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Watercolour of Fijian man, painted by Charles Pickering

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Of the many ethnographic sketches, paintings and prints produced by the United States Exploring Expedition (1838–42), this is far from the best. The unidentified man in this watercolour (Figure 6.1), presumably Fijian, has toes that bulge just a little too much and bears an anatomy painted by a decent, but far from brilliant, artist. The painter in question is most likely Dr Charles Pickering (1805–78) and the painting does not appear to have been for public consumption. When Pickering's *Races of Man and their Geographic Distribution* was first published in 1848, he had the excellent portraits of the draughtsmen Alfred Agate and Joseph Drayton for accompaniment. Yet this painting, one of a pair, is made no less remarkable by its small ineptitudes. The man pictured, and the objects he holds, represent an important part of the thinking of Charles Pickering regarding the movement of peoples through the Pacific, and in turn his understated influence in the history of American anthropology.



Figure 6.1. Watercolour painting of a man wearing a loincloth, hair decorations, necklace and bracelets, with a barbed spear, club and other object.

Artist: Charles Pickering. Gift of the Estate of Margaret Mayall, 1996.

Source: Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University (PM996-15-70/5742).

The Exploring Expedition's visit to Fiji in 1840 compiled what has been described as 'one of the three most important' Fijian collections in the world (Kaeppler 1985:123). The 'scientifics' who accompanied the squadron gathered – alongside both the crew of the squadron and the many peoples of the places they visited – geological, ethnographic, linguistic and biological material on a scale to overwhelm a scientific establishment in the USA that was just beginning to find its feet (Joyce 2001:13; Philbrick 2005:29–31). Many of the luminaries of antebellum science were associated with the expedition, including Asa Gray and Louis Agassiz, the two sides of evolution's American inroads (Browne 2010:209–220; Menand 2001:125–129). The specimens gathered were of such a volume that they were not only scattered to a range of early museums and private collections but also arguably propelled the creation of what would become the Smithsonian Institution (Kaeppler 1985:123; Stanton 1975:291). Some of that Fijian material, including the club pictured, is now held in the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, bearing the distinctive white writing associating them with the 'Ex. Ex.'

Charles Pickering's painting offers a link between the material culture collected by the expedition and early anthropological thought of his time. Some of the objects painted are representative – the *ula* (throwing club) and shell jewellery, for example – while another, a *liku* (skirt) worn by the woman in the second painting (Figure 6.2), is of an uncommon type matching one collected by the expedition (National Museum of Natural History, Woman's skirt, 'Liku,' E3310-0). His decision to include a selection of representative objects, alongside what he likely viewed as representative bodies, reflects his fascination with the culture of Fiji, acquired in the three months the expedition spent there. This interest was a central part of a complex theory of population/cultural diffusion that rested upon what he viewed as the superior cultural achievements of a 'Papuan race', of which Fijians were representative (Pickering 1848:144). To his mind, Fiji was the 'chief origin' of the civilisation 'which pervaded through the Polynesian islands, when first visited by the Whites' (Massachusetts Historical Society [MHS], Charles Pickering Journal 1838–1841, MS. N-706: 18 November 1840).



Figure 6.2. Watercolour painting of a woman wearing a necklace and bracelets, and carrying a basket.

Artist: Charles Pickering. Gift of the Estate of Margaret Mayall, 1996.

Source: Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University (PM996-15-70/5743).

This theory, tied intimately with Pickering's race thinking, was the product of extensive collaboration. In addition to the study of material culture, it drew on botany, geology and, importantly, linguistics. Its linguistic element rested upon the work of Horatio Hale, who was the expedition's philologist. In this role, Hale collected what was, at that point, considered 'the greatest mass of philological data ever accumulated' by a single individual (Mackert 1994:1). He used this data to track the peopling of the Pacific from the islands of Southeast Asia eastward, with Fiji as a staging area, and in doing so he prefigured 'contemporary scholarly debates regarding Pacific prehistory' (Kirch 2017:13). He is now remembered for both this theory and his influence upon anthropologist Franz Boas, to whom he offered extensive instruction (Gruber 1967:5–37; Joyce 2001:159–161). His almost exclusive reliance upon linguistic evidence reflects his intellectual orientation, but alongside Pickering's more holistic approach his work at times appears one-dimensional. A comparison of the two maps adorning their respective expedition publications shows that they shared essentially the same conclusions, through allied but different means.

In November 1842 Hale wrote:

one of the sciences which have of late years attracted an increasing attention [...] is what may be termed the Natural History of the Human race, or, as some have named it, anthropology. (cited in Goode 1891:169)

While his publication from the Exploring Expedition, *Ethnography and Philology*, dabbled in that science, Pickering's *Races of Man and their Geographic Distribution* made the 'Natural History of the Human race' its central focus (Hale 1846; Pickering 1848). This natural history told a story not just of geographic distribution, of migration over time, but of the ways in which migration and culture were shaped by the environment and how both shaped the environment in turn. In his writing this interplay does not always result in a coherent narrative, yet if Hale's work presages contemporary linguistic discussions, Pickering's methods often have a similarly contemporary tenor. His magnum opus, *Chronological History of Plants*, opens: 'the order of nature has been obscured through the interference of man [...] until at length the face of the Globe itself is changed' (Pickering 1879:1), a description that would not be out of place in writing about the Anthropocene today.

The scientific corps of the expedition was configured in order to 'extend the bounds of science, and promote the acquisition of knowledge' (Wilkes 1851:xxix). Its membership made up a microcosm of the north-eastern USA's young and growing scientific establishment. Its geologist, James Dwight Dana, graduated from Yale, Pickering and Hale from Harvard, and all three men had already acquired a reputation as 'the most intriguing, presumptuous, cross grained animals that were ever herded together' (Ord, cited in Stanton 1975:58). They, along with Gray, sought to wrest science from the amateurs and armchair philosophers they felt dominated its American manifestation. Pickering's regard for the 'infant cause of Science' in the States led him to resign from the American Philosophical Society, 'having long seen with regret that the objects' of that institution were 'not appreciated' or utilised sufficiently (American Philosophical Society, Letter to the President of the American Philosophical Society, TN:76994, 12 September 1837). Although Hale and Dana both fulfilled the expedition's instructions, extending the bounds of their respective fields, Pickering's contribution was arguably more subtle (Iglar 2010:25).

Pickering's education at Harvard began in 1819, and his interest in both natural history and racist thought was encouraged by the tutelage of William Dandridge Peck (Harvard University Archives 1821:12).¹ Peck's lectures on natural history discussed the race theory of influential Göttingen scholar Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, and while he would graduate with a medical degree, Pickering made a career as a naturalist (Harvard University Archives, Papers of William Dandridge Peck 1774–1937, HUG1677 Box 12). Soon after his graduation he became a member of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, serving on many of its committees before working as its librarian and then curator of collections. Prior to the expedition's departure he was 'rarely absent from any meeting of the Academy', the affairs of which were then 'conducted chiefly by standing committees' (Ruschenberger 1878:166). His role there was as 'an oracle', 'consulted as a dictionary by his co-workers', and this was to be his *modus operandi* until his death (Gray 1878:442).

His work – cataloguing, advising, organising, compiling – made him a part of the backdrop to nineteenth-century American science, at least in its academic manifestation. Gray described his passion as 'gaining

1 I follow Douglas and Ballard (2008:xiv) in using 'racialist' to 'label derogatory attitudes expressed towards persons or groups on the basis of supposedly collective physical characters', in preference to the 'grossly overdetermined' term 'racist'.

knowledge and [...] storing it up in convenient forms for the service of others' (Gray 1878:444). While *Races of Man* was read relatively widely, Pickering's influence is better told by his frequent mentions in the records of academic societies around the USA. The proceedings of the Boston Society of Natural History, the American Oriental Society, the American Academy of Natural Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, the American Antiquarian Society and many others are littered with mentions of his name, sometimes with regards to botany or zoology, but also to ethnography. His letters further illustrate this role as a facilitator, with guidance offered to young scientists into the late nineteenth century (Harvard University – The Gray Herbarium Library, Charles Pickering Letters 1796–1940, Letter to John Robinson Esq., HL Pick 1, 2 June 1875).

Working as a factotum of scientific society meant that Pickering collaborated widely, even across the intellectual rivalries of his time. Charles Darwin owned a heavily annotated copy of *Races of Man* and drew on Pickering's work in *Origin of Species* (Desmond and Moore 2009:220). This connection was facilitated by Darwin's greatest American advocate, Gray, whose high esteem for Pickering is evident. Yet at the same time Pickering associated with a group of American intellectuals gathered around Agassiz, whose dispute with Gray, and Darwin, was heated. The group in question finds representation in a work called *Types of Mankind*, which was produced as a festschrift for Samuel George Morton, with a contribution from Agassiz (Nott and Gliddon 1854). Just as Pickering sent a list of plant specimens to Darwin, he sent a letter to Morton – whose office in Philadelphia was known as the 'American Golgotha' – informing him of a potential new specimen in the form of the skull of a Fijian man, Ro Veidovi, brought back in arms by the expedition from Fiji (Fabian 2010:1–6, 121).

Types of Mankind argued for race as a product of distinct acts of creation, polygenism, and was a manifesto for that brand of racial thinking. It was also a naked justification of racial hierarchy, slavery in the South and segregation in the North. Pickering's *Races of Man* has been understood by historians both as polygenism's opening salvo and a fatalistic rearguard of its opposite, monogenism (Joyce 2001:53; Lander 2010:83). Confusion about his stance is also apparent in contemporary responses to *Races of Man*, which was taken by one Australian reviewer as a good introduction to polygenism and another, British, reviewer as an 'elaborate and scholarlike' addition to the Christian evidences for monogenism (*Sydney Morning*

Herald 14 January 1851 p. 2; *Standard of Freedom* 14 September 1850 p. 12). This lingering ambiguity arguably reflects Pickering's own ambivalence on the question, resting upon a struggle to reconcile the idea of race with the diversity of human cultures and his own rejection of both slavery and racial hierarchy.

It is an ambiguity that finds expression in his painting, as much as in his writing. His archetypal representation of Fijian phenotype and culture sits uneasily with 'the productiveness of nature' that, having few limits, meant that 'new and undreamt of combinations of features' always arose to vex his efforts at strict categorisation (Pickering 1848:10). Both Pickering's journal and *Races of Man* itself are filled with caveats about race, his changing and shaky convictions leading Oliver Wendell Holmes to describe the book as 'the oddest collection of fragments' he'd ever seen (cited in Stanton 1975:96). His painting shows a determination to assert race's solidity, as much as describe it, and when it was donated to the Peabody Museum in 2006 it came with the description, 'painting of a Polynesian man'. It is perhaps because of the difficulty of that assertion that race remains a hazy element to his work, and it is his natural history that has solidity.

Laura Dassow Walls describes his natural history, his 'interdisciplinary biogeographical methodology', as an elaboration and application of the methods of German polymath Alexander von Humboldt (Walls 2009:119). Early twentieth-century anthropologist Aleš Hrdlička acknowledges Pickering as part of his intellectual lineage, though placing more emphasis on Morton, but attributes *Races of Man* to the influence of James Cowles Prichard instead of von Humboldt (Hrdlička 1914:522). Both are correct, with Pickering's ecological approach echoing von Humboldt, and his anti-hierarchical race thinking mimicking Prichard. However, as he writes in *Races of Man*, 'I shall not soon forget the rush of sensations' from his time on the expedition, and the book bears the marks of more than just other notable contemporary intellectuals (Pickering 1848:23).

A pillar of Pickering's theory of the eastward populating of the Pacific came from an old hand of the China trade. Benjamin Vanderford, who joined the expedition as a translator and guide, was a trader out of Salem, and part-founder of the US monopoly on the bêche-de-mer trade in Fiji. As the squadron spotted the island of Reao, in the Tuamotu Archipelago, he observed to Pickering that 'wherever you find a cocoa palm you will find an Indian' (MHS, MS. N-706: 15 August 1839). While prior to

this Pickering had far from ignored the spread of introduced plants and animals (the expedition itself being a mechanism for the same, as it set up botanical gardens wherever it stopped for any period of time), after Vanderford's rule it became his life's study.

In addition to such maxims he enlisted the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific in his work, finding, for example, that those he met in Tahiti 'were much more particular in the names they gave to different parts of the human frame than we ourselves' and that he was personally 'witness to the intimate acquaintance which every one seemed to possess of the plants and other productions of their island' (MHS, MS. N-706: 19 September 1839). Pickering took 'considerable assistance' from such interactions, both in terms of the material collection of specimens but more generally in the integration of Indigenous knowledge of the landscape and environment into his work (MHS, MS. N-706: 20 September 1839). In Aotearoa/New Zealand's Bay of Islands he was told that the sweet potato 'was brought by a canoe of different construction', one of 'the mode of construction [the squadron observed] at the Samoa Islands', and such testimony was invaluable to his narrative (MHS, MS. N-706: 4 March 1840).

While Pickering drew heavily on contemporary Pacific sources, Hale looked to an older source to support his parallel account. This source, which he termed the 'most important testimony', is a chart drawn by the Ra'iatean *arioi* Tupaia and published by Johann Forster, who accompanied Cook's first voyage (Hale 1846:122). In *Ethnography and Philology*, he argues that the map (which he believed has half of its orientation upside down because of a mistranslation) shows clearly the broad range of precolonial Pacific navigation and the populating of the Pacific from a staging post in Fiji. For Hale, who drew on the philological tradition of Peter Stephen Du Ponceau (1760–1844) and John Pickering (1777–1844), language was at the core of culture, and thus the study of one was the study of the other (Harvey 2010:527; Mackert 1994:12).

The expedition spent from 6 May to 11 August 1840 surveying the Fijian archipelago. This surveying used boats with a small but heavily armed crew, and offered the scientific corps extensive opportunities for botanical, geological and philological collecting. It also became a site of conflict, with a skirmish on the island of Malolo escalating to a massacre that left two Americans and hundreds of Fijians dead. The justification of that killing and the fear that was pervasive among the crew from their arrival on the Islands had an effect upon the work of both Pickering and

Hale. Hale's story of cultural diffusion struggled to reconcile the artistry of Fijian pottery with his open contempt for Fijian peoples. Pickering, while perhaps less contemptuous, conceded that 'they are not savages' but at the same time attributed to the 'Papuan' few redemptive traits (University of Auckland Archives, Charles Pickering letters to Mary Pickering, MSS-Archives-A-162: 8 August 1840).

Both Pickering and Hale were engaged in an early form of anthropology. The former's interest in material culture, in landscapes, architecture and archaeobotany, constitute an archaeological approach to Pacific history that would be repeated in the years that followed. Pickering's collaboration and mentorship offer a glimpse at a diffuse but significant influence upon Atlantic approaches to human history and environment in the mid and late nineteenth century. As his painting, geography and the expedition's collections illustrate, this legacy rested upon work in the Pacific, and specifically questions of Pacific origins asked both of Pacific peoples and the landscape.

Objects highlighted in this chapter were on display at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, from March 2020 to March 2021.

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