2. Pacific journeys

Fiji

In 1881 Woodford abruptly left Gravesend and the family business and took a boat to Suva in Fiji to try to establish himself as a collector of natural history specimens that he might sell to museums and collectors back in England. Heath (1974a: 10) finds the decision that brought Woodford to the Pacific to be somewhat of a puzzle and questions why a young man with a possible career in the family business would begin a wandering rootless life in the South Seas. The stories of Pattisson and Jephson only serve to illustrate that the decisions made by young men to seek opportunities abroad were well grounded in their upbringing and their education. Undoubtedly, from Woodford’s diaries, his book and his early journal articles, it was scientific collecting, ethnographic observation and, to some extent, adventure, that were primary motivating factors in his desire to escape the constraints of late-Victorian English life. Indeed it was true that ‘the driving force behind empire-building was rather the export of surplus energy: that the expansion of Britain was the overspill of restless people. For a young man, life in Victorian Britain might seem intolerably dull’ (Hyam 2002: 280). The chance to go overseas, free of family and social ties, could lead to adventure, an opportunity to make money and to see something of the world.

Woodford arrived in Fiji sometime in March 1882 and spent the first year in the islands collecting natural history specimens (Heath 1974a: 11). The colony of Fiji was annexed in 1874 following submission of a report by Commodore James Goodenough and Consul Edgar Layard (Great Britain. House of Commons. Parliamentary Reports 1874a). The first Governor of the Crown Colony of Fiji was Sir Arthur Gordon (later Lord Stanmore) (Newbury 2010: 85–118). The Colonial Office directions to Gordon were that the annexation of Fiji was to be at no cost to the British taxpayer and that he had to make the colony self-sufficient (Sohmer 1984). Under Gordon the colonial government of Fiji set about the preservation of traditional laws and customs and the maintenance of the authority of local chiefs as a way of utilising local communal organisations for the preservation of law and order. The aim was to make alienation of native land by European planters as difficult as possible (Heath 1974b: 85; Newbury 2010: 103). Gordon’s purpose was ‘the more the native polity is retained, native agency employed, and changes avoided until naturally and spontaneously called for’ the less likely it was that the Fijian people would suffer from contact with Europeans. Gordon’s objective was to stabilise a situation of land alienation by European settlement and acculturation that had quickly got out of hand. But this basic doctrine of
ruling through indigenous political structures and elites was itself an artificial structure that implied ‘if one was to rule well, one should not do too much with one’s rule’ (Cooper and Stoler 1989: 616; Heath 1974b: 86). It was adopted in Fiji in order to shelter indigenous society but it was really just rule by compromise for it allowed for a few European officers to command the lives of many local peoples (Newbury 2010: 179–180). Gordon was pompous, theatrical and liked to present himself as ‘chief-like’ (Scarr 1967a: 53). One of his first duties was to have himself installed as a paramount chief by the Bose Vakaturaga, the Great Council of Chiefs (Newbury 2010: 90). He famously wrote: ‘I feel an excessive desire to be eminent … I still most earnestly desire greatness and power’ (Sohmer 1984: 143 quoting from Chapman 1964: 6). Gordon established colonial government by fiefdom where status was paramount. In the Western Pacific the scale of traditional politics was different from Africa. There were no concepts of statehood, not even at local levels, and the alien construction of depersonalised systems of administration, taxation and justice could not be grafted onto the customary body politic. Here British colonialism had no foundation upon which it could build (Macdonald 2001: 93).

Within this rather alien social and political environment, Woodford’s Fijian collecting experiences did not go unnoticed. Details of this first collection of butterflies, presented to the British Museum of Natural History, were reported in the *Annals and Magazine of Natural History* in 1884 (Butler 1884) and, subsequently, the Zoological Society of London published a fuller account of *Lepidoptera*, sub-order *Heterocera* (the larger moths) of Fiji that Woodford had collected on Viti Levu (Druce 1888a; see Woodford papers PMB 1290 Item 4/10). Publication of the details of his natural history collections in the *Annals and Magazine of Natural History* and the *Proceedings* and the *Transactions of the Zoological Society of London* added to the prestige of Woodford’s collecting. The *Annals and Magazine of Natural History* had first published in 1855 the important findings written in Sarawak by Alfred Russel Wallace about species diversity. These journals were seen as official organs of the Natural History Museum in London. The Zoological Society contained important members and Albert Günther, the Keeper of Zoology at the British Museum, received collections from all over the British Empire. The fact that the Woodford collections were well prepared, carefully packed and transported, and came with precise and detailed documentation made them exceedingly valuable. Woodford’s collecting expeditions at Tonbridge School were returning a handsome dividend.

But after a little more than a year of active collecting and travelling throughout Fiji, Woodford found his finances running low and so, in April 1883, he sought a position as a junior clerk in the colonial Treasury under William MacGregor, then the Receiver General and Chief Medical Officer for Fiji who became Administrator of British New Guinea in 1888. Woodford was not happy at the
Treasury, nor it seems was the Treasury particularly impressed with Woodford (Heath 1974a: 12). Life as a ‘grubbing’ clerk in an isolated colonial outpost, even if it were Suva and the headquarters of the Western Pacific High Commission, would have been a tedious routine for someone eager for an outdoors life in the tropics. Seeking paid employment and some adventure away from the confines of colonial Suva, Woodford secured a temporary position as a Government Agent on the labour vessel returning Gilbertese workers back to their homelands.

The Gilbert and Ellice Islands

In Woodford’s archive there is a long and detailed account of the trip he made to the Gilbert (Kiribati) and Ellice Islands (Tuvalu) between 4 March and 22 June 1884 (Woodford papers PMB 1290 Item 1/1). On the trip to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands he acted as Government Agent on the *Patience*, a 40-ton ketch chartered to return home 45 Gilbertese labourers stranded in Fiji. It was also a chance to see more of the Pacific and possibly do some collecting at the same time. This particular group of labourers had been returning from German-owned plantations in Samoa after completing their period of indenture when they were offloaded, on the shores of Malekula in the New Hebrides (Vanuatu), on the pretext of a need for urgent repairs. Their safety as strangers on a foreign shore was seriously compromised so they quickly signed on again as indentured labourers when seen by a passing Fiji bound labour vessel. The colonial administration in Suva refused to accept their new indentures for longer than 18 months so they were returned to the Gilbert Islands from Suva. Under the Moorsom system of marine measurement, one ton multiplied by 100 cubic feet per ton equalled the storage capacity, in cubic feet, of a sailing vessel. The 40-ton *Patience* was a small and crowded boat for such a long cruise in open ocean. In a maximum of 4,000 cubic feet were loaded the 45 labourers and their belongings, the food and belongings for all members of the crew, and the sailing gear. Woodford’s job was to see to the care, accommodation and food of the men—his diary entry notes that he took charge of ‘56 lbs rice and 6 lbs [tinned] beef and some cocoanuts’ for the trip. He was responsible for them on board the vessel and had to make sure that the islanders were landed at their correct home communities (Woodford papers PMB 1290 Item 1/1 Diary 4 March–22 June 1884). The journey took three and a half months to reach the Gilbert Islands more than 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometres) North-northwest of Fiji.

Woodford was keenly observant, perhaps even scientifically so, and his duties on board do not seem to have been onerous. But once in the islands he noted the internecine squabbles between the various island leaders and the mission politics that seemed to dominate Gilbertese life. Interdenominational disputes remained a source of conflict between the missions during the colonial period in
the Gilbert Islands. This was especially so when the power of the unimane, the old men with control over customary power, clashed with the power of the local religious leaders and the central colonial administration (Macdonald 1972: 137). The unimane operated through the maneaba, the meeting house that was the focus of communal social life, a rest house for visitors and a seat of local customary law and justice. However, with missionisation and colonial administration other structures, such as the church and the district office, challenged the power of the meeting house (Macdonald 1972; Maude and Maude 1932: 275, 292). This combination made for a potent mix in a time of great change.

Woodford found the London Missionary Society pastors in control of much of the economic as well as spiritual life of the local people and noted particularly that one ‘despotic’ missionary fined locals for misdemeanours at the exorbitant cost of ten bags of copra priced at £2 (£850 in current values) per misdemeanour. A white trader was similarly fined 900 sticks of tobacco (about 35 pounds weight or 16 kg) by the same missionary for supplying 20 chickens to a passing ship with ill crew (1 pound weight of stick tobacco, that is 26 sticks, cost 2 shillings a pound, the total cost of the fine being £3/10/- or £1,500 in current values). In Woodford’s diary he details the saga of the missionary from Nukunau (Nikunau) who had a weatherboard church built with contributions from the local people using timber imported from Auckland. The church was then demolished and a coral and lime church built in its place. The lumber was then appropriated by the missionary who had canoes built that he rented out to fishermen. The missionary had three houses full of copra that he wanted to trade with the captain of the Patience but Woodford would not agree to the deal (Woodford papers PMB 1290 Item 1/1 Diary 28 April 1884). Woodford had a little respect for local pastors and wrote:

The people have blind faith in them [the pastors] and whatever they tell them they think must be right and the promise of eternal punishment if their commands are disobeyed, is the means by which they work upon the feelings of the people to blindly follow all they are told to do. I have seen now islands wholly christianised semi-christianised and in a state of darkness and all in the same group. The latter are in a very undesirable state. The two former might be very much better off than they are. The [London Missionary] Society say they cannot afford to keep white missionaries here but I think more rigid inspection and more definite instructions to the native teachers would conduce to the benefit of the people. The power of the missionaries here is as absolute as that of any chief in the old days.

(Woodford papers PMB 1290 Items 3/3, 3/4, 3/7, 3/3/1, 1/1 excluding 1/9, 1/1/3).
Missionaries were also able to impose traditional forms of punishment, such as community isolation, to enforce their power. All other islanders were forbidden to have contact with offenders. They and their extended families would have no access to copra buyers, would be excluded from the village cooperative society, and would be denied recruitment in overseas labour migration (Macdonald 1972: 142). Contact with European traders had seen local disputes and warfare become more serious with the introduction of firearms. Traditional occupations like coconut oil production, and more recently copra production, were extended to become the foundation for a cash economy. Plantation labourers repatriated from Fiji and Samoa had brought in new goods, new ideas and with that new religions (Macdonald 1972: 138). And so to voice his opinions Woodford began the first of a series of long detailed letters to his mentor in Fiji, John (later Sir John) Bates Thurston, then the Assistant High Commissioner for the Western Pacific. The first letter, dated 30 June 1884, detailed the fights between the people of Kuria and Aparema (Abemama) in the central islands and those from Nonuti (Nonouti) and Onatoa (Onota) in the southern islands as well as the possible slavery of islanders from Apaia (Abaiaig) and Tarawa in the northern islands. This personal report to Thurston was detailed and perceptive and Thurston had a keen interest in the Gilbert Islands having visited there in the 1860s during his brief experiences as a first mate on a sailing ship.

The Gilbert Islands formally became a British protectorate in 1892 when Captain Edward Davis of the corvette HMS *Royalist* raised the British flag on the islands. The Ellice Islands were declared a British protectorate later the same year by Capt HWS Gibson of the frigate HMS *Curacao*. In 1893 Thurston travelled to the islands on HMS *Rapid* to appoint local tax collectors. The *Queenslander* (30 December 1893: 1253) reported that where ‘no white trader’s services were available some influential nigger was duly installed chief tax-gatherer’ to collect the one dollar per adult male that was meant to support British administration in the islands. In a paper published in *The Geographical Journal* much later in 1895, following the declaration of a British Protectorate over the islands in 1892 and during a time when he was recognised authority of the Solomon Islands, Woodford put his notes and research into the Gilbert Islands into print. Much of the paper consists of detailed examination of the history of contact and the naming of the islands by passing ships’ captains and comparing the local name with the name given by passing explorers and traders. Woodford repeats his opinion that ‘the natives of the islands under the influence of the London Missionary Society are more liable to err from an excessive insistence upon matters of small importance than from a lack of religious zeal, and it seemed to me that there was a demand for more frequent supervision by a white missionary to mould the ideas of the natives in the right direction’, and that ‘the combined direction of the Government and the missions’ would give the islands a ‘bright and prosperous future’ (Woodford 1895: 341–342). In the meantime, Woodford
wrote of his ideas about population decrease following European contact and important notes about material culture. He also came to the conclusion that the Gilbertese islanders were entirely unsuited for indentured plantation labour and this opinion would come to affect his dealings with workers and employers when posted to Samoa as Acting Consul and Deputy Commissioner in 1895. He concluded his paper to the Royal Geographical Society with a detailed natural history examination listing the flora and fauna he observed there in his trip on the *Patience* making special note of the *Coleoptera* (beetles and weevils) and the *Lepidoptera* (moths) he collected and presented to the British Museum of Natural History (Woodford 1895: 345–349; Woodford papers PMB 1290 Items 4/4, 7/20/3, 6/1; Butler 1885; Woodford 1885).

### The Trader’s Yarn

Following the publication of the long scholarly paper on the Gilbert Islands, Woodford submitted a draft of a novella to the firm of AP Watt and Son of Hasting House, Norfolk Street, The Strand, London, originally titled *The Captain’s Yarn: A tale of the South Sea*. The title was later crossed out and the work renamed *The Trader’s Yarn* (Woodford papers PMB 1381/036). The draft was subsequently returned to his sister Mary Jane Woodford in March 1897 having been rejected for publication. Woodford had informed AP Watt and Son that he was the author of *The Naturalist Among the Head-hunters* but requested in his handwriting on the cover page that his name not be used if the draft were accepted for publication. It is understandable that he would not want to be identified with the novella: it is poorly constructed, has little real direct voice, and the reader would have little sympathy with the hero of the story, a young man who worked as a clerk for a merchant house in Auckland and who sought adventure by signing on as supercargo on a small trading vessel going north to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. While the novella was not a success, it is interesting for its historic details and its connection with Woodford. In 1897, when the manuscript was returned to his sister Mary Jane Woodford, Charles Woodford had just been appointed to a permanent position as Resident Commissioner of the Solomon Islands. Woodford had obviously remained interested in the Gilbert Islands long after his first visit on the ketch *Patience* but the draft does not inform the reader of the diverse natural or cultural environment of the islands that would have given the novella some needed colour. The story has some interesting aspects that could have been expanded and embellished but Woodford appears to have rejected any further attempts at writing fiction.

In the short story, the unnamed young trader is accompanied by an Irish first mate, a Scots captain, two Tongan crewmen, and two Portuguese sailors who had deserted from an American whaler. They set sail from Auckland for the Gilber...
where they plan to buy coconut oil for sale back in New Zealand. When they arrive at Onoatoa and Tepetewea in the Gilberts they find the northern islands at war with the southern islands, but at Apamama they find the king ready to trade in coconut oil. As there is not enough oil to buy, the king orders 20 or 30 people be taken to Kuria to make oil there. The captain at first refuses. The trade winds at that time of year were unpredictable and he was anxious about being able to return to Apamama. Eventually 33 men and 12 women are chosen or ordered by the king to go on the trading vessel and it sets off for the island. At Kuria the tender capsizes and the captain is injured. The mate then takes a small canoe ashore to assist the captain and to repair the tender. During this time the main trading schooner drifts out to sea. The young trader, who had never been to sea before and has been left in charge of the vessel, has with him four crew and the Chinese cook as well as 22 men and 10 women from Apamama. The rest of the story concerns the trials of this young man as he attempts to find land again. The ‘natives’ of course mutiny, raid the stores and drink all the water. They bind the trader, the cook and the Portuguese sailors. The Tongans, being ‘natives’, naturally side with the Gilbertese. After the men gradually run out of food they catch a shark and eat it raw and, as the local men die of thirst one by one, the rest cannibalise the bodies. The trader remarks: ‘then ensured the first of those scenes of horror, over which I will draw a veil’. Eventually the vessel is wrecked on the reef of Nonouti but all have died apart from the young trader, the cook, and four natives—three men and one woman. From Nonouti the Gilbertese take the survivors on a large trading canoe to Aranuka, sailing at night guided by signal bonfires. There they find the captain alive. Quickly they find another trading vessel that takes them back to Sydney.

The framework of the novella is obviously based on some personal experiences, but the detail is lacking. It could be expanded into a decent novel of the Pacific, not in the class of Stevenson or Conrad, but acceptable nonetheless. For the audience back in England the horrors that Woodford declined to describe were the very things that would have attracted the reader. Perhaps wisely he relegated the draft to the storage trunk. The value of the story is that it is interesting to read the ideas that were in Woodford’s mind at the time and especially his interest in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands.

‘These beautiful islands’

On his return to Fiji from the Gilbert Islands Woodford did not stay long in the colony. With his first collections of butterflies well received in London and seeing few opportunities for advancement in the colonial service, or perhaps more accurately understanding that his relationship with his superiors was discouraging, he could see a possible career opening as an expert natural
history collector in the Western Pacific. At that time this was a well-tried path to recognition in the natural history world in England. But this time he would focus on a region only briefly visited and largely untouched by science—the Solomon Islands.

In 1885 when Charles Woodford left London on his first expedition to the Solomon Islands, little was then known of the double chain of six main continental islands, 20 smaller ones and over 900 small islets and coral reefs located east of the main island of New Guinea, south of Bougainville and north of the New Hebrides. These islands are located between latitudes 5°–12°S and longitudes 152°–170°E. The total land surface is little more than 27,990 square kilometres (2,799,000 ha). The climate is monsoonal tropical with an average temperature of 26°C and a mean rainfall of 3,000–5,000 mm per year. The heaviest rainfall season is between December and March.

The archaeological record in the islands is complex. Evidence of human use has been found from Pleistocene sites from Island Melanesia: New Britain, New Ireland and Buka in the northern Solomons. The Kilu Cave site on Buka contains deposits of shellfish remains, fishbone and worked shell that have been dated from 32,000 BP to 29,000 BP (Sheppard 2011: 801; Wickler 2001). Taro was used by people who lived in Kilu. It is assumed that parts of the Solomons south of Buka were colonised during the Pleistocene period. From 3,500 BP the Lapita cultural complex, identified by its distinctive elaborate pottery, skilled seamanship, long-distance movement of obsidian and proliferation of the Austronesian languages, appeared in the Bismarck Archipelago. The southern extension of this movement reached through New Ireland, Bougainville and onto the Solomon Islands as far as Santa Ana off Makira (Sheppard 2011: 799–840). At present we know that the northern and western Solomon Islands were settled by Austronesian-speaking and ceramic-producing peoples in the Late Lapita period around 2,600 BP (Sheppard and Walter 2006: 48; Sheppard 2011). There are numerous Lapita sites in the culturally important Roviana and Marovo Lagoons in the New Georgia region where the abundance of resource rich lagoons and large islands facilitated coastal settlement. The more remote south-east Solomon Islands were colonised in the Late Lapita period by peoples who moved from the resource rich Reef and Santa Cruz islands. These outer islands were settled by Lapita colonists who bypassed the main central islands of Malaita and Guadalcanal although the record is still incomplete and the subject of much debate. This suggests that there were direct, long-distance trading relationships between peoples in the Reef and Santa Cruz Islands and the Bougainville Archipelago to the north (Sheppard and Walter 2006: 59). The boundary between these converging movements of people, between Guadalcanal, Malaita and Isabel, is marked by a linguistic division called the Tryon-Hackman Line (Sheppard and Walter 2006: 54).
The 347 inhabited islands are home to a mixture of Melanesian and Polynesian peoples who speak some 67 languages, 44 dialects and one *lingua franca*, Solomons Pijin (Waite and Conru 2008: 13). Today Melanesians constitute 94.5 per cent of the population, with Polynesians at only 3 per cent. In addition there is now a small Micronesian group resettled from Kiribati that forms only 1.2 per cent of the population. The rural population, more than 80 per cent of the people, rely on fishing and subsistence agriculture for food (Solomon Islands Government. National Statistics Office 2011). The main crops grown are sweet potato, cassava, banana, taro, yams, and *pana*. 
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