18. ‘Something of the vagabond’

New South Wales, Queensland, Samoa, Fiji, Norfolk Island, Solomon Islands 1900–1902

‘To do all my work properly,’ wrote one of his mission staff, ‘I ought to be able to divide myself into two men.’ George Brown understood what he meant. The people under his care were taking on impossible workloads; travelling, counselling, mediating, preaching, teaching, learning languages, translating Scripture, wrestling with small craft at sea and house building on land, establishing plantations to support their work or planting gardens for the survival of their families. Many of them worked in lonely isolation or were embroiled in local tensions. Some of the most able men and women, exhausted by malaria and other tropical diseases, sent apologetic letters to the General Secretary admitting that their health had reached the point where they must leave the tropics or die there. It was a challenge to fill the vacant places and Brown accepted the offer of a lay missionary couple from England.

At the beginning of a new century, Brown could have wished to be more than one person. In the wider community, he took an active interest in important public decisions on Federation, a ‘White Australia’ policy, voting rights for women, the labour movement, and the role of the international powers in the Pacific. The newspapers were full of news of the Boer War in South Africa. In China, foreigners were under attack in the Boxer uprising and Lydia Brown was especially anxious for her niece who was a missionary there. She wrote to her women correspondents of the ‘terrible times’ for missionaries and Chinese Christians, as well as the ‘sharp struggle’ of the Boer War. There were hints that economic prosperity could be returning. Brown continued to take an active part in the affairs of the worldwide scientific community.

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George Brown relished the fact that his work demanded frequent travel. He told one audience, ‘I have been going about a good deal of late years and I like

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1 Heinrich Fellmann, in the Australasian Methodist Missionary Review, 4 June 1900.
2 Ibid., 4 June 1900.
3 Ibid., 4 May, 6 July, 8 December 1900.
4 Sydney Morning Herald, 24 January, 7 February, 21 February 1900.
it. I have something of the vagabond in my nature.’ He loved the energy of the packed bag, the ship moving away from the wharf, the first sight of another coastline. As well as island travel, Benjamin Danks had organised a grand plan for visiting every Australian colonial centre with speakers on mission issues, with many appointments for Brown.

In 1900 a regular journey took Brown first back to Samoa and then on to Fiji. Samoa had recently become a German ‘possession’, with German colonial authority, and was slowly recovering from the years of internal wars and epidemics. In Fiji he visited Hannah Dudley who had been joined by her mother and sister in a volunteer capacity. Brown was impressed with the progress she had made despite inadequate space and support. It was clear to him, however, that the task was too great for one person and would appeal, ‘Will the Church send a duly qualified man for this work? An experienced missionary from India is needed for it.’

During October George Brown travelled with two representatives from the Board around the Methodist circuits of Fiji, meeting all the missionaries in their places. They all gathered at last at Rewa for the annual District Synod meetings and a group photograph was recorded. During their Synod a party of Fijian chiefs approached the Mission House in ceremonial dignity. The chiefs carried a handsome whale’s tooth. They came, they said, to express their sorrow and repentance for the murder of the Reverend Thomas Baker over thirty years earlier in 1867. The people of the place had not only killed him but eaten his body. Chief Ratu Beni Tanoa of Naitasiri spoke on their behalf, ‘We have heard that he was murdered in our province under our rule … the story remains and attaches to us and we are ashamed before you, our elders … we cannot bear it…. We wish, sirs, to make atonement for that which our fathers did.’

In humility the whale’s tooth, a significant cultural symbol, was presented to Chairman A.J. Small with the wish that the evil of the past might be ‘buried, forgotten, never again mentioned.’ Small received the fine tooth and assured the Fijian chiefs of the forgiveness of the Methodist Church. Brown, who witnessed this, was asked to carry the symbolic tooth to Sydney to be cared for in the Missionary Museum.

The deputation from the Board of Missions had been sent to the Fiji District Synod that year to carry a proposal from the Board and the Conference concerning a Constitution. Within that Constitution was a section that was to
cause division. No doubt influenced by Brown, the Board believed that the time was ripe for greater participation by lay Fijian Methodists in the decision making of the Fijian Church. The white missionaries thought that such a move was premature and ill-advised. Brown was disturbed by their reaction. He had very potent memories of the problems in Tonga. A plan for lay representation had been incorporated into a Constitution for Tonga as early as 1875 but when the Tongan aspirations for independence were denied by the distant Board in Sydney the result had been a tragic division. The separated new church called itself ‘Free’—free of the perceived bonds of subjection to the authority of the remote white leadership. He did not want to see the same thing happening in Fiji. It did not seem unreasonable to Brown that a small step be taken in moving toward greater self-reliance within the Fiji Methodist Church. In a private meeting with the Fijian and Tongan men who had been ordained, he learned that their main concern was transparency rather than representation. They explained, ‘The missionary contribution is not clear. The people want to know how these [funds] are disbursed. Let it be placed before the people and they will be pleased, and seek to meet expenses. Do not hide anything from us.’

The Fiji District Synod dismissed the idea of lay representation. Brown and his deputation colleagues had been persuaded that delay was inevitable. Much more training and preparation would be needed. Brown reported, ‘We feel convinced from our observations and intercourse with the Native Ministers and officers, that at present they are not competent to take full charge either of circuit finances or district management, and that all steps in the direction of fuller self-government must be taken with caution and deliberation.’

With the new century, change and renewed confidence was in the air. Within weeks of the formal inauguration of the Commonwealth of Australia on New Year’s Day 1901, the Wesleyan Methodist Conference in NSW at last, after some twenty years of consideration, decided on union with two smaller Methodist bodies in New South Wales—the Primitive Methodists and the United Methodist Free Church. Other strands of Methodism in the other colonies had already decided to unite at some point between 1896 and 1900 while the Wesleyans in New South Wales dawdled. When at last, after yet another long debate, a decision for church union was made late one evening in February 1901, there was great jubilation. George Brown had worked for this result for years, chairing a group to prepare the way for union when he had been President of Conference,

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11 Ibid.
ten years earlier. On a rainy autumn afternoon at the end of April 1901, Brown had the satisfaction of witnessing the moment when the Presidents of three branches of Methodism each signed the Plan of Union in the presence of their communities. One speaker mentioned the critical moment ten years previously under the leadership of Brown when the Wesleyans had resolved to give this matter serious consideration; this had set them on the path to union, he said.\textsuperscript{13} The new united Methodist Church would celebrate their first Conference in NSW at the beginning of 1902.\textsuperscript{14}

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Renewed confidence was felt in the Mission office at 381 George Street. News was encouraging from several spheres of influence. Samoa was peaceful again. New schools for girls, and energetic practical work in community health, were making a difference in Fiji. The NSW Conference of 1901 approved a Constitution of the Fiji District, with a detailed structure for the future to provide for an increase of the self-governing power of the District,\textsuperscript{15} although there would be a delay in bringing in the section that provided for lay representation, Brown persisted with his vision, ‘Our ideal for Fiji is a self-governing Church; but our native agents are not ripe for it yet. Our work is to prepare them for it.’\textsuperscript{16} New Britain was celebrating twenty-five years of missionary work with great signs of health despite considerable challenges.\textsuperscript{17} To the astonishment of the Board, the financial situation in 1901 was a dramatic improvement on previous years. Instead of a debt, they found that donations had improved so much that they now had a surplus and could confidently employ new staff.\textsuperscript{18} The Board began to appeal for missionary laymen who could serve in education, health and training.

The unexpected buoyancy of funds gave Brown the freedom to talk about the Solomon Islands once more. Early in 1901 he began to mention the invitation from traders in the area of Roviana Lagoon for missionaries to come to their area of the western island of New Georgia. In theory, the Melanesian Mission of the Anglican Church was responsible for mission work across the hundreds of miles and countless islands of the Solomon Island chain. Since the days of Bishop George Augustus Selwyn, the grand vision for the Melanesian Mission had

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\item \textsuperscript{13} Methodist, 4 May 1901.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 6 March, 10 March, 17 March 1900, 9 March 1901; Colwell, \textit{Illustrated History of Methodism}, pp. 609–12.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Methodist, 23 March 1901.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Report at Foreign Missionary Meetings at NSW Conference 1901, in \textit{Australasian Methodist Missionary Review}, 9 April 1901.
\item \textsuperscript{17} New Britain Synod Minutes 30 October 1900, in \textit{Australasian Methodist Missionary Review}, 8 December 1900, 8 January 1901.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Report of Annual General Meeting of Mission Society, 28 February 1901, in \textit{Australasian Methodist Missionary Review}, 4 March 1901.
\end{itemize}
encompassed some 2,800 islands spread across an impossibly endless ocean.\textsuperscript{19} In practice, their work was found only in the south eastern sector. Brown asked, ‘Rubiana [Roviana] is part of a field occupied by another mission, but if they cannot occupy it, what then? Rubiana is for the present closed to us by the “honourable understanding”—but if that Mission indicates they can’t work there, then [I am] anxious for the Methodist Mission to do so.’\textsuperscript{20}

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Over the family dinner table and in the intimacy of their home George Brown told his stories and shared something of the pressures of his work. The women of his family who remained at home, his wife Lydia and his two single daughters Lizzie and Monica, were all constantly in touch with the issues of his work. It became clear to them that he needed help. In the past Lydia Brown had helped him by taking responsibility for copying long letters by hand, or passages from his original journal to be sent away for publication. Times were changing. Women were now working in wider spheres and Brown himself had spoken of the ‘fitness of devoted consecrated womanhood for Evangelistic work among the women of heathen races’\textsuperscript{21} and his ‘fervent praise of the work which devoted Christian women are doing in our day.’\textsuperscript{22} Why, then, should Miss Mary Elizabeth Brown not work for her father? Lizzie Brown had given up her teaching role, but was a well-educated single woman approaching forty who was free to offer her new skills in using shorthand and a typewriter. Lizzie began to travel into the city office with her father, at first as a volunteer. It was not long before the Board recognised the value of her work and arranged to pay her a salary as a member of staff, backdated to January 1901.\textsuperscript{23}

Lydia Brown’s world was centred on her home and family, and her wandering man was always drawn back into the circle of her love. Her former life in Samoa and in the Duke of York Islands seemed a world away, even though reminders of those days were always around her in the collection of shields and shells, carved masks and baskets that infiltrated the whole house in suburban Gordon. News had come that the ‘old historic house’ at Kinawanua had been pulled down.\textsuperscript{24} She tried to picture it—the timbers that had sheltered their family and many guests, the verandah where she had watched the channel for a sign of George’s return from the punitive raid, the room where her beautiful Mabel and Wallis had died, leaving their playthings behind to mock her, the attic store room where she had locked herself, weeping for the deaths of her children. The

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\textsuperscript{21} Methodist, 9 March 1901.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Australasian Methodist Missionary Review}, 12 Feb 1901, 9 April 1901.
\textsuperscript{23} Minutes of Wesleyan Methodist Missions Board, May 1898–July 1906, MOM 203 CY 3305, 17 April 1901.
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Australasian Methodist Missionary Review}, 19 February 1901.
\end{flushright}
house had taken so long to build, and she had waited for it wearily, managing her household in the rudimentary hut where the tropical rain leaked through the leaf roof and rodents scuttled behind the woven walls. Now, after little more than twenty years, it was seen as ‘historic’, had been demolished and all its components carried off in the whale boat to be rebuilt on Ulu Island to serve the new training centre there. All that was left, she heard, was the flight of concrete steps, rising up to nothing, and a chimney. That life, that part of her world, had vanished, and Lydia knew that she would never visit it again. Even her name, she thought, had disappeared; the new training centre on Ulu, briefly called ‘Lydia College’, had somehow become George Brown College instead. That had been another life. Now she was a vigorous woman in her sixties, happily helping with her grandchildren in a city that had been home now for over twenty years.

In the summer of 1901 she had the rare delight of having her whole family gathered around her. George was at home for a change. Amy and the Reverend Ben Dinning with their five young children had just moved to Penrith on the outskirts of Sydney, Claudia and her family lived in a nearby suburb and her sons Fred and Geoffrey and their wives also lived nearby. To have them all crowded noisily around her table and to be able to care for them all was a deep joy. With some fidgeting and family negotiations at last they all lined up for family photographs with the newest baby on Lydia’s lap and the older children at their feet. That day another photograph was taken of Grandmother Lydia with nine grandchildren clustered around her, the bigger boys looking uncomfortable, squirming little girls and squalling infants. At their heart sat Lydia, still and calm, the only figure in sharp focus.²⁵

The Mission office was crowded again with the bustle and confusion of a new group of mission staff preparing to leave for their appointments. It was early May 1901. Many of those due to be farewelled were going out for the first time. George Brown had preached at the Ordination service for five young ministers.²⁶ His sermon was based on God’s call to the young and hesitant Gideon, called away from his familiar duties to risk something challenging. ‘Have I not sent you?’ asked God of Gideon.²⁷ Brown spoke from his heart and out of his years of experience. You will be tempted, he said, to think you should have stayed home. He described the troubles of his own earlier years when he had questioned his call to the work. You, too, will be discouraged, he said, and sick and depressed. ‘When I was a young man I took for my motto “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not to thine own understanding” and I commend the same to you … I read Bushnell’s sermon on every man’s life a plan of God.’²⁸

²⁵ Photograph in Brown family collection held by Miss Nancy Joyce.
²⁶ J.A Walsh, M.K. Gilmour (to British New Guinea), W.E. Bennett, T.W. Butcher (to Fiji), W.H. Cox (to New Britain) were ordained at Centenary Hall, Sydney, 23 April 1901.
²⁷ Judges 6:14, King James Bible.
²⁸ Notes from sermon preached by Brown on 23 April 1901 at Centenary Hall, York St, Sydney, in Australasian Methodist Missionary Review, 8 May 1901.
He urged them to look after their health, to exercise and avoid the lethargy of ‘sofa disease’, to keep their minds active and care for their spiritual lives, to spend time with the local people and learn their language, listening with respect to their views and not being too hasty in trying to bring change. Above all, he said, his chief instruction was to ‘Love the people!’

There had been alarming rumours. No one wanted to believe them. The news was confirmed on 9 May 1901, a day when in Melbourne a vast audience of dignitaries and ladies in splendid hats witnessed the Duke of York opening the first Federal Parliament, and in Sydney the large party of missionaries assembled for their valedictory service before they sailed to their appointments. On Easter Day 7 April 1901, the Reverend James Chalmers, known across the Pacific as Tamate, with his colleague Oliver Tompkins, had been clubbed to death, beheaded and their bodies had been eaten. They had been visiting the island of Goaribari on the western coast of British New Guinea. George Brown was shocked and deeply grieved. Chalmers had been a dear friend, a man after his

Figure 19. Lydia Brown with grandchildren 1901.

Source: Brown family album, per favour Miss Nancy Joyce.

29 Ibid.
own heart who had shared so many of his own visions. Like Brown, Chalmers had put himself in harm’s way more than once when meeting unwelcoming strangers. Chalmers’ name was legendary and news of his death went around the world; his old friend William Lawes writing that it was ‘almost impossible to translate Tamate into black and white.’

On the day that they heard the news of Chalmers’ violent end, Brown faced the group of new mission staff about to leave for British New Guinea, German Neu Pommern and Fiji. It was a sombre occasion. Brown tried to be confident; he must allay any fears that nervous people might have, he said, as ‘the place to which they were going was just as safe as Sydney—most of it was, at any rate.’

But others spoke in solemn tones of martyrdom, and sorrow, and the profound loss of their friends in the London Missionary Society. By the time the meeting concluded the whole company stood in silence and then, with quavering voices, sang the farewell song ‘God be with you till we meet again.’

Undeterred, Brown continued to pursue his goal of taking the Christian gospel to the western Solomon Islands. Within a week or so of the departure of the missionary party, Brown was in Brisbane to attend the triennial General Conference. Among several themes concerning the mission enterprises of the Methodists was a Conference resolution to approve the new constitution for the Methodist Church in Fiji with ‘larger powers of self-government’ and with ‘lay representatives enfranchised in the highest local Church court, the Fiji District Synod,’ despite the misgivings of the mission staff in Fiji.

There was serious interest in the Solomon Islands. The debate was vigorous but in the end Brown was persuasive. On the grounds that the Melanesian Mission had still not reached the western region of the Solomon chain after fifty years, Brown was given the authority to plan for a new mission, on condition that there be ‘a satisfactory arrangement with our Anglican friends, so that neither now nor in the future should there be any conflict or competition.’

When he learned that Charles Woodford, Deputy Resident Commissioner for the Solomon Islands was in Sydney in June 1901, Brown acted quickly. He called a meeting of the Board of Missions and invited Woodford to attend. Woodford assured the Board that there were densely populated areas in the western islands where neither Melanesian Mission nor Catholic Marists had established work, and he urged the Methodists to begin something in those areas. He described the intricate local systems, the head-hunting and disease that had decimated the population and the power of rival chiefs with their fleets of war canoes. These days, he said, with the presence of representatives of the Western Pacific High

31 Ibid., p. 486.
32 Methodist, 18 May 1901.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 1 June 1901.
35 Ibid., 1 June 1901.
Commission and Fijian police, there was little to fear. Woodford intended to sail shortly for the Solomon Islands and urged them to send Brown with him to explore the possibilities for a new work. The Board agreed and a week later Brown was at sea with *SS Titus*, on his way to the Solomon Islands.

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There is no record of what his wife Lydia thought. Not only had her husband set off through a fierce gale that was battering shipping, but her eldest daughter Lizzie had sailed with him. As Lizzie was his private secretary and assistant, she intended to keep records of meetings and help with the beginnings of a book her father intended to write. If they survived the storm at sea, they were moving into the territory of head-hunters. It was said that their friend Chalmers had been deeply depressed after the death of his wife and may have even welcomed martyrdom but that was not true for Brown. All Lydia could do was pray for the safety of those she loved.

The first step was to visit Norfolk Island to meet Cecil Wilson, Bishop of Melanesia and responsible for the work of Melanesian Mission. They were ferried to the rocky wharf and driven past the ruins of the one-time penal colony up to the fine establishment of the St. Barnabas complex, almost a small township clustered around the central stone church. Their model of mission was very different from that of the Methodists. On Norfolk Island they had established a strong base where young men were brought from the northern islands to be educated and trained in the Christian faith by British and Australian staff. Each year a party of the most promising young men were taken back to their home regions with the aim of bringing Christianity to their own people. In time, they recognised how difficult it was for a young person with no local authority and a thin veneer of western ideas and manners to have much influence over a community he had left some years earlier.

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37 Methodist, 22 June, 29 June 1901.
Brown was eager to discuss his own plans with Bishop Wilson. Correspondence had passed between them about the request of Solomon Island men for missionaries, but without any resolution. Now they could speak directly. Bishop Wilson was reluctant to relinquish part of his bishopric responsibilities to another Church but it may have been an unequal contest. Brown was twenty-five-years older than the gentle and cautious Bishop, had far more experience in the Pacific and was a forceful personality in pursuit of a long-held dream. Brown also had the support of British Commissioner Woodford. They studied the maps together. Wilson questioned Brown’s choice of the Roviana area of New Georgia; it was a region famously unwilling to receive missionaries. Brown insisted that there was no other mission organisation in that region ‘so we are not going to labour on any other society’s foundations.’ Bishop Wilson felt obliged to

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40 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 6 December 1898, 8 July 1901.
41 *Methodist*, 6 July 1901.
accept the Methodist intention, as a start, to explore the western area.\textsuperscript{42} A new ‘gentleman’s agreement’, unwritten and unsigned,\textsuperscript{43} now marked an invisible line on the sea, identifying parts of the western Solomon Islands as a sphere where the Methodist Mission could work.

The \textit{SS Titus} reached the beautiful Roviana Lagoon of New Georgia on 26 July 1901. The traders were welcoming but the local chiefs much less so. The principal chief Ingava was giving a great feast that day to celebrate the completion of a new house. Things were changing already, trader Frank Wickham explained. If the new house had been opened only a few years ago, it would have meant a raid on another village for heads to be incorporated into the ceremony. The influence of the Resident Commissioner was having an effect, and these days such raids were carried out in clandestine fashion, out of sight of the colonial authorities, rather than in the great days of old when Ingava would take five hundred men to capture slaves. Even with this concession there was still no enthusiasm to have resident missionaries and Brown decided to proceed with caution. For ten days he visited villages and explored the area, talking through an interpreter with village leaders.

It seemed to him that it should be possible to acquire a small piece of land on an island in the lagoon, to use as a mission base, and win the confidence of the people over time before attempting to establish anything larger on the island of New Georgia itself. One evening, he arranged for a large sheet to be suspended between two palm trees, set up his magic lantern and projected images of the people of New Britain, British New Guinea and Fiji, as they had been in the past and as they were now. In the darkness Brown could hear the gasps of astonishment as image after image magically filled the white sheet. He hoped that they would make the connection that he intended—that the Christian gospel had made the difference. They probably did not. Yet, for those with eyes to see, it was all there; change was coming to their people and the absence of fresh human heads at the opening of the chief’s house was just one sign of the beginning of the decay of a complex social system that had served them, for good or ill, for generations. By the end of August, Brown and his daughter were home in Sydney and when he learned that a trader was prepared to sell a little island in the Roviana Lagoon just off the coast of New Georgia, he bought it.\textsuperscript{44}

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In his enthusiasm, George Brown may have been premature. In January 1902, Bishop Wilson visited Sydney and met Brown to continue their debate about

\textsuperscript{42} Tippett, \textit{Solomon Islands Christianity}, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{43} Hilliard, \textit{God’s Gentlemen}, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{44} Minutes of Wesleyan Methodist Missions Board, May 1898–July 1906, ML MOM 203 ML CY 2810, 7 March 1902.
spheres of influence. Brown held that the Methodists would prefer to work in Guadalcanal or Malaita, because of the direct links with men who had worked in Fiji, but would be willing to work in the New Georgia group in keeping with the ‘honourable understanding that no Protestant Mission should interfere with the work of another sister Society.’ Bishop Wilson was hesitant. He had been appealing for funds for a replacement for their mission ship the Southern Cross, so that he could visit the more remote regions of his diocese and feared that the Anglicans would not understand if he were to relinquish some of that area. Wilson said,

I should not regard it as an unfriendly act if you occupy New Georgia, but I should regard it as an unfriendly act if you were to occupy Guadalcanal or Malaita… New Georgia is the last place in which I should think of taking up mission work, and I should certainly not take it up at all if you had a strong and effective mission work there.

By the time the men parted, Brown felt free to report to his Board that while the Bishop for prudent reasons was not willing to give the Methodists official consent to begin work in New Georgia, ‘he was personally not at all disinclined to do so.’ Lizzie Brown’s notes of the meetings with Bishop Wilson were duly typed and added in this new form into the Minute Book, and the formal decision to begin a new Mission in the New Georgia area of the Solomon Islands was made. It was possible to report to the Methodist community that, ‘we shall not in any way whatever interfere with any kindred society…. We shall be fellow-labourers with them, but in a distinct and separate group.’

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Although Brown’s focus in the early months of 1902 was on his new project in the Solomon Islands, there were many other things to take his attention. The first Conference of a united Methodism was celebrated with great optimism and hope in February and Brown was pleased when one commentator noted that a sign that the Union would be stable and blessed was that ‘it should be characterised by an intense Missionary spirit.’ The new mission schooner the Litia was launched. In Samoa there were fresh problems and in Fiji there

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46 The Melanesian Mission used a series of mission ships, over many years, each called the Southern Cross.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Minutes of Wesleyan Methodist Missions Board, May 1898–July 1906, ML MOM 203 ML CY 2810, 4 September 1901. The work in the Solomons Islands was planned to begin in March 1902.
51 Australasian Methodist Missionary Review, 4 March 1902.
52 Methodist, 3 May 1902.
was no softening of attitudes about lay representation. When Brown took his place as part of the great Conference photograph he was very aware of the many excellent Australian laymen in their number.\textsuperscript{53} In society, women had been awarded the right to vote in the next federal election and the wheels had been set in motion to transfer the responsibility for British New Guinea to the newly Federated Australia.\textsuperscript{54} At home, Lydia was constantly busy with their local church planning to build a Methodist church in Gordon and with her growing family; two more grandchildren had just been born.\textsuperscript{55} Central to Brown’s mind at the time was the preparation for another New Mission. Two young ministers had been appointed as pioneer missionaries, John Goldie and Stephen Rabone Rooney, and island teachers had been recruited from Fiji and Samoa. By the end of April 1902 everything was ready.

The farewell was a grand occasion. Missionaries were ready to travel to many places, including the new team for the Solomon Islands.\textsuperscript{56} Monica Brown organised a dinner for five hundred and the hall was crowded for the final speeches of farewell. Tributes were made to the courage of the new team, to Brown who was to travel with them and to ‘his family in consenting to such a lengthened separation, at a time of life when the less arduous labours of his office might have been permitted him.’\textsuperscript{57} When, at last, George Brown rose to speak on behalf of the whole missionary group the entire audience rose to their feet in thunderous applause.\textsuperscript{58}

It was one thing to be borne up by the warmth and security of a great hall packed with supporters. It was different when they stood in the rain on Circular Quay ready to board \textit{SS Titus} on 3 May. Brown knew that the responsibility for this group was his. Not all of them would return home. There would be illness, the hazards of childbirth and possibly violence. He was taking an inexperienced team to a place with an uncertain welcome. There were tears as Helena Goldie and Lydia Brown parted from their husbands; an observer would write, ‘No one could witness the partings on that wharf without feeling that faith and love to God triumphed over the dearest ties.’\textsuperscript{59} A photographer captured an image of the group on the rain-washed wharf.\textsuperscript{60} The faces are sober, unsmiling, apprehensive Fijian and Samoan women, their men, Brown and Danks with some other

\textsuperscript{53} Colwell, \textit{Illustrated History of Methodism}, p. 606.
\textsuperscript{54} The process began in November 1901 and was completed in September 1906. See, Raymond Evans, Clive Moore, Kay Saunders and Brian Jamison, \textit{1901 Our Future’s Past: Documenting Australia’s Federation}, Sydney: Macmillan, 1997, p. 224.
\textsuperscript{55} Inaugural Meeting of the Gordon Methodist Church Trust, 5 October 1901.
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Australasian Methodist Missionary Review}, 6 May 1902. Thirty-one Australian, New Zealand, Fijian, Samoan and Solomon Island men and women were named as they left for several mission regions.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Australasian Methodist Missionary Review}, 6 May 1902.
\textsuperscript{60} Photo, \textit{Town and Country Journal}, reprinted in the \textit{Australasian Methodist Missionary Review}, 7 July 1902.
church leaders and arranged in the foreground Goldie and Rooney, young men preparing to face a great unknown. An onlooker was overheard to say, as they all moved away to board the SS Titus, 'I’m a bit of a heathen myself but this has moved me very much. Brave people these.'

Figure 21. Missionary party before departure for Fiji, Samoa, New Britain and Solomon Islands 1902. Back: Rabone Rooney (Solomon Islands), C.O. Lelean (Fiji), Benjamin Danks, E.W. Caust (Rotuma), John Goldie (Solomon Islands). Front: C. Doley (New Britain), Mrs Lelean, Mrs Doley, George Brown, Mrs Caust, Mrs Neil, E.G. Neil.


Brown, though outwardly confident, would later assure a critic that ‘the three weeks spent aboard the Titus on the voyage from Sydney to New Georgia were amongst the most anxious I have ever spent.’ In those earlier adventures as a pioneer in New Britain and British New Guinea,

61 Australasian Methodist Missionary Review, 6 May 1902.
62 Ibid., 5 January 1903.
We went to a people who were indifferent to our work, but in New Georgia we went to natives who did not wish us to go, and we knew before we went that they did not want us. I have known the head-hunters of New Georgia for many years and 27 years ago they told my dear old friend Captain Ferguson, and myself, that they would have nothing to do with missionaries. I well knew when I visited them last year that if I had asked permission to start a mission I would have got a positive refusal, and so we did not ask but simply went.\(^{63}\)

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**Figure 22. Mission party on wharf before sailing for New Georgia, Solomon Islands 1902. John Goldie and Rabone Rooney in centre front.**

*(Source: The Australasian Methodist Missionary Review, 7 July 1902.)*

In the late afternoon of Friday 23 May 1902, the steamer came into Roviana Lagoon. The sudden tropical sunset was not far away and they chose to stay on board overnight, but in the morning his old friends the traders Norman Wheatley and Frank Wickham were quick to provide boats to transfer people and cargo to land. That night George Brown began his first letter to Lydia.

To my own dear wife, We got here yesterday at \(\frac{1}{2}\) past 4 o’clock just three weeks from Sydney and we were all right glad to get here. As you

\(^{63}\) Ibid.
can imagine we have all been very busy indeed on this the first day here, and I for one am very tired. So far as I can tell at present our prospects are very good … I have visited the island which I bought in Sydney, Nusa Zonga, and find it rather small but I am hoping to get a piece inland very soon. At any rate we won’t meet with any pronounced opposition and this is a good thing. Some white men, not any of the traders here, have been trying to set the chiefs against any Missionaries coming here at all but they have not succeeded in doing so though they have of course done something to unsettle them by their stories … altogether we are in good spirits.  

The next day was Sunday and Brown joined the group for a service of worship. Once again he read scripture and preached before a group of curious local onlookers, bemused by the odd activities of newcomers. That night he added to his letter to Lydia.

I am not feeling very bright tonight and that is a sure sign that I must take a little medicine. I have decided to erect the small house which I brought down on Nusa Zonga the island which I bought in Sydney. We shall know more about the place where we are to have the head station as we know more of the people and have time to look about.

After the relative calm of the Sabbath, the practical work began. Cargo was unloaded and stored in a large copra shed, timber for houses, provisions, equipment—‘There is an awful pile of stuff,’ wrote Brown.

More importantly, they needed to make careful contact with the local men of authority, the chiefs. The power of these influential men would make the difference between disaster and a secure environment for the work they hoped to do. Brown wrote to his friend Benjamin Danks. He told him of meeting with Ingava and other chiefly men,

The results are just as I expected they would be, that is that we shall receive no opposition from the Chiefs or from the people. They do not receive us with any enthusiasm or cordiality simply because they do not know for what purpose we have come and also because they have been frightened by stories told them by some white men in order to prejudice their minds against us…. We shall have to exercise great care and prudence in all our dealings with them especially in these early days in order to remove this impression…. I often felt very anxious whilst we were on the steamer especially as we got near the Solomons but most of my fears have proved to be groundless.
The early weeks were engaged in exploration, negotiation and building the beginnings of trust as well as temporary bush buildings. Brown spent time with the chief Gumi, ‘a very intelligent man,’ suggesting that one day the new arrivals would hope to purchase a portion of land on the coast of New Georgia within range of Nusa Zonga. He had learned to offer time, respect and caution when negotiating with island leaders. He warned the Fijian and Samoan Teachers of the trouble which may be caused by any assumption of superior power or by the appearance of any overbearing conduct on their part. I told them very earnestly that the greatest power in the world was that of love, that we can only hope to win the people by proving in every way that we love them and that we have come here because God loves them and that Christ died for them.\(^68\)

An invitation to travel with Commissioner Woodford to visit the vast northern coral atoll of Ontong Java delighted Brown and he was happy to explore the remote villages there. On his return to Roviana after a very rough voyage, he suggested to his team that they might include Ontong Java, over 250 miles of ocean to their north, in their sphere. They were not enthusiastic; they had barely begun at Roviana.\(^69\) In his absence, however, Goldie and Rooney had identified a piece of land on New Georgia with a fine outlook across Roviana Lagoon. With careful negotiation between the white missionaries and the local chiefs, land was bought.\(^70\) In time it would become the site of a significant church property known over one hundred years later as Munda. The local name, Kokenggolo, meaning fragrance of a local flower, was a fitting title for a place that would slowly permeate a damaged society with healing.

* * *

Far away in her Sydney home, Lydia Brown read the letters that had arrived at last from her George. During their long years of marriage they had been apart as often as they had been together, still linked by their love and the thin web of letters. As he travelled he knew that she was not anchored to a single place in his absence. He had written to ‘Mrs Brown, “Kinawanua”, Gordon or Lindfield, Chatswood, St Leonards or Penrith,’ the locations of each of her children. Family love and loyalty drew her wherever she was most needed at the time and with new babies and active older children she was often away from home. It was hard not to be anxious for her husband. At sixty-seven he was not always well and the demands of first contact in the islands were great. She remembered the days

\(^{68}\) Ibid.


in the Duke of York Islands when spears were there for the business of dealing death, not domesticated into curtain rods in suburban Gordon, and clubs were bludgeons, not curios to be dusted. Now she pored over his letter, searching for the personal words in among the mission information.

I for one am very tired … our prospects are very good…. I am not feeling very bright tonight … I am well and hearty and full of hope…. It will be uphill work at first but it will be alright in the end…. You must not worry about me, I shall be well cared for. We have come here because God sent us and he will preserve us I am sure…. I often think of you all and pray for you as I know you do for me. May God our Father keep and bless you all abundantly. With lots of love to your own dear self I am, my dear loving old wife, your affectionate husband, Geo Brown.71

Now she had to wait, yet again, to welcome him home.

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After nearly two months in the Solomon Islands, George Brown said goodbye to the pioneer group, joined the visiting steamer once more and turned his face to home. He left a vulnerable little group, with great hopes but little so far to encourage them. Brown prayed with them before he left, urging them that ‘if they would be men of power, to be men of prayer.’ ‘We must labour patiently and faithfully,’ he said, ‘remembering that God measures not as men do, and the Master’s “Well done” was to the faithful, and not merely to the successful servant.’ Together, they heard the words of Scripture, ‘Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.’72

To Danks he wrote,

We will all do our best by God’s help to make this Mission as successful as the older ones have been. We are proud of them and some day I hope we shall be proud of this the New Georgia Mission. It is very little and very weak at the present but it will grow as the others have done.73

Winter was nearly over when the SS *Titus* came into harbour in Sydney once more. There were new grandchildren to meet and visitors to greet. It was hard to focus on the regular work of the Mission office or the local excitement as the Methodists at Gordon saw the ground cleared for their new church building. When the crowd gathered on 13 December 1902 to witness the formal laying of commemorative stones and pray for the future ministry at that place it seemed only fitting that one of the three stones was being laid, not by the well-known Dr. Brown, but by his loved wife, Lydia.74

71 Brown to Lydia Brown, 24 May 1902.
72 Methodist, 6 September 1902; John 14:27, King James Bible.
73 Brown to Danks, 26 May 1902.
74 Organ of the Willoughby and Gordon Methodist Church, *Messenger*, 1 Feb 1907.