8. ‘A great sinking of heart’

New Britain, Duke of York Islands
1878

There would be no holiday. The evening before they planned to set out, Brown was spending time at home skinning birds to be preserved for museums. He heard a tap on the window. From the darkness a voice said, ‘I have just heard that the New Britain natives have murdered Sailasa and some teachers.’1 As Brown later noted in his journal,

> We have heard hundreds of tales like these before and have paid but little attention to them; but this time I felt a great sinking of heart as soon as I heard it, and felt assured that there was some truth in it, knowing as I did that Sailasa and some of the teachers had planned a journey inland. When we held our Quarterly Meeting some few weeks ago, Sailasa told me that he had been up inland, and was very kindly received by the natives, and that they all wished him to go again…. He asked me for a few beads, &c, to give the chiefs, and I gave them to him telling him that I was going over soon to New Britain, and would also go inland further up the coast and hoped to get some fine openings for the lotu also.2

Brown’s fears were justified. The next day Fijian chief Teacher Ratu Livai arrived from New Britain bringing confirmation.3 The Reverend Sailasa Naucukidi from Fiji, mission teachers Peni Luvu and Livai Naboro, with Timoti, a Fijian youth who had come as a workman for Sailasa, were all dead and their bodies had been distributed to neighbouring groups for cannibal feasts. Their wives and little children were still in their homes and at great risk. Ratu Livai told how eight teachers had agreed together to approach the inland communities, four starting from the southern coast of the peninsula and four from the north. Ratu Livai and his companions had moved from the south, but being warned of a possible plot against them had retreated. The others had gone on, unknowingly, to their deaths on 6 April 1878. A local chief Taleli was said to have directed the attack.4

In company with some mission teachers and some white neighbours, Brown set off for New Britain. Brown was shocked by the loss and deeply grieved by the

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2 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 10 April 1878.
death of his close comrade Peni Luvu, who had been among the pioneer party. When they reached Sailasa’s house at Kabakada they were greeted by Sailasa’s weeping widow, Merejieni, and the other women who wailed in their grief, demanding that their dead husbands explain why they had abandoned them. As Brown wrote in his journal, ‘Twas little use trying to speak any trite words of comfort and we could only sit silent with them as sharers of their sorrow.’

As Brown wrote, the descriptions of the murders and rumours that there were plans to murder the women and children ‘made my blood boil’. He watched the Fijian and Samoan teachers and observed by ‘their significant sullen silence that their feelings were so deeply moved that they were no longer masters of their passions.’ With the heartrending cries of the women and the whimpering of the frightened children filling the house, Brown sat on a bed with his head in his hands trying to block his ears to the sounds of chaos and anguish. He knew that he was given to acting swiftly and on impulse. Now was not the time for that. He tried desperately to think clearly and to pray for help.

Even as he tried to think what to do, with the turmoil pounding in his mind, blood and gut, he heard that

the Teachers were planning an expedition to Taleli’s village that night and were determined to go without telling me of it for fear I would prevent it. The Fijians and Samoans had consulted together and were prepared to go and two of our party Mr Turner and Mr McGrath had agreed to accompany them. This action brought matters to a crisis and I was compelled to decide what course I would pursue.

The Fijians and Samoans were from warrior peoples, powerful men whose fathers and grandfathers had wielded mighty clubs of war. They had been outraged at the murders of their friends. Brown knew that his own action or inaction would have a part in whatever happened next and he must make a choice. At some point he decided ‘to take the matter into my own hands.’ Within days of the murders he began to keep a detailed record of events in his journal.

Just how he should act was not immediately clear. Most urgent was to take the widows and children to a place of safety. Taleli was already sending messages taunting the traders and missionaries; he was not afraid of any foreign man-of-war, he could dodge the bullets of any musket, the wives of Brown and the teachers should expect the unspeakable, he planned to eat more victims and

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5 Ibid., 11 April 1878.
6 Ibid.
7 Brown to Rev. Thomas Buddle, 2 July 1878.
8 Brown, Journal, 11 April 1878.
9 Ibid.
‘had said that he was especially anxious to get me.’

According to Wilfred Powell, Taleli informed Brown ‘that the taro was cooking with which to eat him.’ Traders and other whites were nervous and armed. Fijian and Samoan missionaries were angry and ready to act independently. Local clan alliances and loyalties were difficult to assess; who might support any retribution against Taleli and his allies? Why had the murders happened at all, when the teachers had believed that they were welcome? Brown came to the conclusion that they were not killed because of cannibal greed, or because they were Christian missionaries, but ‘because they were foreigners’ and so trespassing in places where they were ignorant of the codes and boundaries of local authority, ownership and trade. They had moved across the invisible lines of local power and paid the price for it.

But what should he do and who would be affected by any decision he made? There was his own family with Lydia six months pregnant, the Fijian and Samoan teachers, the white men in the region and the wider community with its complex networks of chiefs and followers, clan groups with long histories of connection or animosity. The mission teachers were already preparing to act because they believed that their mission was at risk and life would no longer be safe if the murderers went unpunished. Brown considered forbidding them, but feared that they would then ‘lose all hope and interest in their work and our work would only result in failure.’ The traders, many of them younger than Brown and an independent crowd living in a frontier world beyond the rule of colonial law, were determined to mount a punitive raid whether Brown joined them or not. Most troubling was the question of how the local tribes would view his action or inaction, for these were the people he was trying to influence. Would direct action against Taleli and his people cost him the trust of the people and turn them against the Islander Teachers? Or would inaction make them despise him for weakness? Either way, the whole missionary enterprise was at risk of failure.

Brown considered his options. When missionaries had been murdered in the Pacific region, as they had in the past decade, there had been retribution. In some cases the responsibility had been in the hands of an island Paramount Chief or King. In others, colonial authorities had sent in troops. In New Britain there was neither a Paramount Chief nor colonial troops within range. He could wait for the visit of a passing man-of-war but was dubious as to whether a

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ship’s captain would be willing to interfere. It seemed to Brown unwise for their vulnerable community to be seen to depend on outside help for their protection. He noted,

When a Ship of War is seen after any such crimes the perpetrators are at once on their guard and take to the hills where it is almost impossible to follow them, a few shells are fired and some houses burnt and this in the majority of instances is all that the most determined Captain can effect even if his instructions allow him to do so much.\(^{14}\)

Should he wait to inform the Commissioner Sir Arthur Gordon in Fiji, and place the matter within the jurisdiction of the Western Pacific High Commission? It would be at least three months or more before any message could reach Fiji and perhaps several months more before a High Commission ship’s company would reach the islands. A lot could happen while they waited. They might all be dead, he thought.\(^{15}\) Should he retreat with his family? Should he withdraw the Fijian and Samoan families? But where was safe? In any case, the difficulties of moving so many people quickly were insurmountable: the little steam launch was unserviceable, the ketch *Star of the East* was beached and under repairs, the trader *Johan Caesar* was too small, the *John Wesley* was not due for months—which left the mission whale boat. With a widely scattered community of outsiders including some twenty-six island missionary families, as well as about twenty white and mixed-race traders, collectors and missionaries, an evacuation was neither possible nor advisable. Should they simply behave as if nothing had happened, and carry on with their work? It was probably the course of action his Mission Board would expect.

The man who struggled with these questions was in a very vulnerable place. After three months of illness across the community, too many funerals and many sleepless nights, combined with the hard physical demands of constant travel, he was exhausted. In his private journal he admitted that ‘often I have been on the very verge of despair … I have often felt faint and weary under the burden but God has helped me.’\(^{16}\) Isolated, depressed, physically run down, mired in grief, rage and a sense of impotence in the face of horrifying circumstances, objective decision making was almost impossible. He knew that he had built something of a reputation as a pioneer among the people of the Mission Board and the wider community of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, and that reputation would be seriously tarnished if people thought of him as the missionary who shot the

\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Powell, *Wanderings in a Wild Country*, p. 147. In remote New Britain, Brown was not aware that Gordon had only just received his commission in London early in 1878, and that the Commission was designed to deal with crimes by British subjects, or against native populations, but not criminal conduct by local people of the Pacific region.

\(^{16}\) Brown, Journal, 27 May 1878.
people of the place. Was this the end of the New Mission? If they evacuated, or were killed, or retreated to a single fortress somewhere, not daring to move out among the people, would the dream he had nurtured, and promoted, and worked for over so many years simply wither and die? Was this the end?

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In the darkness, Lydia Brown woke from an uneasy sleep to the sound of voices and movement. It was three o’clock in the morning on Palm Sunday, 14 April 1878, and George had just arrived back at Port Hunter with the whale boat, the crews, the teachers and a load of exhausted and distressed women with their pitiful belongings. The widows and their little ones were settled and comforted and then George and Lydia Brown were able to tell each other the stories of the four days of his absence. News of the murders had reached the Duke of York group and there had been an evident change in the attitudes of some of the villagers to the recently-come traders and missionaries. There was insolence instead of friendliness, rude demands for goods instead of the usual trading, with barely veiled threats. Lydia’s friend, the wife of teacher Aminio Baledrokadroka, had been threatened at spear point, and with most of the men of their community away on New Britain, those who remained at Kinawanua felt very vulnerable. Rumours were already reaching them that a chief on New Ireland had kidnapped the wife, or was it the daughter, of one of the teachers in his area, and threatened the life of the teacher.

That Sunday morning at Kinawanua the congregation was tense and grieving. George Brown preached from Isaiah 55:8, ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.’ Perhaps he reflected on the mystery of the mind of God and the ways of God that he did not understand at all. All day his mind kept returning to the terrible end of Sailasa, Peni and the others.

He could hardly have preached from the final verses of Isaiah 55, which read ‘For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace.’ That afternoon there was a gathering of the teachers, scientists and traders with Brown to decide on their action. According to Powell, adventurer-scientist of the Star of the East, ‘Mr Brown was the last person [connected with the occurrence] to allow that severe measures were necessary, and the most unwilling to do so.’

A council was held, at which it was determined that if we wished to save our lives we must either fight, and fight well, or withdraw altogether.

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17 Powell, Wanderings in a Wild Country, p. 124. ‘Meanwhile in Mr Brown’s absence the Duke of York natives became excessively insolent to Mrs Brown, and came demanding beads, red cloth, &c., from her.’
18 Ibid., p. 117.
from these islands at once. As this latter plan was impossible, the former was the only alternative, and Mr Brown at last was obliged unwillingly to admit that it must be so. I at once lent all my available muskets and ammunition to arm the teachers, as did some of the traders.\textsuperscript{19}

Brown’s journal, formerly a document where he recorded explorations, adventures and signs of hope, was now almost a confessional. As the days of April passed he recorded the reasoning behind his decision. He knew already that his decision would be questioned by mentors and friends in far places, and he would need to attempt to justify himself. He wrote of that time of painful decision making.

To say that I felt deeply the responsibility of my position is to say but little. I actually [crossed out] literally groaned under the weight of it and earnestly longed for some brother Missionary to share it with me. During these past few months whilst nearly every one around has been struck down with Fever I have felt much my solitary position but it never came upon me with such force as now. I felt that I alone was answerable for it and that if we failed or if any more of the Teachers were killed on me alone would rest the blame. I knew that I had no precedent to guide me and that many good people whose opinions I respect and whose esteem I value wd condemn my action as judged from their stand point. I considered also that I should probably be accused of trying to force Christianity by war on the people and that I must be quite prepared for some not very complimentary remarks on ‘fighting Missionaries’…. All these things were fully considered and the conviction was forced upon me that we must endeavour to punish the murderers if only for the protection of our own lives. After arriving at this decision we determined to do it as speedily and effectually as possible always bearing in mind that we must so act that our conduct would bear any judicial investigation which might take place.\textsuperscript{20}

It was all there. Isolation, lack of precedent, probably incurring the condemnation of people who had respected and even honoured him, expecting to be criticised and caricatured; he guessed, rightly, what to expect. It was almost a year since he had had contact with any fellow missionaries, no letters or conversations, not even a robust argument, and now he lived in a world of easy violence. Whatever action he chose to take he knew that ‘I alone was answerable for it and that if we failed, or if any more of the teachers were killed, on me alone would rest the blame.’ It was a terrifying thought.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 125.
\textsuperscript{20} Brown, Journal, 17 April 1878.
Figure 7. Ratu Livai Volavola, George Brown, Aminio Baledrokadroka in Fiji in 1905. These men had shared with Brown the experiences of Easter 1878.

Source: The Missionary Review: Methodist Church of Australasia, April 1906.
Reluctant he may have been, but even while George Brown had been with the traders on New Britain in the days when he first visited the endangered women and children, he had chosen to arm himself. In the short term at least, there was no sign of peace. He had acquired lead for bullets from the captain of the Johan Caesar and at Kabakada he had ‘bought a very fine Snider from Mr. Southwell for £4.’

Up until that point his armoury had been limited, with an old and dangerously unsafe musket left by a sea captain, and his fowling pieces, smooth bore weapons which fired buckshot and were used for shooting birds for the pot and as a collector. To purchase what appears to have been an expensive military breech-loading Snider-Enfield rifle was to mean serious business. He spent the next day ‘running Bullets, cleaning musket, making cartridges and otherwise preparing for our journey.’ From their store he collected a roll of white calico to tear into strips for identification ‘to bind around the head of every friendly native to prevent their being shot by any of our party.’ Having decided to participate in a retaliatory raid, his preparations were deliberate and thorough. ‘My plan,’ he would write later, ‘was to attack at once from both sides of the promontory whilst the event was quite recent and before the Natives expected us to take any action. They thought only of punishment when a big ship came.’ Their aim was to push through ‘to surprise the Natives in the very town where the Teachers were killed and where they never dreamt that a Whiteman or a Teacher would dare to go again.’

It was a very strange Easter. Across the world, Christians were remembering the death and resurrection of Christ during Holy Week with solemn rituals on Good Friday and joyful celebration on Easter Day, 21 April 1878. Missionary Brown’s journal made no mention of Easter. In a downpour of tropical rain and steamy heat, on the sacred days of Holy Week, men set out from Port Hunter, Duke of York Islands on 16 April heading for New Britain. Armed traders, missionaries and scientists divided their forces, one group to climb and march from the shores of Blanche Bay on the south of the peninsula, the other to stand guard in two whale boats on the northern side of the peninsula, to prevent the escape of fleeing people and to wait for the first group to join them. It would be a week of bloodshed, treachery, brutality, danger, looting and violence. By Good Friday, a number of villagers were dead or wounded, small children separated from parents in the panic, village houses and canoes reduced to smoking rubble, coconut palms and banana trees hacked down. On Easter Day, in the aftermath

21 Ibid., 12 April 1878.
22 Ibid., 15 April 1878.
23 Ibid., 17 April 1878.
24 Ibid., 11 April 1878 continuation. Commentary on events of April 1878, written on blank page marked 2 January 1877.
25 Brown Journal, 11 April 1878. The account begins as an entry on 11 April, and continues on previously blank pages in his Journal for 1877, at 1, 2 and 3 January.
of a violent week, the raiding parties met and held a church service at Matupit Island, off New Britain, and Brown prayed a prayer of thanksgiving that none of the people in their parties had been killed or injured. They stayed at Matupit all that day, considering what they should do next. Although ‘many of us thought that quite enough had been done’ they decided that, although the villages of many people who had been involved in the murders and cannibalism had been burned, the place where the Fijians had died had so far escaped unscathed. They would put it to the torch and take more lives on Tuesday. Messages were sent out to village leaders demanding compensation in the form of traditional *diwara* shell-money, and charred bones believed to be those of Sailasa and Timote were returned to them.

After dark on Wednesday 24 April 1878, Lydia Brown heard a chilling sound carrying across the water. A boat was approaching in the waning moonlight and the sound was one she associated with violent death and cannibalism. To her profound relief, she soon heard her husband’s voice. He and his companions were safely home.

We got to Port Hunter about 8 pm, the Natives yelling and shouting their songs of triumph all the time when we were nearly home. Their old shout when they had got a body to eat but they had none with them wherewith to regale their friends. Twas strange to hear their old cannibal cry under such circumstances and so deprived of its old meaning. Uē āh Uē āh Uē āh and then a loud prolonged cry, half song half shout.

They had fought and survived. Village leaders in a number of places on New Britain had brought shell-money compensation for the original murders and the associated cannibalism. The careful re-building of relationships with the people who had been attacked had begun.

The question remained. What would the rest of the world make of their actions?

28 Ibid., 24 April 1878.