14. ‘The other end of the telescope’

Australasia, British New Guinea, Tonga, Samoa 1890

The map spread before him. The islands of the western Pacific Ocean were studded against blue; the familiar names of Fiji, Rotuma, Samoa and Tonga, the less known New Caledonia and New Hebrides, his old home in the cluster with New Britain and New Ireland and the long chain of the Solomon Islands where he had imagined another New Mission. Lying just south of the equator was the great dragon shape of New Guinea trailing a wide scattering of smaller islands behind its long tail to the east. George Brown had rarely imagined New Guinea as a site for a new Wesleyan Methodist mission. Old friends from the Samoan years, London Missionary Society (LMS) men W.G. Lawes and James Chalmers had begun work on the southern coast of New Guinea in 1874 and 1877, following the first islander pioneers, and the last thing he wanted was a repetition of conflict between the LMS and the Wesleyans in Samoa. With the echo still in his ears of Tongan congregations in the same village trying to out sing each other, Brown wanted to avoid competition between missions and churches.

Now a direct invitation offered another possibility. The Governor of British New Guinea was inviting the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) to consider beginning a new work in his region. Invisible across the map were recent lines of demarcation. Colonial powers—British, German, Dutch and French—had marked out regions now under their authority. One such region was British New Guinea, the south-eastern section of the great island with the small eastern islands first charted a hundred years earlier by the Frenchman Bruny D’Entrecasteaux and his compatriot Louis De Bougainville. Sir William Macgregor was the Governor of the newly annexed dependency in his first appointment in the role. George Brown had met Macgregor at intervals since the younger man, a Scot and doctor, first arrived in Fiji in 1875. Macgregor had observed the work of the Wesleyan Methodist Mission in Fiji. Since his appointment as the first administrator of British New Guinea in 1887, Macgregor had faced the daunting task of governance of the people of a thousand miles of coastline, hundreds of scattered islands and a mysterious and inaccessible inland. He believed that his governance would only be effective if there was a deep sympathy and intimacy with the indigenous people. In his years in the role he would resist significant establishment of British-owned plantations, create progressive labour laws, make it his business to travel widely across his
new and very raw community to establish the rule of law and encourage local people to maintain their traditional villages and agricultural practices.1 In 1889, however, as he considered a strategy for this task, it seemed to him that the work of missions could pave the way for his own goal, the work of ‘civilization’. It was clear that the London Missionary Society, despite being established in the area for years, was understaffed and with many deaths from disease among their workers, now had only one worker in the entire western region, ‘holding the fort with a single sentry’.2 Macgregor pictured having four separate missionary societies—the London Missionary Society, the Catholic Sacred Heart Mission, the Australian Board of Missions of the Anglican Church and the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society—each taking responsibility for a designated region, and he wrote ‘I may be able to see our long line of savagery attacked simultaneously by the four missions. I am looking forward to this.’3

Before George Brown left Tonga late in 1889, he knew of the invitation. He also knew that if the Methodists declined Macgregor’s offer, then the Governor had said ‘some other Church will be asked to do so.’4 Macgregor was interested in recruiting any reliable missionary organisation and had no special commitment to the Methodists. Brown, in his role as General Secretary, was enthusiastic. It was not the Solomon Islands as he had imagined, but it was an open door—and it was British. After the frustration and confinement of the Tongan experience, any new opportunity was appealing. Compared to the expanse of British New Guinea on the map, the Friendly Islands of Tonga were mere specks on the ocean.

It was one thing to imagine a new Mission. Before a New Mission in British New Guinea could become a reality, the men who made the decisions through the colonial conferences would have to agree to it. From the time he left Tonga in late September 1889 until the New South Wales Conference in late January 1890, Brown travelled at a relentless pace—New Zealand, Fiji, New South Wales, Melbourne, by train, ship and coach—speaking about Tonga, New Britain and now the new possibility in British New Guinea. By the time the Wesleyan Methodists of New South Wales met in the heat of summer for their annual Conference, a major debate considered whether or not regular attendance at the traditional Methodist Class Meeting was an essential element of Methodist membership, or whether a new flexibility could be allowed; Brown was so rarely at home that he risked being cut off the membership roll if they kept their own rule. His focus was on promoting the New Mission rather that church polity. Despite the warnings of some who foresaw increasing instability in the

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2 ‘Notes from New Guinea,’ in *Weekly Advocate*, 29 March 1890.
4 *Weekly Advocate*, 7 September 1889.
economic climate and suggested that they should withdraw from one of their older mission fields in order to begin something new, the decision was made to recommend to General Conference that the invitation from Macgregor should be accepted.\(^5\)

If he was honest with himself, George Brown must have seen the invitation to British New Guinea as a dignified escape route from the frustrations and stagnation of Tonga. Yes, it would offer the gospel of Jesus to people who had never heard that name. Yes, it would build fine cooperation with the British administration with the encouragement of Sir William Macgregor who expected ‘very valuable results from a religious, political and commercial point of view’.\(^6\) It would also be a fresh task with purpose after the failures of his efforts in Tonga. There was still no escaping the problems of Tonga. The Sydney Wesleyan Methodists were still smarting over a sense of betrayal that a Church they had nurtured now wanted to separate from them; one wrote, ‘Our foes were they of our own household. Serpents nurtured in our bosom have bitten us.’\(^7\) Further troubled debate about Tonga consumed the people at Conference. The details of that debate, with the full text of a sequence of letters exchanged between High Commissioner Sir John Thurston and Shirley Waldemar Baker, were published in both the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the Methodist *Weekly Advocate*, spreading all the mess and muddle of failed relationships, accusations of libel, self-justification and stiff apologies before the public gaze.\(^8\) It was not edifying. Conference did not believe that Brown had completed his task in Tonga, despite his fifty-page report, and directed him to go back to Tonga as soon as possible. They hoped that his visit would coincide with a visit to Tonga by the High Commissioner. By the end of March 1890 Brown was back in Tongatapu. The trip proved to be a waste of time. Nothing had changed. The exiles were still refused the right to return home. Freedom of worship was still restricted. Distrust, unease and rumour plagued the general society. When Brown discovered that High Commissioner Thurston was not due in Tonga until late May, he left Tonga again, unsatisfied, and arrived back in Sydney on 8 May. The meetings of General Conference had just begun.

Not for the first time, George Brown found himself a focus of controversy among his colleagues from the colonies of Australasia. Some supported his actions in Tonga and others believed that he had made some serious blunders. The men from Victoria were particularly critical. Far from building a climate of reconciliation, they said, Brown’s public meetings in Victoria with the dramatic witness of Tevita and Rachael Tonga had just made matters worse, and his letter to the

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\(^5\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 January 1890 and 7 February 1890.

\(^6\) *Weekly Advocate*, 19 April 1890.

\(^7\) *Weekly Advocate*, 18 January 1890.

\(^8\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 February 1890, 6 February 1890; *Weekly Advocate*, 24 May 1890.
King had been very unwise. They strongly opposed the suggestion that the Conference request Thurston to use his influence in the matter, on the grounds that it was a mistake to ask the State to sort out problems for which the Church should take responsibility. Brown urged them to ask for Thurston’s mediation; another direct approach to King George Tupou was unlikely to help, he said, as ‘Mr Baker was the King of Tonga, Upper House, Lower House and everything else.’ It was a very uncomfortable debate for Brown. As well as questioning his actions in Tonga, the discussion moved to suggesting that someone other than Brown should be appointed as Special Commissioner to Tonga. Brown responded with some irritation. He had not expected the appointment to continue, he said, nor desired to be reappointed for another year. He went on, ‘He would prefer to see someone else appointed. He had had to bear a great deal in connection with the work in Tonga…. He did not wish for the position and he hoped the conference would make other arrangements.’

He could have saved his breath. The meeting immediately voted to appoint him once again as both General Secretary of Missions and Special Commissioner to Tonga, with a vote of thanks and much applause. Perhaps he took himself off home to grumble privately to Lydia. At least they had agreed to ask for the intervention of the High Commissioner.

Two days later George Brown was back in the conference spotlight. Having made his report on the general state of their missions in the established regions, he put to the gathering the invitation to British New Guinea, with the support of several colonial Conferences. Macgregor, he said, spoke of a region of four hundred islands almost untouched by Christian missionaries, with an intelligent island people, skilled builders and gardeners who would make ‘good subjects of the Government if their rights are respected.’ Brown knew that the people in the colonies were concerned about local issues; drought and recent flooding in Queensland, industrial unrest, threats of strike action, miners and shearsers and waterside workers in tension with employers, the hazards of land speculation and rumours of the insecurity of the banking system. Some debated the possibility of a federation of the colonies across Australia. Brown’s focus was to the north and east. He told the gathering that he understood why they might hesitate at this time, but, ‘in the face of the most prudential reasons the Church has sent, and will continue to send, abroad the messengers of light and peace to every dark and peace-less spot of God’s earth.’

There was almost no debate. Brown’s friend Lorimer Fison moved that they agree with the Board’s plan and that Brown be sent to discuss it with Macgregor

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9 Weekly Advocate, 17 May 1890.
10 Ibid.
11 Weekly Advocate, 29 March 1890, quoting Sir William Macgregor.
12 Editorial, Weekly Advocate, 19 April 1890.
in Port Moresby. They members agreed with the new vision and immediately began to promise funds from their own resources. They also decided to establish a missionary magazine to report on the new venture. Even as they were riding this wave of enthusiasm an urgent message came. Governor Macgregor planned to sail to the eastern islands within weeks. If Brown could reach Port Moresby in time he could travel with him to see the proposed region for the New Mission.

George Brown had been home for only a week since his Tonga trip before Lydia was packing his tropical whites again. Port Moresby was so far away and they both knew how long the journey might take. This time, armed with his photographic equipment, he rushed to take advantage of the recent railway link with Brisbane, catching the express train north, then sailing by steamship to Cooktown and on with SS Hygea to Port Moresby. His wife saw him go with the old gleam of excitement in his eyes as he headed for uncharted territory. She would have to wait and hope, praying that his enthusiasm would not outstrip his strength and health, but knowing her man, she knew that he was now being set free to do what he loved best. As he travelled north, some friends urged Methodists in the colonies of New Zealand and Australia to pray for Brown. They wrote:

George Brown is something more and something better than a fearless, ready, steadfast man. The lion heart in him is as soft as the heart of a child. It is full of the tenderest sympathy … which has won him the respect and affection alike of chief and serf among the Natives, of men of high places among ourselves, as well as the veriest beachcomber in the islands of the sea…. He could not do a mean thing to save his life, and he does great things without thinking them to be great. There are men who do little things and magnify them; George Brown looks at his doings through the other end of the telescope.

Travelling north in haste hoping to catch the Governor, Brown may have pondered why he was making this effort. Some would say that he was a restless empire builder, seeking new worlds to conquer, for the thrill of exploration. Some might say he was escaping from the challenges of Tonga and the limits of an office desk in Sydney. There was some truth in all of those impressions. Yet at heart he was a man who was a missionary, who saw the possibility of transformation in the most unlikely people and their communities. He did not preach a message of hellfire and damnation. In later life he would recall his own

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13 Weekly Advocate, 17 May 1890.
14 Ibid. Mrs Ellen Schofield sent an immediate letter with an initial donation of £500 with further gifts to be made annually. Ebenezer Vickery urged four friends to match his offer of £250 immediately and £100 per annum for five years.
15 New Zealand Methodist, 21 June 1890; statements by the Reverends Rainsford Bavin of New Zealand and Lorimer Fison of Melbourne.
experience of coming to faith as a young man in Auckland and discovering ‘the pardoning love of God … new life, new thoughts, new desires, and a new purpose in life.’

As a man who had boundless affection for most of his fellow human beings, his understanding of God was as a God of love. He once wrote to his young daughters in New Zealand:

I hope my dear girls that you will read your Bibles carefully and form your own opinion about God’s character and God’s dealings with us as individuals as well as communities. Take for the very foundation of your opinion that blessed truth that God is love and be assured that any doctrine that anyone may preach that is inconsistent with or irreconcilable with that must be false.… When I was a boy the plan was to frighten children into being good or to pretend to be so by the fear of hell.

Before he began his work in the Duke of York Islands in 1875 he wrote of ‘bringing the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus, with all its privileges and blessings, and with the responsibilities which it entails upon those who receive it.’ The changes which he dreamed of seeing were not only the individual responses, but also a transformation that might re-shape a community. His thoughts, when making first contact with the people of a village on New Ireland, were that ‘the reception of the religion of Jesus will soon produce peace and order where now all is discord and confusion.’ Peace in place of conflict, safety in place of danger, kindness in place of cruelty, calm in place of fear, mutual respect in place of distrust; these hopes fitted well with Macgregor’s goal of civilisation. Brown had witnessed other societies that had been transformed. He believed that it could happen again.

He was not too late, after all. The Hygea arrived in harbour in Port Moresby on 9 June 1890. His arrival was timely. The Governor had not yet left on his tour, and the key players for a discussion of future mission work in British New Guinea were all now in Port Moresby. Compared with the size and comparative flatness of the island of Tongatabu in the Friendly Islands, this was a very different land with some ninety thousand square miles as well as four hundred offshore islands. Beyond the smooth steepness of hills rising from the waters of the port towered range upon range of mountains to the horizon and to east and west as far as the eye could see. Marine villages fringed the shore, delicately poised

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19 Ibid., p. 136.
on stilts over the water and, on the hillsides the glint of sun on corrugated iron roofing marked the houses of the few Europeans. Old friends London Missionary Society missionaries, the Reverend William G. Lawes and Mrs Fanny Lawes, welcomed him. They had all been together as young newlyweds and raw missionaries in Samoa from 1861. Brown met the Reverend Albert Maclaren, representative of the Anglican New Guinea Mission, as well as new LMS men, F.W. Walker and H.M. Dauncey, and was disappointed that another old LMS friend, James Chalmers, affectionately known as Tamate, was not in Port Moresby at the time. For the first few days they enjoyed each other’s company, hiked in the bush, picnicked on the beach, visited local village communities and worshipped in both the tiny ‘English’ church and with village congregations. Brown was busy taking photographs as he was fascinated with the people and distinctive architecture of the place.

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In the sticky heat of the governor’s residence in Port Moresby on 17 June 1890, with his guests gathered round a wide map of the land, Governor William Macgregor laid out his plan. Around the table were Lawes, Walker and Dauncey of the London Missionary Society, Anglican Albert Maclaren of the Australian Board of Missions and George Brown of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society. Significantly, the leader of the fourth mission in British New Guinea was not there. Bishop Henry Stanislaus Verjus of the Catholic Sacred Heart Mission declined the invitation to join them in any kind of comity agreement. He believed that as the Catholic Church was the ‘true Church of God’, any concept of spheres of influence would divest her of her right to teach all men.\(^{20}\) The Sacred Heart missionaries had begun their work at Yule Island and Mekeo to the west of Port Moresby in 1885,\(^{21}\) following the LMS who had been in the region since the arrival of the first Rarotongan workers in 1873. Macgregor knew that he was dealing with men of strong character and would describe all the leaders of the four missions at the time as ‘remarkable men’.\(^{22}\) George Brown was the oldest present, a fifty-four-year-old explorer, scientist and church leader. Lawes was a fifty-year-old missionary scholar, translator, teacher and wise leader, with long experience in Samoa, Niue and New Guinea. Maclaren was a fellow Englishman in his late thirties, new to New Guinea—a godly and ascetic High Church man with a powerful sense of call and Christian duty. The absent leader, Bishop Henri Verjus, was the youngest of the quartet, an Italian-born thirty-year-old who had struggled against great obstacles to establish a Catholic Mission in British New Guinea, known for his passionate desire to see the conversion of the

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20 Joyce, Sir William Macgregor, p. 173.
22 Sir William Macgregor, Address given to the London Missionary Society Centenary Meeting, Edinburgh, 11 March 1895, NLA PETH pam 2450.
villagers, sometimes expressed as being ‘avid for martyrdom’. As a Christian
man himself, Macgregor respected and understood the work of the missions.
His role was to govern a society that was spread along more than a thousand
miles of coastline, divided, isolated, often brutal, and at risk from unscrupulous
labour recruiters. A few years later he would tell an audience in Edinburgh
that he believed that ‘missionary work is a most important aid to Government
work … the principles of Christianity are taught by them all, and this supplies
the groundwork on which the armed constable and the village policeman can
operate with special advantage.’

It was as well that the men representing their missions had already established
friendly relationships. They were all aware that over previous months there had
been some awkward misunderstandings among them. As each mission had had
very little contact with the others, each had made assumptions about their future
areas of influence. Now it became clear that all three Protestant missions had
presumed that they would be working in some of the same areas, even though
‘no rights of any kind have been acquired by either Church’. Maclaren, for
example, had written to a friend in disappointment, ‘My object in coming over
to New Guinea is to see Sir William Macgregor with reference to our mission,
and I am sorry to find that the Wesleyans have taken possession of our centre
of work, so that we shall have to seek a new field…. Now we shall have to go to
the mainland.’ The spectre of the unseemly and debilitating brawls between
missions in Samoa frightened them. On no account could they risk putting any
of their mission enterprises in that situation in the future. For the sake of the
people of the place compromises were worked out. The task was so vast that no
single missionary body could hope to cover the whole country, even if they had
great resources of men and money. None of them did.

The record of their gathering began: ‘We regret the misunderstanding that
has arisen with respect to the field of labour to be occupied by the respective
Societies,’ and went on to outline the detail of how the misunderstandings had
occurred and the proposed new boundaries for the work of each group ‘so as to
use to the best advantage for the native population the force available for mission
purposes, and to prevent as far as possible further complications re missionary
boundaries.’ Macgregor insisted that government policy demanded that in any

23 Garrett, To Live Among the Stars, pp. 238–42.
24 Macgregor, Address given to the London Missionary Society Centenary Meeting, Edinburgh 11 March
1895.
25 Weekly Advocate, 21 December 1889.
26 Albert Maclaren, letter written 26 February 1890, quoted in Frances M. Synge, Albert Maclaren, Pioneer
Foreign Parts, 1908.
27 Minutes of the meeting of 17 June 1890, Port Moresby, quoted in Brown, George Brown: Pioneer-
Missionary and Explorer, p. 468.
28 Ibid.
one village only one grant of land for a church would be given. With recent memories of the crowding of church buildings in Tonga, with dueling prayer meetings, Brown was glad to hear it. The decisions of that day, decided among friends and confirmed by the respective mission boards, would set a pattern of denominational allegiances that continue into the twenty-first century in those regions of contemporary Papua New Guinea.

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To his great delight, Brown was invited to travel with the Governor and his new Anglican friend Albert Maclaren on the government steamship Merrie England to see for themselves the districts marked out for them on a map. They left Port Moresby on 23 June 1890, steering east. Brown was in his element. He was seeing new places and people, tramping with mates through unfamiliar territory, searching for new birds and shells, teasing children by dragging his dentures out. He captured photographic images of proud people adorned with shell, bone and tattoo who gazed steadily at the strange figure under the black cloth. With Macgregor he discussed their mutual enthusiasm for botany, geology, politics, map-making and languages; with Maclaren he shared thoughts about their future mission and theology, and with ship’s captain, government officers and a travelling naturalist discussed everything under the sun. Macgregor’s main aim for the journey was to survey the region and to bring justice to those who thought they could escape the law because of isolation. The Merrie England sailed in a great sweep across seas where Brown had never been. From the tiny island of Samarai they sailed east through the islands of the Louisiade Archipelago, north to isolated Woodlark, west to the Trobriands and south again through the larger islands of the d’Entrecasteaux group. In every place Brown observed everything and kept detailed notes. In many places it seemed that the Merrie England and its party were among the first Europeans to contact the islanders. Brown noted that the area ‘was said to be very unhealthy, but it is certainly very beautiful.’

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Beautiful or not, even after five weeks of travel Brown was still not satisfied that he had found the place best suited for their first mission in the area. Macgregor left him with the ship *Hygea* to explore the D’Entrecasteaux Islands more closely, while the governor took Maclaren in the *Merrie England* along the north-east coast of the mainland to see his proposed region for work. On a very hot day Brown took the ship’s boat and with a crew rowed towards a small island that lay between two much larger islands. He had been warned by Macgregor that the people there were known to be treacherous, indeed ‘among the worst’ he knew in the whole country, and to be careful. With his usual disregard for such warnings, Brown landed. A crowd of people came out to stare at the strangers. Rather than adding his skull to the collections he saw in neat rows outside some of their houses, they seemed quite friendly, and escorted him to several well populated villages; the crowd of onlookers following like a long trail of particles attracted to a magnet. This island seemed to him to have everything he needed; a location within reach of other major islands, a large population, fertile land and a people who seemed prepared to welcome him. The model of establishing a new mission on a strategic small island as a bridgehead to larger populations
was a familiar one.\textsuperscript{30} The island of Dobu, between Goodenough and Fergusson Islands, would be the new centre for the Wesleyan Methodist Mission. It was 4 August 1890, almost exactly fifteen years since he had first landed in the Duke of York Islands.\textsuperscript{31}

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Lydia Brown may well have been thankful that her husband was thousands of miles away when she heard the latest news from Tonga. Shirley Waldemar Baker had been deported. British High Commissioner Sir John Thurston had travelled to Tonga, assessed the situation, made a decision and sent Baker on his way. Lydia missed her husband, but was sure that it was best that he was busy elsewhere when Thurston arrived in Tonga. The questions surrounding affairs in Tonga had gone far beyond the internal wrangling of a fractured Church. Thurston had jurisdiction only over British residents, but the entanglement of local politics, the authority of the King, ancient Tongan clan loyalties and divisions, international trade and finance, and the relationship of this island kingdom to colonial powers had become knotted together in the person of Premier Baker. Was his influence benign and helpful for the good governance of the Friendly Islands, or not? The relationship between Baker and the remnant of Wesleyans was only one part of a greater whole. Thurston arrived in Tonga on 25 June 1890. He met with deputations of leading Tongan chiefs, traders, government officials, church leaders from the Free Church, Wesleyan Church and Catholic Church, and with the King and his relatives. From every part of the community he heard consistent stories of serious criticism and dissatisfaction with the Premier. Secular affairs had been mismanaged. Promises had not been kept. Freedom had not been permitted. Advice had been suspect. Confidence was lost. Divisions had been deepened. Although for twenty years Baker had provided advice to the King and promoted the independence of the island kingdom, the relationship between Premier and aged King was now tainted, and the whole edifice of government was teetering on the verge of collapse. What had once been valuable to the kingdom had been lost. Thurston found that the King had just dismissed Baker as Premier, willingly or under pressure from others. A group of chiefs voluntarily made sworn statements that ‘Mr Baker was the sole cause of the trouble, poverty, and wretchedness in Tonga, and that great disturbance would arise if he remained: they therefore begged his Excellency to take him away at once.’\textsuperscript{32} Now, in the light of all the evidence, Thurston told the Colonial Office ‘that the Premier, both feared and hated, was

\textsuperscript{30} Examples include: Manono between Upolu and Savai’i in Samoa; Duke of York Island in the channel between the more populated New Britain and New Ireland; Nusa Duwa Island off Munda on the island of New Georgia in the Solomon Islands.


\textsuperscript{32} Letters from E.E. Crosby, J.A. Bowring describing events in Tonga between 25 June and 5 July, in the \textit{Weekly Advocate}, 9 August 1890.
unworthy of longer credit or confidence…. I felt that Mr Baker’s presence was unquestionably dangerous to the peace and good order of the islands.” 33 On 5 July, Thurston told Baker that he was to leave Tonga for two years under a Pacific Order in Council as a British subject whose presence in the region was dangerous to peace and order. Baker sailed from Tonga on 17 July 1890, a humiliated and broken man. 34

Days later, unaware of distant events in Tonga, Brown returned to the little government island of Samarai where he rejoined Magregor and Maclaren. As they sailed back to Port Moresby, Brown told the Governor of his selection of a site for a New Mission and assured him that he would be able to bring all his long experience to the task of recruiting staff and raising funds. Both he and Maclaren were now ready to return to Australia to inspire their respective Churches with the vision, a daunting but exciting prospect. On their way south, when they landed in Cooktown in far north Queensland, a telegram was waiting for Brown. To his astonishment, he learned that dramatic changes had been happening in Tonga: Baker was gone, the King had granted full civil and religious rights to the Wesleyan people, and the Tongan exiles in Fiji and Tofua were on their way home. His attention was now divided between new opportunities and the possible resolution of a long-running difficulty.

Lydia Brown was warned. Before her husband landed in Sydney from British New Guinea on 29 August, she knew that the Wesleyans in Tonga, the High Commissioner and his church friends were all urging him to return to Tonga as soon as possible. The small German steamer Lübeck was in Sydney Harbour, due to sail for Tonga and Samoa within days. So Lydia made her preparations. George whirled into Sydney, rushed into the mission office for a few days, as always, grateful for the support in the home office of the Reverend Jabez B. Waterhouse, had hasty reunions with his family, learned that their married daughter Amy was pregnant again, checked and repacked his photographic equipment, arranged for his latest photographic images to be transferred into slides for projection, slept in his own bed for five nights after three months absence, and was away again when the Lübeck sailed on 4 September. This time Lydia sailed with him.

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It had not been planned. The voyage together lasted for only eight days. Even so, the passengers on the Lübeck discovered that they were in the company of a remarkable little group. George and Lydia Brown met fellow passengers

on board: the Reverend James and Mrs Lizzie Chalmers, who were travelling for Mrs Chalmers’ health; the Reverend Archibald Hunt and Mrs Hunt, also from the LMS and transferring from British New Guinea to Samoa, and the novelist Robert Louis Stevenson with his wife Fanny. Stevenson had bought a property in Samoa. The men were quickly attracted to each other. The older women, at first glance, had less in common: recently re-married widow Lizzie Chalmers was newly from England; unconventional divorcee Fanny Stevenson had been adventuring around the Pacific and the quiet Lydia Brown. Though their journeys had been very different, they soon learned that each had married an exceptional man, had lost children, had left adult children behind and had experienced life far beyond the limits of suburbia.

Stevenson and his wife had a rather cynical view of missionaries and churchmen in general, and may initially have been alarmed at the thought of spending this voyage with nowhere to escape from piety. However he would soon write to his mother,

Chalmers and Brown are pioneer missionaries, splendid men, with no humbug, plenty of courage, and the love of adventure: Brown the man who fought a battle with cannibals at New Britain, and was so squalled over by Exeter Hall…. Chalmers, a big stout wildish-looking man, iron-grey, with big bold black eyes…. I have become a terrible missionary of late days: very much interested in their work, errors and merits.  

Each of the men was a storyteller, in writing and speaking. Brown was still full of his latest adventure in British New Guinea and poured out tales with the bloom and gloss of a wonderful story told for the first time. The sparkle and colour of the islands shone, reflected in his eyes as he told of first contact and his dreams for the future. Even Lydia had not heard many of these stories before. As the storm buffeted the ship, the four couples met in the smoking room, usually reserved for gentlemen. Chalmers recalled, ‘We spent many happy hours in it with our new friends. Oh! The storytelling of that trip. Did that smoking room on any other trip ever hear so many yarns? Brown surpassed us all, and the gentle novelist did well.’

By the time the Lübeck reached Tonga, Stevenson had a proposal. He would like to write the story of Brown’s life. Brown must have been tempted. A book by the writer of Treasure Island and Kidnapped would surely publicise the work of mission. Regretfully, Brown declined; his work was so demanding that there was no free time to sit and be interviewed by a biographer. It is possible that he may have feared having his life magnified into something more akin to a novel, with himself as a pirate-cum-hero wielding a righteous sword against a cannibal

36 Lovett, James Chalmers, pp. 351–52.
foe, rather than himself as a fallible man stumbling through the perplexities of unknown cultures. The writer was disappointed, saying ‘Well, Brown, if we cannot do it now, we must just wait,’ but promised his writing gifts whenever the time was right.  

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Sitting cross-legged on woven mats, George Brown met with King George Tupou. They were on the verandah of his house on the Tongan island of Ha’apai. Lydia Brown was with them as they talked, and marvelled at the new ease and freedom of the conversation. The problem of the letter from Brown to the King that had given offence was now behind them. The exiles had returned home, humble in their most ragged mats, and the King was reconciled with his daughter who had been among them. The King told Brown that he had made it clear at a number of public meetings that the Kingdom of Tonga now had three recognised churches, the Free Church, the Wesleyan Church and the Catholic Church. There must, he insisted, be ‘perfect freedom of worship everywhere’ and the unholy division and conflict was to end. It was hard to realise that so recently there had been such bitterness and even physical violence between members of the churches. Many problems still remained to be solved. Questions of property and church land were still waiting for resolution and the hurt of damaged relationships was still tender. Yet it seemed that the remnant Wesleyan Church had survived the storm.

Brown’s two key preoccupations, the fragile Wesleyan Church in Tonga and the New Mission in British New Guinea, intersected through his photography. Most evenings after dark a sheet onto which he projected exotic images of New Guinea from his limelight lantern, was suspended between trees. The people were amazed and delighted and when an appeal was made for volunteers from the Wesleyan Church to serve in the New Mission there was a strong response. Six couples were chosen and Brown would write, ‘Our visit has cheered our people very much, and my lectures and views are making quite stir enough to convince the most sceptical that the Wesleyan Church in Tonga is not dead, but is very much alive.’ Even the King had no objections to the Wesleyans going to New Guinea and said, ‘Of course they can go! Who will hinder them? Let them please themselves!’

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40 Weekly Advocate, 29 November 1890.
41 Ibid., 8 November 1890.
42 Brown, quoted in the Weekly Advocate, 6 December 1890.
The plan was for George and Lydia Brown to leave Tonga in early November, visiting their old home of Samoa on the way back to Sydney. Although he was troubled with a painful rheumatic knee he rarely seemed to rest—attending meetings, working on correspondence and filling any spare moment with photography. He was brought to a sudden halt when, on the way home from a final District Meeting, the buggy in which he was riding accidentally overturned and he was thrown out. A badly sprained or broken ankle did not stop him from insisting on leaving Tonga as planned, however, and they sailed for Samoa on 12 November 1890.

Brown farewelled his Tongan friends with satisfaction even though there was disappointment. As far as he could see, he had completed the task as Special Commissioner but he had not brought true reconciliation to the fractured churches. The Wesleyan District Meeting had sent a message to the President of General Conference in gratitude for his work, saying “Truly, language fails us to set forth the momentous work your representative accomplished.” He knew, however, that he left behind him a church still split in two, with unresolved issues and a legacy of hurt and loss of trust. The Wesleyan Church had not been utterly crushed, but neither did the Free Church see a future where they would again be part of the world communion of Methodists. The damage to the people of Tonga had been great and would not easily be forgotten. So much of it need never have happened if only the original desire of the Church in Tonga for autonomy had been understood and accommodated by the leadership in distant Sydney. If only…. Years later he would write that, on reflection, ‘I always regard the work that I did in Tonga as the best which I have been able to do for the Methodist Church.’ He added a wistful note on what might have been, if his former friend Baker had made other choices before the whole edifice of his power and leadership in Tonga had crumbled into his sad exile, loss and disappointment, ‘He might have brought about the reunion of the Tongan Church, he could have secured for this united Church everything for which the Free Church contended, and he could, by a course of wise and conciliatory action, have rehabilitated himself to a considerable degree with the conference of our Church; but…’

* * *

Visiting Samoa together was a little like coming home. Just over thirty years earlier, in October 1860, a young redhead George with his slim little bride Lydia had left the small safety of the mission ship John Wesley and gone through the darkness to their Samoan home. Now in their fifties, George’s beard was

43 *Weekly Advocate*, 29 Nov 1890.
grey, Lydia was stouter and the old John Wesley had been wrecked years ago. Everywhere they went they were overwhelmed with memories. The grave of dear friend Barnabas ‘Ahongalu, the towering tamarind tree they had planted as a seedling, the low stone fence where once they had watched men carrying headless bodies during the days of war, the houses George had built. Lydia remembered where each of her older children had been delivered, swiftly or slowly and sometimes frighteningly, into the hands of their father, the rooms where they had taken their first steps and had their first lessons, the beaches where they had swum with Samoan children. Now other people lived in the houses, other voices called through the rooms, other women governed the households. Her babies were gone, grown to adulthood in another land. They travelled from village to village, memory to memory. At each place a procession of singing women came to welcome them with garlands of fragrant flowers, heaping gifts of food, fine woven mats and local tapa cloth at their feet. Curious children stared at these strangers and were told by their elders that these were indeed honoured old friends. Men made long orations in welcome and recalled past deeds, grown more dramatic in the telling.

By the final day of their triumphal tour around Savai‘i, Lydia was weary. At sunrise she clambered into the open mission boat with George. The oarsmen bent to their oars and she waved goodbye to the mission community who had gathered on the water’s edge at Saleaula. This had once been home, but was home no longer. Sixteen years ago she had been carried away from that same spot, with tears blurring her eyes and her children huddled around her, to be taken on board the mission ship to leave Samoa forever. She could still feel the wrenching hurt of that time and the pain of her husband as he left a place where he had worked so hard but where it seemed he was leaving under a cloud of criticism and personal conflict. At the time, even his dream of a New Mission had been uncertain. Now she was ready to go home to Sydney. From sunrise until after dark she sat with aching joints in the open whale boat riding over the unimaginable depths of the ocean.47 The renewed love of the Samoans had been a balm for old hurts and a reassurance that their work there had not been wasted. That night she agreed with George that she would return to Sydney by the next mail steamer while he went on to Fjji to recruit more new people for the new Mission.

Brown had been away from home almost all of 1890. Perhaps Lydia Brown imagined that the new year of 1891 might be different.

47 J.W. Collier, Letter to Editor, Samoa, Weekly Advocate, 3 January 1891.