

## 10. 'A fearful mistake'

### New Britain, Sydney, New Zealand, Tonga, Fiji 1879

There was no time to waste. Obstacles seemed to be evaporating at last. George Brown was relieved to find that the new missionary Benjamin Danks was practical, energetic, sensible and good company. After so many months of isolation, ships were arriving at Port Hunter in the weeks before Christmas, including German businessman Hearnshem's *Pacific* and the mission ship *John Wesley*. Contrary to the directions of the Mission Board, Brown was determined to locate the house for the new missionaries some forty miles away beyond the water, on New Britain. Although the two men made a token exploration of other possible sites on Duke of York Island and later on New Britain, where Danks admired the 'untamed, wildly beautiful and romantically tangled bush,' the younger man soon realised 'from Mr Brown's conversation that we should find only one, at Kabakada.'<sup>1</sup> By the time Danks wrote to the Mission Board asking them to rescind their direction that the two British households should be located together, the timber had already been delivered to the Kabakada site. Danks assured the Board that 'we quite agree with Mr Brown when he says that building a house on Duke of York would be wasting timber.'<sup>2</sup>

Their first Sunday together was a great day. The Browns invited their guest the Reverend J.J. Watsford to baptise their six-month-old son Wallis, 'a fine fat fellow—one of the very finest I have ever seen.'<sup>3</sup> Later that morning, George Brown

had the pleasure of baptizing seven of our young men, five Duke of York and two from New Ireland.... These are the first fruits of our work here. They have all been under instruction.... Twas a thrilling service and we all felt very much encouraged. It was especially gratifying to me and I felt very grateful indeed to God for His grace and help.... From today dates the beginning of the Church in this Mission. God grant that many more may be added to the number.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Benjamin Danks, *In Wild New Britain: The Story of Benjamin Danks, Pioneer Missionary*, from his diary, ed. Wallace Deane, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1933, pp. 18–24.

2 Danks to Benjamin Chapman, 25 December 1878, published in the *Weekly Advocate*, April 1879.

3 George Brown to Elizabeth, Amy, Monica, Claudia and Frederick Brown, 16 December 1878 in Brown, George, *Journal, 1877–Dec 1879*, ML A1686-13, 14, 15 CY 2762.

4 Brown, *Journal*, 8 December 1878, George Brown, *Journal, 1877–Dec 1879*, ML A1686-13, 14, 15 CY 2762. The men baptised were: Peni Lelei, Paula Kaplen, Jiali Noa, Inoki To Bagbag, Loti Alik, Petero Topilike, Apisa Turane.

That same day the seven young men shared in the service of Holy Communion for the first time. It was important to the Browns to have Watsford visit them. They knew that when he returned to the colonies he would be able to describe what he had seen and assure the church at home that the mission was indeed making progress. Before he left them, Watsford led an evening service in English, preaching from Psalm 40, 'I waited patiently for the LORD; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock.... And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God.'<sup>5</sup>

The German ship, the *Ariadne* under Captain Bartolomäus von Werner, arrived in the region on 10 December 1878. George Brown went on board the next day. Travelling with the *Ariadne* was the German Consul for Samoa and Tonga, Theodor Weber, known to Brown from his Samoan years. They brought news from Fiji. Chief Justice Sir John Gorrie intended to visit the region to investigate the case and could arrive within weeks. There were rumours, they said, that Brown was 'to be put on his trial for manslaughter, and that he would be punished at least with five years imprisonment, as the privilege of defending his life in such a manner could not be allowed to a missionary.'<sup>6</sup> Brown was encouraged when von Werner and Weber expressed sympathy with his position, suggesting that bloody confrontation was the only way to gain the respect of savages and save the lives of their German compatriots. Weber and von Werner offered to write formal letters of vindication which Brown could use in his defence in court.<sup>7</sup>

Years later, when writing his life story for a wide audience, the visit of the *Ariadne* and the provision of letters of support were framed in terms of a friendly and fruitful encounter. The reality was otherwise. Consul Weber had an agenda; he wanted to negotiate the acquisition of two harbours for the German Reich, at Mioko and Makada in the Duke of York Island group, as a strategic base from which village men could be recruited and sent to Samoa to work on plantations. Brown, as interpreter and a person known and trusted by the village leaders, was ideally placed to facilitate this. He was already acting as interpreter and advisor in a local court case between village leaders and the traders. So letters of affirmation of Brown's role in the punitive raid were written by Captain von Werner and Consul Theodor Weber on 14 December but withheld from Brown. In exchange for Brown's help in facilitating the 'purchase' of the coveted harbours, they said, and a promise that he would not challenge the labour traffic but promote it, they would give him the letters of support.<sup>8</sup>

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5 Psalm 40:1–3, King James Bible.

6 Captain Von Werner to Imperial Admiralty, Berlin, from Duke of York Island, 12 December 1878. Translation quoted in George Brown, *George Brown: Pioneer-Missionary and Explorer: An Autobiography*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908, pp. 280–82.

7 Brown, *George Brown: Pioneer-Missionary and Explorer*, pp. 279–82.

8 Jacob Anderhandt, *Eduard Hemsheim, die Südsee und viel Geld*, Biography, Münster: MV-Wissenschaft, 2012, pp. 262–69.

Brown objected. During his years in Samoa he had been outspoken about the problems for Samoan communities when their land was taken over by foreign ownership and now he saw it happening again. The removal of numbers of young men from their island communities to labour far from home was also fraught with difficulties, as he well knew. At first he bitterly resisted what amounted to blackmail. For days he argued against these demands, struggling for a different solution. In frustration, Weber threatened to send a cable to Berlin condemning the missionary's actions during the 'Six Day War', knowing that this information would reach London and thence the Western Pacific High Commission in Fiji. Only then did Brown capitulate. In exchange for the letters of support he reluctantly agreed to their demands, prepared a form of legal contract of sale for the harbours, albeit with some concessions, and negotiated this with the village chiefs. Some time later, Captain von Werner sent a confidential message to the chief of the Imperial Admiralty in Berlin; he was uneasy about the tactic they had used against Brown, fearing that it had not been honourable, but admitted that the temptation to exploit the situation had been too great.<sup>9</sup> Brown now had letters about his 'heroic deed' but at a significant cost. He was gagged and unable to speak out on perceived injustices to the people of the place. The seeds had been sown for future decades of distrust and cynicism about the intentions of the German Reich.

By Boxing Day 1878, the *Ariadne*, *Pacific* and *John Wesley* had all gone, taking guests, curios, correspondence and reports with them. Although he had offered to serve in the New Mission for three years, Brown knew that his term could be interrupted at any moment. The Wesleyan Methodist Conference would meet in February and might choose to recall him. Chief Justice John Gorrie might arrive from Fiji any day; it was known that Gorrie was committed to the values of the Aborigines Protection Society in England, and a critic declared that he was 'most dangerous, for he invariably takes the part of the Natives against the white settlers.'<sup>10</sup> That did not bode well for Brown. So Brown threw himself and his team into their work. In January, February and March 1879, Brown was constantly on the move, travelling between the communities where the teachers lived, introducing Danks to the region, organising carpenter McGrath to begin the new mission house, opening new bush church buildings, preaching and selecting sites for new stations. He met with influential chiefs Taleli and Bulilai, 'always unarmed', and after exchanges of gifts and further conversations came to the conclusion that 'we are very good friends now'.<sup>11</sup> If he was frequently ill and exhausted, he put it down to the heavy demands of his work.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 268–69. Von Werner's confidential letter to the Admiralty remained in secret Archives for decades, separated from other material about the South Seas.

<sup>10</sup> Bridget Brereton, *Law, Justice and Empire: The Colonial Career of John Gorrie, 1829–1892*, Kingston, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 1997, p. 130.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, *Journal*, 22 January 1879.

It was all very well for Brown to state confidently of the punitive raid, as he did in his journal in January, 'I do not hesitate to say that good and only good has resulted... Our action then saved the Mission and saved our lives.'<sup>12</sup> He knew that by the end of the month his friends and his critics would meet in Sydney for their annual Conference, and would make their own judgement.

In early February 1879, the men of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference of New South Wales and Queensland met in the Centenary Church in York Street, Sydney. It was time to debate the question of the Blanche Bay Affair. The Reverend Benjamin Chapman, as Mission General Secretary, presented the range of documentary evidence from the ships' captains, the German Consul and Brown himself. The general opinion of all these witnesses, he told the Conference, was that Brown was not censurable for the course he had taken. There were, of course, other opinions. The Reverend William Moore, a veteran of the mission in Fiji who had experienced danger from cannibals, contended that any missionary to a pioneer mission should have known that they might be called on to lay down their lives but certainly not to take life. Brown ought to have been a 'protector of the natives whom they went to instruct and civilize,'<sup>13</sup> Moore said and declared that Brown,

in the extremity of great and terrible difficulty, had committed a fearful mistake, which would yet have a very baneful influence on the missionary work in New Britain.... The Conference should express its regret at the course Brother Brown had taken, otherwise it would be a blot on their missionary character.<sup>14</sup>

The debate was lively. Members of Conference were divided between those who shared Moore's anxiety about militant missionaries and those who, often from personal loyalty, supported their friend George and argued that his actions had been justifiable. Should they give Brown the opportunity to defend himself at the next Conference? Should they leave the matter in the hands of the Western Pacific High Commission but fail to demonstrate whether or not his own Church approved Brown's actions? Speeches became more and more emotional. Motions, counter motions and amendments were offered. An awkward compromise was reached. After expressing sympathy for Brown in a desperate situation, the conference decided,

It fully appears to us, that in the judgement of the natives themselves, Mr Brown has administered justice without seeking revenge; and whilst

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12 Brown, Journal, 8 January 1879.

13 William Moore, quoted in the *Weekly Advocate*, 15 February 1879.

14 Ibid.

we still cherish the utmost confidence in Mr Brown as our agent in New Britain, we at the same time now solemnly affirm that we can never sanction the use of military measures in our missionary enterprises.<sup>15</sup>

The name of George Brown remained, however, one that stirred strong feelings, of embarrassment, anxiety, affection, irritation and loyalty. Even among his strongest supporters there may still have been a suspicion that, much as they loved the man, he may have made a 'fearful mistake'.

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Ominously, the journal entries that George Brown had recorded in the early months of 1879 listed a demanding program that would have tested the fittest person. Scattered among references to long, hot, exhausting journeys in open boats or tramps through tropical bush were also frequent references to illness, particularly malaria. Through March he was ill for most of the month, often bedridden. By the first anniversary of the murder of the Fijians in April he was able to preach again near his home, but admitted in a letter to Benjamin Chapman that he was anxious about a planned trip to New Ireland to open some new church buildings. 'At present I am not fit for much. I never was very stout, as you know, but now I am as thin and miserable as I can well be. I had the fever very often and a little too much exposure and anxiety.'<sup>16</sup>

Colonial opinion and colonial justice were on his mind. 'Chief Justice Gorrie hasn't showed up yet,' he told a cousin unrepentantly, 'and so I am still out of "quod" [prison]... I ain't a bit sorry and if ever I am spared to stand before another audience in the Colonies or in England I shall not be slow to tell them so. I suppose I've ruined forever my chance of spouting at Exeter Hall. So be it.'<sup>17</sup> Because of Brown's illness, Ben and Emma Danks had not yet moved to their new house on New Britain. Despite his inexperience, Danks was doing most of the work.

It was a hard decision but at the end of April 1879, when the opportunity came to send George Brown back to Australia for medical help with the small steamer *Alice*, it was decided that he should go. Danks had been shocked to see his superintendent looking 'like a walking corpse'.<sup>18</sup> The *Alice* was too small to accommodate Lydia and the children on the risky journey across the Coral Sea to Cooktown in North Queensland and so with deep anxiety Lydia farewelled

15 *Weekly Advocate*, 15 February 1879.

16 Brown to Chapman, 7 April 1879 in Brown, Letter Book, 1876–1880, ML A1686-3 CY 2772.

17 Brown to Tralie Buddle, 14 April 1879. Exeter Hall on the Strand in London during much of the nineteenth century was the scene of many influential gatherings for those committed to the evangelical missionary enterprise and social action, through organisations such as the Temperance Association and the Anti-Slavery League.

18 Danks, *In Wild New Britain*, p. 35.

her man. Danks sent a letter to Chapman: ‘Mr Brown is very ill; so ill, that I am very much concerned about the future ... he is almost worn out with continued suffering.’<sup>19</sup> He did not add that at the last moment before climbing into the whale boat to go out to the *Alice* Brown confided, ‘I have not told Mrs Brown but I doubt whether I shall return.’<sup>20</sup> Weighted with the burden of responsibility, the younger minister with only five months experience in the region then returned to what he called ‘the house of weeping hearts.’<sup>21</sup> Lydia Brown, it seemed, already understood.

There was now a great silence and an empty place that her active man had once filled. There was no lack of work to be done or challenges every day, but he was not there to share it. Lydia Brown had no way of knowing whether George had survived the voyage to Cooktown or whether he had gone on to Sydney. The newlyweds sheltered in the mission house at Kinawanua with Lydia Brown and her children, and they all valued the support and care of the island teachers in their community. Lydia Brown, as the most experienced and senior among them at the age of forty, took responsibility for the many who were ill, with the medicine and skill available to her; their recent guest Watsford had described her special qualities as ‘her quietness’ and ‘nursing’.<sup>22</sup> When there was trouble in the nearby villages, as when the new convert Peni Lelei was being pressured to take a life in revenge for the murder of a kinsman, Lydia did her best to mediate but missed her husband’s confident approach.<sup>23</sup>

The long hot days passed and still there was no news. A strong earthquake rattled everything in the mission house in June. Danks and Lelei began a little school with twenty-six students, despite the objections of some chiefs. Danks was making some progress on analysing the local language. News came from New Britain that British Commodore Wilson was in the area to investigate the murders and aftermath, and was annoyed to find that Brown was away and that many of the original British participants in the raid had now left the region or were dead. So the days went by through June, July and August as they went on waiting.<sup>24</sup>

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Beyond their horizon, the *Alice* steamed south to Cooktown. George Brown was given hospitality there and again in Brisbane, finally arriving in Sydney still very unwell on 31 May 1879. His friends gave him a warm welcome but he soon realised that debate over his actions in the ‘Blanche Bay Affair’ was still

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19 Danks to Chapman, 30 April 1879, published in the *Weekly Advocate*, June 1879.

20 Danks, *In Wild New Britain*, p. 35.

21 Ibid.

22 James J. Watsford, *Journal of a trip to New Britain, 1878–79*, ML MOM 127, note on back page.

23 Danks, *In Wild New Britain*, p. 39.

24 Ibid., pp. 44–50.

raging. In the colonies including Fiji a fierce battle of words was being waged through correspondence in a number of newspapers. The continuing interest in the controversy was so great that, unwisely, George Brown was persuaded to speak in the Bourke Street Methodist Church about his experiences. His sense of obligation outdid his strength. To the great alarm of his friends, Brown collapsed during his speech. His friends, in tears, were sure he was dying and Brown himself admitted later that he thought so, too. Chapman immediately rebuked those asking Brown to visit their churches, adding, 'Would they kindly take the hint that Mr Brown is too unwell to engage in this kind of work ... he needs rest.'<sup>25</sup>

Brown was a very sick man. As his condition grew progressively worse even the best medical advice in Sydney was unable to help him. (The tropical diseases that troubled him were outside their experience.) Chapman and Brown's brother-in-law William Fletcher were given the task of telling Brown that he was dying. Brown thought of his children in New Zealand, and asked that they be brought to Sydney. No ship was due to leave Auckland for another ten days, so Brown announced, 'Well! All I can say is I do *not* feel inclined to die just now,' and Chapman responded 'Well, don't die!'<sup>26</sup> And so, although a very difficult and wilful patient, he did not die after all. To the alarm of his friends, he then decided that a sea voyage would do him good and that he would sail for Auckland to visit his children there. He was told that he would surely die at sea. When he embarked on the *Hero* in July, the captain observed that all that could be seen was a hat, a great coat, and a pair of boots. Even so, his health began to return and Brown was able to enjoy a few weeks with his five children in Auckland before returning to Sydney in August.<sup>27</sup> He was anxious to be free to go back to the New Mission and Lydia but knew that he had almost certainly not yet escaped facing a tribunal on his actions the previous year. The Secretary of State for the Colonies had instructed High Commissioner Gordon to 'hold as full and complete an investigation as circumstances will permit.'<sup>28</sup>

So September 1879 began. Two lives—the man George and the woman Lydia—continued. Apart, invisible and silent to each other, they were each counting the days and hours until they could be together again. In Sydney in springtime, George Brown's health was better than it had been and although the Board was worried about him, they decided that they should 'leave him unfettered to act upon his own judgement on his arrival at the Duke of York'; he was anxious to

25 *Weekly Advocate*, 7 June 1879; Brown, *George Brown: Pioneer-Missionary and Explorer*, pp. 299–301.

26 Brown, *George Brown: Pioneer-Missionary and Explorer*, p. 302.

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 301–03.

28 *Weekly Advocate*, 26 July 1879, quotes article from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 July 1879, copied from the *London Times*.

attempt some Bible translation and offered to return for one more year.<sup>29</sup> He now prepared to sail from Sydney with the intention of visiting Fiji to meet with the High Commissioner there before returning, he hoped, to the New Mission.<sup>30</sup> He knew that by presenting himself to the judiciary in Fiji he was stepping open-eyed into the lion's jaws, but he just wanted the thing to be over. It was now nearly five months since he had heard news of his family. In the northern islands, still not knowing whether her husband had lived or died, Lydia Brown waited.

In the week that George Brown sailed from Sydney with the *John Wesley*,<sup>31</sup> a report was being written for the British authorities in Fiji about the Blanche Bay Affair. British naval Commodore Wilson had delegated his authority to Captain Purvis of the ship *Danae* to investigate the events of April 1878. One finding was that the original estimate of numbers of those who had been killed during the raid had been greatly inflated; when pressed, the many eyewitnesses each admitted to having seen no more than between two and ten bodies at most, and so the stories of up to one hundred dead appeared to be apocryphal. In addition, the witnesses had explained that Brown had not acted alone but as part of a larger group, and was in fact separated from the party that had done most of the killing and most of the destruction of property. The captain of the *Danae* assured Lydia Brown that his formal report was not entirely damning. Captain Purvis had written that

Rev. Brown could not fail to be present in order to give the full weight of his authority to proceedings; he however appears to have spent most of the time on the beach trying to bring the natives of some of the other districts to reason and was not personally in the places where most of the natives were killed ... [and] could hardly have acted otherwise than he did.<sup>32</sup>

Lydia Brown sent letters to George in the hope that he would receive them in Fiji, and was able to tell him that they were all well. At last there seemed some hope that the miserable matter might be laid to rest and that her husband could come home.

The weeks were passing and by now George Brown was at sea with the *John Wesley*. If he could have had his way, he would have set a course direct to Duke of York and Lydia, but the ship went first to Tonga. There he fretted, acting begrudgingly as note taker while a disciplinary committee from the Conference

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29 Minutes of General Missions Committee of Australasian Conference of Wesleyan Methodist Church, 1865–1898, 8 September 1879, ML MOM 1-4 CY 354.

30 *Weekly Advocate*, 20 September 1879.

31 Brown, Journal, 18 September 1879.

32 Official report of investigation initiated by Commodore Crawford Wilson and carried out by Captain Purvis of *Danae*, 21 September 1879, ML A1686-18 CY 1365.

attempted to deal with problems surrounding an intransigent missionary, the Reverend Shirley Waldemar Baker. Baker was a contemporary of Brown; their paths had crossed in the past and would cross, painfully, in the future. Conference intended that Baker should be recalled but Baker, supported by the King of Tonga and many petitioners had no intention of budging. At the end of three frustrating weeks Brown may not have been impressed when Baker announced publicly that 'if he were young, and did not love to remain in Tonga, he would go to the new Mission.'<sup>33</sup> On 30 October, they sailed for Fiji; Brown noted in his journal that he was 'heartily glad to get away.'

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At Kinawanua during October, while Brown was delayed in Tonga, the spectre of grave illness stalked through the mission community once more. First, seven-year-old Geoffrey Brown fell ill with malaria. The next day, little one year old Wallis, who had just begun to toddle and was the delight of the whole community, began to have convulsions. He seemed to recover a little, but then Emma Danks also collapsed with malaria, to be followed a few days later by Ben Danks. Two of the teachers were also gravely ill and brought to Kinawanua. Lydia Brown and her Samoan house servants had the care of a household of sweating, shivering, vomiting, hallucinating, pain-racked people. On the day that George Brown was setting out from Tonga for Fiji, Danks wrote a grief-stricken letter to Chapman.

We have passed through no small trouble since my last by the *Danae*. Death has cast a shadow over our home and our hearts are sore.... What a mercy that Mrs Brown was not taken ill! In the midst of all this care, suddenly, on Sunday morning the 12th of October, Wallis died. I will not attempt to describe our house that morning; enough to say that we felt that no greater calamity could befall us, and everything seemed dark. We buried him on Monday morning,—a sad task for me and a heart-rending one for the lonely mother!... We have been expecting the *Wesley* for a long time ... [and] have now given up all hope of seeing her before the end of November or beginning of December.<sup>34</sup>

Lydia Brown was exhausted. And every day, while she heard news of more illness, white lawlessness and tribal violence on every side, she watched from her cliff-top verandah for a sail on the curve of the sea, the sign that her husband was coming back to her.

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<sup>33</sup> *Weekly Advocate*, 13 December 1879.

<sup>34</sup> Danks to Chapman, quoted in Brown, *George Brown: Pioneer-Missionary and Explorer*, pp. 336–37.

In Levuka, the colonial headquarters of the High Commission of the Western Pacific in Fiji, the *Danae* had just arrived with letters for Brown and the report for the High Commissioner. As far as Brown knew, his family was still well and safe. There was further delay while they waited for the two key figures of authority, Sir Arthur Gordon the High Commissioner, and Chief Justice Sir John Gorrie, to be available in Levuka. It quickly became clear that each man insisted that he had the authority to deal with the case against Brown and they were overheard quarrelling furiously over it.<sup>35</sup> The Chief Justice sent Brown a summons to appear at court on 13 November 1879 with the charge, 'You have this day been charged before this Court for that you in or about the month of April 1878 did kill and slay certain natives of the island of New Britain whose names are unknown against the peace of Our Lady Queen her Crown and Dignity. Regina v. Brown.'<sup>36</sup>

The High Commissioner, on the other hand, saw no ground on which to institute any criminal charges, and he could not recommend any such proceedings. He declared that 'although I by no means commit myself to unqualified approval of Mr Brown's action, I altogether disapprove of his being treated as a criminal.'<sup>37</sup>

The next few days were tense. Some of the missionaries in Fiji were almost sick with worry on behalf of their colleague though Brown himself seemed surprisingly calm. At one point Brown was called to Government House to meet Sir Arthur Gordon and his Secretary J.B. Thurston; in the light of all the evidence before him, Gordon suggested that the measures taken in New Britain may have been 'hasty and unnecessary but there is a vast difference between indiscretion and criminality ... nothing which has come before me would lead me to impute to you any suspicion of crime.'<sup>38</sup> Even so, the court case was to proceed. Far away, on the day of the court case, Ben Danks and Lydia Brown thought they recognised the mission ship in the distance. They were mistaken.

Fearing that Brown would be jailed for manslaughter, his mission friends arranged for a barrister to appear in his defence. On the morning of the court case they were astonished to discover that the case had collapsed. It was still not clear whether Brown would have been found guilty of manslaughter but the Prosecutor Attorney-General Garrick had withdrawn from the case and Chief Justice Gorrie had bowed to the superior authority of Gordon. With a sense of anticlimax, Brown heard Gorrie explain that because of the time that had elapsed since they first heard of the events of April 1878, the opinion of the

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35 Brown, Journal, 10 November 1879.

36 Brown, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Correspondence and Papers, 1890–1895, ML A1686 CY 1365.

37 Quoted in context of Letter to Editor from Rev. B. Chapman, in the *Weekly Advocate*, 29 November 1879.

38 Extract from the Minutes of Proceedings before HM High Commissioner for the Western Pacific, 11 November 1879, signed by Thurston, quoted in Brown, Journal, 11 November 1879.

High Commissioner 'that yours is not such a case as ought to be so prosecuted' and because of the lack of a prosecutor, 'I therefore in these circumstances do not propose to proceed further with this matter, indeed there is in point of fact no prosecutor (The Attorney General was here asked if it was not so and he replied Yes) and you are accordingly free to depart.'<sup>39</sup>

It was not an unqualified acquittal. No court had declared Brown innocent and there might still be a further enquiry. George Brown realised that he had come frighteningly close to a prison sentence. He had visited a man in prison that day, a trader he had known in New Britain who was incarcerated for murder. He too might have been in such a cell. That night he noted in his journal,

There is very little doubt I fear that Mr Gorrie is not at all pleased that I am not convicted. I was told before I landed in Levuka by those who know him well that he had prejudged the case and was determined to get a conviction.... He wishes to get himself a name and also to show to the world what a great blessing this High Commissioner's court is to suffering humanity of whom he, Mr Gorrie, is the gallant champion.<sup>40</sup>

The *John Wesley* attempted to sail the day after the Court, but with little wind was forced to anchor for the night in the lagoon opposite the house of John Gorrie. Brown admitted that he was 'not very comfortable' about this. The mission ship eventually escaped from Fijian waters on 15 November and set sail for the north with six new mission families from Fiji and Tonga. After weeks of light winds and calms, as they began to pass among the most south-easterly of the scattered Solomon Islands, the wind began to pick up. At last, Brown thought, there was a good chance of a quick run through to the Duke of York Islands, and home with Lydia and the children.

Then, on the night of Monday 8 December 1879, a storm began. The barometer dropped rapidly, the wind blew in fierce gusts and the storm grew from a gale into a fierce hurricane, worse than anything he had experienced. In the darkness, buffeting and violent noise, with all his fellow travellers, Brown wondered not only whether he would escape the rage of the Chief Justice but would he survive the night. The ship was suddenly caught in a great wind gust. Everything not firmly anchored went flying. In his cabin, Brown narrowly avoided being crushed by the harmonium that was dislodged from its cleats and crashed across the space, stoving in the opposite wall; it was one of the more bizarre near-death moments of Brown's life. As he wrote,

The cargo and the ballast all shifted to leeward, and the poor *Wesley* was forced down under water, and lay stricken and trembling there whilst

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<sup>39</sup> Brown, Journal, 13 November 1879.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

the water rushed aboard.... We all felt her gradually settling down, and I climbed up the companion stairs, preferring to struggle and die in the open air than in the cabin.... No one could stand or face the storm and we all thought and felt that the end was come. There was no crying or confusion then, but just a quiet nerve-strung waiting for the ship's final plunge and the instinctive struggle for life that would follow. Many a fervent prayer ascended to heaven and many a goodbye to our loved ones far away.<sup>41</sup>

But the captain had not given up yet. There was a shout for axes. Axes and tomahawks were passed to men who desperately and in grave danger hacked at the masts. With a mighty crash first the main mast and then the foremast splintered and were sent overboard. But now the wreckage of masts and spars was dragging along beside the ship, still entangled with ropes attached to the shattered stumps; a courageous Tongan teacher Wiliami risked his life in the roaring darkness on the half-submerged deck to sever the remaining ropes with his axe and release the ship. The ship, shorn of its masts, was still afloat. With the help of crew and island missionaries, the ballast and cargo that had shifted to the leeward side was moved back, the hold was checked for leaks, and then they all waited for a dawn none of them had expected to see. Brown reflected that their ship could have disappeared at sea and no one would ever have known what had happened to them.<sup>42</sup>

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In the quietness of the tropical evening on the next day, Lydia Brown opened her old autograph book and began to copy another mourning poem into its pages. It seemed a lifetime since the first entries had been written when she was a schoolgirl in Auckland. Now she was a mature woman and her heart was breaking. There were times when she disappeared into the store room and locked the door so that she could weep in privacy. Her husband seemed to be lost to her, her children distant, ill or dead, her companions often ill, some of the teachers were idle and others dead, their white neighbours antagonistic because of Benjamin Danks' opposition to the labour traffic and the local villagers indifferent or warlike. If she had been in Auckland she might have followed custom and clothed herself in dull black. She did not need to strip the colour from her faded clothing. The light and colour was fading from her world. On the page facing her sad poem was George's handwriting. Days before their

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41 Brown, Journal 8 December 1879, also published in the *Weekly Advocate*, 31 January 1880.

42 Ibid.

wedding nearly twenty years earlier he had written of the imagery of seedtime and harvest: 'They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.'<sup>43</sup> The tears were real enough. Now the mother copied many lines of another's verse.

Sighs are but bubbles on the sea/Of our unfathomed agony...  
 Could love have saved, thou hadst not died...<sup>44</sup>

She signed the last page 'Copied Kinawanua D. of Y. Island. SLB In memory of darling Wallis Dec 9th 1879. Died Oct 12th 1879 aged 1 year 3 months.'<sup>45</sup> It was almost impossible to imagine any joy-filled harvest.

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At sea in the leaden light of 9 December, the survivors surveyed the damage to the mission ship *John Wesley*. The jagged split stump of the mainmast stood only about the height of two men, with the foremast stump even shorter. Shattered bits of timber, ripped sails, tangles of ropes, the new whaleboat gone with most of the livestock, everything was in ruins and they were drifting helplessly on an endless ocean with sharks circling. For several days Captain Mansell was not able to identify their position but finally calculated that they were drifting some one hundred miles south of San Cristobal, an island among the more southerly of the string of Solomon Islands. With difficulty the crew was able to lash a spare topmast to the stump of the foremast and they set about repairing sails. George Brown was cheered by their position. They were all alive and with some repairs and clever seamanship they should be able to take control of the ship again. They were now well on their way to the Duke of York Islands and New Britain. San Cristobal was the nearest land and he was sure that they would find shelter there with members of the Melanesian Mission as well as traders linked with his friend Captain Alex Ferguson. One of Ferguson's ships could surely carry him and the island teachers on to their destination, Brown believed. Even the seasonal wind pattern should be in their favour.

With little else to occupy him, Brown kept detailed notes in his journal. At first, even when they had rigged up temporary sails no wind filled them. They were going nowhere. He became more and more anxious and noted, 'Still the same dead calm, a calm glassy sea and the sun as hot and fiery as it can well be. I keep thinking of my poor wife and I feel half mad at this detention and yet we are so powerless.'<sup>46</sup>

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43 Psalm 126:5, King James Bible.

44 D.M. Muir, *Casa Wappy*, quoted in Lydia Brown's Autograph Book, entries from 1853–1880. Held by great-granddaughter Miss Nancy Joyce, Artarmon, Sydney.

45 Lydia Brown's Autograph Book.

46 Brown, Journal, December 1879.

A week after the storm, Brown and Captain Mansell had angry words. It seemed to Brown that the captain was not attempting to reach San Cristobal but instead was moving south. As the days passed his suspicions were confirmed, even though the captain had denied it at first. He was attempting the run of some 1700 miles south across open sea back to Sydney, with a disabled vessel carrying inadequate masts and spars for the sail needed, rather than turn north for the shelter of the Solomon Islands. Frustrated and furious, Brown wrote 'I can only pray that my dear wife may be comforted.... My heart aches tonight as I think of my dear wife. I feel sure that few, if any, in the colonies will justify our running away so heartlessly as we are doing now.'<sup>47</sup> On Christmas Day George Brown wrote disconsolately, 'Tis a sorry Christmas this to me. I have been thinking so much of my loved ones at home all day.... I know that my dear wife and all those at D of Y are thinking and talking of us today and wondering where we are.'<sup>48</sup>

Brown's journal filled with page after page of complaint against the ship's captain and he spent his days either keeping a grim silence or quarrelling with the man over his treatment of the island missionaries. No amount of fulmination against Captain Mansell made any difference. Every day through January the ship sailed further and further south.

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There was little festivity on Christmas Day at Kinawanua. A passing ship had passed on the news that Lydia's husband had been summoned to appear in court in Fiji on a charge of manslaughter but that the proceedings had been stopped. But that had been back in November. Where was he now? This Christmas no friendly mission ship waited in the channel. No gathering of officers and friends sat at their table. Some of the neighbours among the trading community were at odds with Benjamin Danks for his criticism of the labour trade; unlike Brown he was free to speak his mind. Another neighbour, naturalist Kleinschmidt, was saying that their mission had a very bad name in Australian communities and that Brown cared more for collecting specimens—and having his name given to them—than he did for all the souls of the New Britain people put together.'<sup>49</sup> It was hard to feel any lightness of spirit at Christmas. Lydia found herself thinking about the grim sequel to the story of the birth of Christ when a vengeful King Herod ordered the massacre of little boys in a bid to rid himself of the threat of a future king. She reflected on the gospel record of 'lamentation,

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47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., 25 December 1879.

49 Danks, *In Wild New Britain*, pp. 76–77.

and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and would not be comforted.<sup>50</sup> Days later she wrote in her book a poem that ended: 'The heart of Rachel, for her children crying, Will not be comforted.'<sup>51</sup>

'Daily expecting the arrival of the *John Wesley*,' Lydia wrote. It was 23 January 1880 and the shared birthdays of eight-year-old Geoffrey and five-year-old Mabel. That same day the mission ship *John Wesley* at last made harbour.<sup>52</sup> Far from being near Port Hunter, Duke of York Island, just south of the equator, the crippled vessel limped into Port Jackson, Sydney. Since the storm, they had been at sea for forty-seven days and had only made contact with one other ship in the final days off the New South Wales coast. It was no use Lydia watching the Channel. Her husband was about 1700 miles away.

There was astonishment and consternation among the people gathered for the annual Conference in Sydney when Brown and the island teachers appeared. At least they were safe, but now a friend had to tell him that one of his sons was dead; this news came via Samoa. Brown wrote, 'He didn't know which but Mr Fletcher told me later on that it was my dear darling Wallis. Oh, how much I feel for my dear wife in this her grief and sorrow.'<sup>53</sup>

It was a very uneasy return. As he told members of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference, he did not want to be there at all. The shock of hearing that his beloved baby son was dead increased his outrage against the captain of the mission ship; he attempted a formal complaint against Mansell but chose to drop it when others saw it as a personal grudge. Brown sensed ambivalence towards him among his colleagues at the Conference. While some supported him, it was clear that others believed that he, a guilty man, had only escaped prison on a technicality. Distracted by his efforts to find a way to return to his family, Brown gave little attention to the debates in Conference over the formal recall of S.W. Baker from his missionary work in Tonga; Baker was granted permission to 'rest' without ministerial appointment for a year in New Zealand, on condition that he did not return to Tonga during that time.<sup>54</sup> The business of Shirley Waldemar Baker had not yet been put to rest and would return to Brown's orbit over the next decade.

On 13 February 1880, Brown sailed from Sydney once more on the *Avoca*, a schooner heading for the Solomon Islands, and sixteen days later reached harbour in Marau Sound, San Cristobal. Now, to his great relief, Brown found his old friend Captain Alex Ferguson with his trading steamer *Ripple* also in

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50 Matthew 2:18, King James Bible.

51 Longfellow, *Resignation*, Lydia Brown's Autograph Book.

52 Brown, Journal, 23 January 1880.

53 Brown, Journal, 23 January 1880; *Weekly Advocate* 20 Dec 1879.

54 A.H. Wood, *Overseas Missions of the Australian Methodist Church Vol. 1, Tonga and Samoa*, Melbourne: Aldersgate Press, 1975, p. 163.

Marau Sound, and Ferguson offered to take Brown on to join his family as soon as he completed the job of discharging the cargo for his traders. While he waited impatiently, Brown explored the area until the *Ripple* began its progress through the islands on 9 March heading toward the Duke of York island cluster and home.

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His family at Kinawanua was in grievous trouble. The relationship between Danks and the traders was deteriorating still further. Villagers had lost interest in the Christian mission, being far more attracted by the local customs of the *dukduk*. Lydia was becoming more and more afraid that her husband would never return. There had been no news of him since word that he had left Fiji in the middle of November over three months earlier. The ship, and George, must surely be lost. And then, before her father had even reached Marau Sound in the schooner *Avoca*, little Mabel fell ill with malaria on 22 February. Within days, Emma and Ben Danks as well as teacher Sositeni and his wife Seini were all ill and needing Lydia's help. She struggled to nurse everyone and to ignore the aching of her own body and heart. Of them all, the most desperately ill was Mabel, who was losing weight rapidly and had an uncontrollable fever. As the others began to recover their strength, Mabel grew weaker. No love and care, no medicine made any difference. Two days after her father left Marau Sound to coast through the beauties of the Solomon Islands, his daughter died. It was just five months to the day since her little brother Wallis had died and on 12 March a new little grave was dug beside his. Lydia Brown, though a 'shadow of her former self,' according to Danks, bravely attended to everything that needed to be done for her child, but when the funeral was over at last allowed herself to break down and weep and weep for all that she had lost, with Emma helpless to comfort her.<sup>55</sup> In time, Lydia added a note to her book under the entry about 'daily expecting' the mission ship. That had been over six weeks ago and there was still no sign. Perhaps George would never return. Now she added 'Dear little Mabel was taken ill on Sunday Feb 22nd and after 18 days suffering peacefully died on Thursday March 11th 9-30 p.m. "The maid is not dead but sleepeth"'.<sup>56</sup>

It was all too hard. The sight of Mabel's doll, Mabel's sunhat, the open medical book, the useless medicine bottle and spoon beside the empty bed was unbearable. When Ben suggested that he organize a crew for the whale boat and that the two women and young Geoffrey go with him to visit the teachers on New Britain, they were glad to get away. Abandoning the mission house with all its signs of loss, they left Kinawanua in the open whale boat under the small protection of umbrellas from fiery sun and torrential rain. Over the next days

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55 Danks, *In Wild New Britain*, pp. 81–84.

56 Lydia Brown's Autograph Book, 11 March 1880, p. 113.

they moved from one teacher's house to the next until they reached the new but empty house at Kabakada. Lydia tried to go for walks but there was no relief from staring onlookers, nowhere to go to escape into her private agony.



**Figure 10. Lydia Brown at the graves of her children, Kinawanua, Duke of York Islands 1880.**

Source: George Brown photograph collection: Australian Museum V 6398.

On the day Lydia left Kinawanua, George Brown sailed with Captain Ferguson from Roviana on the island of New Georgia in the Solomon chain. Leaving behind the headhunters of Roviana, who had made it very clear that they would not welcome missionaries to their region, the *Ripple* sailed north. Brown could hardly contain his excitement and anticipation during the final six days of sailing north. At last he would see his Lydia and the children, and could comfort her on the loss of their little Wallis. On Sunday morning 21 March, they were off Duke of York Island and watched a canoe coming out from a village about five miles from Port Hunter. Brown recognized Mijieli, one of his teachers. Mijieli found the encounter deeply disturbing. At first he reassured Brown that all was well with the rest of his family. But knowing that the dreadful truth had to be told sooner or later, he admitted, 'I fear, Sir, I have not told you aright about the

children. You must forgive me but I had not the heart to tell you.... I couldn't bear to be the first to tell you.... There's only Geoffrey alive.' 'What! Is my wife dead?' 'No, Sir, she lives but Mabel has gone and Geoffrey alone is left.'<sup>57</sup>

For so long Brown had pictured the moment of his return. In his imagination he had sailed within sight of the mission house on the hillside at Kinawanua above Port Hunter and there on the verandah of the house had been the figures of his longed-for Lydia and the children, waving an excited welcome. He had imagined Lydia running to prepare a celebration meal, whisking through the house to be sure all was ready for her husband-guest, running back to the verandah to watch his progress across the water in the whale boat. He had pictured his children, jumping and shouting his name. But there was no sign. No one waved from the verandah. They had all gone to New Britain, Mijieli told him, and the house was deserted.

It was some time before George Brown could bring himself to leave the ship. His friend Alex Ferguson finally persuaded him and walked the bitter path beside him as he approached the empty house. 'Twas very sad to come home and find all so very desolate. The two little graves were just by the wayside as I entered the grounds and twas some time before I could enter the empty house,' he told his brother-in-law William Fletcher.<sup>58</sup> The mortar was still damp around the stones that one of the teachers had laid over the bare earth of Mabel's resting place. So close. If only... if only....

'We walked up the hill to the house and for the first time I think I really felt faint-hearted and began to think that our troubles and disappointments were never going to end.'<sup>59</sup> In the silent house, faced with an abandoned doll, a little pink dress and the dregs of useless medicine, George Brown was speechless with grief and shock. At last Ferguson put his arm around him and drew him gently away. 'Come away out of this, old man. I'll get up steam again and we'll go and look for Mrs Brown.' Stumbling from the house and pausing again beside the graves of his children, Brown followed his friend back to the *Ripple*. That night they left Port Hunter and steamed up the Channel for New Britain.<sup>60</sup>

At dawn on Monday 22 March 1880, almost eleven months since she had last seen her husband, Ben Danks woke Lydia Brown with the news that a steamer had just come into view round Cape Stevens. It was not clear, in the distance, what vessel it was but any visiting ship was welcome. Then, to their amazement, they recognised a signal. It was Ferguson with *Ripple* and the signal suggested that Brown was on board. The whaleboat was dragged to the water's edge, a

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57 Brown, *George Brown: Pioneer-Missionary and Explorer*, pp. 344–45.

58 Brown to William Fletcher, March 1880, in Brown, *Letter Book, 1876–1880*, ML A1686-3 CY 2772.

59 *Ibid.*

60 Brown, *George Brown: Pioneer-Missionary and Explorer*, pp. 345–47.

crew called and Lydia climbed into it with Ben and Emma, every sense straining toward the ship where she could see, closer with every thrust of the oars, the bearded figure of George Brown. Her husband, unbelievably, lived.

Later, writing to Benjamin Chapman, Brown described watching the Kabakada mission house verandah for a sign of life; was Lydia there after all? Then they saw movement, and the whaleboat coming out to them and

I at last saw my dear wife pale with excitement and with plain traces in her face of the effect of her many trials. I cannot tell you of our meeting when I led her into the *Ripple's* cabin. For a long time, speech was impossible and we could only weep together. We comforted ourselves with the precious words of comfort from him who is the Father of mercies.<sup>61</sup>

The waiting was over at last but a deep well of grief remained.

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61 Brown to Chapman, 28 March 1880 in Brown, Letter Book, 1876–1880, ML A1686-3 CY 2772.