7. ‘If God had called me to that work
Lydia dared not hinder’

Sydney, Auckland, Fiji, Samoa, New Britain,
Duke of York Islands
1876—1878

For forty days at sea George Brown allowed himself a rare time of rest. Landing in Sydney on 10 October 1876, he knew once more the sense of disconnection and alienation as he entered the remembered environment of tall stone buildings, horse-drawn carriages, a railway and fashionably dressed crowds. The Mission Board welcomed Brown, and the visiting Tongan minister, the Reverend Eroni Fotofili. They assured him that they had not forgotten the New Mission, although there had been other demands on their attention. Secretary Benjamin Chapman recorded their ‘high appreciation of the services of Mr Brown and prays that he may long live to extend our mission work in this part of the world.’ Sadly, Fotofili died suddenly days later.

Lydia Brown must have known before he finally arrived back in Auckland on 30 October 1876 that her husband would not be ready to settle down to a comfortable life in a New Zealand congregation. For years he had been reluctant to face middle-class church life. After sixteen years of marriage she knew where his heart lay. Their reunion as a whole family was joyful. Lydia and their children had been lovingly cared for in his extended absence by their Auckland family. It was wonderful to be together again, but his family quickly discovered that it would not be for long.

Almost as soon as the first flurry of greetings and welcomes were over, the cargo unloaded, and the first astonishing tales told, George wanted to put a proposal to Lydia. The Mission Board in Sydney, he said, had asked him whether he was willing to go back to New Britain. He had not given them an answer. First he needed to talk to her. Should he go back? Would she go with him? What about their children? Lydia knew her man well. The man who had come home to her after almost two years away was alight with excitement. True, he was bone-thin, and his red hair and beard had more grey in it. He assured her that he was

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1 Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) Board Minutes, 12 October 1876 in Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Correspondence and Papers, vol. 1, ML CY 1365. Present: President of Conference, J.B. Waterhouse; in chair, General Secretary Benjamin Chapman; Revs Gaud, Hurst, J. Watkin, W. Fletcher, Tait, Martin; and Messrs Dawson, Barker, Reeve, Henson, Read, Crawshaw, Dowsett and Dr Moffit.
much better in health but admitted to recurring malaria. Yet this was a very different man from the hurt and frustrated person who had dragged himself through the final months in Samoa. Then he had been battling over lines of sectarian demarcation, or arguing over the precise wording of critical letters. He had written at that time, ‘I feel these things too much, in fact they make me either very combative or very nervous … my blood boils.’ Now, everything was different. He was relishing the natural hazards of pioneering something new and independent.

When George described the scene many years later, he wrote,

> There was never the slightest doubt in my mind as to what the decision would be. My wife, as all our friends know, is a woman of few words, and she simply said: ‘I can never be a hindrance to you in your work. If it is God’s will that you return to New Britain I am sure that it is also His will that I should go with you. God will take care of our children.’

At the time, however, in a letter to a friend he described it somewhat differently. Brown had set everything before Lydia, the challenges and the work, and how he believed that his experience, as well as his knowledge of the languages of the mission team,

seemed to show that it was my duty to go but that I could only decide after hearing her decision. We agreed to leave it for a day and she laid the matter before God in prayer. I am thankful to say that grace was given to her and she told me the next day that if God had called me to that work she dared not hinder but would willingly bear her part of the burden and go with me to help as best she could…. The painful part is of course leaving our little ones.

Within days of arriving in Auckland, Brown had sent a message to the Mission Board in Sydney to say that both he and Mrs Brown were prepared to return to the New Mission. Five of their children would remain in Auckland. The Board was grateful and recorded in their Minutes their high appreciation of the pioneer Brown, noting ‘the Christian heroism and devotedness possessed by him, and not less by Mrs Brown as is proved by their offer.’ Someone would later cross out the hand written words ‘not less’. The Secretary was correct the first time.

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4 Brown to William Fletcher, November 1876.
5 WMMS Board Minutes, 15 November 1876.
Their holiday together as family was very brief. There was a rush of invitations to visit friends and family, meetings to attend and a family visit to Thames on the Coromandel Peninsula. The most immediate challenge was to make arrangements for their children. Years before, George had written to his father-in-law that ‘Lydia does not at all relish the idea of parting with her chickens,’ and that was only for a brief holiday. George Brown had barely seen his older daughters Lizzie and Amy in three years or Monica, Claudia, Fred, Geoffrey and Mabel in two years. Although he loved them all dearly he was accustomed to living apart from them. It was not so easy for Lydia. Some family members were appalled that she would consider going with him. They were grateful to a benefactor who offered to pay for their daughters’ education in Auckland while the parents were in the New Mission.

Having made the decision, Brown insisted on leaving Auckland early in January in order to be in time to attend the Wesleyan Methodist Conference of NSW and Queensland in Sydney. There was much interest in news of the New Mission though he knew that few had much understanding. Following the Conference, Brown accepted many invitations in several of the colonies to speak about the New Mission. The first impressions and early experiences were already beginning to be shaped into stories to leave audiences open mouthed. His hearers were astonished, shocked or amused by the images that his words conjured up. They came to him, after his addresses, to murmur admiring words about how very brave he must be, and the dreadful savagery of the island people. He had always felt reluctant to do ‘the Dancing Bear business about the country,’ performing missionary tricks for audiences in the colonies in order to raise funds and interest. So he would listen politely to those who tried to understand. It encouraged his ego to be elevated to a high pedestal, but even so he could not wait to get away and return to his work.

Lydia Brown joined her husband in Sydney, bereft of five of her children with only five year old Geoffrey and two year old Mabel at her side. Most things were ready for them to sail; an entire prefabricated timber house was loaded on the John Wesley, with stores for their community. Just before they sailed, a rumour arrived in Sydney that ‘war had broken out’ in the region of the New Mission and George Brown was more anxious than ever to return to his work. On 18 May 1877, the ship sailed through the Heads at Sydney Harbour, out into the open sea. For one of the few times in their married life, George and Lydia Brown spent much of the next three months in each other’s company, as the mission ship made a frustratingly slow passage through the mission regions. Fiji was almost a holiday with social events and visits with friends; a journalist enthused ‘He [Brown] won golden opinions from all sorts of men during his short stay among

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7 Brown to Rev. James Wallis, Sr., 28 May 1873.
Samoa was a disappointment in some ways. Although they were able to meet some old friends, bad weather meant that they were not able to visit their old home on Savai’i, with Satupa’itea tantalisingly visible but unattainable in the distance. George risked a boat ride to visit his friend John Austin at Saleaula. Lydia could only watch from the ship’s deck and remember her home there, and the beloved Samoan friends who had wept when they left three years earlier and who were now almost, but not quite, near enough to hug. While he was on shore at Saleaula, Brown saw a letter sent by one of the Samoan teachers in the New Mission, to Austin, his former mentor. Seteleti had written in February 1877 and his letter clarified the rumours about murders in the northern islands. He had written,

It is still very difficult for these people to understand the Word of the Lord. True, they have great love to us, especially the chiefs of the land; but the great difficulty is, their hearts are still very dark, except a few who are beginning to receive the light, and learn about Jesus; but there are a great many who say ‘There is no God’.… War is still going on, and these are dreadful people for eating each other—they are continually doing it…. We have all been very sick … the people are continually doing wicked things…. We go [to preach] with crying because we don’t know whether we shall live or die; but we go with great love to them because of their darkness … there are signs of improvement, especially in the place where Mr Brown lived.⁹

This was the first real news that Brown had received and, though it was mixed, there were at least signs of hope. The further north they sailed, the further they were from their children in Auckland. If it took the John Wesley so long to travel the sea route between mission regions, it would never be possible to reach the children in an emergency. Lydia believed that she could adjust to living in a new and strange island society, but it was separation from her children that took courage.

Three months after leaving Sydney, after a detour back to Fiji and a stop in Rotuma, the John Wesley came in sight of New Ireland and then at last Port Hunter on 21 August 1877, just two years after Brown’s first arrival. George Brown had been absent for a year and was eager for news. Five of the party he had left behind had died; a teacher, two of the wives and two children. Others had been ill. Neighbouring traders had had serious troubles, with a murder, a poisoning and conflict with the local people. Although the original party had

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⁸ Mansel Hall, columnist in Fiji, quoted in the Weekly Advocate (early October 1877).
stayed at their posts and were doing well, most of the Pacific Island teachers who arrived in 1876 had failed to go to their appointments, choosing to stay clustered in the comparative safety of Kinawanua. Brown was very disappointed and irritated by this. He felt the need to rebuke the teachers for what he believed was simple laziness and also because some of them were carrying guns to guard their women when they went fishing, ‘when there was no occasion at all for them.’ He did not seem to recognise that his Fijian and Samoan colleagues may have had cause for a degree of nervousness.

Figure 5. Original Mission house, Kinawanua, Duke of York Islands.


Lydia Brown, at a time of life when many women have established their homes, now moved into the house built from bush materials that had sheltered her husband and his companions in their first year, while they waited for the new prefabricated building to be constructed. The bush house was already dilapidated, inhabited by mice, lizards and assorted insects and with a few leaks through the thatch. It was filled with their stores, leaving very little space for living, even though all the cooking was done over a fire beyond the house. Nearby was the house of To Pulu, a house darkened by violent memories and

superstition. 12 Outside that house was a dead branch on which were lined up seven skulls of men that To Pulu had killed and eaten. Lydia may have thought wistfully of the comforts of Samoa, but even there she had waited for years for the promise of new houses to materialise. She had managed housekeeping then and no doubt she could do it again. A small village of local houses had sprung up around the original mission hut to accommodate the growing number of Pacific Island families where her children were welcomed. Lydia was grateful that George had recruited two Samoan couples who had worked for her in Samoa to help her with her work. The John Wesley sailed, carrying letters to their older children, and their contact with the rest of the world was gone once more.

Figure 6. To Pulu and wives, Kinawanua 1880.

Source: George Brown photograph collection: Australian Museum V 6419.

Things were changing, little by little. Trading companies were becoming better established and the local people were attracted to steel axes and colourful cloth. The building and gardening methods of the Fijians and Samoans were sometimes copied. More scientists and collectors were arriving so that Brown had competition for the artefacts he collected. Adventurers from around the

12 Benjamin Danks, In Wild New Britain: The Story of Benjamin Danks, Pioneer Missionary, from his diary, ed. Wallace Deane, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1933, p. 70.
world called in. Most interesting of the changes, from Brown’s perspective, was the increasing mobility of the people of the region. People who had dared not travel far from home for fear of attack by enemies, and had always carried a spear and an axe, now could be seen unarmed and taking tentative steps away from their own places. Late in 1877, when the new mission house was being built, a chief and his party came to Kinawanua to have a look at our house. This is the first time they have ever been to this village, though they live within three miles of us. The old chief told me that he had never set foot in it before today, and they all said that it was only through Christianity that they had been able to come. As it was, they were all well armed and only came in force, and with much fear and trembling.\textsuperscript{13}

On New Ireland, people were telling Brown that ‘before the Lotu came to them they were always at war, but now they are almost forgetting how to fight. Tis indeed the same blessed Gospel of Peace still.’\textsuperscript{14} Though this was overstating the matter, there were fragile signs that the fear-fuelled isolation that had created so many different dialects and languages in so narrow a region was easing. Outsiders had encouraged local chiefs to travel with them into unfamiliar places to meet face to face those whom they had long feared from a distance, and the fear was slowly diminishing. There were also signs that even attitudes to cannibalism were undergoing a change, although that was more ambiguous. A man, who admitted to eating human flesh while Brown was away in 1877, said that he was taking the opportunity while Brown was away as he might not get another chance. ‘He said, “Mr Brown is away so we may eat this one. When he comes back he would scold me and I should not be able to eat it”’.\textsuperscript{15} Others chose their moment when they did, or did not, eat human flesh.

Over the months, their new house was taking shape. It was a slow process, as predicted, as Brown frequently asked the builder McGrath to leave his work to travel with him on journeys to distant areas. The half-built house had a fine view from a broad verandah across the St George’s Channel with the long island of New Ireland beyond. They began a garden and Brown wrote, ‘I have planted lots of oranges and guavas and custard apples—all new fruit here. Some other fellow will eat the fruit of them. It’s always been my lot to build houses for others to live in and to plant trees for others to eat the fruit.’\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} Brown, Journal, 7 October 1877.
\textsuperscript{16} Brown to his cousin Miss Australia (Tralie) Buddle, Auckland, 9 November 1877, in George Brown, \textit{Letter Book}, 1876–1880, ML A1686-3 CY 2772.
Lydia Brown needed to be self-sufficient as George was often away for days at a time with several Fijian teachers and the steam launch. She knew that their welcome in the villages was still uncertain and none of them was skilled with managing the steam launch. On one occasion storms delayed their return from New Ireland, and a journey that should have taken four or five days kept them away for ten. Brown admitted to the General Secretary, ‘Mrs Brown had been very anxious about us as we were much longer away than we expected, and the wind had been very strong at Duke of York, so she was glad enough to hear the steamer’s whistle just at daybreak and see her puffing round the South Head into the port.’

It was not only her frequently distracted and absent husband that made Lydia anxious. Five of her children were very far away and they had had no news of them since leaving Sydney. Brown wrote to his cousin Tom Buddle, ‘We often think about the children and wonder how they are all getting on. Poor Lydia I fancy sometimes feels a little anxious about them but we know that they are in good hands.’ That was not all. She had been in good health for most of the time since they arrived but by November she was sure that she was pregnant again.

Now that their leader had returned, the whole team had renewed energy. Island missionaries who had been reluctant to go to their appointments moved to their new places. There were men located in twenty-three sites in the Duke of York group, New Britain and New Ireland with a total of thirty-four ‘preaching places’. They had begun one little school and a Sabbath school, still in embryonic form. At a staff General Meeting in October they decided together that their immediate priorities were to begin schools, make pastoral visits to each community, erect buildings, translate hymns and scripture passages, and to maintain regular meetings of staff for prayer and consultations in each district. There were even a few local people who had indicated that they were seriously interested in this new way of thinking. Brown was moved to tears when two of these men joined the missionary group for their regular prayer meeting for the first time. They were invited to pray, and a Duke of York man, Peni Lelei, after a nervous start, astonished him by offering a simple, beautiful prayer to God. Brown was not always satisfied with the work of the Fijian and Samoan teachers, but believed that it was always useful to place them in strategic locations. He

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17 Brown to Benjamin Chapman, Sydney, 30 October 1877.
18 Brown to Tom Buddle, Auckland, 12 November 1877.
19 Mission Returns for New Britain District for 1877, sent to B. Chapman, 20 December 1877.
20 Brown to Mrs Reed, Tasmania, 1 November 1877, in George Brown, Letter Book, 1876–1880, ML A1686-3 CY 2772.
dreamed of more men and their families coming to extend the work and wrote to Chapman, ‘About the supply of Teachers, I can say little, except that I could locate at once ten or twenty more than I have.’

Not long before Christmas in 1877, the Brown family moved into their fine new house even though it was not finished. Lydia had lived on a building site before and it was better than the temporary bush building. On Christmas Day, Brown preached on the message of the angels: ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.’ They invited the British adventurers from the ketch *Star of the East*, Wilfred Powell, Granville Wood and George Turner, to share their Christmas dinner, where they remembered ‘Christmas at home and in the Colonies.’ Brown set off on New Year’s Day 1878 in the steam launch in company with the party from the *Star of the East* and other companions, to make further exploration along the southern coast of New Britain. The new year of 1878 was full of promise. Or so they thought.

As he had done in Samoa, George Brown asked his wife Lydia to help with correspondence. She copied out his journal entries to send to New Zealand and to the Mission Secretary Benjamin Chapman. He was too busy to do it himself. There was page after page of description of the journey of exploration along the southern coast of New Britain. With his companions they had seen unfamiliar bays and rivers, observed and collected vegetation and fauna, were stoned, yelled at and subjected to some obscene gestures by unfriendly groups on the beach as they tried to approach—and Brown had decided that this new region would make a fine location for mission teachers. He had been ill and confined to a bunk on the ketch, with malaria and then with elephantiasis, which left one leg grossly swollen for some time. Still unwell, he had travelled to visit sick and dying teachers.

Tremors shook the earth at Kinawanua late in January and great drifts of floating pumice came down the St George’s Channel below their house. A volcano had erupted on the edge of Blanche Bay, New Britain, some twenty miles away. Two weeks after the initial eruption, Brown set out to see this remarkable volcanic phenomenon and to confirm that the teachers and their families on New Britain were safe. By the time Brown and his party were in sight of New Britain they could see the column of dark smoke and flame, hear the rumble of intermittent explosions of ash and pumice stone and breathe the smoky atmosphere that blanketed the coastline. Neatly copying the many pages of notes her husband

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21 Wesleyan Missionary Notices relating to the Missions under the Direction of the Australasian Wesleyan Methodist Conference, 1 July 1878, pp. 176–77.
24 He made the journey with Wood, Turner, McGrath, Howard, three Fijian teachers, Peni Lelei and they were later joined by trader Hicks from Matupit.
had made, Lydia Brown may have wondered whether his actions had been in
the interests of science, or over-excitement and stupidity. He had written of
pulling in close to an island newly thrust from the harbour floor and with the
trader William Hicks jumping out into shallow water that was still very hot
and walking on ‘masses of pumice and hard igneous rocks, fissured in every
direction with deep cracks, through many of which smoke and steam still
issued violently.’ They went on to explore the area around the main eruption,
to witness the devastation of the gardens and fruit trees, the floating dead fish,
and the thick grey layer of ash weighing down the blighted vegetation. They
were shocked to see the extent of the damage. Even nature was unstable and
unpredictable.

A volcanic eruption in January; a devastated landscape in February; an
epidemic of illnesses in March. One after another the Pacific Island teachers,
their wives and children, as well as the German and British traders, scientists
and explorers, fell ill, many with malaria. Many sick traders gathered at the
home of the German trader, Blohm, not far from Kinawanua; Blohm worked
for Hernsheim’s trading company. Blohm’s Samoan wife was the first to die.
From that time on through the month, George and Lydia Brown offered care,
nursing and hospitality to many people. Brown frequently was called to visit
those who were sick on nearby islands. He believed that ‘many owe their lives
to the fact that my stock of quinine and other medicines was a large one.’
Although not well himself, he made many trips by boat and sometimes sat with
patients through the night. In his journal he wrote, ‘Still more sickness. It is
really enough to frighten us all. Everyone seems to be ill or just recovering....
The season seems to be a most unhealthy one.’ To their grief, some of their own
Samoan people died. The Browns took Blohm into their own home where Lydia
helped to care for him as well as their own people.

Lydia Brown and his children were rarely mentioned in his journal. Yet in
personal letters to family members and friends he wrote lovingly and with
appreciation of the role of Lydia. Describing the long period of ill health for
their community he wrote, ‘My good wife is almost the only one who escaped,
though, when all our servants and most of the teachers were ill, she had rather
more to do than she ought to have had.’ Writing to their children in New
Zealand, George said, ‘Mama keeps so well and hearty, she has never had the

26 Brown, Journal, 16 February 1878; Wesleyan Missionary Notices relating to the Missions under the
Direction of the Australasian Wesleyan Methodist Conference, 1 July 1878; Brown, George Brown: Pioneer-
27 Brown to Chapman, 25 January 1878.
29 Brown to Chapman, 24 June 1878.
fever at all. Everyone seems to like her. She is a great comfort to me. It is so different coming home now from a long journey to what it used to be in the old times when I was here alone—it is home now, it wasn’t then.”

Lydia was now heavily pregnant in a steamy tropical climate and was probably very weary indeed. She went to support a trader’s wife in childbirth, cared for her sick husband, and was responsible for young Geoffrey’s education and little Mabel’s wellbeing; Geoffrey preferred to play and although an intelligent lad was a reluctant scholar. There were often extra guests at her table. The explorer Wilfred Powell recorded some glimpses of Lydia during that period: ‘a missionary’s wife I have the pleasure of knowing…. We found Mr Brown at home [in the temporary bush house], who, with his good wife, made us welcome to a meal of somewhat native fare, though there was that which we had not tasted since leaving Australia, a good loaf of bread.’

Even while her pregnancy was progressing, Lydia seemed to escape from the general illness and her husband declared, ‘Lydia has enjoyed splendid good health all through. I don’t know what I should have done without her.’ By the time the season of illness began to wane he was very weary indeed. They would take a short holiday, he decided. He would take Lydia and the children for a week or two away on New Britain. They would stay with one of the Fijian households, perhaps with the family of Sailasa Naucukidi or with Ratu Livai Volavola.

But now it was April 1878. A voice at a window, speaking out of the darkness, made such a plan impossible.

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30 Brown to his children in Auckland, 8 September 1878.
32 Brown to Rev. Thomas Buddle, 2 July 1878.