

19. 'The Venerable General Secretary'

New South Wales, Fiji, Victoria, South Australia, Solomon Islands, New Britain, Papua 1903–1906

'It is to be deplored,' a writer announced in 1902, 'that so little aggressive work is done by the Foreign Mission enterprise ... it gives a little relief to know that the Society's operations are to embrace the Solomon Islands.'¹ George Brown was furious – and hurt. Had decades of effort gone unnoticed? He wrote a long defensive reply setting out the work of the Society over the years across the Pacific. When the Mission Board asked Brown to prepare a short pamphlet explaining the range of Methodist missionary work for distribution, he did it with some satisfaction.²

Whether or not new work was being attempted, there was work to be done in the established regions. There were continuing problems in Fiji, and Brown was sent once more in 1903 as a Commission with two colleagues, the President General Reverend George Lane and the Honourable William Robson, to investigate. Not for the first time, there were serious tensions in Fiji between the Catholic Mission and the Methodists, as well as ongoing issues between Methodists and the British colonial government over land and property. Tension was building between mission staff in Fiji and the Board in Sydney over the new Constitution, approved at the 1901 General Conference. The missionaries in Fiji were still offended by the clause about lay representation. They had already voted against it once, in October 1901, and were no more persuaded in 1903.³ It was not an easy visit.

Using his long relationships with colonial authorities and with the missionaries, Brown, Lane and Robson travelled widely around the island group. Brown was delighted to meet with his old friends from the pioneer group to New Britain nearly thirty years earlier, Ratu Livai Volavola and Aminio Baledrokadroka, men he loved and valued.⁴ His appreciation of men like these had influenced his

1 *Spectator*, 21 November 1902.

2 George Brown, *A Brief Account of Methodist Missions in Australasia, Polynesia and Melanesia, their Past History, Present Conditions and Future Possibilities*, Sydney: Methodist Missionary Society of Australasia, 1904; *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 March 1904.

3 Rev. Dr. G. Brown, 'For Members of Conference Only. A Personal Statement.' 1905, NLA Ferg/6162. The Fiji District Synod decision was made on 10 October 1901.

4 Photograph of Brown with Ratu Livai Volavola and Aminio Baledrokadroka, in the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, April 1906.

opinion about the representation of Fijian lay men in decisions about their own finances. The missionaries, it was clear, believed that the local people were not ready for this new responsibility. There were suggestions of possible corruption, undue influence of chiefs and incompetence. Within months of the visit of the deputation, the Fiji Synod once more voted firmly against it.⁵ There would be further fruitless debate on the matter at the New South Wales Conference in March 1904.⁶

The tension between Catholic and Methodist Churches in Fiji had been intensified shortly before the visit of the Commission. Over the years, Brown had witnessed in a number of places the way in which island leaders could use allegiance to a particular brand of religion as a tool to manipulate their own ends. Early in 1903, a Fijian high chief, offended by the Methodists, had chosen to withdraw his allegiance from them and take his entire large community with him to join the Catholic Church. As a sign of this new loyalty, the group gave up their Methodist hymn books, catechisms and Bibles. In an action that was according to their own official procedure but insensitive to those who valued that material as sacred, this literature was taken away and burned, an action that was witnessed by some who were still loyal to the Methodists. This caused great outrage, and the story spread as far as the colonies. It was said that some of the books that were destroyed included the new translation by Brown's friend and contemporary Frederick Langham published only a year earlier.⁷ Having heard the evidence, Brown and his colleagues reported to the Board that although they accepted that the unfortunate incident had happened as described, it was not appropriate to pursue the matter further.⁸

By the time the deputation returned to Sydney and reported their findings to the Board, there was a new reason for grief. Frederick Langham, Bible translator and veteran missionary, had died in London on 20 June 1903. It was a sombre Board meeting. There was rebellion in the ranks of their missionaries in Fiji, illness and discontent in some other fields, and news from the Solomon Islands spoke of the illness and deaths of some of the pioneer team. A brighter moment was the news that the special copy of the new translation of the New Testament in the Kuanua language of New Britain had been presented to the German Kaiser Wilhelm by Heinrich Fellmann while in Germany on furlough.⁹

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5 Brown, 'For Members of Conference Only'. Fiji District Synod decision was made on 14 October 1903.

6 Minutes of Wesleyan Methodist Missions Board, May 1898–July 1906, ML MOM CY 2810, 6 January 1904; *Methodist*, 13 March 1904.

7 Frederick Langham, letter published in the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 6 October 1902.

8 A. Harold Wood, *Overseas Missions of the Australian Methodist Church, Vol. 11, Fiji*, Melbourne: Aldersgate Press, 1978, pp. 256–57.

9 Minutes of Wesleyan Methodist Missions Board, May 1898–July 1906, 6 August 1903.

No one could have foreseen the changes that would happen in their family in March 1904. Lydia Brown had often been with her daughters Amy and Claudia during pregnancy and childbirth, and supported her sons' wives as well. The four youngest little ones were toddling and crawling happily. Lydia loved all her grandchildren dearly, and took a genuine interest in the children of all the missionaries. On 1 March Lydia Brown wrote to Johanna Fellmann of her children, and then wrote of her own daughter Amy's latest pregnancy. Amy's husband the Reverend Benjamin Dinning was staying with Browns during the Conference, but, wrote Lydia,

Poor Mrs Dinning is very near her time of trial and she will be glad to get her husband back. It is an awkward time to be laid up.... They are put down for Tamworth on the northern line. I am sorry they will be so far away from us, but still I hope to be able to visit them once at any rate.¹⁰

She told Johanna about each of her children and grandchildren, the colds, the teething and other ailments, the constant houseguests. Lydia mentioned her visits to Penrith to help Amy and the comfort of having Lizzie and Monica at home, 'though they have to be away from me so much, but I am better off than a good many mothers. I am able to see all my children and grandchildren occasionally, what would your dear mother give for a sight of you sometimes.' She concluded 'I find I have anxieties as a grandmother and I suppose it will be so to the end.'¹¹ Tamworth seemed a long way away, hundreds of miles to the north, but at least Amy's latest little one would be born before they moved.

Amy Dinning gave birth to her second daughter and her seventh baby at Penrith on 8 March 1904. Lydia was probably with her at the time, and would not have been home the next day when George came home to Gordon with the news that the Board had granted him leave of absence 'to engage in literary work'.¹² The publication of the short pamphlet on their missions had suggested that it was time for a more substantial piece of writing about the history of their mission, and Brown was the man to do it. He was beginning to hint at retirement, and the Board was happy to appoint the very capable Benjamin Danks to the role of Acting General Secretary when his leave of absence began.

Leave of absence was quickly forgotten. The news from Penrith was disturbing. Amy was not recovering. Lydia knew very well the hazards of childbirth. She had watched helplessly as other women suffered and faded from life, beyond her medical skills to help. But this was her daughter Amy; Amy the singer, busy wife and mother, leader among the women and children of her church. This

10 Lydia Brown to Johanna Fellmann, 1 March 1904.

11 Ibid.

12 Minutes of Wesleyan Methodist Missions Board, May 1898–July 1906, 9 March 1904.

was not possible, not right. Yet Lydia watched and knew. The doctors affirmed that Amy was dying and there was nothing they could do. The family gathered. Friends travelled to see her and, through their tears, gently sang familiar hymns around her bed with Amy's voice joining in. Lydia held her hand and heard Amy's quiet prayers for her husband, her little ones, her newborn baby. George baptised the baby girl, at Amy's request, and laid the newborn, head still wet with the waters of baptism, in the curve of his daughter's arm as she stroked the infant head and whispered the new name, her own name, Amy Eadith.

Amy Dinning died on 17 March 1904. Her baby daughter Amy Eadith was nine days old. George and Lydia Brown were heartbroken. The funeral, on Amy's fortieth birthday, was a very big one, with a crowded church in Penrith before funeral trains carried them back to Gore Hill Cemetery. Hundreds of letters of condolence poured in. No one knew how to comfort the grieving family. There were so many reasons why this was a meaningless and mysterious death, and platitudes did not help. Among the sounds of weeping Lydia heard the tiny cry of a motherless baby. One thing was certain. Ben Dinning must leave Penrith very soon with his older children for his new appointment in Tamworth, and Monica had offered to go with him to help for some months. Amy's infant daughter was coming home with Lydia.¹³

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The funeral flowers drooped and decayed. Printed leaflets in memory of Amy Dinning were sent out in response to the overwhelming mountain of condolence messages. Black-bordered notepaper matched the bleak grief of Lydia's heart. A tiny child needed her, and Lydia Brown with the help of her daughter Lizzie cared for the baby through sleepless nights and weary days. In a letter to a friend she wrote,

It has been a terrible blow to us and a loss to her family and the whole Church. Never more will we hear her lovely voice singing with such feeling all those lovely pieces, and she was so good and kind to everybody and such a gentle nature. Her poor husband misses her terribly.... It has all been such a mystery to us that Mrs Dinning should have been taken away in the midst of her usefulness. We never expected her death.¹⁴

At the April Board meeting his friends offered their formal condolences to George Brown and his family. They felt for him, but this was not the only serious illness and risk of death before them. News of the illness and forced retirement of staff seemed to be a constant feature of their meetings—European and Pacific Island missionaries, their wives and children. They agreed that it was vital that new

¹³ *Methodist*, 9 April 1904.

¹⁴ Lydia Brown to Johanna Fellmann, 14 November 1904.

mission staff should have rigorous medical checks before they were accepted for service, but even the fittest people could have an accident or be laid low with malaria or tropical ulcers. The latest news from the Solomon Islands mentioned their own share of poor health among staff and local people, but Helena Goldie, who had now joined her husband, wrote cheerfully, despite the challenges of their context. She said that the chief on Roviana Island had refused to receive an Island teacher but she had persuaded her husband to let her go,

hoping it would lead to something greater. I just go in a small boat I borrow from Mr Wickham, and only take children with me, and even then the first time I went the people who were able all ran away. It was a very cold welcome even though they came back afterwards. They said that they were afraid of me, but I laughed at them, saying I was a very little woman for them all to be afraid of. The next Monday the chief ran to meet me, and the welcome felt very much warmer. I held the sewing class, and did what I could for about thirty sick people, and going home was caught in a squall, and the boat nearly went to the bottom. We were glad to get home.¹⁵

When Lydia Brown heard news of Helena Goldie and Ray Rooney's bride who had joined him in 1903, she thought of these young women and others like Johanna Fellmann. They were all in their child-bearing years in remote and isolated places; if Amy could die following childbirth in Penrith, with a doctor at hand, what of these other young women when their time came?

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At home, Lydia cared for a tiny baby and the many houseguests who travelled through, while George was frequently out or away from home for meetings and speaking engagements.¹⁶ In May 1904 he attended General Conference in Melbourne where his close friend and colleague the Reverend George Lane concluded his term as President-General. Once again they debated the Constitution and increased powers of self-government for the church in Fiji and once again made no progress, sending the matter back to Fiji.¹⁷ To Brown's pleasure the Conference confirmed that he could take one year of leave to complete his 'Reminiscences'. He had been able to report that the first chapter was already written.

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15 Helena Goldie, letter of 20 March 1904, in the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 6 May 1904.

16 Brown addressed the New South Wales Presbyterian Assembly Foreign Missions Night; reported in *The Messenger of the Presbyterian Church of New South Wales*, 20 May 1904.

17 *Methodist*, 4 June, 11 June 1904. General Conference in Melbourne began on 26 May 1904 and was held in the Wesley Church, Lonsdale Street.

It was not an easy year. In August 1904 George and Lydia Brown were shocked by the sudden death of their friend George Lane. Painful correspondence from Fiji continued to arrive on the desk of Brown as General Secretary. Mission funds were dwindling again and an ambitious plan for Brown to travel across several States on a speaking tour was arranged. Two Fijian men, the Reverend Taniela Lotu and layman Ratu Niko Rabuku, arrived in Sydney to travel with him. At a public meeting of Methodists in Sydney in September 1904, with Brown interpreting for Taniela Lotu, the two Fijians spoke with feeling of contemporary issues in their Fijian Methodist Church. Little was said of the controversy over lay representation, but as the audience listened to the godly old Taniela and the imposing layman Rabuku many were persuaded that men like these ought to have a greater voice in their own church.¹⁸

‘Dr Brown has been away from home for such a long time,’ wrote Lydia Brown. He had been travelling for two months in Victoria and South Australia with the two Fijian visitors, trying to raise funds for a Special Appeal Fund for missions but was disappointed with the response. Lydia did miss him. Her heart still ached with the grief of losing her beloved Amy and she admitted that she ‘could not take an interest in anything. I trust the Lord is now giving me more resignation to His will. I know that He does all things well and by and bye we will see the reason for all these afflictions.’¹⁹ In her more honest moments she confessed to her friend Johanna Fellmann that as the first anniversary of baby Amy’s birth and mother Amy’s death approached, she was struggling to make sense of her loss.

This month brings it all before us again so vividly.... The past year has been a very sad one to all of us and I think life will never be the same again. How I miss her precious weekly letters ... now all is so silent. If I could really believe that it had been God’s will for her to die I would be more resigned but I cannot help feeling that her death was untimely. She did not expect to die and none of us did either.... There is so much mystery connected to the unseen world. We must patiently wait until we will understand it all.²⁰

It was not that she did not have plenty to fill her days. Her house, as always, was full of guests and Baby Amy was a delight but demanded a lot of attention. She wrote, ‘I am thankful for my own good health and for the healthy baby. She is a great pet with us all and is quite an advertisement for a bottle-fed baby. Lizzie is perfectly wrapped up in her and would almost break her heart to lose her. The little darling is getting very interesting.’²¹

18 *Methodist*, 24 September 1904.

19 Lydia Brown to Johanna Fellmann, 30 November 1904.

20 *Ibid.*, 7 March 1905.

21 *Ibid.*

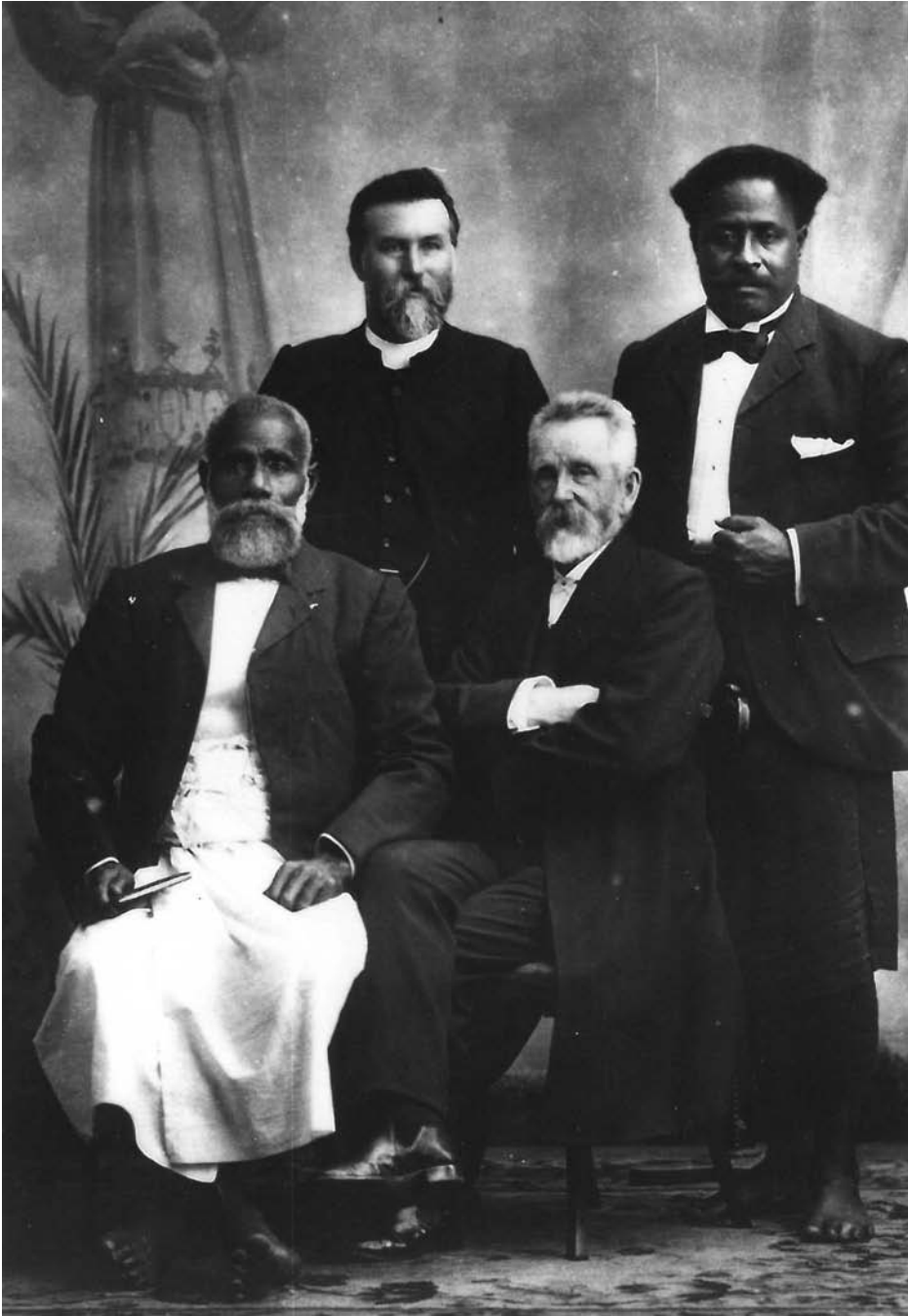


Figure 23. George Brown with Benjamin Danks, Taniela Lotu and Ratu Niko Rabuku, Sydney 1904.

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

The Brown household was still in a state of change. George Brown had arranged for the purchase of another house in Gordon, nearer the railway station for convenience and with a large room to house his ever-increasing collection of artefacts and library but, as Lydia wrote, 'We are wanting to move into our other house near the station but we must get rid of this place first.'²² Lydia Brown had another worry on her mind as well. Daughter Claudia was expecting another baby and after the shock of losing Amy her mother could not bear to think of another loss.

By March 1905 George Brown was home from his interstate travels. Conference was a stressful time, as Brown was involved in another confrontation over lay representation in Fiji. On behalf of the missionaries in Fiji, C.O. Lelean contended that the idea had been hatched by the Board in George Street, Sydney and was a danger to the work of God as men who could not manage their own small affairs could not be expected to deal with financial business; though a worthy goal for the future, it ought to be postponed. Brown countered that delay was even more dangerous; admission to the full privileges of the Church was a 'matter of right and justice,' he said.²³ Another significant report was brought to that Conference; discussions had begun between the Presbyterian General Assembly, the Congregational Union and the Methodist Church about the possibility of a future Church Union.²⁴

While George Brown was distracted with mission matters, Lydia Brown supervised a family move to a slightly smaller house in Gordon. She wrote that 'it has been a great work moving especially with all the curios.'²⁵ Claudia had produced a fifth daughter safely and Lydia did her best to help her when she could. Lydia was thankful that she was a healthy woman as, at the age of sixty-seven, she had the constant care of small Amy Eadith who was just learning to walk—and my two daughters being so much away from home at their duties leaves me very much tied, but I would not part with the little darling. She is part of her dear Mother.'²⁶ Lydia continued to write loving pastoral letters to the women missionaries, aware that many lived in places where violence was common. She was shocked by a massacre of ten Catholic missionaries in the Baining area of New Britain late in 1904, with five nuns murdered—I do feel so sorry for those poor sisters.'²⁷

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22 Ibid., 30 November 1904.

23 *Methodist*, 11 March 1905, 19 March 1905.

24 *Methodist*, 19 March 1905.

25 Lydia Brown to Johanna Fellmann, 7 March 1905.

26 Ibid., 9 May 1905.

27 Ibid., 30 November 1904; *Methodist*, 12 November 1904.

For years people had said to George Brown, 'You must write a book.' The Mission Board had urged it and now the General Conference had given him time to work on it. His diaries, his political letters, his correspondence as General Secretary and with scientists of many stripes around the world, and his enthusiasm as editor and writer for the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review* provided him with a mass of documentation to help his memory. As he approached his seventieth birthday later in 1905, he was aware that men of his generation were dying, suddenly or in a slow decline, and a fresh urgency came to him. He carried in his memory a body of knowledge that he believed he must pass on. Lydia Brown told a friend, 'I suppose this year Dr Brown will be leaving the mission office as he really intends to write his book. It will be strange for him and Lizzie to be away from the office.'²⁸

It seemed so difficult to let go the work that had consumed him for so long. He had great confidence in his successor Benjamin Danks, and his intention was to return to his role as General Secretary once the year of writing was over, but even so he found it hard to relinquish the daily connection.

If Brown was to write his book, where was he to work? The distractions of his private household, and the mission office with its new technology of telephone and cable, made them unsuitable. He decided to escape by taking a sea voyage to revisit the three regions that he had himself pioneered, refresh his memories and focus on writing in a quiet setting. Miss Lizzie Brown would travel with him again as his private secretary and typist. The voyage would be a holiday after illness and the stress of responsibilities. On a bright cool winter afternoon, a crowd of some two hundred Methodists met at Parbury's Wharf on Sydney Harbour on 7 July 1905. An anonymous benefactor in New Zealand had donated a 108-ton yacht to the Methodist Mission for use in their Pacific work and they crowded on deck to dedicate her. The Board had decreed that the yacht should now be named the *George Brown*. That evening George Brown and his daughter Lizzie embarked on the *SS Moresby*; the *George Brown* would follow them north.²⁹

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'I cannot realise that I am out of the office, even for a time,' wrote George Brown cheerfully, as they sailed north. 'Miss Brown, for a wonder, has kept fairly well. I am first class so far as health goes.'³⁰ Lizzie Brown observed that 'Father soon cast off his worried looks. The sea seems to cast a magic spell over him.... I shall be glad to be settled on the little island of Nusa Zonga and get to work' on the

28 Lydia Brown to Johanna Fellmann, 7 March 1905.

29 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 August, 4 October 1905.

30 Brown, Letter, 10 July 1905, in the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 August 1905.

book.³¹ Before they moved on beyond the last place of regular contact with the rest of the world, at Gizo, Brown wrote, 'I feel so thankful that there is no cable or telephone in the Solomons. I hope to appreciate them by and bye, but not now. I hope to get to work on my book next week. That is going to be my work every day I hope until the yacht [the *George Brown*] arrives.'³²

The Browns, father and daughter, settled on the little island of Nusa Zonga and a pattern of writing began. 'I keep pretty steadily at work every morning and so I am making very fair progress. Of course a good deal of time is taken up with sorting out my papers and reading up old books, letters etc to refresh my memory.'³³

Lizzie Brown was relieved that the island in the Roviana Lagoon was so small that her father could not escape far from his task, although he usually found time for a sail at sunset. Distractions were few and so he could report to Danks, 'You will be glad to know that we have got on remarkably well with the book. We have, I am sure, done twice as much as we should have been able to do at Gordon.'³⁴ When a canoe or other small craft was available he made the crossing to the large island of New Georgia to visit the developing site of the mission at Kokenggolo. A mission house had been built on a hill overlooking the Lagoon. Children were being attracted to the mission and one day Brown and Lizzie witnessed about sixty children and youth delighting in a grand Sports Day, complete with swimming and diving races and an excited tug of war.³⁵ Ray Rooney and John Goldie were full of hope for the future despite many challenges. They had decided late in 1904 to expand their borders by stationing Rooney on the island of Choiseul.³⁶ Goldie wrote, 'History may repeat itself here – the history of Fiji, Samoa, New Britain and New Guinea. What God has done in these places he can and will do for the Solomons. My dream is not a wild one.'³⁷

For his peace of mind, it was as well that Brown was not connected to the rest of his work by cable or telephone. Isolated on tiny Nusa Zonga in the Roviana Lagoon, he did not read the letters of complaint that reached the mission office from Fiji, describing the proposed Constitution as the 'tyranny of needless

31 Mary Elizabeth Brown, Letter, 17 July 1905, in the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 September 1905.

32 Brown, letter, 22 July 1905, in the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 September 1905.

33 Brown to Danks, from Nusa Zonga, 7 August 1905.

34 Brown to Danks, in the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 November 1905; *Methodist*, 11 October 1905.

35 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 October 1905.

36 Solomon Islands District Synod resolved on 25 November 1904, 'to include in the bounds of the District the large island of Choiseul, and to constitute it as a separate Circuit,' in the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 April 1905.

37 John Goldie, *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 March 1905.

legislation'.³⁸ Nor was he aware that, to the astonishment of Chairman Small in Fiji, Hannah Dudley had resigned and departed without warning to work for the Bengali Mission in Calcutta, taking seven young Indian girls with her.³⁹ He did not read of the challenges facing their missionary in the Chinese quarter in Cairns; this man commented on the community of Chinese, Singalese, Japanese, Malay and Kanaka residents, a group that 'almost sends a red-hot advocate of a "White Australia" into a fit of convulsions, who longs for a political besom [broom] to sweep the whole thing off the face of the sacred soil of the continent.'⁴⁰ News of the deaths of more of his old friends did not reach him. His focus was on the islands of the Solomons, Neu Pommern and New Guinea. His world had narrowed to the villagers of the lagoon and the memories awakened by his old letters and papers.

Early in September they joined the passing steam ship *SS Moresby* and went on to visit the other regions where he had been a pioneer. By the time they reached the region that had been known as British New Guinea, Lizzie Brown was ill with malaria and the writing project came to a temporary halt. This area was now called Papua, and was under Australian colonial responsibility. Tropical diseases were a significant problem for their mission people in the area. Travelling on to Neu Pommern they were welcomed by the mission staff and other old friends. There was much to encourage Brown, and he reported warmly of Heinrich Fellmann that he 'has done splendid work for the Mission and enjoys the confidence and esteem of both the German officials and the foreign residents and the natives.'⁴¹

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At home in Sydney, Lydia Brown waited until she had her household settled in bed and began a letter to Johanna Fellmann. It had been a very busy day with seven grandchildren to mind and she was weary. She admitted that she had been worried for her husband and daughter but had just heard that they had arrived safely at Dobu. 'I hope we shall now soon see our wanderers home and I hope they will come back with renewed vigour for whatever work may be before them,' she wrote. Lydia wrote of Wallis Danks. Wallis, the baby who had been born to Emma Danks at Kinawanua with such drama in 1880, was now a young man, an ordained minister and had recently gone as a missionary to his birthplace. Lydia wrote,

38 *Methodist*, 2 December 1905.

39 Morven Sidal, *Hannah Dudley: Hamari Maa, Honoured Mother, Educator and Missioner to the Indentured Indians of Fiji 1864–1913*, Suva: Pacific Theological College, 1997, pp. 80–90; the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 September 1905 reported that Miss Dudley had resigned on 24 July and gone to join the Bengali Mission in Calcutta. In time she returned to continue work in Fiji.

40 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 September 1905.

41 *Ibid.*, 4 November 1905.

I want to write and thank Wallis for attending to the graves of my precious children ... give my love to him and thank him from me. It was a sad time for me when I had to see my darlings buried out of my sight, but even that was not so hard as losing my precious Amy in the midst of her usefulness. God's ways are mysterious, but doubtless He will make it plain by and bye and I must not murmur but what grieves me is that I could not have done more to help her with her family, but God knows how willingly I would slave for my dear ones.⁴²

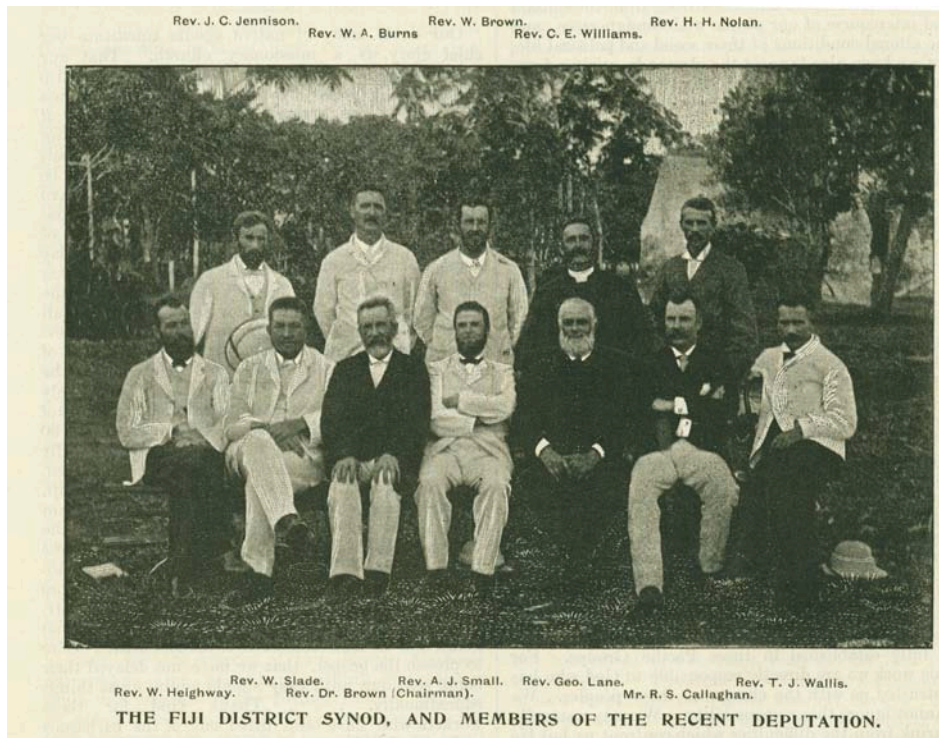


Figure 24. George Brown with visiting deputation and members of Fiji District Synod 1901. Back: C.J. Dennison, W.A. Burns, W. Brown, C.E. Williams, H.H. Nolan. Front: W. Heighway, W. Slade, G. Brown, A.J. Small (Chairman), George Lane, R.S. Callaghan, T.J. Wallis.

Source: The *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, March 1901.

George Brown and his daughter Lizzie arrived back in Sydney early in November with the *Prinz Waldemar*. They had been away for four months. Within weeks Lizzie was able to tell a friend that she 'felt quite well again now and ready to go on with writing the book.'⁴³ Very little work would have been

42 Lydia Brown to Johanna Fellmann, 27 October 1905.

43 Mary Elizabeth Brown to Johanna Fellmann, 22 November 1905.

done on the book at that time, however. Brown discovered that, while he had been happily meeting with other mission staff in the northern island groups, in Fiji many of the Methodist missionary staff members were very unhappy. They objected to the directive of General Conference that the new Constitution for Fiji Methodists must be brought into effect in 1906—which included the right of each Quarterly Meeting to elect a layman as their representative to the Financial District Synod. They had been protesting for at least the past five years that this was premature, and believed that 'a burden was being placed on the shoulders of the missionaries that was well-nigh impossible to be borne.'⁴⁴ Not every missionary in Fiji felt this way, but the men who were not rebelling against the directive were all about to leave Fiji for retirement, furlough or sick leave. The scale of the problem emerged when they attempted to work on the plan for ministerial appointments in Fiji for 1906. A number of Tongan and Fijian Native Ministers had recently died, several Australian ministers were going on leave—and most of the rest announced that they wanted to transfer back to Australia or New Zealand. Their Chairman, A.J. Small, was horrified. He sent an urgent cable to Sydney: 'Station sheet practically blank situation serious strongly advise you summon me Sydney immediately to confer with the Board.' The reply came back: 'Cable main facts of situation.'

Small tried again. It seemed to him that it was imperative that he speak with the Board personally. The steamship *Hauroto* could provide timely passage. This time, on 31 October 1905 he cabled, 'Twelve signed memorial requesting recall self Heighway retiring strongly desire explain matters may I come and return *Hauroto*.'⁴⁵ To his great frustration, the only reply was a cable saying: 'Board awaits mail write fully.'⁴⁶

A week after arriving back in Sydney, Brown attended a very disturbed Board meeting. There was little interest in his latest travel tales. A series of letters had arrived from Fiji, with a Memorial signed by ten men.⁴⁷ They asked to be 'recalled to the Home Work on the grounds that they cannot conscientiously administer that part of the new constitution relating to the admission of Lay Representatives to the Financial District Synod.'⁴⁸ The Board was shocked. They knew that there had always been resistance to the inclusion of Fijian laymen in decision making but they had never dreamed of a mass resignation of staff. The names of the signatories were all familiar to Brown. He had visited them all, been entertained in their isolated homes, laughed with their children and witnessed their good work. They were his friends. To lose so many gifted and

44 *Methodist*, 2 December 1905.

45 Minutes of Wesleyan Methodist Missions Board, May 1898–July 1906, 11 November 1905.

46 *Ibid.*

47 The Memorial to the Board was signed by H.H. Nolan, C. Bleazard, C.O. Lelean, J.C. Jennison, J.W. Burton, W.R. Poole, Wm. Bennett, R.O. Cook, Cyril Bavin and W.T. Butcher.

48 Minutes of Wesleyan Methodist Missions Board, May 1898–July 1906, 11 November 1905.

able people would be a disaster. At one level, George Brown understood their frustration. Memories of his own struggles with the Mission Board had been revived while he had been re-reading his own records of struggles in Samoa and New Britain. Then he had acted according to his own lights and been rebuked by the Board of the day. He knew what it was like to see a local scene very clearly and doubt whether a remote body of men meeting somewhere in a distant city could possibly imagine the issues he was facing. He understood the tension between the island-centred staff and the New South Wales-centred Board, the intimate understanding of a local scene against the long experience of a broad history of a region, the engaged parochial view opposed by an educated wide view. A.J. Small had written that to wait for organic growth was wiser and that ‘to chisel out a new constitution in Sydney may be a fine achievement from a sculptural point of view but it won’t breathe.’⁴⁹ Even so, Brown remained determined to pursue this issue.

The Board struggled, and then did what Boards do. They set up a small sub-committee, including Brown, to try to draft a response.⁵⁰ Repeatedly the sub-committee and the Board met during December. Line by line, clause by clause of their draft was debated, criticised, revised, ripped up and sent back for more work.⁵¹ Finally a much manipulated letter was drafted; it expressed ‘surprise and regret at the attitude of the Brethren ... but after long and painful consideration, it declines to recommend any course which would interfere with the action of the [General] Conference.’⁵² There was a plea for signatories of the Memorial to reconsider their attitudes and postpone their retirements from mission work.⁵³ By now, inevitably, news of the dispute had spread across Methodism in Australasia and everyone had an opinion. It was said that the influence of George Brown on the Board was so powerful that his stubbornness was at the root of the conflict, in effect responsible for forcing good men out of Fiji.

Brown was very distressed. He wrote a long confidential statement for members of the New South Wales Conference. He wrote ‘as an old missionary who loves Fiji and the men who labour there.’ These men, he believed, ‘would never accuse me of seeking to drive them from Fiji.’ He had no wish to be embroiled in controversy, for ‘the subject is too painful, and I am neither able nor willing to bear the strain.’⁵⁴ Almost his entire long ministry had been spent in the service of the mission enterprise and

49 Small to Brown, 8 February 1905, in Wood, *Overseas Missions of the Australian Methodist Church, Vol. 11, Fiji*, p. 280.

50 Minutes of Wesleyan Methodist Missions Board, May 1898–July 1906, 15 November 1905.

51 Ibid. In addition to meetings of the sub-committee, the full Board met to debate the draft on 6, 11, 15 and 18 December 1905.

52 Minutes of Wesleyan Methodist Missions Board, May 1898–July 1906, 18 November 1905.

53 Ibid.

54 Brown, ‘For Members of Conference only.’

during all those years I have always enjoyed the love and esteem of my brethren in the mission field, and though the brethren in Fiji deplore the action taken by the General and Annual Conferences which I and others have advocated, I rejoice in the assurance that I retain their love, though they cannot all accept my judgement on this important matter. But with advancing years I cannot any longer endure and bear the pain to which I have been subjected. Letters are being sent from another State to myself personally and to ministers of our Church, in which, as stated publicly 'the most scandalous statements' are made against me, in which I am charged with being solely responsible for the action taken by the Conferences, with driving our missionaries out of Fiji and other similar charges. These charges I indignantly deny.⁵⁵

He continued that no one could say that the process had been hasty. The issue in regard to Fiji had now been brought to five annual Conferences and two General Conferences, with three deputations visiting Fiji, since 1900. Point by point, he argued against the objections of the missionaries in Fiji. He saw little sign of any preparation for future self-government. He could not believe that in a Church that had been established for seventy years and had thousands of Fijian lay preachers, catechists and teachers that not a single reputable lay person could be found who could be nominated; if that were so it would be 'the most serious reflection which has ever been made on the value of our work in Fiji, and on the labours of the noble men and women who have laboured there, and I for one would bow my head in shame if I believed it to be true.'⁵⁶

He saw the inclusion of laymen in decision-making as an act of justice and essential for the health of their work in Fiji, and although he recognised the need for training in the principles of self-government and self-support and believed that the Fijian Church would need missionary leadership for some years yet, 'I do, however, contend that a beginning should be made ... and that it should be done at once.'⁵⁷ In the rapidly changing context of Fiji at the beginning of a new century, the risks were too great if they delayed. He concluded that in his opinion the best policy to pursue in Fiji

is that we should make our Church in Fiji the Church of the people of Fiji, that the people should feel that they do not belong to the church of the missionaries or of the people of Sydney or Australia, but that they and their Church in Fiji form part of the great universal Church of Christ, and that they are responsible to God for its continued success.⁵⁸

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55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

There were days, as the new year of 1906 began, when George Brown felt old and tired. It was not just that he had marked his seventieth birthday in December, or that people sometimes referred to him as the ‘venerable General Secretary’ or that his whiskers and hair, once gingery, were snow white. He felt that there were so many weights on his shoulders, so many signs of instability in his work, so many disappointments. Despite their best efforts and the most heart-felt appeals, the response to the major appeal for funds had been disappointing. Acting-General Secretary Benjamin Danks put the situation bluntly, ‘Is our Church staggering under a burden it ought not be called upon to carry, or is she evidencing a degree of inattention to her call that is blameworthy?’⁵⁹

Almost every region where they had mission work was going through periods of significant social change and stress. Even the most committed of the mission staff were often forced to resign because of illness.⁶⁰ Many of the women missionaries whom he had championed were finding that the rigours of a tropical climate, or the equally debilitating effects of unhappy relationships in an isolated community, were too much for them and were giving up. There were complaints from discontented staff about conditions.⁶¹ Although the disgruntled men in Fiji had chosen to delay their retirement from the field after all, the problems there still festered. The many Board meetings were often stressful. George Brown still retained his love for the work of mission, and when invited to speak publicly it was reported that this ‘worthy father’ had kept his audience ‘at the one moment convulsed with laughter, and the next brought to the soberest consideration of the claims and necessities of our work.’⁶² Even so, there were times when discouragements cast a cloud over his usual optimism. The idea of retirement was beginning to appeal. Danks was doing a fine job as Acting-General Secretary. Brown’s contemporaries were dying and a new generation was taking their place, men and women who were more familiar with a legendary old man than with the human George. He had lost none of his relish for life but was anxious to complete his book, to write on other themes, to travel beyond the Pacific and to spend more time on his keen interest in the scientific world.

He had seriously underestimated the time it would take to write his book. There were so many distractions and other responsibilities. There was also an immense archive of documents that he had created over the years. He wavered between writing a history of Methodist missions in the Pacific, a compilation of observations on Pacific culture or an autobiography. On what matters would it be best to keep silent? The manuscript was already becoming longer and longer,

59 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 5 March 1906; Annual Report of Mission.

60 *Ibid.*

61 Minutes of Wesleyan Methodist Missions Board, May 1898–July 1906, 6 October, 7 November, 5 December 1906.

62 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 April 1906.

and very unwieldy, though far from complete. With some embarrassment he asked Conference for a second year of leave to complete the work and, with some reluctance, leave was granted.⁶³

* * *

The year 1906 was a year of natural disasters. Bushfires roared across New South Wales.⁶⁴ Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions of catastrophic proportions shook San Francisco, Italy, Tonga and New Zealand.⁶⁵ In Samoa a volcano on the island of Savai'i was erupting again and molten lava was slowly pouring down toward the eastern coast near Saleaula, engulfing villages, farms and plantations in its path. The house that George had built of stone in Saleaula in 1868 was now deeply embedded in a barren waste of lava some ten feet deep. Villagers had been forced to flee as the lava moved on out across the beach, out as far as the reef, leaving desolation in its wake and destructive waves to trouble the coastline.⁶⁶ If ever Lydia Brown considered visiting again any of her former homes in Samoa, Tonga or New Britain, she decided against it. Almost every home where she had once lived was now gone; collapsed, demolished and relocated or engulfed by lava. Her good friend Emma Danks had recently travelled back to New Britain to visit her son Wallis. Lydia was happy for her. Emma wrote that she was 'enjoying myself immensely. It is a great treat to be here, and to see some of the boys and girls of our day, now men and women with their children around them; living good lives themselves and working for God. We sowed in tears but see what a good harvest has been gathered in.'⁶⁷

For herself, Lydia knew that she would never go back. As a very private person, she may have been surprised to see her own portrait in the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, her smooth hair still quite dark in the simple style she had worn since she was a bride and her soft grandmotherly features framed in the lace yoke of her dress. As Acting-General Secretary, Benjamin Danks had done what her husband could not have done and written a public appreciation of the woman who had nurtured him and his wife through the loneliness, illness and grief of their first years in the islands. Although, he said, Dr. Brown was widely known and valued,

His good wife, one of the most unassuming and modest of women, is not so generally known. Those, however, who have been honoured with her friendship realise what a Mother in Israel she is, and know that by her patient self-forgetfulness and her strong, willing endurance of

63 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 August 1906.

64 *Methodist*, 13 January 1906.

65 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 September 1906.

66 *Ibid.*, 4 May 1906.

67 *Ibid.*

hardships for the Master's sake, she has strengthened and cheered her husband in his great work ... the story of her life there and the suffering she had to bear has yet to be written ... she is greatly respected and loved by all who know her.⁶⁸

Several factors worked together to help George Brown to decide to announce his retirement. On the one hand he found himself embroiled in a war of words with the Bishop of Melanesia, Cecil Wilson, over boundaries. The Bishop was not happy. In the Solomon Islands John Goldie's action in establishing his colleague Ray Rooney on the island of Choiseul and purchasing land for a mission property on the northern atoll of Ontong Java gave offence.⁶⁹ From the Bishop's vantage point this was a sign that the Methodists were not keeping to their boundary agreement and was 'an abominable breach of trust.'⁷⁰ A stiff letter from the Bishop to Brown 'requesting that the doctor should definitely define the limits of our Missionary work,' was discussed at a Board meeting just after Christmas 1906. Brown offered his response and had the support of the Board, but it was clear to him that serious questions still lingered in their minds. It would be resolved in the end, particularly as the Melanesian Mission was unable to provide enough workers to establish their own work there, but not without tension.⁷¹ The other major issue facing the Board at that time was the unhealed sore over lay representation in Fiji. Seven years after the question had first been raised, they were still arguing. In 1907 the matter was still a live issue and would be for years to come.⁷² The Board itself was deeply divided over how to proceed. The best they could do was to urge the Fiji District 'to consider the whole question of the extension of self-governing powers and self-sustaining responsibilities of the Fiji Methodist Church' and report in three years time.⁷³ It was exhausting and dispiriting. Brown was wearying of fighting the same battles year after year. He believed that he had other work to do before he faced his own end.

Two months later the Reverend Dr. George Brown presented the Board with notice of his retirement. He intended to finish his work as General Secretary at General Conference in June 1907.⁷⁴

68 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 5 November 1906.

69 *Ibid.*

70 David Hilliard, *God's Gentlemen: A History of the Melanesian Mission 1849–1942*, St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978, p. 138.

71 Alan R. Tippett, *Solomon Islands Christianity: A Study in Growth and Obstruction*, London: Lutterworth, 1967, p. 358.

72 William E. Bennett, 'Fiji,' in *A Century in the Pacific*, ed. James Colwell, Sydney: William H. Beale, 1914, pp. 439–506, p. 474.

73 Minutes of Wesleyan Methodist Missions Board, 1906–1909, 22 February, 25 February 1907.

74 Minutes of Wesleyan Methodist Missions Board, 1906–1909, 17 April 1907.



Figure 25. Lydia Brown 1906.

Source: The *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 5 November 1906.