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Stephenson Percy Smith (1840–1922), founder of the Polynesian Society

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The collections of the Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, in Wellington include papers of Stephenson Percy Smith and of the Polynesian Society. Smith had a long and successful career as a surveyor and public servant in New Zealand, devoted himself to ethnological research, and founded the Polynesian Society in 1892. As Spriggs has observed, the Polynesian Society was the most prominent of the major institutions and societies with an interest in Pacific archaeology and anthropology formed in the 1880s and 1890s. Its flagship journal, the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (JPS), was ‘an important venue for publication of Maori traditions’, although many of these ‘were presented by Smith and others through a very distorted European lens’, with lasting consequences (Spriggs, **Chapter 8**, this volume). JPS also published contributions in the fields of antiquarianism, archaeology, history, philology, physical anthropology and social/cultural anthropology (then usually termed ‘ethnology’). This inclusion of a wide range of discipline areas reflects the continued currency of an holistic approach to the ‘science of man’ (see also Mann, **Chapter 3**, and Dotte-Sarout, **Chapter 4**, both this volume). This chapter comprises a biographical introduction to Stephenson Percy Smith and a description of the founding of the

Polynesian Society, as well as a description of the *Uncovering Pacific Pasts* exhibition at the Alexander Turnbull Library and a brief overview of the Library's Smith and Polynesian Society collections.

The stated purpose of the Polynesian Society, co-founded in 1892 by Smith and surveyor Edward Robert Tregear (1846–1931), was

to promote the study of the Anthropology, Ethnology, Philology, History and Antiquities of the Polynesian races, by the publication of an official journal [...] and by the collection of books, manuscripts, photographs, relics, and other illustrations. (Tregear and Smith 1892:3)

The term 'Polynesia' was 'intended to include Australia, New Zealand, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Malaysia, as well as Polynesia proper' (Tregear and Smith 1892:3). As Richards et al. (2019) have shown, although the term 'Archaeology' did not appear in the JPS index until 1933, papers discussing Polynesian prehistory and/or what would now be considered archaeological techniques were published in JPS from the very beginning.

Smith, along with Tregear and Irish-born politician and amateur naturalist Joshua Rutland (1836–1915), was particularly interested in these topics (Richards et al. 2019:324–328; see also Godley 1922). Among his early publications in JPS was a paper on 'Stone Implements from the Chatham Islands' and a series of contributions in JPS's dedicated Notes and Queries section on various aspects of the migrations and origins of people in Polynesia, including the likelihood that subsurface archaeological evidence – in this case 'stone hatchets of the usual Polynesian type', 'dug up in the soil' on Sunday Island (the largest of the main Kermadec Islands, also known as Raoul Island) – bore witness to past visits to 'those solitary islands' by 'some numbers of the Polynesian race' (Smith 1892, 1893; see also Richards et al. 2019:324–328). Although the majority of scholarly attention and critique of Smith's work has been directed towards his writings on Māori and the settlement of New Zealand, Whimp (2014) argues convincingly that it was Smith's work on the island Pacific outside New Zealand – above all the existence, nature and location of Hawaiki, the 'reputed homeland and point of origin' of the Polynesians – that came to dominate his studies (Whimp 2014:119).

JPS has been described as 'one of the oldest continuously published ethnographic periodicals in the world' (Sorrenson 1992:7). Smith was largely responsible for the production of the first 30 volumes of the

journal, which may be seen to represent a significant part of his legacy. It is also important to note, as Spriggs (**Chapter 8**, this volume) has done, that the Polynesian Society encouraged Māori involvement and that JPS published many papers by Māori and other Pacific Islander scholars.

The life and career of Stephenson Percy Smith

Stephenson Percy Smith (1840–1922) has been the subject of numerous biographical dictionary entries and publications (Bagnall 1966; Byrnes 1993; Scholefield 1940). Another important source is a series of obituaries and other commemorative memorial pieces published in JPS in 1922 by Smith's fellow society members. These included Tregear, ethnographer Elsdon Best (1856–1931) and Otago museum curator Henry Devenish Skinner (1886–1978) (Best 1922; *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 1922; Skinner 1922; Tregear 1922; on Skinner see also White, **Chapter 23**, this volume). Two further contributions – one authored by interpreter and genealogist Hare Hongi, also known as Henry Matthew Stowell (1859–1944), the other by anthropologist, doctor and politician Te Rangi Hiroa, also known as Peter Henry Buck (1877–1951) – were published in te reo Māori (the Māori language) with English translations (Hiroa 1922; Hongi 1922). Various obituaries in daily newspapers also add details. The contemporary writings from the time of Smith's passing collectively provide a timeline of his life and career, along with an insight into his personality and traits as witnessed by some of those who knew him best.

The fact that two obituary memorial tributes were composed in te reo Māori was very fitting. Smith was noted for his efforts

to acquire a knowledge of the Maori language, and his efforts to obtain a mastery over that language were so persistent that he came to be regarded as one of the most accomplished Maori scholars in the Dominion [i.e. New Zealand]. (*Journal of the Polynesian Society* 1922:67)¹

1 On 26 September 1907 the colony of New Zealand ceased to exist. New Zealand became a dominion within the British Empire. The shift from colony to dominion was a change of name only and did not result in New Zealand becoming any more or less independent from Britain than it had been before. Nevertheless, other parts of the Empire, including Australia and Canada, also became dominions at this time, wanting a distinct status that would not see them confused with lesser 'colonies' (Ministry of Culture and Heritage, New Zealand Government 2018).

In the English translation of his te reo words of farewell for Smith as the late president of the society, Hongi wrote, 'Greetings unto thee as the supreme head of the institution which (more than any other) has embalmed and conserved the choicest remains preserved in the language of our forefathers' (Hongi 1922:79). Hiroa also gave recognition to the important contribution Smith made to Māori scholarship, highlighting that 'Though in his veins there was no drop of Maori blood, yet in thoughts and ideals, he was more Maori than the present generation of Maoris' (Hiroa 1922:82). Finally, Skinner summed up some of the key qualities that formed the basis for the high esteem in which Smith was held, writing:

My memory of him embodies several elements – the impression of unusual strength of intellect, of complete mastery of the material in his own field, and of boundless kindness and lenience towards the unbalanced enthusiasms of youth. (Skinner 1922:84)

The newspaper and JPS obituaries provide pertinent details of Smith's life. He was born in Beccles, Suffolk, on 11 June 1840, the son of John Stephenson Smith (1811–1874) and Hannah Stephenson Smith, née Hursthouse (1813–1891). The family arrived in New Plymouth, on the west coast of New Zealand's North Island, on 7 February 1850 on the ship *Pekin*. On 4 February 1855 Smith joined the Survey Department in New Plymouth under Octavius Carrington (1816–1901) as a cadet and went on to be appointed assistant surveyor in 1857. His early adventures in the North Island saw him in the role of an explorer, capturing the scenery in a series of artistic impressions and writing a detailed account, which was later published (Smith 1953).

In his career as a surveyor Smith went on to be the district surveyor for Kaipara in 1859 and joined the Native Land Purchase Office in Auckland in October that year. In 1863 he married Mary Ann Crompton (1842–1911) and returned to Taranaki as district surveyor in March 1865. During 1866–67 he was stationed at Patea, and from January 1868 to February 1869 he surveyed the Chatham Islands. In February 1870 he transferred to the Inspector of Surveys Department in Auckland, before being appointed chief surveyor for Auckland provincial district on 25 January 1877, promoted to assistant surveyor-general in September 1882, and in January 1889 appointed surveyor-general and secretary of Crown lands (see:

illuminated address, Puke Ariki ARC2002-592). He thus became the head of the Lands and Survey Department, before retiring from the public service after 45 years on 31 October 1900 (*Evening Post* 1922:8).

During the final decade of his long career in the public service, Smith founded the Polynesian Society, as described in more detail below. He also made a visit to the Kermadec Islands on the government steamship *Stella* under Captain Fairchild, and took every opportunity to travel extensively in the Pacific, including four months as resident in Niue in 1901 (Smith 1903:2). Seen in combination with his scholarly interests, Smith's career as a surveyor was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it 'allowed him to pursue his intense interest in Māori culture and language [...] and to develop his genealogical, ethnological, and ethnographic skills' (Whimp 2014:40). Certainly his publications in JPS, outlined earlier in this chapter, often relied on observations made and artefacts collected in areas he had visited in the course of his professional duties, including the Chatham and Kermadec Islands. On the other hand, his surveying activities transformed 'vast areas of Māori land into colonial entities', thus effectively contributing to the dispossession of the very peoples whose culture and language so fascinated him (Whimp 2014:40; for a comparable example see Thomas 2011).

Lake Rotomahana and the district around nearby Mount Tarawera were of special interest to Smith, as he had first visited the area in 1858 and created one of the earliest surviving sketch maps of the lake (Alexander Turnbull Library [ATL] MS-2015). Soon after the volcanic eruption of 10 June 1886 he led two expeditions to the area, from 14 to 17 June and from 27 July to 12 August (Bagnall 1966:266). He also made a topographical survey (*Hawera & Normanby Star* 1922:5) resulting in an official government report titled 'Volcanic Eruption at Tarawera', complete with sketches and maps (Smith 1886).

Smith is noted for the diversity of his roles and positions held, including chair of the board of Land Purchase Commissioners and member of the Public Trust Office Board, the Government Life Insurance Board, and the Native Reserve Board. He was also a governor of the New Zealand Institute, a corresponding member of the Royal Geographical Society of Queensland, a member of the Historical Society of Honolulu, and was made a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in 1880 (*Auckland Star* 1922:8). On a more local level, he was governor of the New Plymouth

High School and a member of the Mokau River Board, New Plymouth Recreation Ground Board and Mount Egmont National Park Board (Scholefield 1940:313).

In 1920 Smith was awarded the Hector Medal by the New Zealand Institute, now the Royal Society of New Zealand (Puke Ariki A74.789). He died at his home in New Plymouth on 19 April 1922 at the age of 81 (Byrnes 1993:471).

Scholefield noted that ‘Smith was much more than a mere surveyor. He was interested in botany, conchology and geology, and had some scientific knowledge of all’ (Scholefield 1940:313). Bagnall assessed the basis for Smith’s success, writing: ‘His appointment as Surveyor-General on 29 January 1889 was the merited culmination of a career marked by energy, application, tact, and originality’ (Bagnall 1966:266). Tregear, who worked very closely with Smith during the founding years of the Polynesian Society, concluded that Smith’s ‘moral strength, purity of life and conduct, and his high ideals had their source in a religious belief too deep for words, but moulding every thought and action’ (Tregear 1922:74). And Elsdon Best wrote that Smith’s ‘outstanding and fundamental qualities’, ‘the qualities that made for eminence, the attributes that compelled admiration, respect, and downright affection in all who came into contact with him, were those of character and ability’ (Best 1922:75).

The founding of the Polynesian Society

The Polynesian Society was officially founded at its first meeting, held in Wellington on 8 January 1892 (Sorrenson 1992:7). The previous year Smith had been working to gauge support and interest, as well as drafting his proposed outline and scope for the aims of the society. In his diaries Smith made various entries regarding milestones in the preparation for the founding of the Polynesian Society. On 31 May 1891 he wrote: ‘At home all day. Preparing circular & lists re proposed “Polynesian Society”’. (ATL MS-1990). For 6 July 1891 he recorded his activity as: ‘At the Office. Commenced to send out circulars re “Polynesian Society”’. (ATL MS-1990). Early in the following year these preparations came to fruition when his entry for 8 January 1892 notes:

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At the Office. In the evening attended a meeting in the Museum Library to establish a 'Polynesian Society', which I had called, after sending out nearly 400 circulars to all over the world. (ATL MS-1991)

The list of names annotated with the heading 'List of Persons to whom original circular re forming Polynesian Society was sent' is held in the collection of the Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL MS-Papers-1187-125).

There is no doubt that Smith was the main driving force behind the establishment and founding of the society. Sorrenson accurately records that 'Smith was undoubtedly in command' and describes the three-decade period from the foundation in 1892 to the death of Smith in 1922 as the foundation years. The original principles of promoting 'the study of the Anthropology, Ethnology, Philology and Antiquities of the Polynesian races' continued as part of the core of the scope, with Polynesian as a term always interpreted broadly (The Polynesian Society 2019).

During the foundation years Smith was highly instrumental in personally managing and running many aspects of the society and its operations. With membership widely dispersed in New Zealand and beyond, the journal was the main means of communication and dissemination. Smith was editor of the journal and the author of many articles; he also served the society in various capacities, including secretary and president. The society was based around a core group in Wellington until the time when Smith retired to New Plymouth in 1901 and the society's operations were relocated with him. This included the printing of the journal, which was taken on by Thomas Avery & Sons. Following his death, the society's operations were once again moved to Wellington in 1925, and for some time the coeditor of the journal was Johannes Andersen, librarian of the Alexander Turnbull Library. A decision regarding the location of the society's library was reached by postal ballot, resulting in the library being placed on indefinite deposit with the Alexander Turnbull Library in 1958 (The Polynesian Society 2019).

Exhibition

The *Uncovering Pacific Pasts* exhibition, presented in two display cases in the Katherine Mansfield Reading Room of the Alexander Turnbull Library, features a small selection of objects from two collections of the library: those of Stephenson Percy Smith and the Polynesian Society. The objects selected as exhibits, reproduced as Figures 11.1 to 11.5, all represent periods and aspects of Smith's life and work – a watercolour from his youth capturing an episode of adventure in the New Zealand landscape painted in 1859, a carte de visite portrait from c. 1876 when he was a surveyor and public servant, a printed circular of 1891 resulting in the founding of the Polynesian Society the following year, an illustrated testimonial marking his retirement dated 1901, and an oil portrait of 1917 when he had returned to New Plymouth. The selected exhibits showcase some of the wide range of formats in the collections that help to illustrate the life and work of Smith and the founding of the Polynesian Society.

The first exhibit is a portrait of Smith by Harry Egmont Fookes (1868–1947), painted in oil on canvas and mounted in a wooden frame (Figure 11.1). It is dated 1917, when both the artist and subject were living in New Plymouth. The portrait was possibly painted from life, but is more likely based on a photograph taken at Smith's residence, 'Matai-Moana', in which he is portrayed seated on a bench in the garden (*Journal of the Polynesian Society* 1922:74). Fookes was a telegraphist and amateur artist, the son of Albert Cracroft and Harriet Fookes, née Hirst. Educated at Nelson College, he passed his Civil Service Exams in October 1883, worked as a telegraphist in Wellington and was later appointed telegraph superintendent in New Plymouth. He married Eleanor Mary Rochfort (1872–1944) in 1898. Fookes died on 26 December 1947 in New Plymouth and he is buried in the city's Te Henui cemetery.

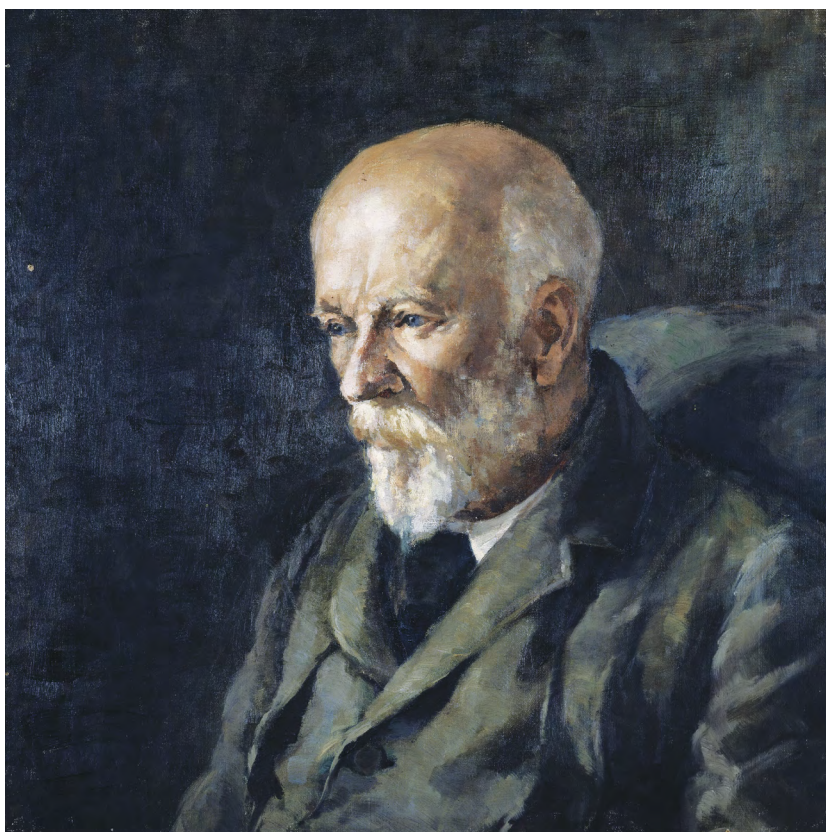


Figure 11.1. Harry Egmont Fookes (1868–1947): Portrait of Stephenson Percy Smith, founder of the Polynesian Society.

Oil on canvas, 500 x 502 mm, 1917.

Source: Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL G-487).

The second exhibit is a carte de visite portrait of Smith by Hemus & Hanna photography studio in Queen Street, Auckland (Figure 11.2). The mount features studio imprints recto and verso and an inscription annotated verso. The albumen photograph on printed mount is undated, but is attributed to c. 1876 based on the reference in the inscription to 'Inspector Surveys for North Island', a position held by Smith from 1870 to January 1877, combined with the period of the studio operation at this Queen Street address from 1876 to 1882. John Robert Hanna (1850–1915) and Charles Hemus (1849–1925) first established their studio together in September 1875, and after their partnership was dissolved in 1885 both operated other photographic businesses in Auckland.



Figure 11.2. Hemus & Hanna: Stephenson Percy Smith (1840–1922) (left) and annotated reverse (right).

Carte de visite, 101 x 64 mm, c. 1876.

Source: Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL PA2-1467).

The third exhibit, a watercolour painting by Smith dated January 1859 depicting men paddling in a canoe and standing on the edge of the river, captures an episode on the Mokau River on 7 January 1858 during his exploratory journey in the central North Island (Figure 11.3). Smith was a teenage survey department cadet at the time and recorded the new surroundings he encountered during adventures in the remote parts of New Zealand in the best tradition of naturalist explorers. This is one selected example from a group of watercolour sketches by Smith from this period held in the collections of the Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL A-137-001 to A-137-006). A narrative account of this journey based on his diary was printed and published as a pamphlet by *Taranaki News* in 1858, and Smith created a grangerised, or extra-illustrated, annotated copy with sketches inserted (ATL MS-2014).



Figure 11.3. Stephenson Percy Smith (1840–1922): Scene on the Mokau River, 7 January 1858.

Watercolour on paper, 215 x 255 mm, January 1859.

Source: Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL A-137-005).

The fourth exhibit is a circular prepared by Smith and sent out to some 400 individuals, outlining the scope and intentions of the proposed Polynesian Society. The circular is dated 19 June 1891, from 41 Tinakori Road in Wellington, and this copy from the papers of the Polynesian Society is annotated on the second page with a list of 10 names of members and their membership subscription. In another annotated column is a list of expenses, including cost of printing circular, envelopes and postage stamps. The circular is printed as a bifolium in fine letterpress on laid paper with 'Spicer Brothers' watermark (Figure 11.4).

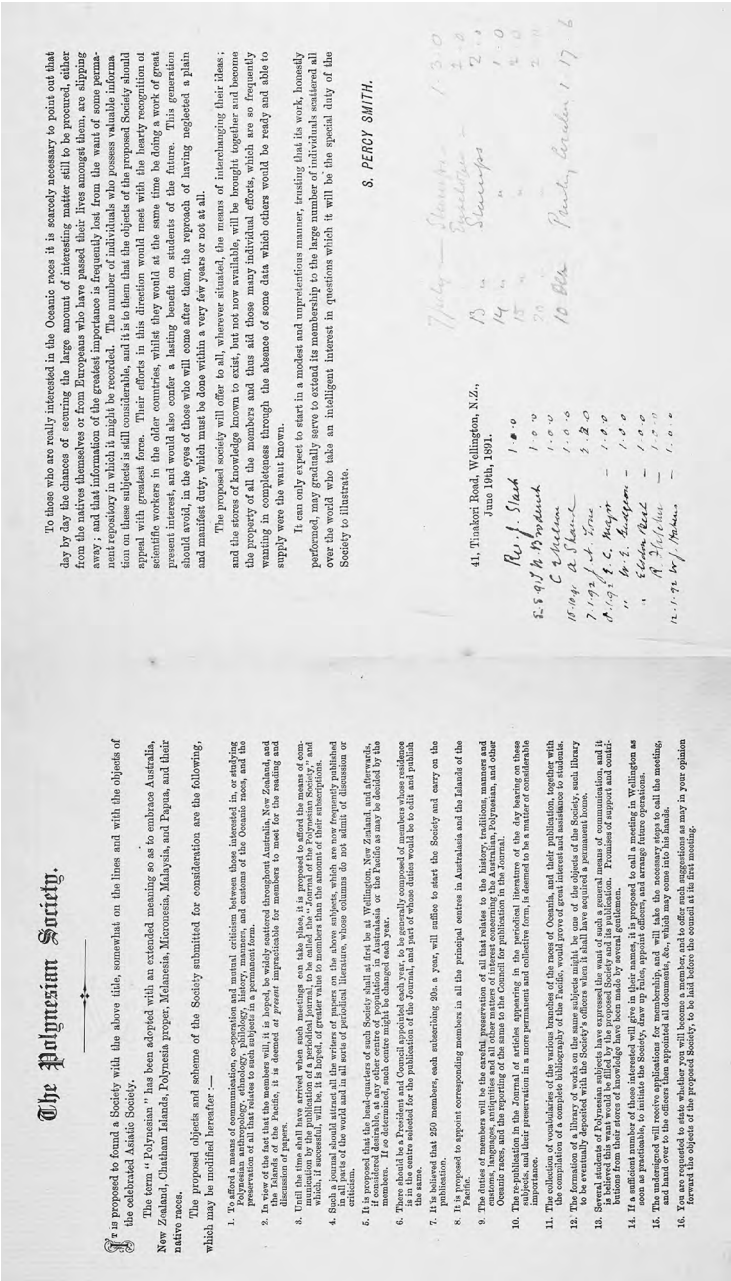


Figure 11.4. Stephenson Percy Smith: The Polynesian Society.

Bifolium printed circular, letterpress on watermarked laid paper, 255 x 410 mm, 19 June 1891.

Source: Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL MS-Papers-1187-125-1.)

The text of the circular records Smith's intentions to broadly model the proposed new society 'on the lines and with the objects of the celebrated Asiatic Society', founded in 1784. Smith defines the term 'Polynesian' in its broadest, most encompassing form, including Australia, and then goes on to outline the objectives in 16 points. The second page addresses readers who may have an interest in the society and does not hesitate to appeal on the basis of the urgency in preserving Indigenous and cultural knowledge, stating:

This generation should avoid, in the eyes of those who will come after them, the reproach of having neglected a plain and manifest duty, which must be done within a very few years or not at all.

The fifth and final exhibit is a testimonial presented to Smith to mark his retirement after a long and successful career in the New Zealand public service, culminating in the position of surveyor-general and secretary of Crown lands. It was prepared by the artist and draughtsman George Neville Sturtevant (1858–1937), head of the lithography department of the Government Printing Office in Wellington. The testimonial is painted in watercolour with detailing in gilt and ink, and text in calligraphy, headed: 'Stephenson Percy Smith Esq[ui]re F.R.G.S, Surveyor-General and Secretary for Crown Lands'. It concludes with a text in te reo Māori: 'Tena te haere na, Tenei te noho nei, Taukiri hoki e! Matou ka raru. Matou ka mihi nei. Haere, e koro e! Haere ki raro' (You depart, yet we remain, such woe! We are distressed. We salute you. Farewell Sir! Go north).

The testimonial features a list of names of the officers of the District Lands and Survey branches, as well as decorative scenes and landscapes to represent different events and stages of Smith's career in various parts of New Zealand. The design includes vignettes showing a Māori chief, the 'Landing Place of "Tainui" Kawhia H[arbou]r', 'Tarawera' showing the steaming Mount Tarawera in 1886, 'The true pioneer: – The Surveyor' depicting a surveyors' camp, and a settlement 'At the Kermadec I[sland]s'. In addition, there is a view of the Southern Alps, a scene in Taranaki, 'The first attack, Road-making', 'Victory! The smiling home' with a pastoral scene, a section of kauri forest, and a mining operation at the Grahamstown Goldfield near Thames with working mines, mine machinery and houses. The whole is surrounded and divided into sections by painted Māori carvings, interspersed with a theodolite (portable surveying instrument) and numerous plant species native to New Zealand, including kowhai, a tree-fern, native clematis, a nikau palm and flax (Figure 11.5).



Figure 11.5. George Neville Sturtevant (1858–1937): Testimonial presented to Stephenson Percy Smith, Surveyor-General and Secretary of Crown Lands.

Ink and watercolour on paper, 604 x 905 mm, 1901.

Source: Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL D-007-002).

Overview of relevant archival collections

As already mentioned, the Alexander Turnbull Library holds archival collections relating to Stephenson Percy Smith and to the Polynesian Society. The collection of Smith's papers includes a series of his diaries along with some manuscripts, notebooks and sketches. The main run of 50 diaries for the period 1863–1912 (ATL MS-1961 to MS-2011) is preceded by the diary and materials relating to his journey into the interior of the North Island in 1858 (ATL MS-2012 to MS-2015). In addition, there are letterbooks from the period 1861–76 (ATL MS-2020 to MS-2022) and notebooks relating to the Chatham Islands (ATL MS-2014), Kermadec Islands (ATL MS-2025) and Niue (ATL MS-2026). There are also Smith's notebooks relating to post-eruption expeditions to the Mount Tarawera area in 1886 (ATL qMS-1836; and McLean family: Papers MSX-5136), and papers relating to the Crompton-Smith family (ATL 88-362). Other significant holdings of Smith archival materials are held in MS 281 at Auckland Museum (Auckland Museum Library MS 281) and at Puke Ariki in New Plymouth (e.g. ARC2002-300).

The papers of the Polynesian Society held at the Alexander Turnbull Library comprise records of the society including correspondence and minute books and an important collection of manuscripts. These are held under 'Polynesian Society: Records' (ATL MS-Group-0677) and 'Polynesian Society: Further Records' (ATL 80-115), while there is also a small group of 13 black and white photographs, 'Polynesian Society: Photographs' (ATL PAColl-7273), donated by the Polynesian Society in 1954. More recent records are held by the Polynesian Society at the University of Auckland. The JPS has been digitised and is available online (*Journal of the Polynesian Society* 2019). The journal and archival collections represent a valuable resource for research into a broad range of subjects as represented by the interests of Smith and the activities and scope of the Polynesian Society.

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