

3. 'With aching hearts...'

Samoa 1865–1868

Hurricane winds and storms of controversy shook the early months of 1865. Writing in his journal after the annual Watch Night service, George Brown reflected that he was 'more determined to live nearer to God than I have yet done. I felt very conscious of many shortcomings during the past year ... I want to advance in piety and holiness of life and also in wisdom.'¹ It may have been just a pious note, but he was going to need holiness and wisdom.

Although Martin Dyson had applied for a transfer away from Samoa, he was still there and having an influence. Brown was disturbed to learn that Dyson had attempted to negotiate with London Missionary Society (LMS) leaders about possible areas of influence and had received a blistering response from the LMS; 'a most serious attack on his [Dyson's] character.' They accused Dyson of 'proselytizing aggression,' 'taking advantage of petty native quarrels and cases of discipline' to draw disaffected LMS members into the Wesleyan fold, and of buying land and building chapels 'and holding out the prospect of European missionaries' in competition with their Society. They considered his residence in Samoa 'a hindrance to the peace and harmony of our Mission.'² Brown sympathised with Dyson but worried that his friend sometimes took action without consultation. The shackles of trying not to offend the 'other Society' chafed against the longing for freedom to take initiatives and establish new work. Wisdom was indeed needed.

A great storm was coming. The atmosphere was often heavy with humidity. Steam rose from the earth as the sun followed violent rain. This time, their people told them, there was going to be a cyclone. As the winds rose, Brown and a local trader secured the windows and school boys prepared protection for the thatch on the roof of their strong stone house. With their children, servants and some neighbours, George and Lydia Brown gathered in the dining room of their house listening to the crash of falling trees and the howl of the wind as it tore at the thatch. 'The tide outside our house was driven into our front gate,' Brown recorded. 'No one dreamt of sleeping as we were quite uncertain how it would end.'³ As the eye of the cyclone passed and the wheeling wind

1 George Brown, Journal, 1860–71, 1 January 1865, ML A1686-8-9 CY 225.

2 Ibid., 3 January 1865.

3 Ibid., 27 January 1865.

shifted direction, some Samoans risked trying to add to the layers of coconut palm fronds weighing down the thatch in the darkness and pouring rain. ‘They succeeded partly and then we all lay down on the floor and between dozing and starting up at some heavier blast than usual the night passed away.’⁴

It was three days before the winds eased. The mission grounds were littered with uprooted trees and torn branches, the tossed and shredded wreckage of the storm. Coconut palms looked like tattered furled umbrellas. Some food gardens had been destroyed. To their great relief, the new house constructed with such amateur and laborious toil had withstood the storm and they were safe.

It was not an easy start to the year. Brown was working hard but was often discouraged. There were some signs of hope but many things made him anxious. Some members and leaders were losing interest and ‘falling away’. He felt disappointed in his own preaching and noted that ‘I might as well be preaching to the Posts as to many of that congregation.’⁵ The people were quite prepared to change religious allegiance; when he asked a Samoan why he had left the Methodist church to become a Catholic, he was told that it was ‘because you threw us away and we despaired of you coming back again.’⁶ Dyson was hoping to leave Samoa for another region and his mind was already turning elsewhere. A promised new staff member had not yet come. Letters from the General Secretary in Sydney demonstrated that he did not understand their context in Samoa, and only served to irritate. Brown was often ill, little Lizzie and Amy were both ill with whooping cough—and Lydia was pregnant again. Just before Brown left for his mid-year journey around Savai’i, they learned that Dyson had been appointed to Tonga. He would soon be gone.

George Brown was on the final day of his journey around the coast, on 17 July 1865, when a lad arrived with an urgent letter from Barnabas ‘Ahongalu. ‘Satupa’itea and Tufu are fighting and a man is killed,’ he wrote, ‘the Devil is awake at last.’⁷ Brown and another Tongan teacher left immediately to hurry on foot over the last fourteen miles back to Satupa’itea. Darkness fell and they pushed on along a rocky beach by the light of flaring torches. At a large village they found a family mourning over the body of a young man who had just been killed. The men of the village had already gone to seek revenge. By the time he encountered Barnabas and his party he learned that a temporary truce had been struck and the bodies of the dead had been returned to their people. Late that night Brown reached home. He was relieved that Lydia and the children were away with Sarah Dyson while he was travelling, but the deserted house seemed very comfortless. Next morning after an exhausted sleep Brown sewed

4 Ibid., 28 January 1865.

5 Ibid., 15 March 1865, 16 July 1865.

6 Ibid., 30 June 1865.

7 Ibid., 17 July 1865.

and dressed some terrible axe wounds then went to sit with others to attempt peacemaking. He noted later that 'we did all we could to get them to make peace but in vain.' They did agree to a temporary cease-fire.⁸

The uneasy stand-off between antagonists held for the next two months. Lydia Brown and the children came home and Brown tried to go on with his work but he knew that the fragile truce could not last forever. At midnight on 11 September 1865 he heard that an attack was about to begin. With teachers and students from the training school, he waited through the night by fires. At dawn they sat together blocking the narrow path at the boundary between the villages in their role as 'holders back' or peacemakers, waiting for the fighters to arrive. Brown found it difficult to recognise the antagonists when they came prancing down the path, seeing

great stalwart fellows almost entirely naked, brandishing their Guns, Spears and Clubs leaping and shouting right up to the place where we were sitting. They were all shining with oil and had their hair dressed with bright scarlet flowers and their brows bound with frontlets made of the bright inner shell of the Nautilus which glistened amongst their dark hair.⁹

Unwilling to trample the peacemakers for fear of ill fortune, the warriors leaped and shouted, 'Why do you stop us?' Threats were met with speeches, and still more speeches as the peacemakers sat for hours in the hot sun refusing to move. Just when it seemed that peace was possible, at sunset there was news that outlying groups had clashed. Two men from Satupa'itea were dead. That night he wrote, 'All talking was at once given up and it was soon felt that any attempt at mediation just then would be quite useless.' People of neutral groups were sent to retrieve the mutilated bodies and the Browns were very shocked when they returned bearing two bloodied heads. They knew those faces; the dead men had helped to build their house. That night they went to sleep with the sound of distant wailing in their ears.¹⁰ Even though there was a formal gathering of chiefs and people at the end of September to declare that the fighting was at an end, this would not be forgotten. Memories of loss and plans for revenge were to linger on, hidden but poisonous.

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As Lydia Brown's third pregnancy progressed, her husband wrote to his father that he was worried that the baby would come when their house was

⁸ Ibid., 17–18 July 1865.

⁹ Ibid., 11 September 1865. In *George Brown: Pioneer-Missionary and Explorer: An Autobiography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), Brown retells this story, from his journal, but dates it as happening on 11 September 1866. The original journal entry is 11 September 1865.

¹⁰ Brown, Journal, 11 September 1865.

overcrowded with guests, the much hoped-for new missionaries—or when they were entirely alone.¹¹ Five weeks after the deadly fight in their community, the mission ship the *John Wesley* was sighted at last. They had been waiting for many months. Brown and Dyson took a crew out to meet her while Lydia and Sarah excitedly prepared a welcoming meal. A great gathering of Samoans, at their most charming, crowded to greet the visitors as they came on shore. One of the newcomers recorded his impression, of ‘the large stone Mission House which stood about one hundred yards back from the landing place, looking so cool and pleasant among the surrounding trees, and with its door wide open, inviting us to rest.’¹²

George and Lydia Brown were delighted to discover that not one but two new missionary couples had arrived; Frank and Nellie Firth and John Austin and Jane, his bride of one month. Austin would later write of the ‘hospitable care of Mrs Brown’ and describe how they all gathered in the dining room and sat down to ‘what seemed to us the most sumptuous repast we had ever had—a large dish of roast pigeons, with plenty of native vegetables, followed by some kind of pudding, I forget what. While Mrs. Brown was lamenting that she had nothing better to set before us, we were rejoicing over the splendid dinner.’¹³

It was a day of high delight for everyone. It was as if the troubles of the previous month had never happened. Villagers came with songs and flowers, gifts of food, *tapa* cloth and fine mats. Although the newcomers had been warned on their way through Tonga that the mission work in Samoa was in a low state, their first impressions were all positive. Brown wrote, ‘We had so many blessings that day ... I could have cried with joy and had hard work to keep quiet.’¹⁴ That night they had four mission families under their roof.

To the deep regret of the Browns, Martin and Sarah Dyson left them with the *John Wesley* on 2 November 1865, on their way to Tonga. Frank and Nellie Firth were to take the place of Dysons at Manono but it was soon clear that the Austins would need to stay with the Browns for some time. Their arrival had been a pleasant surprise and so there was neither an appointment nor a house ready for them. Brown knew that this appointment would need to be considered with great care. John and Jane Austin could begin learning the language at Satupa’itea and Jane, fresh from Sydney, could begin to feel more at home

11 Brown to George Brown Sr., 15 August 1865, in Brown, *Letters, 1862–78*, ML MOM 102. George Brown senior in Barnard Castle continued to support his distant son with his letters, and among other things, had reported that he had been called to the Bar in the Middle Temple, a significant achievement for a largely self-educated man.

12 John Austin, *Missionary Enterprise and Home Service: A Story of Mission Life in Samoa and Circuit Work in New South Wales* (illustrated), Sydney: J.A. Packer, 1922, p. 83.

13 Austin, *Missionary Enterprise and Home Service*, p. 83.

14 Brown, *Journal*, 16 October 1865.

among friendly but curious Samoans before moving to a more isolated place. Lydia wondered how the nervous Jane would respond to tribal warfare or the sight of bodiless heads.

Two weeks after the Dyson family left them Lydia rose early. The signs of labour had begun. Her husband recorded in his journal that she 'was able to set the Breakfasts but did not stay at the Table. Just as breakfast finished all was over and we were rejoicing over the speed and safe birth of our third little girl.... The Lord is very good to us.'¹⁵ This time Lydia did not suffer some of the problems of previous deliveries and new baby, Monica, was also well.

At the beginning of 1866, Brown had just turned thirty and found himself Chairman of a large and demanding district fraught with problems. His close friend had gone. He experienced attacks of elephantiasis which made long walks painful. Sea travel was often dangerous. Having new staff was a mixed blessing. In their rivalry for prestige and power, a number of the Samoan chiefs were competing over the privilege of having a resident missionary and threatening to take their people to another mission if they did not get their way. As Brown and Austin circled the island of Savai'i in January 1866, chiefs in each area argued over the appointment of Austin. One moonless night during their journey, John Austin went outside in an unfamiliar village and almost plunged over a precipice into the sea far below; Brown, who was wearying of the arguments, noted that 'a step or two further and the question of his appointment would have been decided forever.'¹⁶ The decision was finally made to settle the Austins at Gagaemalae, thirty miles to the west of Satupa'itea in an area of substantial population with affiliation with the Wesleyans.

It was a hard year. Although the news did not reach them for three months, they learned that a tsunami had caused serious damage on the Tongan island of Tongatapu and the mission ship *John Wesley* had been carried on to a reef by the tidal waves. It was now a wreck. Martin Dyson and three other Wesleyan missionaries had been on board at the time, but had been rescued. Now the mission ship, their lifeline between the rest of the world and their lonely place, was gone. Each day the physical demands and the emotional pressure took a toll on Brown's energy; working among people with a very tentative grasp of Christian faith and strong connection to traditional belief and custom was a challenge. Lydia Brown's life had become an endless round of providing meals for guests and managing her own three little girls. Even after the Firths and the Austins had gone to their appointments, they kept returning to Satupa'itea for extended periods because of illness, loneliness and waiting for childbirth. Lydia helped both Nellie Firth and Jane Austin with the births of their babies that year.

¹⁵ Ibid., 16–17 November 1865.

¹⁶ Ibid., 5 January 1866.

After nine months of almost constant houseguests, Brown wrote to his uncle, 'We are getting pretty tired of it now.'¹⁷ Whenever she could, Lydia travelled with George to the nearer villages, with her children and cheerful parties of servants, school boys and teachers, on foot or by mission boat. Perhaps some of these outings were a form of escape from an overcrowded house. In the middle of 1866, just before leaving for another long journey, Brown recorded a prayer in his journal.

I have again dedicated myself to His service this morning ... I feel more than ever determined to preach Christ and desire to make this the great object of our visit. O for a Baptism of Fire. O for more personal holiness. May God bless and keep my dear wife and our precious little ones.¹⁸

It was a struggle. The entries in his journal became fewer and briefer. He was too unwell and too tired to be bothered.

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While the Wesleyan missionaries in Samoa met for their District Meeting in October 1866, in Sydney a sub-committee was investigating a disturbing letter that had come to them from the LMS in Samoa. Brown, Firth, Austin and Barnabas 'Ahongalu had a good and harmonious meeting unaware of the criticism that was being levelled against them. The Reverend A.W. Murray had written on behalf of the London Missionary Society in Samoa that 'The greatest hindrance to our work' was not heathenism, tribal wars nor the work of Catholic priests 'but Wesleyan intrusion.'¹⁹ The debate was still unresolved: should the Wesleyans ever have returned to Samoa? The committee in Sydney concluded that the original withdrawal had been the result of a misunderstanding, and that the return was justified because of the pleas from Samoan people who had remained faithful to the Wesleyan cause. In a letter copied to Wesleyan leaders in the Australian colonies and New Zealand, the Wesleyan Committee apologised for giving offence to fellow Christians but stated: 'We are unanimously of the opinion that under no circumstances will the Wesleyan Church be again induced to voluntarily discontinue its Missionary operations in Samoa.'²⁰ Unfortunately, the rhetoric was not matched by practical support. That year their mission ship had been lost, colonial interest in missions was limited and Samoa held a much lower priority in their plans than Fiji or Tonga. Their forceful letter would only serve to antagonise the people of the LMS.

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17 Brown to Rev. Thomas Buddle, 11 July 1866, in Brown, Letters, 1862–78.

18 Brown, Journal, 1 June 1866.

19 A.W. Murray, letter of 20 August 1866, quoted in Minutes of Wesleyan Methodist Missions Committee, 22 October 1866, ML MOM1 CY Reel 354.

20 Wesleyan Methodist Missions Committee, New South Wales, Minutes, 22 October 1866.

The pattern of journeys continued in 1867, although now Brown could limit himself to the eastern and north-eastern districts of Savai'i. Barnabas took the main responsibility for the training of young men in their Seminary, but Brown took his share in teaching, as well as the weekly round of mission work. He was often ill and weary and discouraged. The pattern of frequent houseguests continued as did local quarrels and rumours of quarrels among Samoan communities. At the beginning of the year he had written, 'I am not methodical enough and so waste much precious time and have very little to shew at the end of the year. Lydia and I had a long talk about it and we have determined by God's help to be more methodical and regular in all our engagements.'²¹

Far from being more methodical, however, his daily discipline of keeping his journal slipped away and was soon reduced to a bald list of preaching places. He was worried about both his new mission colleagues. Mrs. Firth had seen one child die and was quite often ill herself, and Mrs. Austin was finding the isolation and demands of life in Samoa very stressful. In periods of particular difficulty the Austins would retreat to the Browns' home at Satupa'itea and by July 1867, were back there again. Austin was suffering from boils and Jane Austin had a newborn infant. Lydia Brown had taken delivery of a sewing machine early in the year to help her clothe her family, but may have had limited time to use it.

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In the clusters of villages in the district where the Wesleyan Methodist mission was established at Satupa'itea, although there were several chapels linked with both the LMS and the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS), the more significant alliances and loyalties were with clan and community. Each person knew where they belonged in rank, in family and in village community. They understood the alliances. There was a long and bloody history of inter-tribal battles, revenge begetting revenge, a death for a death, memories stained with mutilations, murders and beheadings. The mission community knew that, one day, old memories would transform into new violence.

There were hints that fresh trouble might be on the prowl just before George Brown left to visit the northern coast of the island in August 1867. A revenge killing in the area, followed soon after by another death, made some of his young men nervous about leaving home as boat crew, but Brown decided to travel anyway. He was just beginning to feel some encouragement; in one area he observed cooperation between LMS and WMMS people and wrote 'they prove most distinctly that *they* at all events do not regard our mission here as a "hindrance" to the cause of Christ.'²² But then he received urgent messages from Austin and 'Ahongalu urging him to return home as quickly as he could. The

²¹ Brown, Journal, 7 January 1866.

²² Ibid., 5 August 1867.

fighting men of neighbouring Palauli had warned that they planned to attack the large community of Satupa'itea within days. Abandoning his program Brown hurried back overland and by canoe. He found the people very disturbed and ready to defend themselves. That night he wrote that they 'commenced at once to prepare their double canoe. We are anxious.'²³

They had reason to be anxious. For a week, despite great tension between the two opposing alliances of Satupa'itea and Palauli, there was no action. Brown attempted to carry on his normal work. They all knew that sooner or later someone would take the first step into battle. The mission household through that period included George and Lydia, six months pregnant, their three small daughters, Lizzie, Amy and Monica, Jane Austin with her two infant daughters, Jane's niece who had come to help her and, for some of the time, John Austin. Brown did his best to dissuade the Palauli people from fighting and when the threatened deadline for the Palauli attack came and went he hoped that the threat had passed. His Satupa'itea neighbours assured him that their enemies were simply waiting for more allies to join them. In all the small chapels church members were gathering at dawn to pray for peace. A week passed in anxious waiting, but the lull could not last.

Rumours and action, advancing and stepping back, threats and false assurances of peace, fervent prayers and violent killings, wars of words and wars of weapons; the next weeks were confused and grim. Working with local teachers, Brown attempted to use a Samoan cultural style of mediation in time of war, offering gifts of a fine mat and a Bible. These offerings were rejected and countered with the insult of symbols of firewood and stones, hinting at a killing and cooking of enemies. They all went away angry. By evening, one group 'had laid waste all the plantations of Satupa'itea. The Nuts and Breadfruit trees were nearly all cut down and the flourishing plantations of last week were all destroyed. It will take years and years to repair the damage.'²⁴

That night at the prayer meeting he was grieved to hear the desperate petitions of the local people, outnumbered, surrounded on every side by their enemies. Other leaders tried to mediate, and Brown, with pastoral responsibility for church members in all the warring communities, travelled among them through a landscape of damage and waste. He knew it was no use. By now many women and children, with the old and the ill, had come to the Mission House for refuge, crowding into the outside buildings near the main house while their men waited for an attack.

On the morning of 30 August 1867, Brown made another attempt to find a compromise between the men of Palauli and the men of Satupa'itea, even

²³ Ibid., 9–11 August 1867.

²⁴ Ibid., 23 August 1867.

though it was clear that a battle was imminent. As he wrote, 'I had just stated my proposition to the Rulers of Palauli and they were considering it when we were all startled by a gun fired 20 or 30 yards behind us.... We almost held our breath until it was answered by another and then we knew at once that all mediation was at an end.'²⁵

The combatants immediately left the scene and Brown found himself trapped between two groups of warriors. Stumbling through thick bush, confused, temporarily lost and with the sound of nearby gunfire in his ears, Brown finally emerged on to a beach and made his way home, shaken but safe. The grounds around his house and the outbuildings were now full of fleeing women, children and the aged. Wounded men were carried onto the mission grounds, each new arrival causing a wave of dismay. Knots of people, mainly women, gathered in outbuildings and on the house verandahs to pray together. 'Poor creatures, they wept sore and we wept with them.' Passing one of the groups, Brown heard 'one of our best leaders praying most fervently, and I longed to go and join them for God was there, but I had work to do.'²⁶ The battle raged all that day. By evening an outlying village was on fire, while the sound of drum beats reverberated against the noise of gunfire. Well after dark the sound of gunfire eased and, outnumbered, the men of Satupa'itea reluctantly decided that the only way to avoid more loss of life was to retreat. Under cover of darkness and with the protection of the double canoe 'which still kept blazing away at anything that moved,' they launched all their canoes, taking on board the wounded, the elderly men and boys, leaving the women and children in the mission house. 'After this we had a little peace and the poor heartbroken creatures that filled our rooms laid down to try and get a little rest. It was little use however.... It was a dreadful night and we eagerly welcomed the first signs of daylight.'²⁷ The sun rose on an empty beach and the sight of the double canoe in the distance under sail for Safotulafai with all the others.

Daylight revealed the full horror. Twenty men were dead and many more wounded. Through the day, with the help of men from the Training Institution, some teachers and some women, they went to retrieve the remains of the dead, heads and bodies, fallen in

a dense Bush full of vines and creepers and so stony it was almost impossible to walk over it. It was a ghastly sight to come across the poor fellows lying in that gloomy bush headless and mutilated. Poor fellows, we had lived amongst them for almost seven years and many of them were most intimate with us. And yet there they were.²⁸

25 Ibid., 30 August 1867.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 31 August 1867.

That night he recorded their names and places in his journal. They had been men of prayer, men driven to fight against their wishes by loyalty to their clan. Brown was angry at the waste of life and destruction of livelihood. Next morning he preached to a heartbroken congregation and in the afternoon went with teachers to search again for the dead and ‘brought in two heads and one body.’²⁹

John Austin arrived from Gaegamalae to the sight of a village house on fire and the sound of rumours that the enemies planned to come back to burn the town and kill the women and children. Brown and Austin met warriors on their way to inflict more damage and, to their relief, saw them turn back. There was not much left to destroy. Enemies had been carrying away anything of value and torching any houses that remained. Brown sent Austin to Apia to report the fighting. A few days later, with Lydia, Jane Austin and her niece, Brown noted that ‘in the evening we all took a walk down through the Village. We had better have stayed at home as we came back with aching hearts when we saw the desolation and destruction caused by this sad war.’³⁰

When John Austin returned to Satupa’itea he brought new staff, the Reverend John Osborne and his wife, as well as ‘a very seasonable supply of flour etc as we were getting very short.’³¹ Osborne would later describe the ‘hearty welcome from the Chairman and his thorough missionary wife,’ although he observed that, understandably, ‘Brother Brown was quite cast down.’³² Lydia Brown had been facing her own challenges. During those difficult days she was managing a frightened houseguest with two very young children, and three young children of her own with a fourth kicking under her apron. All her outbuildings—kitchen, wash-house, store—were filled with frightened refugees making it almost impossible to move and work there. There were wounded men bleeding on the floor, grieving women to comfort, prayer meetings on the verandahs, a reckless husband off being a hero. Her sewing machine was silent. The last of the flour was full of weevils and the local food gardens had been shredded. She is rarely mentioned in the record, but she lived this experience beside her husband.

In the aftermath of such a time of violence and upheaval, what should they do now? The people of the four villages in the immediate vicinity of the Mission House had fled and now lived as refugees in distant villages. The stone Mission House, which had survived, stood alone with no friendly population around

29 Ibid., 1 September 1867.

30 Ibid., 5 September 1867.

31 Ibid., 9 September 1867.

32 Osborne, Letter, in *Wesleyan Missionary Notices relating to the Missions under the Direction of the Australasian Wesleyan Methodist Conference*, November 1867.

it. No one knew when they would return home. Normal mission work was not possible. Brown may have been tempted by letters from his father assuring him that he would find a welcome and a church in England.

After many months of a house crowded with guests, at last their colleagues began to depart, each going to their appointments. On 16 November 1867, with the minimum of fuss, Lydia gave birth to a fourth daughter, Claudia. Their colleagues had gone. The Samoan people were scattered. Their stone house at Satupa'itea was almost deserted. The day came when the decision was made. They would have to move away.