9. ‘I shall not be surprised to hear that many condemn’

Sydney, New Britain, Duke of York Islands
1878

There was another problem now. George Brown was going to have to explain himself and his actions, and attempt to justify himself to his Mission authorities and the public in the colonies. Soon after he arrived home he began to record what had happened in his journal. ‘I felt deeply the great responsibility I was assuming and I think it right now to state the position in which I was placed and the reasons which induced me to decide as I did.’¹ He marshalled his reasons. The teachers were planning to go anyway on the grounds that life was no longer safe, ‘nor was mission work practicable if these murderers were not punished.’²

The whites in the area said that they were no longer safe unless something was done. They had attempted to claim traditional compensation according to local custom before the attack, but had been refused. ‘I felt that punishment was necessary not so much to revenge the deaths of the Native Minister and Teachers as to protect the lives of those who were left.’³

What had happened during those days of violence? It would be debated and argued over long after Easter 1878. Who had done what? Who had witnessed what? Who was to blame, if blame was appropriate? How many had died? Could a missionary ever be justified in participating in such a raid, much less being an active leader in it? Two participants, George Brown and Wilfred Powell, kept detailed written records and much oral evidence was collected later from the Fijian and Samoan teachers and other eyewitnesses. The details varied and the numbers of supposed dead or wounded were very fluid but there was no escaping that it had been a damaging and brutal week for a great many people both as actors and victims. Brown himself had been armed and with the party in whale boats off the coast under threat from many canoes. His account of his own actions was ambiguous until he described efforts at peacemaking when a party approached him, days later, wishing to ‘pay for peace’.

¹ George Brown, Journal, 1877–December 1879, April 1878, ML A1686-13, 14, 15 CY 2762.
² Brown, Journal, continued from 11 April 1878, written on page marked 1 January 1877.
³ Brown, Journal, 11 April 1878.
I told them we fought now because our lives were in danger and not merely to revenge the Teachers. They acknowledged the truth of all I said, and said Tis true, tis true we began it not you. I accepted their offering, gave them a little present in return and told them we would make a formal peace according to their own customs in a few days.4

After George Brown returned home to Kinawanua on Wednesday 24 April, he wrote, ‘I decided to do no more at present. We have taught the Natives a lesson they will not soon forget. They have lost as nearly as we can tell 90 or 100 killed and wounded besides their loss of houses and shell money.’5 He was home. He was alive and safe, and so were his men. But in the euphoria of coming home alive from battle, Brown knew he would have to explain himself.

Even the large pages of Brown’s 1878 journal were not enough to record the whole tragic affair and he was forced to continue the record on unused pages in his 1877 journal, marking the correct date as he went. It was inevitable that he would need to answer questions one day. He wrote with a degree of frankness about his feelings and actions. Even so, he did not choose to record whether or not he had inflicted injury on anyone. He had been present and armed as two whaleboat parties had scattered the men in forty canoes; he was skilled with a shotgun against birds but did not make clear whether he was equally adept with a military rifle. In her final weeks of pregnancy, Lydia Brown transcribed thirteen pages of the journal to be sent to Mission Secretary Benjamin Chapman. Knowing that this document was likely to be published in the church magazine and elsewhere, they added appropriate explanatory notes to the original text with the more dramatic incidents of danger, courage, cruelty, treachery and ultimate reconciliation. However, before the long letter to Chapman was completed, all references to a rifle, bullets, particular dead bodies or personal belligerence had mysteriously disappeared. Writing in self-justification on 13 May 1878, a month after the events of what would become known as ‘the Blanche Bay affair’, he wrote,

I have now made peace with the greater number of the towns with which we fought or rather which we punished … I am certain that our Mission here stands better with the Natives than it did before and that we are in a better position to do them good. They respect us now as they never did before and as they all acknowledge the justice of our cause in punishing the perpetrators of the murders they bear us no ill will…. This lesson will not soon be forgotten by the tribes here. It was short

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4 Ibid., 22 April 1878.
5 Ibid., 24 April 1878. Although Brown wrote that the people had ‘lost as nearly as we can tell 90 or 100 killed and wounded,’ it would later be assumed that 100 had been killed. This number was always uncertain. Evidence taken at the Inquiry by Captian Purvis on 21 September 1879 mentioned that between two and ten dead bodies were seen by each eye witness, ML A1686 CY 1365.
sharp and decisive and so it had its due effect on them. They say ‘twas
an earthquake not a fight’. I honestly believe that the plan I adopted
was the best and was in fact the only one which could have saved the
Mission and many of our lives. Tis true that many lives have been lost
but the present and future good of thousands will far outbalance that…. This has been no unprovoked shooting of natives nor was it anything
like an attempt to force a way into their country by force of arms....
[O]urs was an honourably conducted war to save our own lives and to
prevent a recurrence of any such barbarities. There is not a native in the
group who does not acknowledge that we did right and that no other
resource was left to us.⁶

Even so, no amount of justification could help him escape from the shadow that
now darkened his world.

* * *

It was evidence of their isolation. No ships had visited the area for months
and the first opportunity to send mail was when the little trading ship Johan
Caesar left for Fiji on 14 July 1878, three months after the murders and punitive
expedition. Among the many letters that it carried to family, friends and the
Mission Board was a letter from Brown to High Commissioner Sir Arthur Gordon
and his colleague Sir John Gorrie in Fiji. ‘It is my painful duty to inform you,’
he began his succinct two pages of description of recent events. ‘A large number
of huts were burnt and a number of natives were killed in the Districts where
the murders were committed … everything is quite quiet now.’⁷ On a happier
note, George was able to report to the New Zealand family the safe birth of a son,
Wallis, on 3 July. ‘Lyd has done nobly this time no fuss and bother but in a nice
quiet business-like manner she presented me with a fine lump of a boy and only
indulged in a quiet cackle of satisfaction herself over the affair.’⁸

The months following the violence of April were difficult. Many of the teachers
and other foreigners were ill with malaria and Brown’s usual remedy of quinine
with a dose of raw egg and brandy did not always work. Some of his valued
teachers died. Brown was deeply discouraged and if he was actively engaged in
general mission work apart from regular preaching appointments, it was rarely
recorded. The goals set for the mission in November 1877—language learning
and translation, schools, pastoral visiting—were not being met, except for
the erection of some small church buildings. The island teachers were taking
responsibility for preparing the few possible converts for baptism.

⁶  Brown, Journal, 13 May 1878, partly recorded on page marked 13 January 1877.
⁷  Brown to Sir Arthur Gordon, Governor of Fiji and High Commissioner for Western Polynesia, 5 July 1878,
George Brown Letter Book ML CY 2772.
transformation he had hoped to see among the local people was not evident. There were changes, certainly, and some chiefs were now inviting teachers and traders to their area, but this seemed to be motivated more by a desire for prestige and potential wealth to flow from the outsiders than from a desire to hear about the white man’s god. Crowds of people would come for the first few mission services, out of curiosity, but then lose interest. People who had appeared to welcome the teachers had been persuaded, quite easily, to kill and eat them. The observer Wilfred Powell would write later, ‘The mission had been there three years at the time of my visit, and I cannot speak very favourably of the progress it has made, though it was from no want of zeal on the part of the missionaries themselves, but from lack of sympathy in the natives…. I do not think there are ten real converts amongst the Duke of York natives.’

Brown’s own spirit was in a dark place. His journal was full of travel with the traders, his own health, collecting artefacts, hunting and fishing, irritation with his teachers and complaints about the brawling traders but with rare clues to his inner life. One journal entry read, ‘The last six months have been most distressing ones to me and often I have been on the very verge of despair. Almost everyone has been ill and the care of all has been thrown on me alone. I have often felt faint and weary under the burden but God has helped me.’

There was one thing that he could claim. Brown’s repeated journeys to New Britain to negotiate with the clan groups and their leaders were producing results. Building on his knowledge of appropriate cultural models for peacemaking in Samoa, he had discovered and used the local system of compensation with the giving and receiving of gifts, demonstrating the symbols and rituals of peacemaking. Brown believed that he had been able to bind up the wounds of the dreadful days of battle and violence and restore the relationship to a place of friendship. However, while the people of New Britain might have been prepared to live in peace, he was not sure that the Mission Board in Sydney or supporters in the colonies or England would be so forgiving. Although in private letters he was frank, boasting that ‘I love the natives well and did them the kindest action I could do them by teaching that roast missionary is too expensive a dish for them to indulge in,’ he still feared that ‘some of the goody goody folk will be very much shocked.’ To his cousin Tom Buddle he confided that he planned that he and his family would stay with the New Mission for the

11 Ibid., 13 May 1878.
12 Brown to Rev. Lorimer Fison, 6 July 1878.
13 Brown to Rev. Frederick Langham, Fiji, 5 July 1878.
full three years he had set himself, ‘that is if our late action does not displease the powers that be. If it does I shall clear out with good conscience. If we have many such seasons as the last one this is not a billet many would covet.’

Soon the letters he had sent with the ship Johan Caesar would reach Sydney. Would the Mission Board be shocked? Could he be called to face the church Committee of Discipline, or worse, the colonial judicial system? Although Brown assured a friend that he was ‘quite content to defend our actions anywhere and before any tribunal,’ his bravado masked a deeper anxiety about his own future and the future of the new Mission.

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On Friday 13 September 1878, two months after leaving New Britain and five months after the deaths of the Fijians, the Johan Caesar limped into Sydney Harbour, leaky and battered. The next day, George Brown’s letters reached Benjamin Chapman and the Sydney Morning Herald published the first startling summary of events in remote New Britain. Members of the Mission Board read in their morning newspaper that three island missionaries had been attacked, killed and eaten and that an expedition of reprisal had gone out, leaving at least fifty people dead and property destroyed.

The Mission Board met urgently on Monday at the church office at 227 Pitt Street. Twenty-two men gathered in great dismay. If they had hoped that the newspaper account was wild exaggeration, Benjamin Chapman quickly disabused them of that hope. He presented them with Brown’s very long letter, with a document signed by six white residents who had taken part in the raid. The Board members listened as Brown’s words were read aloud. Their much-esteemed missionary had written, ‘I have to tell you that this sad affair brought us into collision with the natives, and though that has resulted in good, I would rather not have had the tale to tell.’ The story unfolded in painful detail; whether it was called punishment, revenge or teaching a severe lesson, it sounded very rough justice indeed. The letter from the six white residents was an affirmation of Brown’s action. They wrote, ‘But for your prompt action in the matter, the lives neither of traders nor missionaries would have been safe in any part of these groups.… [We] express our conviction that your action is fully justified.’ The mission carpenter James McGrath had come with the Johan Caesar and was interviewed by an increasingly anxious Board.

14 Brown to Tom Buddle Jr., Auckland, 11 July 1878.
15 Brown to Consul Weber, Apia, Samoa, 6 July 1878.
16 Brown to Chapman 26 June 1878. The first thirteen pages were copied from the journal in the handwriting of Lydia Brown.
17 Letter from white residents, Port Hunter, Duke of York Islands, 23 May 1878, published in full in the Sydney Morning Herald, 23 September 1878.
Sitting among the Board members was a young man who listened with acute attention. This was not an academic exercise for him. As the troubling debate swirled around him, recently ordained missionary the Reverend Benjamin Danks pictured his bride Emma, waiting in Sydney to sail with him to their missionary appointment. The mission ship *John Wesley* was in Sydney Harbour, loaded with their cargo and the materials for their new house. They were due to sail the next day to join George and Lydia Brown in the New Mission.\(^{18}\) He and Emma, newly married, were committed to going to the New Mission and they did not want to withdraw. Emma was the daughter of missionary John Watsford and had been raised on the legends of cannibal Fiji in the past.

The Board struggled for hours. Did Brown deserve severe censure, perhaps even withdrawal? How much information should be released to church members and the general public? What should be done about the new missionary Danks, ready to sail immediately for Fiji and then on to the New Mission? Everything had looked so promising but was now in jeopardy. The Board at last formed some careful statements "which might possibly cover the considerable diversity of opinion as to the wisdom of the course which Mr Brown adopted."\(^{19}\) After summarising the information they had received, the Minutes of their meeting recorded that

> This meeting expresses its deepest sympathy with the Revd George Brown in the very perplexing, painful and dangerous position in which he was placed; but at the same time it deeply regrets that no other course seemed to him to be open, which would ensure the safety of himself and of the large number of persons belonging to the mission party of whom he was regarded as the protector.\(^{20}\)

They decided to release all the information they had received for publication, and that Ben and Emma Danks should travel to the New Mission as planned. However, they instructed that the Danks’ new house must be built as close as possible to the Brown’s house at Kinawanua.

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The day after the emergency meeting of the Mission Board and before the detailed news of the disaster in the New Mission was released Benjamin and Emma Danks sailed with the *John Wesley* on 17 September 1878. Emma’s brother, James J.

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\(^{18}\) Present at the meeting of the Missions Board on 16 September 1878 were clergy B. Chapman, G. Hurst, J. Watkin, W. Fletcher, F. Firth, W. Kelynack, G. Martin, C. Stead, F. Tait, J. Clifton, B. Danks; and laymen J. Barker, Miller, G. Read, Innes, Crawshaw, J. Hardy, Henson, Haigh, Dowsett, Reeve and Wearne, in Minutes of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, 16 September 1878, in Wesleyan Missionary Society Correspondence and Papers, ML CY 1365.

\(^{19}\) *Weekly Advocate*, 28 September 1878.

\(^{20}\) Minutes of General Missions Committee of Australasian Conference of Wesleyan Methodist Church, 1865–1898, 16 September 1878, ML MOM 1-4 CY 1365.
Watsford, went with them for a sea voyage after illness. Danks was not aware that his future senior minister Brown had told Chapman that he would prefer to have no new colleague unless that man felt that it was ‘a privilege to come and cannot thank God from his heart for the opportunity of living and working, and of suffering, and perhaps dying here.’ They landed first in Fiji, hoping to recruit more Fijian workers for the New Mission but wondering whether news of the murders would discourage them. It was one thing to be told you might be killed by cannibals. It was another to learn that men you knew had indeed been killed and eaten. However, they found that the men who had volunteered to go were still determined to keep their promise. When one was offered the chance to withdraw from the mission party, he answered that his ‘mind was made up that I go,’ and his wife, when asked, said ‘I am the outrigger of the canoe and when the canoe goes, I go.’

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As the new recruits sailed north, George and Lydia Brown were wondering about the way the news of the deaths and the raid would be received in the colonies. Months earlier, Brown had written with foresight to Chapman,

> There will, no doubt, be a difference of opinion about my conduct in connection with the punishment of the murderers—for that I am quite prepared—and I shall not be surprised to hear that many condemn the course we felt compelled to adopt. To them I can only give the reasons that influenced us, but I cannot make them feel their force as we felt them. The responsibility of our acts rests in a great measure upon me, and that responsibility I am quite willing to take.

His prophecy was correct. As soon as the details of the events in New Britain were made public, a storm broke. In church papers and the general press everyone had an opinion. Those who supported Brown suggested that the circumstances were without precedent and that he had been forced to act to protect the lives of others; he deserved sympathy not blame, they said. Even those who wanted to defend Brown were guarded in their words, however, speaking of regret that he could not have found some other course of action. At the very least, they declared, the matter should have been reported to the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific, Sir Arthur Gordon, and left for him to take appropriate action. Why didn’t Brown withdraw his people from danger, or gather in a defensive position at Port Hunter? Within the church community there was a war of words unleashed with sharp letters being published over many months, some critical of Brown and some attempting to defend him, until

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21 Brown to Chapman, 24 June 1878.
22 James J. Watsford, Journal of a trip to New Britain 1878–1879, 10 October 1878, ML MOM 127.
the church paper declined to publish more correspondence on the matter. A number of journalists in the colonial newspapers from Sydney and Melbourne to Auckland and Fiji were savage in their condemnation and mockery of the missionary enterprise. Brown, wrote one, had ‘befouled his character as a Christian minister.’\textsuperscript{24} The Mission Board had ‘had dust thrown in its eyes.’\textsuperscript{25} Another was scathing of ‘missionaries on the war path … bearers of glad tidings who take care to have their muskets with them … Christian arguments in the shape of bullets … if Wesleyan Christianity obtains a foothold in New Britain it will have been by the means introduced by Mohammed—the sword in one hand, the book in the other—baptism or butchery the only alternatives of the people.’\textsuperscript{26}

News of the troubles in New Britain travelled around the world. A report that reached England via the United States demonstrated the somewhat slippery grasp those in the northern hemisphere had of the geography of the Pacific; it was said that ‘Five Wesleyan Missionaries are alleged to have been killed and eaten by the Maoris [sic] in New Zealand.’\textsuperscript{27} In London, the Aborigines Protection Society brought their concerns about the distant missionary George Brown to Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, Secretary of State for the Colonies at Whitehall, requesting a judicial enquiry. They were assured that when Sir Arthur Gordon returned to Fiji later in the year he was instructed to ‘hold as full and complete an investigation as circumstances will admit.’\textsuperscript{28} Brown had predicted the concern of the Aborigines Protection Society; unrepentant, he suggested that those ‘who remain snug and comfortable in their own safe and quiet homes and who think the poor natives are always right and are always ill-treated and oppressed by whites will condemn my action in this matter and be dreadfully shocked.’\textsuperscript{29}

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Brown was still isolated from the rest of the world and remained ‘anxious to hear what you stay at home folk think of us.’\textsuperscript{30} It was with some relief that they welcomed the unexpected visit of two British men-of-war to the area early in August. The captains of both the \textit{Beagle} and the \textit{Sandfly} had been unaware of the incidents of April but each undertook to enquire into the issue and provide an independent report for the colonial authorities. It is unlikely that villagers felt free to complain against the actions of outsiders to outsiders, especially as

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} \textit{Fiji Argus}, 22 November, 29 November, 6 December 1878, quoted in the \textit{Weekly Advocate}, 3 May 1879; letter to Editor, ‘The Fiji Argus and the Rev. George Brown’.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{26} \textit{Melbourne Age}, 27 September 1878.
\item \textsuperscript{27} \textit{Weekly Advocate}, 14 December 1878.
\item \textsuperscript{28} \textit{Weekly Advocate}, 26 July 1879, quoting reports from the London \textit{Times} of letters of 26 December 1878 (Aborigines Protection Society) and 27 May 1879 (Secretary of State for the Colonies).
\item \textsuperscript{29} Brown to Rev. James Wallis Sr., 2 July 1878.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 9 September 1878.
\end{itemize}
Brown was also present on the ship. Nonetheless, reports were written which Brown believed were not unfavourable ‘either as regards my judgement or my humanity’.\(^3^1\) Despite the tension of waiting for long-delayed news from home, with his own illness and the death from disease of more of his teachers, Brown tried to go on with his work. He accepted an invitation by Captain Horne of the *Sandfly* to join them on a visit to the north coast of New Ireland in September. Unfortunately, their return was delayed. Lydia Brown was very alarmed to hear rumours that her husband had been murdered. When he did not return at the expected time, and day followed day without news, she became more and more terrified that the rumour could be true. She was alone, isolated and responsible for her children Geoffrey, Mabel and baby Wallis, while she prayed daily for her five other children; she had had no word of them for over a year. To her intense relief, the *Sandfly* came back at last, with Brown weary but unscathed. Brown brushed off the danger and complained that the villagers had ‘most industriously circulated the report that I was killed by the natives at Topaia.’\(^3^2\) The rumour could so easily have been true.

![Figure 8. Lydia Brown and women at Kabakada, New Britain 1880.](image)

*Source: George Brown photograph collection: Australian Museum V6397.*

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31 Brown to Lizzie (Buddle) Arthur, New Zealand, 9 September 1878.
The ship *Dancing Wave*, direct from Sydney, arrived in November. Here at last were the letters and newspapers they had long hoped to see. There were letters from their family, and the good news that Benjamin and Emma Danks were on their way to join them. Significantly, the bundle of newspapers made clear the attitude of the people in the colonies to the Blanche Bay affair. In his journal on 13 November Brown wrote, ‘Most of them disapprove. Well I must just leave it for the present…. Whatever they think or say now I have a clear conscience about it.’ Clear conscience or not, he added ‘Not at all well today.’\(^{33}\) He was angry to see the false accusation that the island teachers normally moved among village communities carrying weapons—the ‘baptism or butchery’ slur. The thing that hurt the most, however, was reading letters from those he loved and respected who spoke of their grief and regret that he could not have found some other way to respond to the murders. His good reputation was at serious risk.

**Figure 9. Teachers and catechists of mission, Kabakada, New Britain 1880.**


In a curious way, at the same time as he was being severely criticised by distant peers, George Brown was beginning to see signs that the New Mission was making progress. Fewer people carried arms, women and children were more likely to move without protection, and sorcery seemed less common. People were attending church services in greater numbers and three men were almost ready for baptism. Brown reflected, ‘Two years ago they laughed at us and the

\(^{33}\) Brown, Journal, 13 November 1878.
lotu and often wanted to know what we would pay them if they came to hear us
preach.’34 After long and patient negotiation, Brown had made his peace with
the chief Taleli and his people and he believed that now reconciliation had been
achieved with all the clan groups who had been part of the violence of April.
As a sign of a more stable community, while one of the visiting ships was in
harbour, the local villages presented a display of wealth with a canoe carried up
the beach loaded with shell money and chief To Pulu standing aloft in it. Brown
set up his photographic equipment and captured four images as ‘the dukduks
and all the people came on with weapons poised and keeping regular time to the
drums until they all mixed in a mob in regular hurly burly.’35

* * *

Five days later, on 1 December 1878, in the middle of the night a ship entered
the channel. It was the John Wesley at last. Waiting on board in the dark were
Benjamin and Emma Danks. Their honeymoon holiday was over and now,
although they assured each other that they were not afraid, they knew that
they faced a new and very strange world. Across the water drifted the sounds
of a village on the shore; the beat of drums, shouts, singing. They had been
warned that there had been violence only months earlier, and it was hard to
know what to expect. Ben was moved by the courage of his bride. A canoe came
alongside and three men clambered on board. The new teachers watched while
their wives gathered nervously around Emma Danks, astonished. In the lantern
light they saw three naked men with a white streak painted down their chests
and abdomens, greased hair, faces painted with black pigment or lime, mouths
and teeth orange-red. Danks noted that ‘the sight was not exhilarating.’36 The
new arrivals were relieved when George Brown came on board and met for the
first time a couple who would become dear friends and colleagues for the rest of
their lives. They rowed through the warm darkness to the landing place several
miles distant. Danks would always remember the moment of arrival.

The mission house was then situated on a jutting point of land, about
one hundred and fifty feet high, which formed the northern head of Port
Hunter. The path leading up to it was just a rough bush track. Mr Brown
led Mrs Danks up this steep road while Mr Watsford and I stumbled
after them. The jungle smelt damp and the way was pitch black. We
reached the summit, and passing along the path in front of the house
saw Mrs Brown standing in the doorway holding a lamp in her hand. As
we stepped on to the verandah she gave us the heartiest of welcomes.…

34 Ibid., 20 November 1878.
35 Ibid., 26 November 1878.
36 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. 15.
As she took my dear one in her arms and kissed her, I experienced a feeling of relief and content, which helped me much in the succeeding days. Mrs Danks went to her like a daughter to a mother.\textsuperscript{37}

It seemed that the time had come for a new beginning.

\textsuperscript{37} Danks, \textit{In Wild New Britain}, pp. 16–17.