

# Chapter 14

## On Writing a Biography of William Pritchard

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Biography offers a unique opportunity to resist the generalisations and stereotypes spawned by older, positivist historical schools of thought and more recent theory-based postcolonial approaches. The relatively small scale and specific nature of biographical inquiry avoids the grand themes and pronouncements that lead to the propagation of radical generalisations, whether conservative or liberal, on large-scale topics such as imperialism and colonialism. It offers the opportunity to concentrate on historical specificities, local histories, and individual stories. Such is the case in my study of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century British Consul, William Pritchard, who was born in Tahiti in 1829 and served in Samoa and Fiji before being fired, following a Commission of Inquiry that I show to have been little more than a kangaroo court. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said advocates ‘studying the map of interactions, the actual and often productive traffic occurring on a day-by-day, and even minute-by-minute basis among states, groups, identities’.<sup>1</sup> Nineteenth-century archives can produce (surprisingly, perhaps) this kind of excitement, for a careful reading of memos and letters going to and from the Colonial Office, for example, gives one a sense not only of the slowness of communications, but also of the immediacy of discussion once a document arrived or was in preparation. Minutes scrawled on letters, sometimes by more than one person, and dates attached as documents passed from person-to-person, all evoke a sense of immediacy and sometimes of the character of those involved. We don’t see the people, but we see their writing and we read their observations and decisions. This is why I included not just portraits of key people involved in Pritchard’s career, but also their signatures. It is a gesture not just to them, but to the archives as well.

Many often-heard assumptions about imperialism, missionaries, and relationships between Europeans and Pacific Islanders become more complicated when seen in the context of Pritchard’s life. For example, among those with imperial ambitions in the mid-century Pacific Islands was Tonga’s King George Tupou; conversely, the British government, at the urging of the Colonial Office, rejected offers of cession from Fiji and deflected requests for protection from Tahiti and Samoa. In the Colonial Office, Permanent Under-Secretary Fredric

Rogers, remembering the lessons of the American Revolution, believed independence, with its attendant loss of investments, to be inevitable, and he was unenthusiastic about new colonial ventures. Pritchard brought samples of high quality cotton from Fiji; this was of great interest to merchants in Manchester, but it left Rogers unmoved. The on-going Maori Wars and his personal resistance to the idea of European settlers moving into Fiji further strengthened Rogers' scepticism, despite vigorous support for the cession of Fiji from high naval officers such as Admiralty Hydrographer Captain John Washington who saw in cession the possibility of better defending the shipping lanes between the goldfields of Australia and Britain.

Pritchard, backed by the authority of Cakobau, spent most of 1859 in London, working in the Foreign Office (FO), and he had extensive written communication with the Colonial Office (CO) over a still longer period. My archival work on Pritchard's interactions with the FO and CO over the proffered cession of Fiji makes clear the paradoxical reality of Rogers as an anti-imperialist (or at least a sceptical imperialist) in the Foreign and Colonial Offices. It also makes plain that these government offices benefited from the large talents of a number of permanent officials, including Rogers and his immediate predecessor, Herman Merivale, who seemed inclined to recommend accepting the offer of cession when a change in government and Merivale's move to the India Office altered the state of play. Both Merivale and Rogers won firsts at Oxford and were impressive on many fronts. Rogers was one of the founders of the *Manchester Guardian* newspaper. These were talented and able men who often worked for ministers who spent little time on the job. On a lower level, some of the 'dispatch-reading draft-writing heads of departments' took their work seriously, but others 'were gay and frolicsome spirits who came late, strutted from room to room, had brandy and cigars, flourished their crested sleeve-links, and left early to dress for my Lady Angelina's "at home", or to dance at the Honorable Miss Emily Evening's ball'.<sup>2</sup>

For missionaries and Pacific Islanders too, the reality that emerges from Pritchard's story is one in which the stereotype of the missionary as a cross-culturally inept imperialist is challenged time and time again. In the post-colonial and secular world of many writers and critics, the motives and impact of the missionaries are often dismissed with something like contempt, but to understand this phase of history we must understand not only the missionaries—who were diverse in background, education, commitment, and effectiveness—but also the people of the Islands, who, with a few violent exceptions, allowed the missionaries to stay and eventually decided to embrace the new religion. The story becomes more interesting, not less, if we take both missionaries and Islanders seriously and look at them with a critical but less cynical eye. Several contemporary historians have made a similar point, including Andrew Porter, Jane Samson, and Greg Denning.

If the Wesleyan missionaries in Fiji were blazing the trail for Empire, they certainly went about it in a diffident and unconvincing way. The Anglican Bishop of New Zealand, George Selwyn, influenced Commissioner Smythe to oppose the Cakobau/Pritchard attempt at cession, and Smythe received the same message from John Binner and other missionaries in Fiji itself. Even before he reached New Zealand and Fiji, Smythe met Sir William Denison, the Governor of New South Wales, who also expressed concern over attempts to attract settlers to Fiji. Why was there such opposition? A desire to avoid disputes over land, such as were wracking New Zealand; a desire to avoid too much government (read 'Anglican') interference in Wesleyan and other nonconformist missionary activities; and concern over the political influence and religious ecumenicalism of Consul Pritchard each played their part, but, whatever the cause, the story certainly complicates any stereotypical vision of the missionaries as stalking horses for builders of Empire. Other questions also arise: we might well ask why the missionaries persisted (of course, many didn't) when in some cases—as in Tahiti—for so long they enjoyed no success. Why did their Polynesian hosts put up with them for all this time? And why did the missionaries ultimately succeed in converting their hosts—or, to use Lamin Sanneh's terms, how and why did individual Polynesians discover Christianity and eventually embrace it? Sanneh writes mostly about Africa, but when he says that he prefers to speak of the '*indigenous discovery of Christianity* rather than the *Christian discovery of indigenous societies*',<sup>3</sup> his words resonate powerfully in the context of Oceania as well. Conversion did not come quickly in most cases, and it did not come without serious deliberation among the local people.

For 40 years, the missionaries worked in a Fiji under the protection of chiefs and their communities, and the eventual colonisation of the islands by Britain in 1874 was certainly not the result of a long campaign by missionaries or London civil servants to achieve this end. Throughout the South Pacific, the power of the missionaries, traders, and other foreigners was limited, and their religious and commercial messages to the people of Oceania were embraced with greater or lesser enthusiasm depending on how useful they seemed to be to the latter. In Tahiti, Pomare II embraced Christianity slowly and this hesitation was returned by the missionaries, most of who continued to be appalled by Pomare's private behaviour and stalled on accepting him for baptism. Pomare was astute, however, choosing his moment and using his alliance with Henry Nott and other missionaries to his political and commercial advantage. For a few years after 1815, when Pomare triumphed in battle over his enemies and was baptised, something akin to a 'missionary kingdom' prevailed in Tahiti, with Nott and others helping to draft laws that were in some respects politically liberal but socially oppressive; this situation persisted after a fashion, but when Pritchard was growing up bilingual in Tahiti (he was born there in 1829) he was subject, like other missionary children to Tahitian influences that were at least as strong

as his English ones; in his memoir he remembers thinking of himself as Tahitian as well as English, and sometimes preferring the former.<sup>4</sup> Neither the vulnerability of traditional cultures nor the influence of Europeans should be exaggerated in discussions of the social impact of the Pacific missionaries and later colonial officers. Albert Wendt, the Samoan writer, has rejected the label of Pacific Islanders being 'hapless victims and losers' in their contact with imperial Europeans, instead celebrating the 'marvelous endurance, survival and dynamic adaptation' that he sees around him.<sup>5</sup>

In Samoa and in Pacific histories, Malietoa Vainu'upo<sup>6</sup> is widely acclaimed as the crucial first contact for John Williams in 1830 and thereafter the guarantor of the safety of the Polynesian missionary teachers who stayed after Williams left and the British missionaries who arrived some years later. Malietoa, however, was always cautious and pragmatic about the new religion, and my most recent research finds his role in the conversion of Samoa to be paradoxical and worthy of reassessment. In each of these examples, it is clear that the chiefs, far from being manipulated by the missionaries, were able to use the outsiders and the *lotu* (church) to their own advantage. In Samoa, Malietoa's monopoly on the teachers was short-lived, partly because other *matai* would not tolerate such exclusivity. No cynicism is implied here; as was suggested above, this was largely a Samoan process, and today, it is interesting to note that Samoan theologians, commonly seen as being traditionalist and conservative, are also drawing on traditional *fa'a Samoa* values to put the weight of Samoan religiosity behind a push for ecological integrity, women's rights, and more.<sup>7</sup>

Telling Pritchard's story necessitated a lot of archival work, in part because almost nothing was known about his personal life, even by family descendants, and the only way to find him was through his personal writings and through the archives—the National Archives, the School of Oriental and African Studies, and British Library, all in London; the Turnbull Library and National Archives in Wellington; the Mitchell Library in Sydney; the National Library and more in Canberra; the Fiji Archives in Suva; and more in Samoa, the USA, and elsewhere. Such research, of course, gives great pleasure and calls for appreciation and gratitude for archives and archivists alike. In addition, I was able to draw on the family knowledge of today's Pritchard *aiga*, living in New Zealand, the Samoas, Australia, England, and the USA. This contact was of enormous importance, for I received nothing but encouragement from the family, and the few private documents that exist relating to William Pritchard (including two photographs) were made available to me. I'm grateful for this, as I am also for the support of the Austrian South Pacific Society (and their sponsors in turn), headed by Dr Hermann Mückler. Dr Mückler and his team did a splendid job, and their Novara series, subtitled 'Contributions to Research on the Pacific', is in itself a wonderful and much-needed contribution to Pacific research.

Prior to the publication of my work, Pritchard's personal life was the subject of speculation in histories and even in one play, written for and performed at the Pacific Arts Festival in Suva in 1972.<sup>8</sup> Very little was known about Pritchard at that time, and some widely-reported 'facts' turned out to be wrong, including Pritchard's purported death at the hands of American Indians in 1870, as reported in a letter to an English newspaper from Pritchard's friend, the naturalist Berthold Seemann. My scepticism about Seemann's account was based on nothing more than a gut feeling, and so it was a moment of elation when, after several years of searching, I found at Tulane University in New Orleans a 1907 copy of *The Mexican Herald* that carried on its front page Pritchard's obituary; this image, of course, also appears in *Prelude to Empire*. This kind of basic information was missing when I began this project, and so one vital line of research was aimed at filling these gaps. Another breakthrough occurred in the National Archives in Wellington, where I found certificates identifying Pritchard's first wife, a Samoan named Patisepa, and their two daughters, and giving birth dates, marriage date, and Patisepa's death certificate—a treasure trove! A few years later, friends in Samoa were able to find and show me Patisepa's burial place—an emotional moment of a different kind. What I couldn't do was describe what Patisepa looked like or even why she died so young—the consular death certificate reads 'affection of the brain', but medical experts tell me that this was a generic term used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Pritchard himself was elusive too, but three images exist, including the two photographs mentioned above and an engraving in Pritchard's *Polynesian Reminiscences* in which he is on board HMS *Pelorus* with Cakobau, Mata'afa, Captain Seymour and others. These figures are not identified in Pritchard's book, and so it gave considerable satisfaction to determine who they were—more detective work! Pritchard writes virtually nothing about Patisepa in his memoir and never even gives her name. What does the biographer do with such blanks, and is speculation legitimate? Is Patisepa's absence from Pritchard's writing evidence of a hard heart? It seems unlikely, as he had delayed taking up his appointment to Fiji during her illness and, when Patisepa died, Pritchard took their daughters with him to Fiji, first securing land for them in their Samoan grandparents' villages. I found the record of this land transaction at the National Archives in Wellington, and it is worthy of note that the agreement states explicitly that Pritchard himself was not a beneficiary; Patisepa's family and Pritchard were aware of the possibility of foreign involvement in Samoa and the possible threat to land ownership, and this land was strictly for the daughters. Perhaps Pritchard found it too painful to write about Patisepa—an opposite but equally speculative suggestion. Curiously, Patisepa is not mentioned in the Mexican obituary either. What we do know from Pritchard's own accounts and those of others is that he was 'a tough guy' (to quote a family source) who knew how to use his fists, who loved to hunt and fish with his Samoan friends, who

was linguistically talented and politically adept, who studied and relished the genealogical relationships and political intrigue of the Samoans and Fijians, who tried to establish a reading room in Levuka, and who married three times—to Patisepa, who was Samoan, to Ellen Fanny Glover, who was English, and to Guadalupe Ramirez, who was Mexican. He was massively sociable and energetic, and appears to have had a very wide range of friends and acquaintances from all segments of society in Samoa and Fiji, and was familiar too with the more transient or occasional visitors such as naval officers and their crews, whalers, and traders. He travelled extensively, and we often get a taste of his exuberance, as when he climbs the pyramid of Cheops in Egypt on his first journey to England from Fiji, when he describes a fight in Samoa and in his excursions into the interior of Viti Levu with his friend Seemann.

In writing *Prelude to Empire*, I found that an accumulation of fragments was enough to reveal the person outlined above. Even those who contrived to bring him down, such as James Calvert and Colonel Smythe, acknowledged Pritchard's political skills, and his religious tolerance infuriated the fiercely anti-Catholic Calvert and other Wesleyans. The fact that the Fijian chiefs gave Pritchard 'the full, unreserved, entire, and supreme right, authority, and power to govern Fiji' upon his return from England in 1859 surely reflects a remarkable level of trust and confidence, perhaps even astonishing, given the fact that Pritchard at that time had spent only a few weeks in Fiji. Of course, the acceptance of Cakobau's offer of cession was probably expected, and some have accused Pritchard of bullying, but it is hard to imagine the chiefs acting as they did unless they had decided that Pritchard could deliver things that they wanted, such as the renunciation of Tongan claims in Fiji. In this, they were not disappointed. Pritchard, with no force at his disposal unless the navy happened to be making a visit, and with only the slowest of communications with London, decided to act when he believed action was warranted, as in the Macuata War, when Ma'afu came close to achieving a Tongan-led triumph over Fijian forces allied with Cakobau. His actions got him into trouble with London for 'interfering in native affairs', and his behaviour was certainly unconventional and caused alarm in London, but there can be no dispute over his political and intercultural skills or his personal energy and efficacy. It is also worth stating again that the Fijians, like other Pacific people, were not mere pawns in a game devised by the Colonial Office, Pritchard, or the missionaries. Far from it; they made choices, and these choices were made with their own best interests in mind.

I have not invented any 'conversations' in the biography, and I report only those provided or alluded to by Pritchard or others in the archives and other documents. The story is vivid enough without this, I believe, and it would have introduced an element of fiction running counter to the intention of this particular work. Instead, I have allowed Pritchard's voice to be heard through extensive quotation from his own writings. Sadly, no personal letters appear to

be extant, but there is plenty of official correspondence, a few articles written in England and Mexico, and, of course, his book, *Polynesian Reminiscences*, which was completed by Seemann from Pritchard's notes after the latter left England for Mexico. Frustratingly, I have not found these notes, despite my approaches to Pritchard family members and archives in many places, including Seemann's native Germany.

More productively, the various archives provided detailed information about Pritchard's professional life. The National Archives at Kew (London)<sup>9</sup> were, of course, the principal source, and here I found not only the correspondence that passed to-and-fro between the Pacific and London, but also the minutes of Pritchard's trial<sup>10</sup> in Fiji. A close reading of these minutes revealed the flimsy, sometimes farcical, nature of the evidence against him, and this, along with other sources, led me to conclude that Pritchard was badly treated and that he was the victim of a campaign against him. The machinations of the people involved in London and Fiji are apparent in the documents that survive, and they presented me with the evidence that achieves what Pritchard failed to achieve in 1863, the restoration of his reputation; it is a long-delayed piece of justice. The principal villains of the piece, if they can be so-called, were undoubtedly Calvert and Smythe, but others also played their part. Some were traders who had disputes with the consul, but in the complicated finances of the day, when barter and exchange were common, commodities often substituted for money, and money itself could be 'Spanish' dollars (actually Mexican), American dollars, or pounds sterling, disputes were inevitable. More troubling were the decisions by the government auditors, Arbuthnott and Davis, to disregard almost everything that could have exonerated Pritchard, and the even more egregious behaviour of the members of the Commission of Inquiry, who are revealed in their own minutes to be unreliable. Illustrating the truth of Said's remark, quoted earlier, about the rewards of studying 'day-by-day and even minute-by-minute' interactions, is the clear evidence of a conspiracy against Pritchard, including the passing along from Colonel Smythe to T.H. Farrer at the Board of Trade and then to Sir James Murray at the Foreign Office of the idea that no correspondence from the accused should be taken in evidence at the Commission of Inquiry because Pritchard was 'amazingly plausible on paper'.<sup>11</sup> This phrase passes *verbatim* from man to man.

On the other hand, naval officers such as Commodore Seymour; the American Consul, Dr Isaac Brower; many Levuka traders, such as Frederick Hennings; and some missionaries, including the Reverend William Moore, offered favourable comments on the consul's behavior and character, and, as noted above, even his enemies, such as James Calvert, acknowledged Pritchard's skills and impact in the political sphere, especially with regard to Tongan involvement in Fiji. In weighing such a range of commentary, one comes to some conclusions about the man himself and also about the people and institutions around him. While the

actions of many were reprehensible, others, such as Sir Frederic Rogers (later Lord Blachford), were intellectually and professionally impressive. The multi-talented naturalist Berthold Seemann was, of course, Pritchard's friend, and he offered, belatedly, a ringing protest at the way the consul was treated. Similarly, the literature on William Pritchard shows divisions between admirers and critics, the strongest admirers including Ronald Derrick, who described Pritchard as 'a sincere friend of the Fijian people at a period when friends were few'.<sup>12</sup>

I chose Pritchard as a subject because I liked his story in *Polynesian Reminiscences*, and because, like him, I had worked in Samoa and Fiji and was thus able to imagine what he and others described. I also found the period endlessly surprising. It is post-contact but pre-colonial, and everything was in a state of flux. The Europeans, through their illnesses, had inadvertently brought demographic calamity in their wake, and trade, money, alcohol, firearms, evangelism, and literacy all introduced, for better or worse, new realities into the Pacific world. Rumours of imperial designs on Samoa and Fiji were not uncommon, but the fact is that Samoa and Fiji were independent political entities at this time, and in all matters of significance, including trade and religion, it tended to be the chiefs, not the foreigners, who called the shots. In this context, the career of William Pritchard in Fiji is perhaps even more interesting because of its exceptionality, but his authority in some ways came from the chiefs more than from London. This is what eventually led to his dismissal.

A close look at Pritchard's life reveals that ending the Tongan threat to Fiji was both Pritchard's most important achievement and the immediate cause of his downfall, for 'interfering in native affairs'. It also reveals the influence of the evangelical revival in England in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that produced a successful anti-slavery movement and also a paternalistic but still important desire to protect the Islanders from aggression, exploitation and, later, 'blackbirding' and other abuses. The evangelical belief in the common origins of humankind complicated the missionary response to even the more egregious realities of life in some of the islands, such as infanticide and cannibalism. Revulsion pulled one way, but a sense of common humanity and their belief in the universal possibility of redemption pulled the other. Naval officers, as Jane Samson describes,<sup>13</sup> while not always averse to shelling villages in retribution for perceived 'crimes', did so rarely; they frequently sided with the local people in disputes with European traders and other residents, and one of their tasks was to deter the colonial ambitions of other powers who threatened the independence of the various groups. The children of the early missionaries, including Pritchard, grew up at home in Tahiti, Samoa, and elsewhere; many of them married locally and their descendants remain there today, as is the case with Pritchard's older brother, George, and his wife, Atalina. If Pritchard's

daughters had lived, Pritchard might well have had direct descendants in Samoa today, but, as young children, they drowned at sea in a hurricane, and his two sons by his second wife appear to have no living descendants. Pritchard's losses make a mournful list: two daughters drowned as children; one wife dead from 'affection of the brain' and another from post-natal complications; and a career that ended in public and unjust disgrace. But his life was also social, exuberant and well-lived. It makes a good story.

My interest in Pritchard was reinforced, as noted above, by its parallels in geographical terms with my own experience, but I soon discovered that the realities of his life, and those of others in the political and social worlds of the period, offered a stark and enticing challenge to widespread preconceptions connected with race relations, imperial ambitions (and lack thereof), missionary motives and behaviour, and the lives of Victorians. The stereotypical stuffy colonel certainly bears a striking resemblance to William James Smythe, but people such as Seemann and Pritchard are very different, as are the beachcombers and traders. European residents liked to identify a 'King' or 'Queen' from among the local chiefs, but strong parallels with European lineages and monarchs were few and far between. In Samoa, for example, rivalries and a tradition of decentralised authority soon dissipated Malietoa's monopoly over the distribution of missionary teachers (a decentralisation reinforced on his deathbed by Malietoa himself, who forbade the future accumulation of certain titles by a single person). Ironically, the more centralised monarchies, such as existed in Tahiti, proved ultimately less successful than Samoa in resisting foreign occupation and securing again their independence. One sees in stories such as Pritchard's the emergence of the modern world, where lives are lived in places of transition and intermingling—'on the beach', so to speak. What could be more modern and surprising than the three wives of the Victorian tearaway-turned-gentleman, William Pritchard? There is a grand tradition of Victorian adventurers, male and female, but the intercultural skills and openness of people such as Pritchard are seldom heralded. Similarly, the subtlety and adaptability of Polynesian and Melanesian leaders becomes apparent in this story. Ma'afu had great skills, and he and Cakobau both invested in naval power and were shrewd negotiators. Each of these and other leaders in the Pacific were faced with shattering circumstances, with dramatic population decline and social upheaval on a large scale. Individuals, villages, and whole societies made decisions about profound spiritual and material questions, and each created its own blend of change and continuity. The Pritchard story complicates, and sometimes destroys, the conventional wisdom, and it does this through an account that has the weight of hard-won evidence from archival research and the pleasure and enlivening quality of real-life experience.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York 1993), 20.
- <sup>2</sup> William Pritchard, *Polynesian Reminiscences* (London 1866), quoted in Andrew Robson, *Prelude to Empire: consuls, missionary kingdoms, and the pre-colonial South Seas seen through the life of William Thomas Pritchard* (Vienna 2004), 89.
- <sup>3</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Michigan 2003), 10.
- <sup>4</sup> Pritchard, *Polynesian Reminiscences*, 1.
- <sup>5</sup> Albert Wendt (ed.), 'Introduction', *Nuanua: Pacific writing in English since 1980* (Honolulu 1995), 3.
- <sup>6</sup> Other spellings are sometimes used, including 'Vai'inupo'.
- <sup>7</sup> Charles W. Forman, 'Finding our own voices: the reinterpreting of Christianity by Oceanian theologians,' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 29:3 (July 2005), 118.
- <sup>8</sup> Isobel Whippy, *Pritchard*, performed at the South Pacific Festival of Arts, Suva, May, 1972.
- <sup>9</sup> Formerly known as The Public Record Office.
- <sup>10</sup> Formally, a Commission of Inquiry.
- <sup>11</sup> See Robson, *Prelude to Empire*, 137.
- <sup>12</sup> R.A. Derrick, *A History of Fiji* (Suva 1968), 155.
- <sup>13</sup> Jane Samson, *Imperial Benevolence: making British authority in the Pacific Islands* (Honolulu 1998), 130ff.