⁸ Brown's first step on arrival was to ask directions to the Buddle household at Onehunga. His aunt Sarah Buddle and her husband the Reverend Thomas Buddle were his only contacts in New Zealand; they had migrated from Barnard Castle in 1840 when he was only a little boy but now they opened their home to him. The 'friendless lad', as he saw himself, had once more found a family in a foreign land. Sarah and Thomas Buddle's influence on him was profound. He began to

feel that there was something wanting in my life and, under God, I attribute my conversion to the good impressions I received there. I was not preached to except by the powerful influence of Christly lives. Day by day I realised more and more that there were higher things than I had dreamed of, that the life I had lived was very far from that which I ought to live.³⁹

The close circle of colleagues and friends of his uncle was rich in character and many made a deep impression on Brown. Joseph H. Fletcher, school Principal, led a study group for young men each week. At the Methodist Church in High Street, Auckland and through the Young Men's Christian Association he found friends. Young George Brown continued to reassess his life and question the way he had been living it. Over a period he experienced the 'throbbings of a new life, new thoughts, new desires, and a new purpose in life.'⁴⁰ John Whiteley led church services where George Brown brought to a climax his growing desire to follow Jesus Christ, and invited him to become a lay preacher.⁴¹ Isaac Harding encouraged him to consider the Christian ministry as a vocation. R.B. Lyth, missionary doctor in Fiji for sixteen years, challenged Brown with the needs of Fiji, urging him to consider missionary work, and this thought caught like a burr in his mind. Thomas Buddle introduced him to the complexities of relationships between Māori tribes and Māori and white settlers, taking him to witness some key events; the 'fire in the fern' would flare into violence over the next decade and more.

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38 Brown, *Pioneer, Missionary and Explorer*, p. 16.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

41 E.W. Hames, *Out of the Common Way: The European Church in the Colonial Era 1840–1913*, Auckland: Wesley Historical Society of New Zealand, 1972, p. 9.

The young woman from the river in the New Zealand bush and the young man from northern England via Canada did not meet often. It was often enough. Lydia spent four months in Auckland in 1859, and although George Brown's name is not among the autographs collected during that time in her little book, they must have met often in the small world of that colonial town. Perhaps she was too shy to ask him to sign her book. By September 1859 Lydia was home in Raglan. A few months later she was a witness at the wedding of her older brother William and his bride.⁴² For herself, she could only wait.

It was mid-winter, late July 1860, and George Brown had come. He had come with his question and now Sarah Lydia Wallis had promised to be his wife. The wedding would need to be almost immediate as George was under instructions to be ready to sail for Sydney, then on to Samoa in five weeks time. In the few days of preparation, the family made urgent appeals for a marriage license and borrowed a wedding ring. Lydia gathered her things to begin a life far from home among a warrior people in an unknown land with a man she barely knew. She now found courage to offer him her autograph book. His entry, carefully signed 'Mission House, Raglan, 26 July 1860' was a curious choice of words for a young man wanting to encourage his chosen bride. His message ran for three pages of breathless prose and verse. For a man whose prose was usually lucid, this note edged towards incoherence. He used the imagery of the effort of planting a crop and the joys of a hoped-for harvest. His little sermon spoke of

many a long weary day of toil has to be endured ... we who are commissioned to sow the seeds of great and glorious truths ... the promise-keeping God ... shall we doubt His power and love? Oh, no ... Though the day may be full of toil and sorrow ... yet the day will come when they who have gone forth weeping bearing precious seed shall doubtless come again with rejoicing.⁴³

No word of romance, no mention of love, just the honest statement of a man who knew that they would be sharing tough challenges, but believed that his 'promise-keeping God' had a good purpose for them both. On the same day her father James Wallis added his own words, with the conviction of experience. The first sentence was firmly underlined twice:

'I will never leave thee'. In every circumstance of difficulty, in every situation of danger, in every season of sorrow, and in the vale of death, the Christian may be guided and defended, supported and comforted by the divine assurance 'I will never leave thee'.⁴⁴

42 William Wallis married Harriet Hamlin at Raglan in January 1860.

43 Lydia Brown's Autograph Book.

44 Ibid.

Lydia Wallis and George Brown were married at the Mission House, Raglan, just eight days after he arrived to ask his question, on 2 August 1860. Her father the Reverend James Wallis performed the marriage ceremony and when completing the formal documents identified Lydia's occupation as 'missionary' instead of the more common 'spinster'. Whether he meant that she was already working as a missionary with her family at Raglan, or that he knew she would work beside her missionary husband in the future, it was an acknowledgement of her place as a fellow worker.⁴⁵

Within days it was time to go. At the last minute, her mother added her blessing to the autograph book: 'The Lord bless thee and keep thee; the Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee; the Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.'⁴⁶ On a cold morning the whole family crossed the harbour in canoes with all the cargo. Then with many embraces and prayers and tears they saw Lydia ride away on horseback, with a second horse loaded with many bundles, parcels and boxes, her husband of four days, her younger brother and two Māori lads. None of them could guess how long it would be before they would meet again.

It was in no way a classic honeymoon but George Brown declared later that it was 'the best journey I have ever made ... I was happy all the time.'⁴⁷ Lydia the bride was as experienced at such journeys as her bridegroom. Together in the new intimacy of marriage, they began their winter trek with light hearts, making fun of the hazards as they followed narrow bush tracks along the sea coast. In Brown's later record he described long walks through dense bush, skirting swamps, tripping over hidden tree roots in mud 'almost up to our knees,' struggling with an unwilling horse as they tried to swim it across the harbour at Waikato Heads. All the baggage, much of which Brown 'often fervently wished had been sunk in the harbour before we started,' then had to be carried by one horse while Lydia walked. For six cold nights they camped out and on the last night on the west coast they were caught in wind and heavy, driving rain that 'blew down our little shelter tent, and drenched us most pitilessly, long before daylight.' They were offered kindness by Māori people along the way. The final stage of the journey took them across the waters of Manukau Harbour, west of the isthmus, and to the welcoming arms of the Buddle family. Years earlier Thomas Buddle had written to the mission leaders in London of his prayers for

45 George Carter, 'An introduction to the South Pacific activity of Wesleyan Methodism,' in *Wesley's South Seas Heritage: South Pacific Regional Conference*, Auckland: World Methodist Historical Society, 1987, pp. 25–26.

46 Numbers 6: 24–26, King James Bible.

47 George Brown, *Pioneer, Missionary and Explorer*, p. 18.

the boys and girls in the Wesleyan school: 'If the Lord but pour his Spirit upon us ... we shall not have to look to England for a constant supply of missionaries for the Islands of the Pacific.'⁴⁸ His prayers were being answered.

Bride and groom had almost no time to themselves in the final weeks in Auckland with shopping, farewell meals, church services and special farewell presentations.⁴⁹ There were times spent with the Buddle family around the fire at home at Onehunga, laughing with the young cousins and learning of the latest tensions among the Māori. Just six weeks after George Brown appeared to ask Lydia Wallis to marry him, they sailed from Auckland, New Zealand, on 4 September 1860 on the 700-ton steam ship the *Prince Alfred*, bound for Sydney to join the mission ship, the *John Wesley*. As the steep green suede and corduroy of the familiar hills receded, and the tearful faces of beloved friends faded, Lydia may well have been alarmed at what she had done. She was now Mrs Brown, linked to a man who was still almost a stranger. They had already had time for their first misunderstandings and arguments. Her husband would remind her years later of the 'bright happy girl' he married, 'though you did think that I was tired of you after three weeks of married life.'⁵⁰ Since their wedding they had rarely been entirely alone, their tentative relationship always tempered by the presence of others. Even now, they were part of a shipboard crowd. At sea, George relished the return to the open ocean while Lydia struggled with seasickness as the vessel ran into storms. He was delightedly travelling on again, leaving a place that had always been temporary. She was leaving her home and beloved family behind. Her own parents had left their home in England and had never returned. She had to ask herself, will I ever see my home and family again?

It was early springtime in Sydney as they passed through the great sandstone cliffs of Sydney Heads, a foreign landscape to them both, another palette of colours. They were expected, and the Methodists of Sydney town gathered them up in welcome. It had been a wretchedly long wet winter, they were told, with floods and storms. Even in the centre of the city the muddy roads were almost impassable. Everyone was glad for warmer breezes and sun shining on the pink and white of fruit blossom. In the streets near the harbour new sandstone and granite buildings were rising among private houses. Local talk was of the discovery of gold in New South Wales at Kiandra and Lambing Flat, of Garibaldi in Italy, of the recent departure from Melbourne amid great fanfare of an inland expedition with Mr Burke and Mr Wills—and the fighting in New Zealand. The local newspapers were full of news of the Māori King movement

48 Thomas Buddle, letter to Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, London, 9 October 1851.

49 Among other gifts, Brown was presented with a large Bible, signed by thirty young men from the Young Men's Christian Association.

50 Brown to Lydia Brown, 3 September 1908, Brown Letter Books, 1902–1909, ML A1686-7 CY 2810.

and Thomas Buddle was quoted extensively.⁵¹ If Lydia admired the 'Spring novelties' on sale at the store of David Jones & Co, she knew that silks and gloves and striped Swiss cambric were not going to be any use where she was going. They were invited to the homes of church members and made some new friends who encouraged them with their prayers. George was invited to preach at the churches at Balmain and Paddington and did his best to speak about a future which was still not clear to him.



Figure 1. George and Lydia Brown, wedding portrait, Sydney 1860.

Source: Brown family album per favour of Miss Nancy Joyce.

One day in Sydney they sat, solemn and still, while a photographer captured their image. Twenty-one-year old Lydia gazed directly at the camera with George Brown beside her. Her hands lay calmly in the lap of her fashionable wide crinoline skirts while he was perhaps a little tense. It was a record of that moment in between, in the space between the known and the unknown, the youthful past and whatever was to lie ahead. There would be many other photographs but they would never look so young again.

Ten days after they arrived in Sydney, George Brown was ordained to the Christian ministry in the family of Methodism on 19 September 1860 at the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in York Street, Sydney. They were surrounded by

⁵¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, issues from 14 August to 25 September 1860.

new Christian friends. Two of the clergy who laid hands on Brown in blessing would be important to him in later years in their roles as General Secretary of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society; both the Reverend John Eggleston and the Reverend Stephen Rabone would, in their turn, be his link with the wider church.⁵²

A week later, on board the sailing ship the *John Wesley*, now listed with the honorific of Reverend and Mrs Brown among the handful of passengers, they passed again through the Heads and headed out to sea under sail with a course set for Tonga and then north for Samoa.

⁵² Brown, *Pioneer, Missionary and Explorer*, p. 24.