Introduction

In January 1890 the account of three visits to the Solomon Islands made between 1886 and 1889 by the young English naturalist, Charles Morris Woodford, was published in London, to some critical acclaim, by George Philip and Sons. With a typical late-Victorian eye for romance in the exotic, and an appeal to the vogue for tales of adventure and daring, his publisher called the book *A Naturalist Among the Head-hunters* (Woodford 1890b). In that same year it was published in three editions, one in London, one in Melbourne, and one in New York. For a young traveller’s account and first published book, it is well written, sympathetic to the social and economic conditions of the Solomon Islanders of that time and, even now, is very evocative for anyone familiar with the islands and the people. Publication of the book further emphasised the practical value of scientific observation from the field. Arguments about the relationship between observations made in the field and the scientific theorising made in the study and the museum were endemic in the world of 19th century natural history (Driver 1998: 24). Knowledge from the field was not always to be trusted. For the author, the authority of his exploration depended substantially on the writing of a well-accepted narrative of travel.

Woodford, then 38, listed his professional associations as Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, Corresponding Fellow of the Zoological Society, Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society of Australia, and Fellow of the Linnaean Society of New South Wales. During the course of his travels and work in the Solomon Islands over the next 25 years, Woodford would make collections of over 20,000 natural history specimens for the British Museum of Natural History and give more than 500 ethnological specimens to the British Museum and other major collections (O’Brien 2011). He also left us a substantial archival collection of reports, press cuttings, personal diaries and photographs (Woodford papers PMB 1290 & PMB 1381, PMB Photo 56 & Photo 58). His contribution to the natural history and ethnology of the Solomon Islands is significant and the collections remain unequalled in size and diversity (Tennant 1999: 426). Unfortunately, his botanical, zoological and ethnological contributions to Pacific research remain largely unrecognised.

By the time Woodford published his main book, two descriptive reports of his three trips had been published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society* (Woodford 1888a and 1890c). A short article with six images had been published in the *Illustrated London News*, the world’s first illustrated weekly newspaper (Anon 1889b). A second article with four of those images had been published in the *Popular Science Monthly* (Woodford 1889) a successful American magazine founded by Edward Youmans to disseminate scientific
knowledge to the educated nonprofessional. These papers focussed on the results of the first and second expeditions. The idea that men of science, amateur or professional, should also publish in popular literature was well accepted by the educated public of the late-Victorian period. Publishers with explicit religious credentials or sober academic values, like John Murray, competed with those whose literature was secular, even radical, such as John Chapman and his Westminster Review. Woodford’s book was published at an opportune time. In fact, the Solomon Islands had just been the subject of two long articles in the Westminster Review (Anon 1888a and 1888b). To be taken as an authority on the Solomon Islands, Woodford had laid his ground soundly.

Reviews of his book were numerous. Alfred Russel Wallace, the naturalist considered to be the 19th century’s leading expert on the geographical distribution of animal species, reviewed the book for Nature. While praising Woodford’s writing style in a slightly condescending tone as perhaps a little humorous Wallace did say ‘[t]he book is well got up, well illustrated, and very pleasantly written. It is full of information regards the natives, the scenery, and the natural history of these little-known but very interesting islands, and can therefore be confidently recommended to all who care for books of travel in little-known countries’ (Wallace 1890). In Australia the book was reviewed extensively in the Sydney Morning Herald (19 November 1890), in the Australian Town and Country Journal (26 April 1890: 27), and in the Queenslander (19 April 1890: 757). In England reviews appeared in the Observer (9 May 1890), in the News of the World (24 August 1890) and a number of other regional papers (Woodford papers PMB 1290 Items 9/28 & 9/28/1). Woodford also received a personal letter from Sir William MacGregor from Government House, Port Moresby in late October 1890 complimenting him on the quality and historical importance of his Solomon Islands book (Woodford papers PMB 1381/016b).

Woodford himself wrote ‘[t]hat the Solomon Islands will one day be of great importance to the Australian Colonies I have not the slightest doubt’, and ‘[t]he object of my visit to the islands was neither political nor commercial, but the following pages, while giving some account of the islands and this was to lead to an important career as the first Resident Commissioner of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. He was to remain in that post from 1897 to 1915. Woodford almost single-handedly established the Protectorate, with very little financial or even political support from the British Colonial Office. As one writer has put it, the British Protectorate of the Solomon Islands was established with ‘[o]ne man and sixpence’ (Coates 1970: 220–239). Woodford’s contribution to the establishment of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate is therefore significant. At that time
in the establishment of protectorates, Imperial agents like Woodford were key intermediaries between the colonial authorities and local peoples and settlers. These officials were brokers between two alien worlds. As mediators with local factions and as interpreters of local social and political groupings, they could be wayward, sometimes hard to control, sometimes tactful or blunt implementers of Imperial intentions (Newbury 2010: 1).

As Resident Commissioner, Woodford was in a difficult position. He was both a client of and a broker between the Colonial Office in London and the Western Pacific High Commission in Suva. His personal and professional relationships with senior officials in both agencies often led to difficulties and personal conflicts. Many of these conflicts have been discussed in other work that has considered Woodford’s role as a colonial administrator (Bennett 1987; Heath 1974a and 1978). These studies have been assessments of Woodford’s role in pacification campaigns in the New Georgia Islands and in the controversial waste lands regulations that alienated large areas of land for plantation use with little reference to customary owners and their rights. Colonial government was the politics of compromise. As Newbury (2010: 7) has shown in his careful re-examination of the career of Arthur Hamilton Gordon, Crown Colonies, such as Fiji and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, and Protectorates, like the Solomon Islands, were managed as forms of benevolent tutelage often established following not-so-benevolent military intervention. The Solomon Islands were not occupied by military force in 1893 but in the four decades before annexation the coastal districts of many islands were bombarded by vessels of the Royal Navy Australia Station in reprisal for attacks on white traders and settlers. These ‘acts of war’ were indiscriminate, often careless and while it is difficult to know if many villagers were killed in these actions, much property was destroyed. To local people, the arrival of the Royal Navy was a signal to retreat into the deep jungle. It was also incomprehensible.

Few men have so prophetically determined their future as Woodford, who wrote: ‘I know of no place where firm and paternal government would sooner produce beneficial results than in the Solomons. The numerous small tribes into which the population is split up would render any organised resistance to properly constituted authority quite futile, while I believe that the natives themselves would not be slow to recognise the advantages of increased security to life and property. Here is an object worthy indeed the devotion of one’s life’ (Woodford 1890b: 23fn). In truth, the ‘natives’ did not easily submit to colonial authority. There was long standing resistance to imposed law and order in New Georgia and on Malaita, but despite this, and some justifiable criticism of Woodford’s pacification and land policies, he truly did devote himself to the islands. However, Woodford’s career extended beyond the boundaries of the Solomon Islands. He collected natural history specimens in Fiji and the Gilbert
and Ellice Islands (Kiribati and Tuvalu). He worked briefly with the Western Pacific High Commission and Treasury in Suva and was, for one short trip, a Government Agent on a labour vessel returning indentured workers back to their homes in the Gilbert Islands. He even collected moths on Peel Island in Moreton Bay during an enforced stay when quarantined there during a cholera scare. He lived and worked in the Western Pacific from 1882 to 1915. It was a long, often arduous, career.

Charles Morris Woodford was a product of his time, his class and his background. He was a strong believer in his work and his role in developing a peaceful Solomon Islands within the wider British colonial system. Formal colonialism was a paternalistic system. Both missionaries and colonial officials carried their cultures and perceptions, and by inference their biases, with them. Thomas (1990: 148) wisely wrote that ‘both historians and anthropologists have written as though colonisers had no culture’, for overgeneralising that all Europeans in the Pacific were racist invaders hardly enables one to evaluate the colonial experience faced by local peoples. This book seeks to explain why a man who wrote such a powerful phrase as ‘the devotion of one’s life’ in the margins of a footnote of a book and then spent all his life in fulfilment of that duty.

With the passage of time it is possible to see how Woodford lived his years in Tulagi on the periphery of British colonial developments. In the Solomon Islands he lived not only out of place but largely within a different mode of time. Fortunately, Charles Morris Woodford left us a large and valuable archive of papers, diaries and letters. Reading the actual written pages of the diaries is a thought-provoking experience. These have been available for research for some time (Woodford papers PMB 1290) but only recently have the original archival documents been made more accessible and new material gifted to The Australian National University by the descendants of the Woodford family (Woodford papers PMB 1381 and PMB Photo 56 & Photo 58). It seems a good time to revisit Charles Morris Woodford and his record.

Charles Morris Woodford—the man

What sort of man was Charles Morris Woodford? From the diaries of his early expeditions as a naturalist he appears strong, confident, assured of his place and comfortable in his role as an explorer/adventurer. He was a product of a particular class and society that trained men to see themselves as leaders, as men of authority and position. They were confident of their place in the world. Woodford’s views of the Solomon Islanders would not have been greatly different from his opinions of working-class English or, for that matter, colonial Australians. It matters not now about our opinion of that class of English for in early times this view was unquestioned.
His relationship with his family was formal. At that time, this too was unquestioned. Woodford was the legal and assumed head of his family. He lived apart from his wife and sons for many years, but social convention did not see this as strange. His wife stayed at home in England or Australia, his sons went to boarding school. This was the pattern of normal upper-middle-class family life in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods. The lack of available documentation between Woodford and his family makes it difficult to know more of the personal man but his marriage was long and comfortable and his sons respected their father.

As an administrator he assumed the role as head of his colonial officers. He was in a benevolent and paternalistic position over the local people—and the white traders, merchants, missionaries and beachcombers—who lived in the islands. He wrestled with the formalities of the bureaucracy and, given the burden of the Western Pacific High Commission and then the Colonial Office above that, it is easy to see why he sometimes rebelled. The British colonial structure was both pedantic and parsimonious. Some official correspondence is wonderfully insightful of people and place but much of it is mundane and tedious. Woodford’s health began to fail after 1907 and some of his tendencies to antagonise his superiors date from after that. Woodford was seen by the white settler population as a good administrator. How local people viewed him and his decisions is not recorded.

Those colonial days are now past. We are fortunate to have much of Woodford’s documents and photographs to add to the story of colonial life in the Solomon Islands before the First World War. Charles Morris Woodford gave his working life to the Solomon Islands, just as he said he would when he wrote that there was no other place where firm and paternal government would produce beneficial results as in the islands. He firmly believed that his mission was to bring security of life and property to the peoples of the islands. Having written ‘[h]ere is an object worthy indeed the devotion of one’s life’, he then tried to see his dream achieved. He deserves our respect for trying.

Solomon Islands today

There is, however, a more pressing need than simply academic research. The Solomon Islands are beautiful and dramatic. As an anthropologist I have been fortunate to have been working there since 2005 on various social science research projects, mainly large-scale surveys of social needs assessment. The Solomon Islands, as a nation, is in a difficult rebuilding stage. In late 1998, Guadalcanal freedom fighters, first called the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army and then the Isatabu Freedom Movement, forced the evacuation of more than
35,000 migrant settlers, mostly Malaitans, living in the Honiara area. In response, a rival Malaitan Eagle Force emerged in mid-1999 and staged a coup d’état after combining with elements from the national police. The open conflict between these groups became known as the Tensions. In July 2003 intervention forces, called RAMSI (Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands) composed of military and police from Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific nations, re-established law and order (Allen and Dinnen 2010). RAMSI has now been in the country for more than a decade and this policing component will be there for some time to come. There have been some excellent examinations of the crisis and the intervention, but they are not the focus of this book. The reader interested in the Tensions and RAMSI’s role in the reconstruction is referred to Allen (2005, 2009 and 2011), Dinnen (2002), Allen and Dinnen (2010), Dinnen and Firth (2008), Fraenkel (2004), and Braithwaite et al. (2010). The reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, recently made available despite the government embargo, contain much important information on the nature and extent of the civil unrest, its aftermath and the need to confront the truth as an act of healing (Solomon Islands Government. Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2012).

The civil unrest had strong historical roots despite being labelled ‘ethnic violence’ in the media. In fact internal conflicts are often the culmination of actions precipitated by a social environment structured in the past (Solomon Islands Government. Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2012: 27). The fighting between Malaitan and Guadalcanal groups was exacerbated by economic disparities that bred social and economic deprivation, especially in rural areas. The many-layered social and cultural context in which Melanesian land and resource use are constructed are entangled in ‘historical articulations of resistance against a foreign state that is perceived as lacking local legitimacy’ (Allen and Dinnen 2010: 308). This resistance is especially true in Malaita. Internal migration to the largest town, Honiara, by people seeking a better life led to the growth of large squatter settlements and illegal buying and selling of customary land. In-migration is inherently destabilising and has led to personal violence and anger between different cultural groups. The result was collapse of political legitimacy and virtual bankruptcy of the state. Restoration of law and order is only part of a larger picture. State building is centred on three pillars: law and justice, economic governance, and machinery of government. These are worthy goals but once again the West is seen to be imposing neo-liberal ideas of development, law enforcement and procedural justice and economic restructuring that assumes that ‘Western-derived notions of “best practice” are inherently superior to any others’ (Allen and Dinnen 2010: 318). Liberal peace serves to divorce conflicts, especially those in developing countries with a multiplicity of cultural and social subgroups, from the social context of the disharmony and deprivation.
This island-based deprivation was partly a result of resource availability, or lack thereof, and the suitability of land that could be used for plantation development. This disparity had its foundation in the early colonial period when the people of the Solomon Islands became divided into the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’. Those from the west, particularly Guadalcanal and New Georgia, were able to grow produce on their lands and sell it to traders and planters. They were the ‘haves’. Those people from the east, notably from Malaita but also from other outer islands, had little choice but to sell their labour, firstly to recruiters who took men to the sugarcane fields of Queensland and Fiji, and then to planters in the west. These men, mostly Malaitans, became the principal wage labourers (Allen 2009). They became the ‘have-nots’. This created elements of class tension among peoples and led to distrust, enmity and struggle by some Malaitans. They actively rejected pacification by the colonial administration and Christianity brought in by missionaries before the arrival of colonial rule. The act of British colonialisation imposed laws and values that were alien to the fragmented, culturally diverse peoples of the islands. At the time of colonialisation in 1893 the British Protectorate would have had only about 100,000 people speaking over 65 languages. Figures published by the Special Lands Commission in 1957 note that in 1930 Hogbin reported more than 20 dialects on Guadalcanal alone and the population figure quoted by the commissioners of 106,309 people was collated from local records not a formal census (Allan 1957: 12–17). Even today there are only a little over 500,000 people in the nation. Communities are generally coastal, small and physically isolated. There are more than 6,000 rural communities of varying sizes in the country (Lawrence, Allen et al. 2006–2007). This is a multifaceted society made up of many cultural and language groups. In the small villages, people continue to operate a subsistence economy, there is a substantial wage-earning agricultural working class on oil palm plantations and in the fishing industry, the government bureaucracy is inefficient but modernising, and in the main town, Honiara, there is now a sizable local middle class. The cost of living is high and wages are low. The ordinary wage earner is finding it hard to support his or her family. Support for the extended family is becoming a burden for many. Government services in rural regions are poor, education and health systems are not providing Solomon Islanders with quality of life and many of the underlying causes of the Tensions remain unresolved. The youth are particularly disaffected.

This book is a study of the life and work of the man who set up the framework of the first colonial state, the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, between 1897 and 1915. This was a time when a particularly British mix of idealism and pragmatism characterised Imperialism. Woodford’s values, beliefs and directions are important to understand in the light of modern Solomon Islands history. Woodford’s very genuine and firmly held belief that this particular group of islands would benefit from ‘firm and paternal government’ was visionary but
not without its critics. In recent years the nation has been called Australia’s ‘failing neighbour’ (Wainwright 2003). This discourse has become prominent in international relations following the breakdown of state-centred law and order in places such as Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan, leading to the policies of co-operative intervention (Wesley-Smith 2007: 39). Woodford would be sorely grieved to see his ‘beautiful islands’ reduced to such a parlous state (Woodford 1890b: 188). The problem with the small Melanesian states is not that they are prone to fall apart but that they were imperfectly assembled in the first place. Structures were rudimentary, resources—both manpower and financial—were limited. Opportunities to diversify an economy reliant on tropical product extraction remain limited, the territorial reach of the government incomplete. Western institutional implants exist uneasily alongside the indigenous institutions that have persisted throughout the colonial and post-colonial eras (Wesley-Smith 2007). The creation of a state is a complex task. This book attempts to explain how Solomon Islands, as a colonial state, came into existence through the eyes of its creator—Charles Morris Woodford.
This text taken from *The Naturalist and His ‘Beautiful Islands’: Charles Morris Woodford in the Western Pacific*, by David Russell Lawrence, published 2014 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.