

13. 'One of the toughest morsels'

New South Wales, New Zealand, Tonga, Fiji 1887–1890

'I am counting the days,' George Brown wrote, as he travelled home to his family early in 1887. By March he was home again at last with his 'dear old woman' and his six children. Now Lydia could hand back to George her anxieties over his financial affairs, and there was news of Lizzie teaching at Brisbane Girls Grammar, Amy's engagement, Monica's art, Claudia's romances, Fred and Geoffrey's studies. His new role meant still another house move. Lydia seemed to be packing up all their belongings almost every year. This time they moved to a handsome house in the new suburb of Randwick. She had not forgotten other homes. On a brass plaque at their new home at 6 Wood Street, Randwick, with its leadlight windows and iron lace, was the word 'Kinawanua', a memory of that other home on a ridge overlooking the St George's Channel and in sight of the huts of cannibals.

It was soon clear that any dream of staying home and writing a book had been pure fantasy. Brown began work at the Mission office at 415 George Street, Sydney on 7 April 1887. He was already familiar with the office, the Board and the broad work of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in the Pacific and had visited each of their fields of work. It had been part of his world since 1860. Over the years he had sent enthusiastic, miserable and angry letters to that office. Now he was sitting in the uneasy office chair with other men's letters on his desk. Of all the responsibilities before him, the most urgent was the conflict in Tonga. The new High Commissioner in the region, Sir Charles Mitchell, had appealed to the Wesleyan Methodist Conference in New South Wales and Queensland to attempt to reunite the fractured Methodists in Tonga. Brown had been appointed, with two others, to travel to Tonga in July as a delegation to attempt to deal with a complex and difficult situation.¹

The lives of two men, the Reverends George Brown and Shirley Waldemar Baker of Tonga, had followed many parallel paths. Baker was a year younger than Brown and both Englishmen had arrived in the colonies before they turned twenty. They each were ordained and began their missionary lives with the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in 1860, Brown in Samoa and Baker in Tonga. Baker's wife had come from Brown's home town of Barnard Castle.

¹ George Brown, *George Brown: Pioneer-Missionary and Explorer: An Autobiography*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908, pp. 422–23.

Both were men of strong personality and strong opinions and experienced long-distance tussles with the Mission Board. Brown knew of the breakdown of trust between Baker and his colleagues in Tonga during the 1860s. Although they never served in the same field, Brown and Baker met at intervals over the years and kept up a friendly correspondence. When Brown was in Sydney in 1874 to promote his vision for the New Mission, Baker was also in town and returned to Tonga to encourage a substantial gift from the annual fund-raising of the Wesleyans of Tonga to support the new enterprise; people criticised Baker's aggressive methods of fund-raising, but appreciated the funds.² Brown knew of the good work Baker was doing on a Constitution for Tonga, which was enacted in 1875, and perhaps envied the way in which the missionary Baker was able to advise the Tongan King George Tupou so that Tonga was able to maintain its independence. In Samoa in the same period, rivalry between competing chiefs had made it almost impossible for them to take a united stand against colonial powers. The influence of Baker with the Tongan King was increasing, causing anxiety among Methodist leaders in the colonies and irritation for the civil authorities at the Western Pacific High Commission.³ Baker was under attack on many fronts. George Brown had had his own serious problems in 1878 and 1879, and perhaps he had a certain fellow feeling for Baker who was also under attack from armchair critics. Both Brown and Baker could have been in the mind of the High Commissioner Sir Arthur Gordon when he described Wesleyan missionaries as 'those eager, irrepressible, maladroit, bustling, tiresome persons who are forever offending prejudices and getting into hot water.'⁴

By the time Brown found himself seated in the General Secretary's chair in 1887, his path had crossed with that of Baker a number of times during the previous decade. He had been note-taker for a deputation investigating Baker in Tonga in 1879 while on his way to face court in Fiji. Then, after the dismasting of the mission ship, he had been an unwilling participant in the Conference of 1880 where Baker was severely censured. The Conference decided that in 'reference to his interference with the politics of Tonga, Mr Baker has gone beyond the bounds permitted to our missionaries'⁵ and he was ordered to 'rest' for a year in New Zealand, away from Tonga. King George Tupou of Tonga was offended that a distant council had withdrawn his advisor. A year later Brown and Baker met again at Conference. Baker was still in trouble with his Church. In defiance of the demands of the 1880 Conference, he had returned to Tonga, taken up office

2 Noel Rutherford, *Shirley Baker and the King of Tonga*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1971, p. 85.

3 J.K. Chapman, *The Career of Arthur Hamilton Gordon: First Lord Stanmore 1829–1912*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964, pp. 284–85.

4 Sir Arthur Gordon, speech to the London Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, quoted in the *Weekly Advocate*, 23 June 1883.

5 W.G.R. Stephenson, 'Preface,' in *The Secession and Persecution in Tonga*, ed. J.B. Waterhouse, Sydney: Wesleyan Book Depot, 1886, p. 4.

with the King as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Comptroller of Finances, and continued to influence significant decisions. By midyear he had been appointed Premier. In December 1880, the King issued a Proclamation:

I, George Tupou ... having made up my mind that my people and country shall be entirely free and independent, and having thoroughly resolved that Tonga should have an independent Church, take this opportunity of publishing my intentions so that the leaders of the Church in Sydney, the missionaries and the whole world shall see that I am determined to have the separation.⁶

In an era when international commercial and political interests were active in the Pacific region, those with insight knew that many of the island groups, sooner or later, would become protectorates or be annexed by a colonial power. One of the few regions to be able to withstand pressure from outside was Tonga. Flags were being raised—and torn down—over more than one coveted piece of land in those years but the painted tin crown in the colours of Germany or England worn carelessly by To Pulu in the Duke of York Islands would never be accepted in Tonga. It was a serious error of judgement on the part of the several Wesleyan councils in 1881 to fail to understand the desire for independence in Tonga or the internal rivalries that existed between British and Tongan church leaders. The response of the decision-makers in the Australian colonies was too slow, unwise and unhelpful. They forced the resignation from ministry of Baker, demanded the withdrawal of J.B. Watkin who supported the King and appointed J.E. Moulton, who was in bad odour with the King at the time, as Chairman. When news of this reached Tonga, there was a furious reaction. An attempt by General Conference to transfer the Wesleyan work in Tonga from the control of the Mission Board to the control of the Conference of New South Wales and Queensland was also rejected. A telegram was sent to the President General from S.W. Baker in May 1881 demanding an independent District and the reinstatement of Watkin. It concluded, 'Grant this, peace. Reject, one secession. Don't be deceived. Secession will be universal and popular.'⁷

The fabric of the Wesleyan connection was wearing very thin in Tonga. Over the next few years, the signs of increasing tension multiplied and division hardened between those who supported Moulton and those who agreed with the King. Differences of opinion about the scene in Tonga had spilled far beyond the local setting as Methodists in NSW, New Zealand and Victoria came to different conclusions about who was in the right. Attempts to find a compromise failed, and Baker told Brown in 1884, 'I think that nothing but secession will bring the

6 A. Harold Wood, *Overseas Missions of the Australian Methodist Church Vol. 1, Tonga and Samoa*, Melbourne: Aldersgate Press, 1975, pp. 166–67.

7 S.W. Baker to President General Of Wesleyan Methodist Conference, 29 May 1881, in *The Secession and Persecution in Tonga*, ed. Waterhouse, p. 6.

Sydney Conference to its senses and should the General Conference not yield to the wishes of their Melbourne brethren, I will go for it with all my might and that means something.’⁸

On 14 January 1885, in the presence of King George Tupou, a formal decision was made to secede and establish the Free Church of Tonga with Watkin as its first minister. The people of Tonga would now be independent, not only from the control of any colonial power, but they would also have their own independent Church, based on the doctrines and polity of the Wesleyan Methodist Church. Those who were reluctant to accept this were threatened with the loss of land and dismissal from senior government positions. ‘Will you be in the free church or the enslaved church?’ they were taunted, and told to transfer membership, allegiance and property.⁹ A large number of people resisted this demand. Yet another deputation from General Conference attempted mediation but failed. The deputation observed, ‘On every side we hear “Tupou is King but Mr Baker rules”’.¹⁰ Their recommendations, which included transferring both British combatants Watkin and Moulton out of Tonga, were later rejected by Conference.

Not long before Brown left Sydney for his trip to England in 1886, disturbing documents relating to events in Tonga were published and distributed in Sydney.¹¹ They described a sorry scene of persecution. Those Tongans who still remained loyal to the Wesleyan Church were said to belong to ‘the Church that has to wait for orders from somewhere else.’¹² There were tales of floggings and imprisonment, loss of property and employment, threats and banishment. The King, who had spent some months in the northern islands of the group, returned to Tongatapu in July with an intimidating fleet of sixty canoes and 1,800 armed men. It became almost impossible to disobey the King’s wishes.

One tropical evening in Tonga in January 1887, while Brown was in the depths of a frozen winter on the train journey across Canada, Baker was driving in the buggy with his son and daughter. On the Beach Road on the coastal fringe of the town of Nuku’alofa, the buggy lamp shone on armed assailants. Baker’s son went to speak to the men but was shot and wounded. His daughter Beatrice jumped down to go to her brother while Baker tried to control the frightened

8 Baker to Brown, 31 May 1884, in Rutherford, *Shirley Baker and the King of Tonga*, p. 242.

9 J. Moulton to NSW & Queensland Conference, 3 February 1885, in *The Secession and Persecution in Tonga*, ed. Waterhouse, pp. 16–17.

10 Report of the deputation (J. Watsford, F. Langham and W.T. Rabone) appointed to visit Tonga by the 1884 General Conference, 16 May 1885, in *The Secession and Persecution in Tonga*, ed. Waterhouse, pp. 81–85.

11 J.B. Waterhouse (ed.), *The Secession and Persecution in Tonga*, 1886.

12 Elizabeth Wood-Ellem (ed.), *Tonga and the Tongans: Heritage and Identity*, Alphington, Vic.: Tonga Research Association, 2007; Siupeli Taliai, ‘Ko e Kau Fakaongo,’ in *Tonga and the Tongans: Heritage and Identity*, ed. E. Wood-Ellem, Melbourne: Tonga Research Association, 2007, pp. 147–60, p. 147; Gareth Grainger, ‘Fakaonga Exiles,’ in *Tonga and the Tongans: Heritage and Identity*, ed. E. Wood-Ellem, Melbourne: Tonga Research Association, 2007, pp. 161–77, p. 162.

horse, but Beatrice was trampled, wounded by another gunshot and left permanently paralysed. Baker escaped but was very alarmed.¹³ He had known that he had enemies in many places and there had been other plots to kill, or capture and deport him. Although the group of assassins proved to be escaped convicts, there was suspicion that perhaps some discontented Wesleyans had been behind it. In the wake of the shooting, the reaction of the King, no doubt encouraged by Baker himself, was extreme. The Wesleyans were targeted in violent reprisals. The weeks that followed the shootings were terrifying. Men were executed and more executions were threatened. There was lawlessness, with floggings, plunder of property and imprisonment. Churches were closed, and Tupou College with its few remaining students was disbanded.¹⁴ Only a stubborn handful of Wesleyans remained and a month after the assassination attempt a hundred of them left Tonga to seek asylum on the island of Koro in the Fiji group.

Brown and two colleagues arrived in Tonga late in July 1887. After two weeks of intensive meetings with all the parties, he returned to Sydney very despondent. Neither party was prepared to compromise. He reported that there was little hope of 'this grievous wound being healed so long as Mr Moulton remains in Tonga.'¹⁵ To Brown's great disappointment and despite days of debate in Conferences both in Sydney and later in Melbourne, the recommendations brought by Brown and his colleagues were rejected. The church in Tonga was not given status as an independent Conference and Moulton was not transferred on the grounds that he was needed by the remnant group. Moulton, who was present for the debate in Sydney, declared, 'If they removed him, whom would they send in his place? ... There was only one man in this Conference who had the necessary qualifications and that was the Rev. George Brown. If they would send Mr. Brown down he would ask the Conference to withdraw him.'¹⁶

By the time the matter was debated in Melbourne it was clear that the conferences in the other colonies were very dissatisfied with the decisions of the New South Wales and Queensland Conference.¹⁷ As debate raged over whether, or how, there could be reunion of the churches in Tonga 'on honourable terms', or whether it was possible for the Wesleyan Methodists to entertain the idea of organic union with other Methodist Churches in Australasia (such as the Primitive Methodists, or the Bible Christians), it seemed quite possible that the General Conference itself was at great risk. Rather than creating a climate of

13 Wood, *Overseas Missions of the Australian Methodist Church Vol.1 Tonga and Samoa*, p. 189.

14 J. Egan Moulton, *Moulton of Tonga*, London: Epworth Press, 1921, pp. 101–02; Grainger, 'Fakaonga Exiles,' pp. 165–72.

15 Brown Report to NSW & Queensland Conference, January 1888, in Wood, *Overseas Missions of the Australian Methodist Church Vol.1 Tonga and Samoa*, p. 196.

16 *Weekly Advocate*, 4 February, 11 February 1888.

17 *Ibid.*, 12 May 1888.

union they were heading for a split. In front of a crowded gallery of onlookers, a tense debate raged for two days. At last, to the relief of everyone but Brown, Moulton was persuaded that for the good of everyone he should transfer to Sydney from Tonga and continue his scholarly work on Bible translation—on the condition that George Brown was appointed to Tonga in his place. Although Moulton declared ‘that Mr Brown was regarded in Tonga as a Baker-ite,’ he believed that Brown could be trusted; he was ‘a thorough missionary,’ ‘a most capable man’ and ‘Mr Baker would have in Mr Brown one of the toughest morsels to deal with that ever he had.’¹⁸ Brown denied that he was in Baker’s, or anyone else’s, camp and pointed out that the act of appointing him as Special Commissioner to Tonga was most unlikely to resolve the profound problems there. Even so, he was prepared to be obedient to Conference. His brethren were overjoyed at this solution and sang, ‘Praise God from whom all blessings flow’ with tears in their eyes.¹⁹ Brown was not so sure.

An urgent telegram was sent to Lydia Brown in Sydney. Was she willing to go to Tonga with him? Once more she faced a hard choice; to be with her husband or to be with her children. But these days her children no longer needed her so much; Lizzie was in Brisbane, Amy was newly married and the others were competent adults. Her reply was read aloud to the meeting in Melbourne. She had written, ‘If you think it is your duty to go, I am willing.’²⁰

If Brown was reluctant to be appointed for a long period in Tonga it was only in part because of the obvious difficulties of the task. Sydney in 1888 was a vibrant, prosperous and interesting place as they celebrated the centenary of the colony. It was disappointing to be away. He had been welcomed back into the respect of his peers and had even been a nominee for the role of President that year, albeit with a grand total of three votes. As General Secretary for Missions, his responsibility was far wider than the narrow issues of Tonga. In Samoa, political battles were raging between three colonial powers, Germany, the United States of America and Britain, while traditional Samoan chiefs wrestled for power as loyalties shifted. Fiji was changing and volatile; some suggested that the original population was a dying race because of epidemics, and officials, planters, missionaries and other foreigners were vying for power over land and people. What had once been known as the ‘New Mission’ in New Britain and New Ireland had been established now for thirteen years and was making progress. He wanted to visit them all to encourage them, in particular to promote the agency of indigenous leaders. In recent times he had tried to promote the wider use of lay agents in missionary work but this had been rejected. Single women were beginning to offer for missionary service and although this was a novel concept

18 Ibid., 26 May 1888.

19 Ibid., 19 May 1888, 26 May 1888.

20 Brown, *George Brown: Pioneer-Missionary and Explorer*, p. 438.

to many, Brown was starting to see possibilities for it. In his own household he witnessed the intelligence, energy and ability of his adult daughters. His wife had always worked beside him in challenging missionary places; she had been not only wife, mother, hostess and housekeeper but also nurse, secretary and voice of reason. Benjamin Danks, newly returned to Australia, had recently spoken publicly of his great admiration for Mrs Lydia Brown, 'a good, brave, noble Christian lady.'²¹ Perhaps employing women in mission work was not such an outrageous idea.

That was not all. Instead of being sent to deal with an intractable problem in Tonga, he wanted to be free to begin something new. Through contacts with island traders he had heard a remarkable story. A Solomon Island man who had been taken to Fiji as a labourer had been converted to Christianity while working in Fiji. Now he had returned home as a lay preacher and was a pioneer missionary among his own people.²² Brown had passed through the Solomon Islands and knew their beauty and the violence of their people. At the Conference in Sydney in 1888 he had pointed out that, 'Within a few days sail of this Australian coast were large islands, such as the Solomons and the Admiralty Group, which were inhabited by teeming thousands of people to whom the first tidings of the Gospel of Christ had yet to be proclaimed.'²³ But at that time no one was listening and he had no clear plan. The conflict in Tonga cast its shadow over everything.

George and Lydia Brown sailed from Sydney in June 1888, travelling slowly first through New Zealand and then Fiji. In New Zealand, Brown was not impressed by the lack of interest in his missionary meetings and commented that, 'Unless something is done very soon the Missionary Collection, like the Moa, will have to be added to the extinct species in New Zealand.'²⁴ Lydia was thankful to spend time with her elderly parents. They were a little surprised to find S.W. Baker in Auckland. His daughter, injured in the assassination attempt, lay paralysed in their Auckland home and needed constant care so Baker travelled frequently between his family in Auckland and his duties as Premier in Tonga. He and Brown had several friendly conversations; Brown thought he seemed lonely and isolated from his Methodist friends in Auckland. Passing through Fiji in July, they were touched to meet an old friend from the pioneer group to the New Mission, Ratu Livai Volavola, and excited by the presence in the Training Institution of four young men from the Duke of York Islands. Brown was becoming restless as time went on and they waited for their ship. He wrote to Moulton, 'I often get fainthearted about the whole affair... I would feel much

21 Benjamin Danks, quoted in the *New Zealand Herald*, 9 July 1887.

22 *Missionary Notices Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, UK, Sixth Series Vol. III*, March 1888, p. 49.

23 *Weekly Advocate*, 11 February 1888.

24 *Ibid.*, 8 August 1888.

happier if I were now on our way to start a new Mission in the Solomons or any other savage group. However we must do our best.’²⁵ In a later letter he added, ‘I dread the journey more and more as time draws near. I will do what I can, with God’s help, and if I fail, why, I must fail.’²⁶

George and Lydia Brown landed at the wharf in the chief town of Nuku’alofa on 7 August 1888. Coming from the relative sophistication of the Sydney of the 1880s, the town must have seemed very small. Lydia was familiar with similar towns; early Auckland, Apia and Levuka. In each place the foreign residents lived in sometimes uneasy relations with the original people of the place. She knew that a community like this was small enough for the foreigners to all recognise each other but big enough for distinct parties to form; small enough for gossip to travel fast but big enough for foreign residents to imagine themselves superior to the local people; small enough to be isolated from the rest of the world and big enough to believe that the whole world was centred on them. The newcomers were in the middle and yet on the edge of affairs. They were known, but were still outsiders, unlike those who had lived in the area for many years. They were identified with the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Australasia but also known as old friends of the Bakers. In a divided community, perhaps observers wondered which side they were on. Within days of their arrival the Moulton family left Tonga, amid great signs of grief from their supporters.

It was time to begin work. Inevitably there was suspicion of Brown’s motives. The Free Church suspected that anyone from the Australian Methodist Church had come to interfere with their autonomy. The Tongan Wesleyans had heard a rumour,

that I was coming down to sell some of the churches to the Free Church, to burn the remainder, and to pass over all lands, etc, to the Free Church Conference.... [I told them that] I was sent to promote peace and goodwill among all parties ... there was no truth whatever in any report that I was going to extinguish our Church ... on the contrary I was certain that I expressed the feelings not only of the Conference but of the Methodist Church everywhere that our Church should remain in Tonga for ever and ever.²⁷

Foreign residents were not sure that they could trust him. In attempting to walk a middle path in a divided community, George and Lydia Brown were known to dine with, play tennis with and worship with the opposition. He was said to have

25 Brown to Moulton, from Sydney, 12 June 1888, in Brown, Letter Books, 1888–1889, ML A1686-5 CY 2810.

26 Brown to Moulton, 9 July 1888.

27 George Brown, *Report by the Rev. George Brown, Special Commissioner of the Australasian Wesleyan Methodist General Conference to Tonga*, Australasian Wesleyan Methodist General Conference, Sydney 1890, reports of December 1888 and 26 April 1889.

'a sharp rat-terrier look.'²⁸ Alert, watchful, and though he spoke words of peace they were not sure about him. Even so, things seemed to be becoming calmer and the excesses of the previous year were not repeated. As for his relationship with Baker, who continued to come and go from New Zealand, Brown continued to meet him for 'square talks' and told President Lane, in Sydney, 'He talks very freely with me and I think is willing to do what he can. I have not yet got from him what his wishes are. Mr Baker is a "big fish" and it won't do to try to land him too soon. I do not wish to frighten him at the beginning.'²⁹

Language caused Brown to stumble. Although he believed that he spoke functional Tongan, some statements he made in a public meeting were misunderstood and caused outrage among the members of the Free Church. Of several remarks that gave offence the most damaging was that he had declared that the division of the past few years was 'in my opinion, the work of the Devil, who had caused it and was using it for his own purposes.'³⁰ The reference to 'the Devil' was taken to be a slur against the Free Church, or S.W. Baker, or even the King himself. The fragile peace was disrupted. Although Brown did his best to reassure the Free Church that he had been misunderstood, there was little sign that things were improving. As the months went by it seemed to Brown that although Baker and Watkin made promises of easing the limitations on the remnant Wesleyans there was no action. Brown began to despair that any reunion was possible and decided that the divided churches should make up their minds to 'work side by side in peace and harmony.'³¹

At the end of 1888 George Brown returned to Sydney to report to Conference. Lydia remained in Tonga, assuming that he would only be gone for a month or two. A family friend wrote admiringly of her as one who 'remains patient and steadfast at her post' as she had done in New Britain,

and she does this sort of thing after a quiet, matter-of-fact fashion, as if it involves no more self-sacrifice than an interview with the butcher and the selection of the daily joint. And when she comes home again she will just step into her vacant place as quietly as if she had only been visiting a neighbour round the corner of the street, instead of making a sacrifice which brings tears into strong men's eyes whenever they think about it.³²

28 Rutherford, *Shirley Baker and the King of Tonga*, p. 207.

29 Brown to G. Lane, 7 September 1888.

30 Brown, Australasian Wesleyan Methodist General Conference, *Report by the Rev. George Brown, Special Commissioner of the Australasian Wesleyan Methodist General Conference to Tonga*, First Report, December 1888, p. 6, Printed Sydney 1890 NLA N 287.09961 BRO.

31 *Weekly Advocate*, 1 December 1888.

32 *Spectator*, 4 January 1889.

They were not to know what that sacrifice would mean. By the time her husband had returned at last to Tonga in May 1889, Lydia knew that her first grandchild had been born to Amy, and had died days later on his great-grandfather Wallis' eightieth birthday.³³ She had been too far away to cradle the child or to comfort Amy.

For the early months of 1889, Brown travelled in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, speaking at church meetings about the scene in Tonga. With him on these public platforms were two of the exiled Wesleyans from Tonga, the Reverend Tevita Tonga and his wife Rachael. Tevita Tonga was one of the men most loyal to Moulton and to the original Wesleyan cause and his wife Rachael was a member of the Tongan nobility, intelligent and articulate. To colonial audiences, usually preoccupied with the continuing drought, the threats of commercial recession and debates about excluding Asians from the colonies, their stories were dramatic. They told tales of persecution, flogging, humiliation and exile as they tried to raise funds for the support of their troubled church. This disturbing news sped round the colonies and deepened antipathy toward the people of the Free Church and in particular toward the Reverend Shirley Waldemar Baker. At the time, it may have seemed a legitimate and reasonable approach. However, by the time Brown returned to Tonga in May 1889, he discovered the damage that had been done.

Days before Brown arrived back in Tonga, having visited the Tongan exiles at Koro in Fiji on his way, Baker sat down to write a letter from his Auckland home. 'Sir,' he began abruptly, dispensing with his usual friendly greeting to 'My dear Geo.'³⁴ He was feeling bitter and betrayed. Over the months he was becoming more and more isolated, under attack on all sides. Observers like the colonial officer Sir John Thurston noted the 'violent and often unwarranted hostility with which Mr Baker has been pursued by his opponents both clerical and lay,'³⁵ and Brown had told the President George Lane, 'We have to look at this sad affair from both sides ... both Mr Watkin and Mr Baker feel sore about some of the things which have been said and written about them in the colonies.'³⁶ But now even his trusted friend Brown was blackening his name in the colonies. Baker wrote,

I was very surprised and also grieved to find from the papers to hand from South Australia about your sayings and doings there relative to myself and especially to read a leader of the *Advertiser* dated March 29 1889 concluding with this remark. 'Of this we are sure should the Revd George Brown tell the tale in London which he has told in Adelaide and

33 Monica Brown's Birthday Book. James Wallis Dinning was born 15 April and died 18 April 1889.

34 S.W. Baker to Brown, 11 May 1889.

35 Rutherford, *Shirley Baker and the King of Tonga*, p. 161.

36 Brown to President Lane, 6 October 1888.

produce as his witnesses Mr and Mrs Tonga such a storm of feeling might speedily be raised as would not only render Mr Baker's residence in Tonga impossible but drive him to seek shelter for his dishonoured head in some corner of the planet where his name has never been heard.'³⁷

Baker charged Brown with 'being guilty of a most base, mean and dishonourable action and that you have been guilty of lying and acting a lie.'³⁸ Brown had not witnessed any of the events he was declaiming in the colonies, he argued, and Tevita and Rachael Tonga were unreliable witnesses. Baker was outraged at what he described as 'exaggerated statements made on the Wesleyan platform in the Colonies bringing tears from the eyes of the audience and squeezing money out of their pockets.'³⁹ The man with the pen felt cornered. In Tonga he was being blamed for the excesses of others, in fear for his life from enemies. Even the King, whom he had served loyally for so many years, seemed to be losing confidence in him. In the colonies his name was an anathema. Now even one of his oldest friends had betrayed him. In a passage that he would later regret, he concluded,

I should certainly have thought you who escaped a felon's cell at Suva because I was made your scapegoat—for it is well known the understanding between the officials of the British Government and Messrs Chapman and Hurst that if I were not sacrificed and recalled you would not escape, but if I were recalled you would be let go free on the charge of having murdered the innocent women and children of New Ireland in your murderous raid made upon them—would have acted more honourably to an absent friend but I was fool to think that in your desire to raise money you would ever think of the injury you were doing to the character of an absent friend. I am, Sir, your obedient servant, Shirley W. Baker.⁴⁰

Copies were made of this letter and sent to key leaders in the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Australasia. Brown saw the original later in May. The war of letters had begun.

Once, they had been friends. Now every word scratched onto paper was loaded with hurt and disappointment. In a first response Brown told Baker,

I only wish to remind you that for years I, with some others, have endured much pain in my endeavours to present your conduct to the

37 S.W. Baker to Brown, 11 May 1889.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*

Conferences in the most favourable light.... I had good hopes that the wrongs which our people suffer would be removed. I endeavoured in every way possible to work with you and through you.⁴¹

In a private letter to his cousin Tom Buddle in Auckland seeking legal advice, Brown wrote, 'You will be astonished at the calmness of my reply.... I have been astonished at it myself. Had I consulted my own feelings and inclinations I would have gone down and horsewhipped him in the streets but I kept my soul in patience from the sheer contempt which I feel for the fellow.'⁴²

Did he have a strong case to sue for substantial damages for libel, he asked Buddle. In a very long letter of self-justification to the President General he listed again all the problems in Tonga and defended himself against the attacks of Baker. If anything, he insisted, he had been too gentle with Baker and 'the White residents were openly saying "Mr Brown might as well have stayed in Sydney"' and some of our people were disposed to think that they were going to be handed over to Mr Baker whether they wished it or not.' Now Baker had no good word to say for him, even mentioning his 'carrotty beard' as if ginger whiskers were a sign of ill will.⁴³ It was clear that Brown was no longer in the mood for conciliation.

The remaining months in Tonga until they left in September 1889 were frustrating. Brown was an angry man and now was sure that he was wasting his time. Baker had said that he was unwilling to take any action to facilitate the union of the two churches as long as Brown remained in Tonga. Brown had caused offence in several settings, inadvertently or otherwise; a letter addressed to King George Tupou critical of Baker's influence was seen as insulting. He had achieved neither a reunion nor an honourable withdrawal of the Wesleyans. The continuing irritation of having competing congregations worshipping almost side by side in the same village was causing petty complaints about disputed property, loud singing and noisy prayer meetings. His dreams of promoting a New Mission in the Solomon Islands were being smothered under the weight of curt letters, sharp conversations and threats of legal action. There was no longer the violence in Tonga of earlier years, but a visitor observed that the local people 'had lost heart, somewhere or somehow.'⁴⁴ It was some small comfort to know that the British authorities in Fiji disputed Baker's accusation of collusion between colonial officials and church leaders over the New Britain affair of

41 Brown to Baker, 1 June 1889.

42 Brown to Thomas Buddle Jr., 17 June 1889.

43 Brown to J.C. Symons, 19 June 1889.

44 'A Journalist on Tongan Affairs,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, reprinted in the *Weekly Advocate*, 6 April 1889.

1879. Sir John Thurston described it as being, 'without foundation in fact ... is mendacious and slanderous in the highest degree, whether as regards yourself or such officers.'⁴⁵

It was as well that George Brown had his wife Lydia beside him through this time. On occasions, he had said that 'a canoe needs an outrigger' and a missionary needs a wife to give needed balance and stability. He spoke with feeling, knowing that without Lydia he would be in danger of being capsized in the dangerous seas of conflict. Lydia's chief responsibility from May 1889 until late that year was the care of her husband. Her man with the carrotty beard, now greying, was not a happy man and often in pain with rheumatism. He felt constrained by the small scale of the islands of Tonga when there was a whole world beyond.

The end came quickly in September 1889. A formal approach by Brown asking for a meeting with the leaders of the Free Church to attempt to work out a plan for reconciliation was met with a reply in the form of a Minute from the Free Church Conference. It stated baldly,

That no further communication will take place between the Free Church of Tonga and the Rev. G. Brown, Special Commissioner of the General Conference in connection with church matters, owing to the action taken by the Rev G. Brown during his deputation tour through the Australian colonies and also on account of the irritating letter he wrote to his Majesty the King of Tonga on the 6th June 1889.⁴⁶

Within days, Baker tried to apologise for his savage letter that had referred to a 'felon's cell'; 'I beg leave to apologise for said letter and withdraw the same.'⁴⁷ Brown wasn't having it. He shot a reply straight back. He was pleased to see the apology but was not willing to accept the withdrawal of the letter without time to consider the implications.⁴⁸ Lydia was not there to offer any wisdom; she had just heard news of the serious illness of her father and left immediately with the mail steamer *Wainui* for New Zealand. Brown planned to leave on its next trip. He had already begun his very long and detailed report. He had never had very high expectations of success and would conclude his report, 'I am sorry that I have not been able to secure the "honourable and lasting union of the two Churches", but trust that something has been done towards the conservation of our work, and the promotion of the welfare of the Tongan people.'⁴⁹

45 J.B. Thurston to Brown, 9 September 1889, from Fiji. Enclosures included an official communication by HE Sir Arthur Gordon on 12 November 1879 and an extract from the *Fiji Times*, 15 November 1879.

46 J.B. Watkin to Brown, 9 September 1889.

47 Baker to Brown, 11 September 1889.

48 Ibid.

49 Brown, Australasian Wesleyan Methodist General Conference, *Report by the Rev. George Brown, Special Commissioner of the Australasian Wesleyan Methodist General Conference to Tonga*, 1890.

He was not sorry to leave. He had told the Wesleyans that he may or may not return in 1890, but he knew that he now had a perfect opportunity to escape the confines of Tonga. An invitation had come to the Board of Missions, with the possibility of a fresh beginning in a new region. The only disappointment was that it seemed that the Solomon Islands would have to wait.