

## 15. 'A doubtful experiment'

### **New South Wales, Victoria, British New Guinea, New Britain 1891**

Sitting at his own dinner table on New Year's Eve 1890, George Brown was a beloved visitor. He had missed Christmas at home yet again, this time at sea between Auckland and Sydney. Over the previous ten months he had spent a total of sixteen days in Sydney. That summer evening, the Brown family attended the traditional Wesleyan New Year's Eve Watchnight and Covenant Service at their local church at Randwick. This new year of 1891 was still a mystery for George Brown. All he knew was that his life must now take a new direction. The period of focus on Tonga was over. The New Mission in British New Guinea was ahead; he would administer this enterprise but another man would be the leader of the pioneer party. He imagined that he was likely to continue in the role of General Secretary of Foreign Missions. There was also a rumour that he would be a nominee for the next President of Conference in New South Wales and Queensland but in the past he had gleaned an embarrassingly meagre number of votes. It was true that some of his colleagues did not approve of him. As midnight approached on New Year's Eve, he heard the familiar words: 'Christ has many services to be done; some are easy, others are difficult; some bring honour, others bring reproach.... Yet the power to do all these things is assuredly given us by Christ, who strengthens us.'<sup>1</sup> With the voices of his friends and family around him, Brown joined the refrain in the familiar old words. 'I am no longer my own but Thine. Put me to what Thou wilt, rank me with whom Thou wilt....' All he knew was that the mysteries of 1891 were in God's hands.<sup>2</sup>

When the Board of Missions met in January for the first meeting of the year, there were conflicting emotions. There was enthusiasm about the New Mission and the recruitment of experienced missionary the Reverend William Bromilow to lead a large team of Fijian, Tongan and Samoan workers. On the other hand, realists among them were anxious about the timing of such a grand enterprise. The speculation of the boom years was beginning to collapse, banks were becoming increasingly nervous and strikes were crippling maritime and pastoral

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1 Rupert E. Davies, *Methodism*, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1963 p. 90. The 'Covenant Service' was instituted by John Wesley in Great Britain in the eighteenth century for the use of Methodists.

2 Ibid.

industries.<sup>3</sup> There was potential for advances in mission work, but Brown's trusted right-hand man in the mission office, the Reverend Jabez B. Waterhouse, was gravely ill. To Brown's grief, Waterhouse died a week later and Brown would have to face a complex year without his brotherly help.<sup>4</sup>

The rumours were increasing. It was hinted publicly that one of the candidates for the role of President of Conference was a missionary 'whose name is today familiar as a household word throughout Australasia.'<sup>5</sup> This posed a dilemma for both George and Lydia Brown. As he had not taken seriously the idea that he might be elected, he had accepted an invitation to travel to Melbourne during the period of Conference to speak at a fundraising event in support of the New Mission.<sup>6</sup> Lydia was also torn. Her daughter Amy was due to give birth in the New South Wales country town of Oberon where her husband Benjamin Dinning was the Methodist minister. Should Lydia travel to Oberon to help Amy, or be with George during the pressures of Conference? There is no evidence as to where Lydia Brown chose to be on 3 March 1891. On that day in Sydney, her husband George was elected by a large majority to the role of President of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference in New South Wales and Queensland for 1891 and her daughter Amy gave birth to a baby boy in Oberon about 124 miles away. Within a matter of days, George Brown had been relieved of his responsibilities in Tonga, made a rail journey to Melbourne and back. He became a grandfather and, in the words of an observer, he had 'gathered up the reins of the Methodist coach as one accustomed to the situation.'<sup>7</sup>

It had never been a foregone conclusion that Brown would one day take his seat as President of Conference. He had always known that there were mixed opinions about him. It was said,

An impression was abroad at one time that a life devoted to pioneer work as a missionary had so interfered with the acquirement of technical Methodist information and the development of a business faculty as to make Mr Brown's election to the Presidential chair a doubtful experiment. And there can be no doubt that this impression has delayed the honour which Mr Brown has long deserved, and which has at length been accorded him.<sup>8</sup>

However, before the weeks of Conference were over, it was warmly reported that Brown as the President of Conference 'has put to flight the fears of many, and has exceeded the expectations of others, by the exhibition of splendid business

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3 *Weekly Advocate*, 10 January 1891.

4 *Ibid.*, 7 February 1891.

5 *Ibid.*, 21 February 1891.

6 *Ibid.*, 14 March 1891.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

qualities in connection with the functions of his high office... [he has] insight into the nature of things, an accuracy of judgement, and a talent for smoothly accelerating the business of the Conference.'<sup>9</sup>

The Methodist coach did not accelerate at a great pace, it had to be admitted. The meetings ran for almost three weeks. After years of focus on issues of the communities of the islands of the Pacific, Brown found himself presiding over debate on many issues specific to New South Wales and Queensland.<sup>10</sup> A great deal of time was spent on issues of church property, with debate over leases, land purchases, debt on new buildings, trusts and regulations.<sup>11</sup> There was also debate on Local Option (the right for local regions to influence the practice of the liquor trade), the 'needless multiplication' of Protestant churches in thinly settled rural districts,<sup>12</sup> an enhanced role for the lay members of Conference, the increasing demand for an active role for women within the church, and the harsh reality of social unrest.

One task for the new President was to prepare a Pastoral Address. Underneath all the ordinary concerns of Methodist congregations was the knowledge that the world they were all living in was very unstable. For many it was a year of what Brown called 'great commercial trial'. While the Methodists were meeting in Sydney, in Queensland strike action by shearers was becoming increasingly violent; dissatisfied unionists were burning the Queensland Premier in effigy.<sup>13</sup> In his Pastoral Address Brown urged Methodists to be in sympathy with that movement which 'aims at securing by legitimate means truer social adjustments.'<sup>14</sup> While having no sympathy for violence and lawlessness, he acknowledged that

there is an element of unrest whose characteristics are in harmony with the principles of the Sermon on the Mount, which favours a more equal distribution of the good things of this life. It reminds us of the 'all things common' usage of the early Church. Millionaires and beggars cannot live side by side in a pure Christian atmosphere.... Let us not sacrifice men in the interests of material progress.... The Kingdom of Jesus must increase though material progress decrease.<sup>15</sup>

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9 Ibid.

10 The following year, in 1892, Queensland became a separate Conference, but in 1891 New South Wales and Queensland were a single Wesleyan Methodist Conference.

11 Minutes of the Australasian Wesleyan Methodist Conference of NSW and Queensland: 1891, ML 287.1/7 CY 1365.

12 *Weekly Advocate*, 21 March 1891.

13 Manning Clark, *Manning Clark's History of Australia*, abridged by Michael Cathcart, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993, p. 383.

14 George Brown, 'Pastoral address,' *Weekly Advocate*, 21 March 1891.

15 Ibid.

The voices of women were silent in Conference, as they had no representation there. However it was becoming very plain that women had voices and wanted to be heard. A Women's College had just been opened at the University of Sydney.<sup>16</sup> Women formed associations to work for fairer working hours for shop girls,<sup>17</sup> for the right to vote and in support of temperance. Women wanted better education and the opportunity to work and serve beyond their home. George Brown knew from experience in his own family the worth of educated women and the great worth of the role his own wife had played through years in missionary endeavour. In 1888, Brown had failed to persuade the church of the value of using the agency of both lay men and women in missionary service. By 1890 they were willing to explore the possibility of offering opportunities for 'the Christian zeal of our sisters in these southern lands',<sup>18</sup> although a request from New Britain for a woman worker was rejected. It was clear, however, that the climate of opinion was changing. Other missionary organisations were now employing single women, including Methodist women, and their own Central Methodist Mission in Sydney had recently employed women to visit prisons, the disadvantaged and the sick in the inner city. Younger people favoured the idea but more senior people were dubious. The church journal declared that it was a great pity that their own women had to seek a place to serve outside their own Church: 'Surely modern Methodism is capable of sufficient expansion and adaptation to give scope for the realisation of its ancient ideal, a work for everybody, and everybody at work!'<sup>19</sup>

George Brown assured the Conference that he believed that 'a large field for female missionary work was open to their Society ... New Britain and New Guinea offered practically unlimited scope for this particular kind of labour.'<sup>20</sup> Fearing that there was enough opposition to the concept to shut the door for women entirely, Brown proposed a convoluted process. He suggested that a Ladies' Auxiliary be established to raise funds for potential future work by women missionaries—and won the day with a unanimous vote in favour.<sup>21</sup> It was a first step.

During March 1891, while the Methodists were meeting in Sydney, another group of men was also in Sydney to debate a matter of great importance. Some of the most distinguished men from the colonies of Australasia had gathered for

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16 Clark, *Manning Clark's History*, p. 369.

17 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 February 1891.

18 Australasian Methodist Conference Minutes of New South Wales 1891, quoting General Conference Minutes for 1890, ML 287.1/7.

19 *Weekly Advocate*, 7 March 1891.

20 *Ibid.*, 21 March 1891.

21 *Ibid.*, 21 March 1891. W. Moore, J.E. Moulton and A.J. Small pointed out problems, but voted for the resolution. See the Australasian Methodist Conference Minutes of New South Wales 1891, ML 287.1/7.

the National Australasian Convention, working toward a potential federation.<sup>22</sup> Few of the Methodists had travelled as widely as Brown across the colonies of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and New Zealand and for years he had been arguing for common action and a common policy for defence. He had participated in a sequence of Wesleyan Methodist General Conferences, a version of colonial federation, where men from the various colonies made decisions about common goals. Aware of the Convention meeting nearby, the Methodists spoke of the 'supreme question of Australasian Federation', and declared that 'the coming week or two will give a colour and direction to the national life for years—perhaps centuries—to come.'<sup>23</sup> They were disappointed, however, by the secular nature of the Convention, and while they affirmed the concept of 'One People—One Destiny,' added that, 'It is none the less regrettable that there should be no public recognition of the Divine Being in the attempt to lay what we all hope will prove to be the foundations of a great and glorious Australian Dominion.'<sup>24</sup>

A message was sent from the Methodist Conference to the Convention, assuring them of the deep interest of their Church in the question of federation: 'We trust that under divine guidance you may be led to conclusions which will advance the best interests of Australasia.'<sup>25</sup> In the end, the Methodist Conference was long over and all their people had gone home before the Convention completed its work on a proposed draft for a federated Australia in mid-April. Even then any action on their thoughtful efforts would be delayed, obstructed and amended. Federation was still ten years in the future.<sup>26</sup>

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Once Conference was over, Brown needed to demonstrate that his election had not been a 'doubtful experiment'. As President for the year, he would be a member of many committees, preaching, visiting, writing and having special influence.<sup>27</sup> His preaching had a colourful turn of phrase. He startled one congregation by announcing that he was there to report the rumoured death of the Devil, but even if it proved true that the Devil was dead, he said, 'his extensive business was still carried on, with some branch concerns in the low parts of Sydney,'

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22 Zelman Cowen, 'Is it not time?' The National Australasian Convention of 1891, in Patricia Clarke, *Steps to Federation: Lectures Marking the Centenary of Federation*, Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2001, pp. 33–35.

23 *Weekly Advocate*, 28 February 1891.

24 *Ibid.*, 7 March 1891.

25 *Ibid.*, 14 March 1891.

26 Cowen, 'Is it not time?' in P. Clark, *Steps to Federation*, pp. 36–37.

27 During his Presidential year Brown was a member of, or chairman of, the following committees: Board of Missions, (Protection of) Privileges Committee, Examining Committee, Sunday School Union, Newington College Council, Ladies College Burwood Council, Provisional Theological Institution, Affiliated College Committee (with aim of establishing a College within University of Sydney), Centennial Thanksgiving Fund Committee, 'The Methodist' publication Committee.

that showed more ‘devildom’ than many remote mission regions.<sup>28</sup> Early in the year he moved up the city street from the offices at 415 into new premises at 381 George Street, in a prime city location almost opposite the new and elegant Strand Arcade.<sup>29</sup> The Mission Office had been given a fine room on the first floor overlooking the busy street, sharing the property with the large Book Depot, committee rooms and the office of the *Weekly Advocate*. This suited Brown well. For years he had been writing for the church journal and secular newspapers and now he planned to begin a new magazine to promote the latest New Mission, to be titled *The Australasian Missionary Review*. His written offerings may have been thought too generous; a Board Minute once instructed him to ‘read a brief extract’ of a long report to Conference, with the words ‘brief extract’ heavily underlined.<sup>30</sup>

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There was no shortage of stories for the church papers during May 1891. ‘The churches in this city have been fairly taken by storm,’ one wrote effusively, while there were excited references to ‘a Missionary Invasion’ and an ‘avalanche of gatherings’.<sup>31</sup> As well as other notable visitors and events, a large party of men and their families had arrived in Sydney on their way to pioneer the New Mission in British New Guinea. It was a time of intense activity in the Mission Office.

The pioneer missionary team was far larger and their departure was being orchestrated on a far grander scale than had been attempted before. A ship to take the party to the northern islands had to be chartered and staff finalised. A schooner, two whale boats and the pre-fabricated components of two houses, along with tools, trade goods and supplies had to be funded and purchased. About seventy islander men, women and children had to be accommodated for several weeks in the city and provided with warm clothes. The presence in Sydney of so many people from Tonga, Samoa and Fiji was a novelty, and at first a source of some amusement and condescension as they visited many congregations. Their singing, dancing and style of prayer charmed and intrigued those urban dwellers who had never visited the Pacific. Then a new respect began to grow. These people were intelligent, articulate, physically imposing men and women whose Christian faith was more authentic than that of many suburban church-goers.<sup>32</sup> They were willing to risk their lives for the gospel.

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28 Letter to the Editor, *Weekly Advocate*, 25 April 1891.

29 381 George Street was located between Market and King Streets. In an earlier period, the building had housed a photographic and artist’s studio.

30 Minutes of General Missions Committee of Australasian Conference of Wesleyan Methodist Church, 5 December 1888, ML MOM 2 CY354.

31 *Weekly Advocate*, 25 April, 10 May, 23 May 1891.

32 *Ibid.*, 16 May, 23 May 1891. ‘In a physical sense they are fine specimens of the *genus homo*, and we are glad to be able to say that their mental qualifications are equal to their physical development. They have delighted and impressed many of our city congregations.’ See *Weekly Advocate* 23 May 1891.

They were themselves vivid evidence of the change that was possible. If their own islands could hear and respond to a gospel of peace, grace and forgiveness, despite histories of violence and cruelty, could not the same happen in the islands of British New Guinea?

At one of the many special meetings where Brown and the islander men spoke, in the very large new Methodist Church at Waverley, the place was crowded. One Fijian speaker noticed that the building was lit by a number of chandeliers suspended from the high ceiling, some larger than others. One remained unlit. He spoke of the simple coconut oil and wick in a coconut shell used to light the houses in his home village and pointed with respect to the illumination of the chandeliers. He had been told, he said,

that the oil had been brought there in long pipes, and he pointed to where he supposed the hidden pipes might be. So the gospel had been brought to Fiji, and the unseen Spirit had supplied the oil for the true light that shone there. Then throwing himself forward and pointing straight to the large chandelier which was radiating its light all around, 'There' said he, 'that is England' and he pointed to some of the lesser lights, 'that is Sydney; that is Tonga; that is Fiji,' and then suddenly pointing to the unlit chandelier, 'There' said he, 'That is New Guinea!'<sup>33</sup>

Town-dwellers who came to be entertained and amused went home sobered and challenged. One wrote of how moved he had been to meet the island missionaries. 'I am not naturally emotional,' he wrote and added that he was determined to take practical action to support their work, on the scriptural grounds that faith without works was dead. 'Some Christians seek to fulfil the scripture by combining their faith with someone else's works.'<sup>34</sup>

For several weeks the island visitors were the talk of Sydney. A group photo of them all appeared in an illustrated newspaper.<sup>35</sup> They appeared in crowds in churches and city streets. Sixty of them descended on the Zoo in Moore Park, to be astonished at the bear pit and the elephants.<sup>36</sup> Two ferry loads of people sailed up the Parramatta River for a great picnic at Fern Bay, and a party of Samoans braved a tram ride to Randwick to visit Lydia Brown at her home, 'Kinawanua', where she greeted them in their own language. George Brown was able to go home in the evenings, but he was distracted with the many demands of final preparations for their journey. The enterprise was proving very costly. He knew that there was growing unease in the wider community as the impact of

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33 *Weekly Advocate*, 23 May 1891.

34 *Ibid.*, 10 May 1891.

35 *Town and Country Journal*, 23 May 1891, reference in *Weekly Advocate*, 30 May 1891.

36 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, July 1891. Sydney's first zoo was located in Moore Park between Anzac Parade and Cleveland Street.

financial calamities overseas and local strikes began to affect the economy; would the widespread financial woes leave this new missionary enterprise crippled by impossible debt? Lydia Brown did her best to provide a stable household to support him, and offered hospitality to islander and white missionary alike. She preferred the role of friend and mother to that of public figure. It is likely that William and Lilly Bromilow, with ten years mission experience in Fiji, as well as the other new missionaries, were guests in the Brown home during their weeks in Sydney. Brown had recently written that 'I think that no men are more brotherly than missionaries: and I know no men—or women either, for that matter—who can talk more or sit up longer to do it than old missionaries when they meet together in the Islands.'<sup>37</sup>



**Figure 16. Mission Team ready to leave for New Britain and British New Guinea 1891. Front: the Reverend W. Brown, Mrs W. Brown, Mrs Lilly Bromilow, the Reverend S. Fellows; Back: the Reverends J.T. Field, R.H. Rickard, George Brown, W.E. Bromilow, J. Watson and Mr Bardsley.**

Source: James Colwell, *Illustrated History of Methodism: Australia 1812–1855; New South Wales and Polynesia 1856–1902*, Sydney: William Brooks & Co., 1904, p. 418.

<sup>37</sup> *Weekly Advocate*, 21 February 1891.

At the Farewell service for the missionary party at the Centenary Hall on 18 May 1891, a close friend of the Browns, the Reverend Lorimer Fison, made a speech. Fison told the gathering that, 'the Mission party were a fine contingent, with a fine man (Bromilow) at their head, who had a fine woman at his head. There were some women specially made by God for missionaries' wives. Mrs Bromilow was one, George Brown had got hold of another, and he knew of a third [his wife].'<sup>38</sup>

Lydia Brown may have found it embarrassing to be singled out as being 'specially made by God' for a wife of a missionary. She knew, however, that her own background as the child of missionaries was unusual—'I lived among the Maoris [*sic*] as long as I could remember.'<sup>39</sup> Not every woman found this role natural or even possible. For some, only loyalty to their husband—and the practical impossibility of escape because of the isolation of their mission location—kept them there. More than one man had returned to Australia much earlier than expected because his wife was ill or very unhappy. When, a week later, Lydia said farewell to the missionary families as they boarded the *Lord of the Isles* on 27 May to sail for British New Guinea, she wondered if they understood what they were facing. This hopeful party was going to an alien place with a language they could not speak, with diseases they might not resist and to a people who had no reason to welcome them. Some of them would never see their homes again. Her husband was travelling with them, excited but already exhausted and unwell, anxious about everything that might go wrong. With prayers and tears, the ship pulled away from Moore's Wharf at last and voices blended from ship to wharf as they sang together, 'Jesus, Lover of my soul ... / Hide me, O my Saviour hide, / Till the storm of life is past; / Safe into the haven guide, / O receive my soul at last.'<sup>40</sup> Their last sight of the barquentine was its three masts standing proud as it disappeared toward the Sydney Heads and out of the harbour into the open ocean.

After the extreme activity of the previous few weeks, there was a sense of anticlimax. The Mission office 'seemed strangely silent ... the contrast between the bustle and confusion of the preceding three weeks and the now unnatural calm was very marked.'<sup>41</sup> An observer noted, after the ship had sailed, 'Such a large party has never before, to our knowledge, gone forth at one time to initiate an enterprise like this, and we pray that their success may be in proportion to their numbers.'<sup>42</sup>

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38 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 1 June 1891.

39 C. Brunson Fletcher, *The Black Knight of the Pacific*, Sydney: Australasian Publishing Co. Pty. Ltd., 1944, p. 65.

40 Charles Wesley, 'Jesu, Lover of my soul', 1707–1788.

41 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 1 June 1891.

42 *Ibid.*

After a rough voyage north, the *Lord of the Isles* reached at last their destination, the small island of Dobu between the larger islands of Normanby and Fergusson. As they approached on 19 June 1891, the wind dropped and they were becalmed within tantalising reach of their goal. It was a great relief when the government steamer *Merrie England* came into sight, with the Governor, Sir William Macgregor, and they were towed to a landing place. Macgregor had promised Brown 'You may depend on my doing all in my power to aid your people in every possible way.'<sup>43</sup> The Governor was in the area to investigate the murder of a Chinese trader in the region where the Methodists planned to go and reflected that 'it is a good thing that I shall be first at Dobu with a large force.'<sup>44</sup> Macgregor was understandably anxious about the wellbeing of this pioneer party and noted in his diary his concern for the families, particularly the young children among them, who had 'come to brave the unknown dangers of this new country of evil character and its actual hardships and dangers, all for Christ's sake! They have indeed a courage equal to the best.'<sup>45</sup>

Now they needed to negotiate for a place where they could settle. Macgregor was a key to the negotiations with the village leaders, requesting a particular site and allowing time for them to debate it. The presence and authority of the Governor was important as it was clear that both the Methodist and the Anglican missions were part of his strategy for the wider region. As soon as a site was negotiated, a period of intense work began while the *Lord of the Isles* was still in the area. Several men of the pioneer team had practical skills. Building material was unloaded and in steamy heat and torrential downpours they worked to build a secure place. Brown used the time to visit villages and meet local leaders, despite feeling ill. It was hard to guess whether acceptance of an alien presence by the local people was just a temporary mask while the Governor and his police were in their district. Noting his first impressions, he wrote,

The people are very friendly, and we never see arms, either in their canoes or in their villages. We have a grand district, with plenty of people and openings for Mission work on every side.... I am inclined to think too that we shall find a more suitable opening for female agents in these Groups, than we have in any of our older districts, but it is too early to speak positively about this.<sup>46</sup>

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43 Macgregor to Brown, 5 April 1891, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Correspondence and Papers, ML CY 1365.

44 Sir William Macgregor, 13 June 1891, Manuscript Diary, 14 November 1890–14 April 1892, NLA mfm G 23005.

45 Ibid.

46 George Brown, letter, 22–23 June 1891, published in the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 1 August 1891.

At dawn on 14 July 1891, Brown sailed on with *Lord of the Isles* to visit his old region of New Britain with new staff for that area. As they left the pioneer group behind, Brown recorded in his journal his relief that this great enterprise was safely begun.

I have been feeling very unwell lately, but this morning all sense of bodily weakness and pain seemed to leave me, as my heart was full of devout thanksgiving and gratitude to God for his great goodness to us all. I have felt deeply the great responsibility of this voyage, and have had many fears and much anxiety at times; but now I have no other feeling than great thankfulness.<sup>47</sup>

Far away, to the south, a small schooner the *Dove* sailed toward Dobu. The *Dove* was a new vessel for the use of the New Mission, paid for by many small donations from Methodist children around Australia. Lydia Brown almost had the honour of launching her, but the church philanthropist Mrs Ellen Schofield was the one who flung the bouquet of white flowers on their blue ribbon against the bow as she slid into the harbour.<sup>48</sup>

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For the first time in over ten years, George Brown sailed once more into the St George Channel. 'The change which has taken place here since the days when we landed is such as no stranger can possibly appreciate,' he wrote.<sup>49</sup> The region was now a German colony with German language and German place names; what he had known as New Britain was now Neu Pommern. In the place where once a handful of isolated traders had feared for their lives, plantations and substantial trading enterprises flourished. The Methodist missionaries had been joined by the Catholic missionaries of the Sacred Heart, who arrived in the area in 1882; this created a new set of challenges as the German Foreign Office had decreed that both Catholics and Methodists were free to work in the Gazelle Peninsular though in separate areas.<sup>50</sup> Brown's old friend, the Samoan-American woman, 'Queen Emma' Forsaythe, welcomed him to her grand establishment near the centre of German administration at Herbertshoe.<sup>51</sup> The area was almost unrecognisable. Children were in schools, people wore trade clothing, housing imitated that of the men from the South Seas, plantations replaced jungle and

47 George Brown, Journal, 14 July 1891, quoted in Brown, *George Brown: Pioneer-Missionary and Explorer: An Autobiography*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908, p. 493.

48 Methodist Mission Board Minutes, 15 June 1891; *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 1 August 1891. The *Dove* sailed for New Guinea on 4 July 1891.

49 Brown, Journal, 20 July–1 August 1891, published in the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 2 November 1891.

50 J.L. Whittaker, N.G. Gash, J.F. Hookey and J.R. Lacey (eds), *Documents and Readings in Papua New Guinea History (Pre-History to 1889)*, Milton, Queensland: Jacaranda Press, 1979.

51 R.W. Robson, *Queen Emma: The Samoan-American Girl who Founded an Empire in 19th Century New Guinea*, Sydney: Pacific Publications, 1965.

cannibalism was disappearing. More profoundly, there were other signs. It was not simply that communities had built churches and were going through the forms of Christian worship. Fear was being replaced by trust. Brown laughed with men who remembered the time when he first visited a village and was threatened with a spear; ‘nowadays they go without fear to places to which it needed a lot of persuasion and some bribing to get them to venture when I first visited them,’ Brown wrote.<sup>52</sup> Generosity was replacing avarice. Brown was deeply moved when a community brought gifts of chickens, sugarcane, yams and coconuts. He recorded, ‘If anyone had ventured to predict such a scene a few years ago, he would have been laughed at by all who knew these people, for the idea of present giving was one which was very far away from their customs ... [this was] a further proof of God’s truth to change the whole nature of men everywhere.’<sup>53</sup> Most satisfying of all the changes were signs that local people were taking leadership in this new Christian community. Men, like his old friend and fellow translator Peni Lelei, were as much pastors to their people as any of the Fijian or Tongan men.<sup>54</sup> This was truly becoming a church of the people of the place. If such changes were possible in New Britain, he believed, there was good hope for the future of the new work in the eastern islands of British New Guinea.

In all the memories stirred by his return to this region, the face of a younger Lydia was always there. Sitting in an open boat off New Britain alone with a local crew, soaked to the skin and uncomfortable, he recalled earlier times, and ‘could scarcely imagine that so many years had passed, and that I was not again a missionary, with my good wife waiting for me at Duke of York.’<sup>55</sup> Ten years after he had sailed from Port Hunter with Lydia in tears, he landed once more in the Duke of York Islands and climbed the hill to Kinawanua past the graves of his children. So many once had walked that hill with him; the island teachers, sea captains and traders, Ben and Emma Danks, his murdered friend Alex Fergusson, the deluded immigrants from Europe, chiefs and followers. Their house was still there. Lydia had suffered so much in that place that perhaps it would have hurt too much to ever return.

The return voyage south to Sydney was surprisingly dangerous. The chronometer of the *Lord of the Isles* was faulty and during a five-week passage they were repeatedly alarmed to find themselves almost aground on reef or rocks as they passed through the Coral Sea and the Great Barrier Reef. Brown ‘never had

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52 Brown, Journal, 20 July–1 August 1891, published in the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 2 November 1891.

53 Ibid.

54 Peni Lelei died early in 1895 in the Duke of York Islands. The notice of his death stated that he was one of the first converts, ‘bright, intelligent ... very earnest in preaching gospel to his own people.’ See the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 5 February 1895.

55 Brown, Letter, 14 July 1891, published in the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 2 November 1891.

more narrow escapes from shipwreck, and never experienced a more anxious time at sea than I did on this voyage.'<sup>56</sup> It was September by the time he reached home, exhausted and unwell after several bouts of malaria and bronchitis.<sup>57</sup> The colonies, in particular New South Wales and Queensland, had been embroiled in industrial action almost the whole time he had been away, and now angry unionists marched with banners through Sydney. The economy was crumbling. Friends were dying; before the year was out they had news of the deaths and illness of several of the islander missionaries so recently farewelled, and a missionary woman being cared for by Lydia died in their home.<sup>58</sup> The newly established New Guinea Mission begun by the Anglicans at Dogura in British New Guinea was also facing great trouble, with almost all their staff ill with malaria; Albert Maclaren and his colleague Copland King had been farewelled in Sydney in August, but by 27 December 1891 Maclaren was dead. Brown grieved for his friends, shaken by reminders of the fragility of human life.

George Brown passed on the responsibility of the role of President in March 1892. All around them society was in pain. More and more people were out of work and in serious financial distress. In February and March 1892, banks were closing their doors against desperate depositors whose entire savings were lost. Ordinary working people, as well as those who had thought themselves secure, found themselves humiliated, hungry and homeless. Against this background, the Wesleyan Methodists met in Conference. As his final act as President, George Brown presented his Retiring Address. Some aspects of their Church he affirmed. They were willing to modify church polity, to exercise 'the power of adaptability to changing circumstances' without compromising the central truths of classic doctrine.<sup>59</sup> They had embraced change, he said, in less central areas like church music and whether or not a preacher could be bearded; to a hall filled with be-whiskered men he teased that 'the possession of a big beard was not inconsistent with soul-saving power.'<sup>60</sup> More importantly, they were now considering new opportunities for ministry by women and beginning to work for a potential union of the several branches of Methodism. He was glad that they were opening the way for greater participation by laymen in decision-making as he did not believe 'that we use to its full extent the services of the intelligent Christian laymen in our Church for the advance of Christianity, and for the good of humanity.'<sup>61</sup> The spiritual life that Brown offered was a

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56 Brown, *George Brown: Pioneer-Missionary and Explorer*, p. 495.

57 Brown arrived back in Sydney on 6 September 1891.

58 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 1 December 1891. Miss Marian Crosby had accompanied her brother, the Reverend Ernest Crosby, from England to Tonga between 1884 and 1891. Miss Crosby died on 8 October 1891.

59 Brown, 'Retiring address at end of term as president,' in the *Methodist*, 5 March 1892.

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.*

life as ‘a living likeness of God’ rather than conformity to a particular form of Christianity. In England he had seen hedges clipped into the shapes of peacocks and urns, he said, but for ‘true spiritual life’

it is not necessary that this life should be trimmed into the shape of a Methodist peacock or a Presbyterian urn. Nor do we feel it right that we should put any man on a pedestal, and say, That is the man to whom all should conform, even though that man be John Wesley, John Knox, Dr Parker or General Booth.<sup>62</sup>

In the light of contemporary events, Brown suggested that ‘we do not exercise that power in the politics of our country which we ought, as a Church, exercise.’ He added, ‘We, who believe in the power of the Gospel of Christ to exalt and bless the nation, cannot with impunity be indifferent to the principles and life of our legislators.... We are men and we are citizens, and all that concerns a man or that affects the land that we love, must be of interest to us.’<sup>63</sup>

The symbols of the office of President were handed to another man at last. Now there would be space for something new.

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62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.