

# 8

## Local agency and William MacGregor's exploration of the Trobriand Islands

Andrew Connelly

At the time of British New Guinea Administrator William MacGregor's first visits to the Trobriand Islands in 1890 and 1891, the islands had been frequented by whalers for over 40 years and by traders for over a decade. However, this long history of European encounter and exchange in the Trobriands failed to result in the construction of a body of knowledge available to MacGregor, since many encounters were not recorded or were buried in ships' logs, published information was widely scattered, and some regular visits were kept secret. Because of this, MacGregor ventured into an informational wilderness to 'discover' the islands for himself. On the other hand, these previous exchanges had produced a local body of shared knowledge that shaped his reception by Trobriand intermediaries, especially local chiefs who attempted to recruit him into exclusive exchange relationships. If not unrecognised by MacGregor, then at least unreported were the surely numerous interactions between Trobrianders and his Polynesian and Melanesian companions, whose presence and conduct would have been as significant for Trobrianders as MacGregor's was.

William MacGregor was born in Scotland and completed medical studies at Edinburgh, gaining his certificate in 1872. He then joined the British colonial service as a medical assistant, working in the Seychelles and Mauritius under Governor Sir Arthur Gordon, who encouraged him to take on administrative tasks as well. It was here that he first developed an interest in 'native' affairs and welfare. MacGregor followed Gordon to Fiji in 1874, where a string of appointments over 14 years amounted to an extended training course in colonial administration.<sup>1</sup>

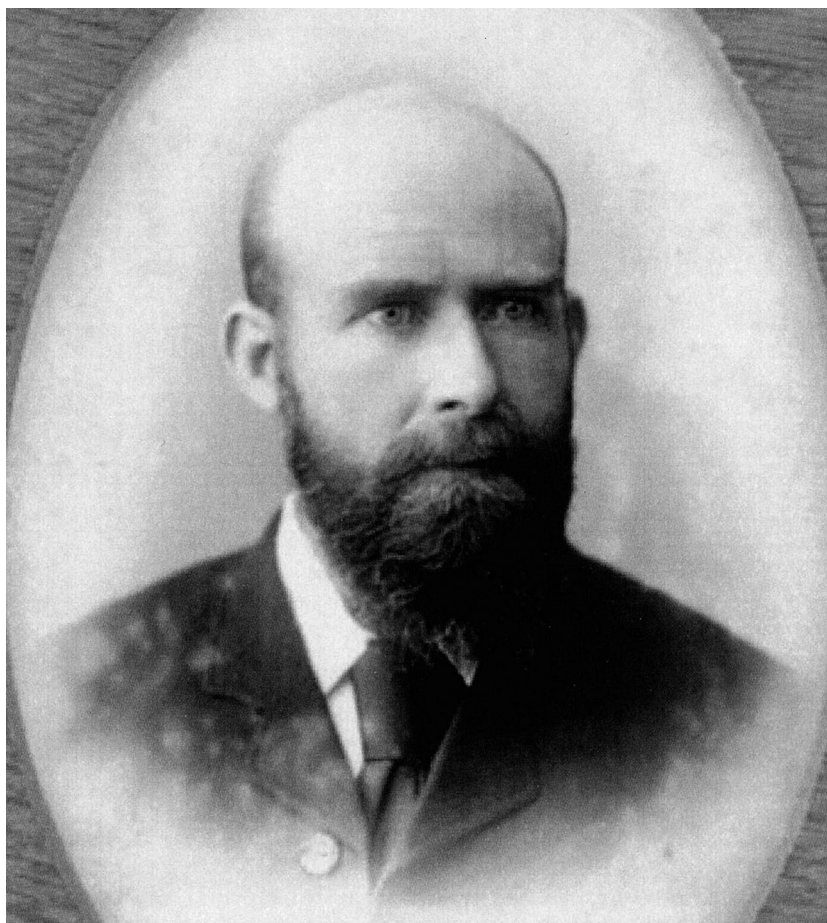


Figure 8.1: William MacGregor, 1888.

Source: State Library of Queensland.

---

1 Chief Medical and Health Officer, Receiver-General (Treasurer), Colonial Secretary and Acting Governor. Joyce 1971.

MacGregor stepped ashore at Port Moresby in September 1888, where he was sworn in as Administrator after proclaiming the former British protectorate's new status as the Crown Possession of British New Guinea. He would lead British New Guinea (long informally and later officially also known as Papua) for a decade, as Administrator until 1894, and as Lieutenant Governor from 1895 to 1898.<sup>2</sup> MacGregor sought to encourage development such as gold mining and copra plantations in British New Guinea but, due to his earlier experiences under Gordon, and perhaps his medical background, he also valued protecting the Indigenous population from exploitation by Europeans.<sup>3</sup> This often brought him into conflict with white elements of settler society. MacGregor viewed exploration as one of the responsibilities of his position and undertook many expeditions large and small to 'discover' and document the Territory's geography, geology, natural history and population. He personally established initial government contact with many Papuan societies, and 'pacification' of hostile or warring groups was a priority. These expeditions were written up in despatches to MacGregor's superior, the Governor of Queensland, and published as appendices in the British New Guinea annual reports. These official despatches, read with interest in colonial offices and drawing rooms across the British Empire, served as a narration of the new government's self-discovery of its own territory and subjects.

When MacGregor first arrived in 1890, Trobrianders had had face-to-face contact with seaborne Europeans for at least half a century, and had been familiar with the sight of European vessels for much longer. A long tradition of regional trade by seagoing canoe meant that Trobrianders were highly mobile, travelling throughout a large area of islands numbering in the hundreds, from Muiuw (Woodlark) in the east and the Louisiades in the south-east, to the D'Entrecasteaux and south-eastern coast of New Guinea to the south. They would have known of and likely interacted with Europeans long before any reached Trobriand shores.

---

2 MacGregor demanded this mainly symbolic promotion after his first five years. Joyce 1971: 118–119; Sinclair 2009: 135.

3 Joyce 1971: 141, 143, 167; see also Sinclair 2009.

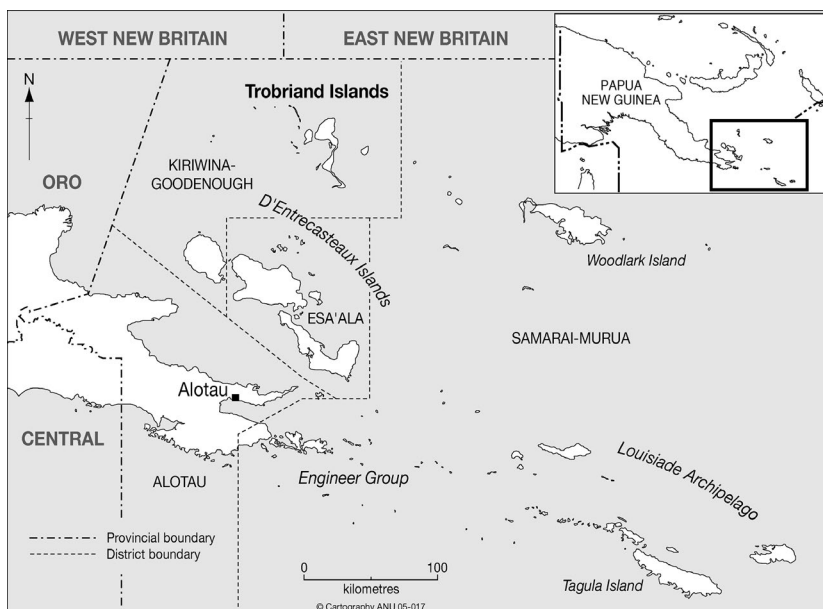


Figure 8.2: Map of Milne Bay Province, south-eastern Papua New Guinea, showing the Trobriands and surrounding islands in the Solomon Sea.

Source: © The Australian National University, CAP Carto GIS.

The first documented sighting of the Trobriands by Europeans was in 1793, when French Rear Admiral Bruni d'Entrecasteaux named the island group after his first lieutenant Denis de Trobriand whilst sailing past, and roughly charted the northern and eastern shores.<sup>4</sup> Thirteen years later, British captain Abraham Bristow was frequenting the area, making contact with nearby Islanders and passing close to islands he logged as being at precisely the latitude of northern Kiriwina.<sup>5</sup> Unrecorded meetings during this time would have been likely between such passers-by and Trobrianders either on the beach or at sea in their large sailing canoes.

<sup>4</sup> Horner 1995: 183.

<sup>5</sup> MacGillivray 1852, I: 175–176.

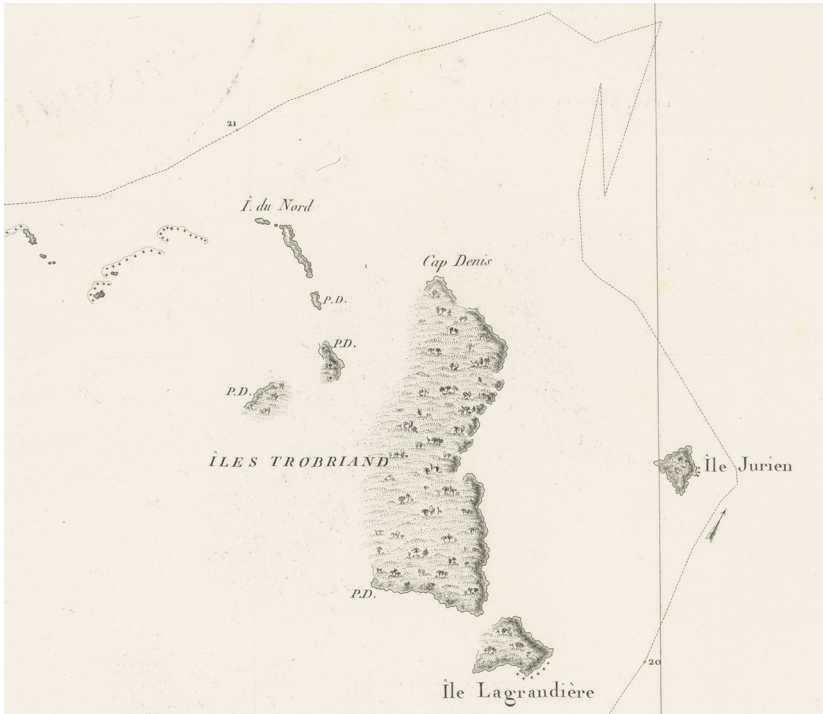


Figure 8.3: First map of the Trobriands, detail from C. F. Beautemps-Beaupré, 'Carte des Archipels des iles Salomon, de la Louisiade et de la Nouv.<sup>le</sup> Bretagne; situes a l'est de la Nouvelle Guinee / redigee par C.F. Beautemps-Beaupré, hydrographe sous-chef du depot g.<sup>al</sup> de la marine en 1806', 1807.

Source: National Library of Australia MAP Ra 82 (Copy 1) Plate 21.

By the early 1830s a more regular form of European contact was taking place, as whalers extended their hunt into the Solomon Sea.<sup>6</sup> The first recorded direct encounter between Europeans and Trobriand Islanders comes through a brief account given by Captain R. L. Hunter of the British whaler *Marshall Bennett*, which dropped anchor off Cape Denis on north-western Kiriwina in October 1836. While Hunter's men remained warily in their whaleboats, the Trobrianders there to receive them showed no hesitation, wading out to the boats with baskets of yams – as Hunter noted, 'in fact, as many as we could find room for, of the finest yams I ever saw', to exchange for hoop iron.<sup>7</sup> Trobriand

6 Thomas Beale writes evocatively of being becalmed aboard the British whaler *Kent* north of the Lusancays (just west of the Trobriands) in 1832. Beale 1839: 310.

7 Hunter 1839: 38.

yams were valued by whalers as a staple that was easily stored in barrels and kept well, and Hunter was surely not the first whaler to call into Cape Denis, as the Islanders' readiness to trade indicates a well-worn routine on their part. The Trobriands became known as one of the few places in the region where whalers could safely come ashore to trade for food and gather wood and water without fear of attack, and the islands were regularly visited until the decline of the industry in the 1860s.

By the 1840s, *bêche de mer* collectors and traders had joined the whalers visiting the area. Russian anthropologist Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay briefly visited the Trobriands in late November 1879, aboard the *Sadie F. Caller*, a 'smart three-masted American schooner' engaged in the trade.<sup>8</sup> Five years later, the German ethnologist and naturalist Otto Finsch called in briefly aboard the German steamer *Samoa*. Both men were pressed with carvings for trade. Finsch remarked that he already knew of the Trobriands' 'excellent yams' before visiting, since small trading vessels had been coming down from German New Guinea to barter for them for some years.<sup>9</sup>

While these early visits had been recorded, apparently none of them were known to MacGregor in 1890. Information from these contacts was either buried in whaling logs and thick shipping atlases or published in foreign languages. It may be difficult to imagine today how disconnected various disciplinary, generic, regional and national information flows were at the time.

Furthermore, others had good reason to keep their 'discoveries' in the islands a secret, so much so that facts surrounding this early contact period remain murky. Englishman William Whitten was one of the earliest 'settlers' in the islands of eastern British New Guinea, having arrived in the territory in 1874. Often humbly described as 'a storekeeper at Samarai' (a European settlement in China Strait off the eastern tip of New Guinea), he was a keen and opportunistic entrepreneur, soon making a good business outfitting the many miners that flocked to each new gold strike in the area.<sup>10</sup> According to Leo Austen, an Australian resident magistrate in the Trobriands in the 1930s, Whitten and a Norwegian named Oscar Solberg had

---

8 Webster 1984: 223.

9 Finsch 1888: 204–210. Trobriand passage translated for the author by Hilary Howes.

10 Nelson 1976.

established a 'fishing station' (actually a site for smoking and storing *bêche-de-mer* for occasional collection) on north-west Kiriwina in the 1880s.<sup>11</sup> C. A. W. Monckton wrote that while trading in *bêche de mer*, Whitten became the first European to discover 'that pearls of a fair quality existed in a small oyster forming one of the staple foods of the natives', managing to keep this a secret and to 'purchase large quantities of the pearls from the natives for almost nothing' until the sale of his haul in Australia let the secret out, which 'brought down upon him a host of other competitors'. While denied a possible fortune by the competition, Whitten had 'made enough to bring a younger brother from England, purchase a bigger and better vessel, also a large amount of merchandise', thereby laying the foundation for the formidable Whitten Bros holdings of the next several decades.<sup>12</sup> Austen noted that Whitten's friendships with Trobrianders were memorable enough that 'the people have gone so far as to name a special dance after him. This is known as the *Bwiteni*'.<sup>13</sup> Whitten called at the islands regularly during the period of MacGregor's initial tours (see below).

MacGregor's brief first visit to the Trobriands in July 1890 aboard the government steamer *Merrie England* came on the way back to the mainland after an inaugural trip to Woodlark Island to the east, in company with Reverend George Brown, head of the Australasian Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society and a veteran of mission work in Oceania, first in Samoa then more recently in the New Britain group north of the Trobriands in German New Guinea.<sup>14</sup> While MacGregor went to Woodlark to investigate the murder of two white traders, he and Brown were also surveying the area for promising locations for new mission stations, as MacGregor felt that missionaries were indispensable to the work of 'civilising' the Papuans. Their first Trobriand stop was the eastern island of Kitava, where they camped on Nurata, a small islet just off the southern coast. MacGregor reported that:

In the morning at least 200 people came round the coast to the nearest point of Kitava extremely anxious to trade with us. They were very friendly and do not carry arms ... It is clear that they and all the other

11 Austen 1936: 10.

12 Monckton 1921: 4–5. While Monckton has garnered a reputation for inaccuracy, in a close study Nancy Lutton concluded that while exaggerating his own adventures, the first two of his three memoirs on British New Guinea are reasonably accurate. Lutton 1972.

13 Austen 1936: 10.

14 Gardner 2006.



natives of the Trobriands have a great aptitude for carving in wood ... We were surprised at the number of people that appeared on Kitava, which was so deeply wooded that it might at a little distance have been thought to be uninhabited.<sup>15</sup>

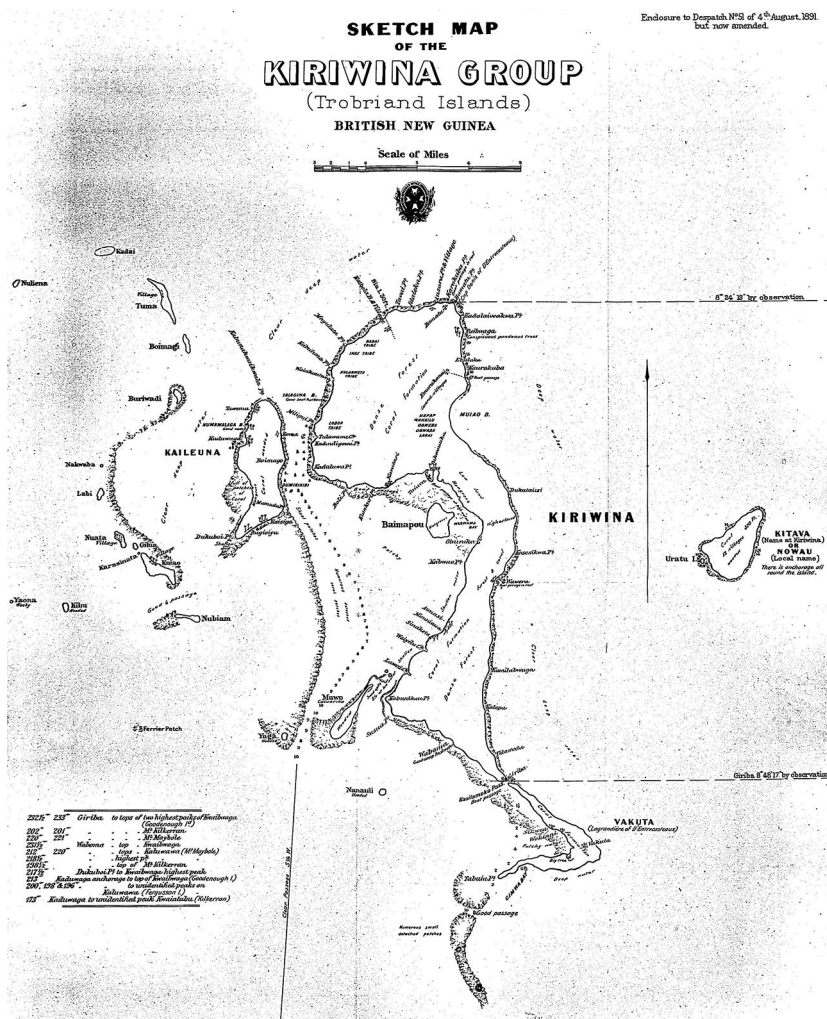


Figure 8.4: William MacGregor, 'Sketch Map of the Kiriwina Group', 1893.

Source: National Archives of Papua New Guinea.

15 MacGregor 1892: 7.



The view of Kitava from offshore, with large inland villages lying hidden beyond tall, thickly wooded cliffs, would fool anyone unfamiliar with the island. The spot where the steamer dropped anchor had in fact been one of the preferred stopping places for whalers, so it was no surprise that Kitavans en masse made for the *Merrie England* to trade at first light.

From Kitava the steamer proceeded around Kiriwina's northern end and directly to the large coastal village of Kaduwaga on the western island of Kaileuna, indicating that MacGregor had at least some information about points of interest in the islands, yet not enough to correctly record their names, relying on poor communication with Kitavans to derive 'Waiyova' for Boyowa (a local name for Kiriwina), and 'Avatana' for Kaileuna. As they passed Tauwema village on the north coast of Kaileuna 'some of the natives came out to meet us on canoes, and were very desirous that we should stop there', apparently to trade.

The Trobriand passion for encounter and exchange, as well as MacGregor's growing realisation of the group's popularity amongst traders, was further demonstrated upon arrival at Kaduwaga:

Before the anchor was down the steamer was surrounded by a crowd of canoes, the occupants of which wished to sell yams. It appears that German traders come to the Trobriands to purchase yams for Matupi [Rabaul in German New Guinea]. A schooner named the 'Hans' is engaged in this trade. We were very kindly received by the people and presented to the chiefs.<sup>16</sup>

MacGregor found that while no English was spoken, a few words of German were known. MacGregor and Brown were 'almost able to hold a sort of broken conversation by means of the languages of Fiji, Murua [Woodlark] and Matupi'. The fecundity of the place was striking to MacGregor, who had seen more of Papua than any other European before him:

The fertility of the soil was evident from the immense stores of excellent yams stacked up in specially constructed log houses. Nowhere else in the possession have I seen so much food in stock. Besides yams, they brought two pigs to the steamer for sale and a great quantity of newly caught fish.<sup>17</sup>

---

16 MacGregor 1892: 7.

17 MacGregor 1892: 7.



Figure 8.5: Trobriand yam houses, 1897. Photograph by George Brown.

Source: Australian Museum.

The village chiefs paddled out to the steamer the next morning with presents of cooked food.<sup>18</sup> Impressed by what little he saw of the Trobriands on this first visit and charmed by the people, MacGregor hinted at feeling misinformed about the islands:

The whole [of the Trobriand group] are greatly more important than I had been led to believe, as regards extent, productiveness and population. It will, however, take two or three weeks to inspect the whole, a task I fear must be deferred for some time.

MacGregor's sources for information on the islands would have been the itinerant traders based at Samarai. Many of these were loners and malcontents who would not have been friendly toward the nascent government, and even the more gentlemanly adventurers such as Whitten and Solberg would have at first been ambivalent and rather close-lipped.<sup>19</sup>

18 Trobriand society is one of few in Melanesia to possess an hereditary system of ranked chieftainship, but one that includes much room for competition between the various chiefs, or *guyau*. See Malinowski 1922: 62–70; also Mosko 1995.

19 Back in Samarai six months after MacGregor's first visit, when it was clear that he would be paying closer attention to the islands, Whitten offered more detailed geographical and ethnographic information, plus the news that 'they stole several things from [MacGregor's party] at Kaduwaga when we were there'. MacGregor, Diary, 1 January 1891, NLA MS 38.

Judging from MacGregor's 'first contacts', by 1890 Trobrianders saw the arrival of a European vessel as an opportunity to trade yams and carvings for valuable iron, and were highly competitive amongst themselves for access to the foreigners. The chiefs' visit on board with gifts of food was part and parcel of this competition, as they attempted to secure the newcomers as exclusive trade partners by opening an exchange relationship and by 'softening' their minds, to use a *kula* term, with gifts.<sup>20</sup>

Trobriand receptions of Europeans were modelled upon long engagement in regional networks such as the *kula*, wherein visiting exchange partners are competitively hosted in order to romance from them objects of desire. *Kula* strategy centres upon impressing counterparts with one's power, attractiveness, influence and generosity, and it is interesting to note that *kula* magic (*mwasila*) is closely linked to the magic of beauty and attraction.<sup>21</sup> Having long experience with visiting Europeans, of different sorts but all intent upon trade, Trobriand chiefs immediately placed MacGregor as another potential trade partner, and each did all in his power to impress and ingratiate this newcomer. MacGregor's Oceanian crew would likely also have been regarded as potential exchange partners, and fêted as well.

MacGregor returned a year later, in July 1891, for a longer tour of introduction and inspection. He was dropped at Kaduwaga with a whaleboat and 'a boat's crew of Papuans and South Sea Islanders', instructing the *Merrie England* to collect the party a week later.<sup>22</sup> MacGregor makes little further mention of this boatload of Oceanians, and so a prominent element of the visit, that of their own encounters with Trobrianders, remains a largely hidden history. MacGregor took a few of his crew along when walking inland from the beaches, but most would have remained with the boat and interacted with locals on their own terms. These kinds of local interactions between Papuans and other Pacific Islanders, unmediated and often unnoticed by Europeans, formed the backbone of the colonial encounter in the Trobriands, as elsewhere in the region.<sup>23</sup>

20 Malinowski 1922: 360–361; 1929: 330; Campbell 2002: 43.

21 Malinowski 1929: 186 fn.

22 MacGregor 1893a: 3.

23 See Thomas 2010: 16–17 and *passim*. See also Gammage (1998), offering a detailed account of how a later government expedition in New Guinea was in large part conducted by Indigenous participants, with three European 'leaders' serving as figureheads.

MacGregor's aim on this second visit was to get as comprehensive a view of the islands as possible given his limited amount of time. The visit generated a lengthy despatch, in which a straightforward description of the topography of the group and its people is joined by close observation of those facts and conditions that informed upon future prospects for governance, trade, industry and missionisation, all folded into a narrative of the events of his tour. Great detail is also given to descriptions of the surrounding waters and the suitability of anchorages for ships of various sizes.

Following a short inspection of the outer islet of Buriwadi to the west, the party returned to Kaileuna, from where 'the principal chief of Kaddawaga [sic], Tosieru, and a young man named Puluaiwa, who knew about a dozen words of English slang, accompanied me all over the group up to the moment I left in the steamer'; hence, although barely mentioning them again, MacGregor was never without these elite local intermediaries throughout his tour.<sup>24</sup> With 14 years' experience dealing with the stratified societies of Fiji, he was gratified to find in Papua a similar system of Trobriand chieftainship. MacGregor showed great interest in meeting the chiefs around the islands, and was careful to note the names of all those he met along with village and district names. For his part, Tosieru would have aimed to demonstrate to other chiefs his influence over this distinguished friend and guest by staying at his side throughout his visit. The party spent the night at Tauwema under the care of another solicitous chief:

The chief of Tawema is Katuwauta, a lame and very amiable man, who was very desirous of making us comfortable. We were very liberally supplied with cooked yams of different kinds, cocoanuts, &c ... I there received a visit from Tudava, chief of the neighbouring village of Waigiri. These two chiefs assured me that their people never fight with any other tribes. We saw nothing reprehensible in their conduct, save perhaps that their women are allowed too much freedom with strangers.<sup>25</sup>

---

24 MacGregor's original spelling of place names (which varies at times) is retained in all quotes, while I use more standard spellings employed by Trobrianders and researchers over time. MacGregor learned the next year that Puluaiwa was in fact Paramount Chief Numakala's son. MacGregor 1893b: 28.

25 MacGregor 1893a: 3.

From Tauwema the party rowed over to Kaibola on the north coast of Kiriwina. MacGregor initially saw no one, just a few canoes drawn up on the beach where the party made camp, 'but there were 500 or 600 round us before sunset'. Upon hearing the news of the arrival of strangers, everyone within walking or paddling distance who could come to the beach apparently did so, and hence MacGregor got his first taste of an enduring Kiriwinan welcome, the curious throng.

After exploring the rugged east coast of Kiriwina by boat the next day, MacGregor returned to find Tawaguguna, the chief of Kaibola, waiting for him on the beach, 'physically a very fine specimen of the Papuan race, and a very kind and hospitable person, manifesting not the least distrust or suspicion'. On previous explorations elsewhere in the Territory, MacGregor had grown used to encountering people who were shy, afraid or downright hostile to his advances. This enthusiastic welcome by Trobriand crowds, and the easy-going hospitality of the chiefs, were both unexpected and appreciated.

The party passed an uneasy night, not from fear of attack by warriors lurking in the bush, but from the unceasing chatter of what turned into a gigantic slumber party: 'Some 200 or 300 natives camped all night near us; and as at least half of the whole number were ever talking at once, there was not much sleep to be had in our camp.' MacGregor's visit coincided with the harvest celebrations of *Milamala*, so beyond a large contingent from Kaibola, other people would have been socialising away from their villages and staying out through the night.<sup>26</sup>

The next morning MacGregor was welcomed into Kaibola village half a mile from the beach, where he was visited by 'three chiefs ... from other tribes'. He did not realise – nor was he told – that he was being sized up by some of the most important men on the island, the highest ranking members of the senior branch of the chiefly *Tabalu* matriline of northern Kiriwina: 'Each with a number of men came to see me. They were Toula, of Omerakana; Numakala, of Utabala; and Utabalu of Kaisanai; all large men, and two of them with a decided tendency to obesity – a great rarity among Papuan men. They were all very friendly.' MacGregor's 'Toula' was To'uluwa, brother of Paramount Chief Numakala, both of whom would have been residing

---

26 See Malinowski 1929: 212–213.

at Omarakana, so MacGregor's attribution of villages was partly mistaken. To'uluwa succeeded his brother as Paramount Chief in 1899 and held the position until his death in 1933, famously hosting the young anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski at Omarakana during World War I.<sup>27</sup> Unsure of MacGregor's intentions, Trobrianders withheld Numakala's true status, and the identity of Omarakana as the seat of the Paramount Chief, until his third visit the next year.<sup>28</sup>

MacGregor impressed upon the chiefs the advent of the *Pax Britannica*, and was met with convincing expressions of wholehearted approval:

When it was pointed out to them that the Government would interfere in future and punish any tribe that molested its neighbors, they protested that they would not fight; that they had no desire to fight, and that they were prepared at once to sell me all their spears ... They said that they understood the position of the government. It was quite plain that social matters are in Kiriwina on a footing quite different from that of any other part of British New Guinea.<sup>29</sup>

This turned out to be polite lip service to their guest. Formalised warfare was not suppressed for nearly a decade, fighting waxed and waned throughout the colonial era and through Papua New Guinea's independence in 1975, and loosely organised inter-village fights flare up sporadically to this day.

In the afternoon MacGregor's party rowed down the west coast of Kiriwina, from Kaibola to Boli Point at the north-western edge of the great Kiriwinan lagoon, pitching camp on a secluded beach, '[b]ut our presence soon became known to the people of Kavatari, and by dusk there were probably nearly 200 of them in our camp'. In the morning even more people appeared, and MacGregor walked the two miles to the large lagoon village of Kavataria accompanied by chief Pulitala of Mlosaida (adjacent to Kavataria) and followed by this 'great crowd', while the whaleboat followed along the shore, escorted by a fleet of 53 canoes.<sup>30</sup>

---

27 While clearly another high-ranking kinsman, it is unclear exactly who the third man, 'Utabalu of Kaisanai' [adjacent to Omarakana], was, but he may have been Tagilai, a third brother named by MacGregor in a later despatch (MacGregor 1898: 38). It seems that 'Utabala' (the village) and 'Utabalu' (the man) were misrecognitions of the term 'Tabalu'.

28 MacGregor 1893b: 28.

29 MacGregor 1893a: 3–4.

30 MacGregor 1893a: 4.



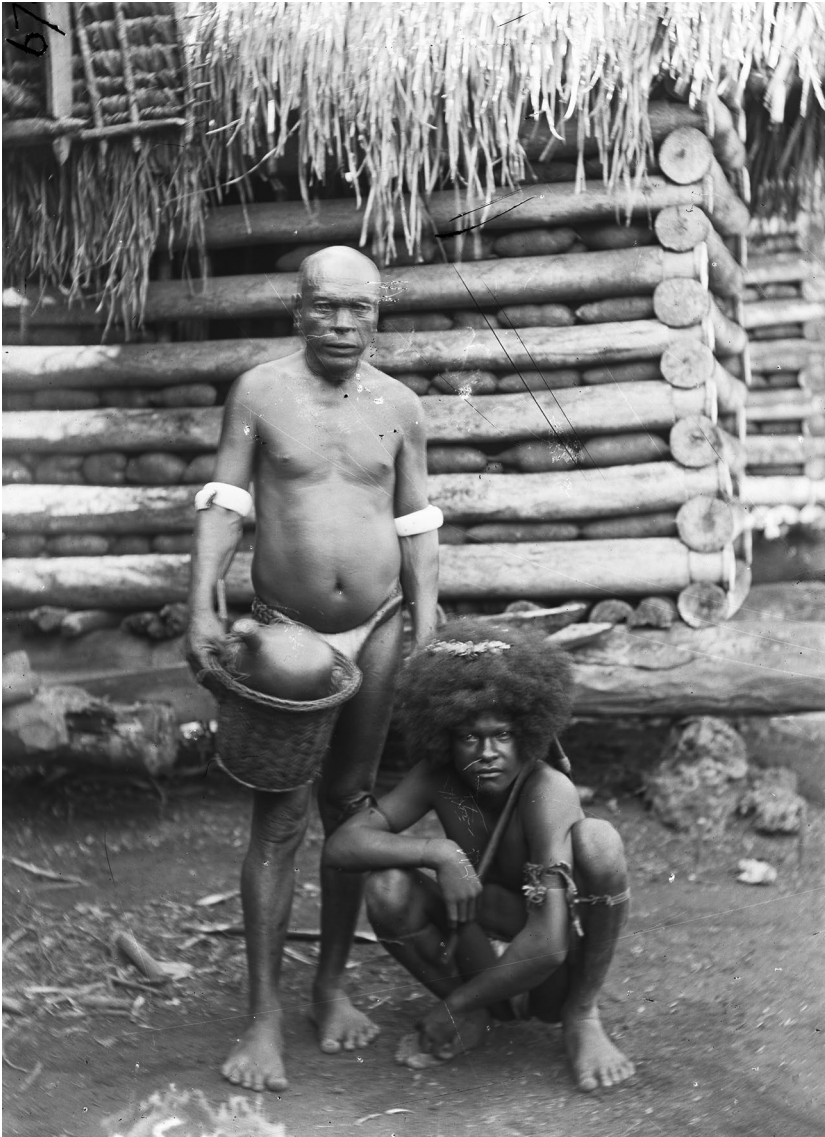


Figure 8.6: Paramount Chief Numakala and son (possibly Puluaiwa), 1897. Photograph by George Brown.

Source: Australian Museum.

MacGregor was keen to note the particulars of Trobriand chieftainship, to him a rare example of hereditary rank in the Territory: 'It was very seldom that a woman or a boy approached a chief except in a crouching attitude; and the chief, called in their language Guiao, is listened to

and treated with respect.' MacGregor at once put into play the strategy towards chiefs that would become long-term policy: 'Of course the chief in every instance received special consideration at my hands, but there was no difficulty in putting them in the position of inferior chief towards the administrator. Good opportunities occurred several times for doing this publicly.'<sup>31</sup> An example of this public display of the new order came at Kavataria, in view of a crowd of 1,200 to 1,500 onlookers:

When we arrived there a small number of leading men were seated in front of the village on a small platform, apparently erected there for that purpose. On landing, I took possession of this, turning them all off, and allowing no one there save the two principal chiefs. This was not regarded at all with ill-humour, as would be the case in many parts of the possession, but was amongst this people at once recognised as the proper course for me to take.<sup>32</sup>

While MacGregor viewed this as a display of his authority, the two chiefs that remained on the platform would have been delighted at this distinguished outsider's public recognition of their locally contested status.<sup>33</sup>

MacGregor continued his tour for another six days, walking inland to visit villages and rowing south along the lagoon to the southern island of Vakuta before returning to Kaduwaga to be picked up by the steamer.

MacGregor's first-person narrative reads like an explorer's account, as he writes of his personal discoveries, and adds them to the fledgling government's knowledge of its territory. But he does not hide the fact that he was a latecomer. Everywhere MacGregor went along the coast he saw people curing *bêche-de-mer* 'for the trader'. At Sinaketa the business was substantial ('They secure a considerable quantity of trepang for trade') but generally it was on a small scale, such as at Labai ('They were also curing a few *bêche-de-mer*, with which to

---

31 MacGregor 1893a: 4.

32 MacGregor 1893a: 4.

33 One of these two 'principal chiefs' would have been Pulitala, of a junior branch of the chiefly Tabalu, the highest ranking chief on the lagoon and arguably the second most powerful chief in the islands at the time. The other man was most likely either the non-chiefly headman of Kavataria, one of Pulitala's kinsmen, or the Tabalu chief of Gumilababa, a mile inland to the north.

purchase tobacco from the trader') and at Kavataria ('they obtain a few trepang for the trader'). But also at Kavataria MacGregor noted that '[t]his tribe is very keen on trading and are regularly visited by traders', so at least there, more may have been on offer beyond the odd basket of sea slugs. We have seen that German traders had long been coming down from Matupit to Kaduwaga for yams, and it is likely that Kavataria and adjacent villages were also selling them. Carvings and other local wares are also likely to have been offered.<sup>34</sup> While traders apparently had not yet taken up residence around the lagoon (but would by the time the first resident missionary arrived three years later), the trade in pearls, which would form the foundation for Trobriand economic activity for the next 20 years, may already have begun, unbeknownst to MacGregor. Trobrianders would probably not have volunteered such information to MacGregor unless asked directly, and his despatch seems to indicate that lacking a fluent interpreter, the bulk of his information came from direct observation, not questioning. Whitten was likely collecting pearls by this time and, if his secret had already gotten out, other traders would also have had an interest in continuing to keep it under wraps to avoid taxes, duties and other regulation.

What is clear is that by this time Trobrianders had had enough contact with 'the trader' to become inveterate smokers: 'They are all passionately fond of tobacco, and their use of it is more thorough than I have ever observed elsewhere. They seem to swallow the smoke, and learn to retain it for a considerable time, and then emit it through the nostrils.'<sup>35</sup> This passion seems to have taken hold rapidly, since Finsch had reported in 1888 that Trobrianders had no knowledge nor interest in tobacco.<sup>36</sup> Just three years later, the lust for nicotine had eclipsed even the desire for iron tools, and was the key motivation for Trobriand-European interaction for decades, colouring relations with government, traders and missionaries alike. One of the many chiefs to assure MacGregor that fighting was a thing of the past reportedly remarked, 'If I were to fight, where should I get my tobacco from?'<sup>37</sup>

---

34 The Kuboma district near Kavataria had long been home to a local industry turning out wooden bowls and other utensils for inter-island trade. Upon the offer of 'all their spears' for sale at Kaibola, MacGregor, always the astute collector, wrote 'As they were, in most instances, made of ebony, I should gladly have accepted the challenge had it been possible for me to carry them, which was not the case in only a whaleboat with all our stores and baggage'. MacGregor 1893a: 4.

35 MacGregor 1893a: 4.

36 Finsch 1888: 208.

37 MacGregor 1893a: 4.

MacGregor was a keen observer and natural writer, and in 8,000 words left an insightful depiction of the Trobriand Islands in the late 1800s, with descriptions of landscape, culture, subsistence, language, dress, villages, housing and health conditions, all couched in a narrative that includes telling accounts of his interactions with Trobrianders. General appraisals expected from his administrative viewpoint are joined with an ethnographer's eye for small details of observation. Some comments seem to serve only to relate a bit of colour, such as at Obweria, an inland village where a visit from a European was entirely novel: 'The women, especially the old women, were very curious to see a white man, and delighted in peering into my eyes.'<sup>38</sup> There is room for humorous anecdote that lends a sense of humanity to Trobrianders, all too often missing from colonial writing. Upon leaving Obweria:

Our guide was unable to separate himself from his pig – a fine half-grown animal. This creature would insist on following him like a dog, of which the poor man was greatly ashamed, and he several times in ill-temper severely punished the pig in trying to send it home. But the Papuan pig is certainly the most affectionate, the most active, and the most intelligent of swine; and this devoted adherent, if driven off at one point, soon appeared on the path ahead waiting for its owner.<sup>39</sup>

Throughout his one-week tour MacGregor was greeted, guided and fêted by various chiefs, who appear to artfully manage his visit in order to impress and gratify him, but also to display an easy association with this exotic visitor for their own local benefit. They used him in many ways as a curiosity, just as European nobility had long patronised exotic human beings from faraway lands for their own aggrandisement. On Vakuta, MacGregor observed that, '[t]hey said they had heard all about the government from Murua, and had long been expecting me ... We had the same kind, hospitable and unsuspicious reception here as we had received elsewhere in Kiriwina'.<sup>40</sup> MacGregor was so enamoured with the chiefs that upon finding one away from Vakuta 'on a voyage to the island of Kitava', he pressed on to the next village to enjoy the hospitality of one at home.<sup>41</sup> While the *guyau* of various villages would have conferred about MacGregor's visit, most would have been acting independently

---

38 MacGregor 1893a: 5.

39 MacGregor 1893a: 5.

40 MacGregor 1893a: 6.

41 MacGregor 1893a: 6.

of each other, yet all offered surprisingly similar welcomes, making the party comfortable, offering food in excess, and treating MacGregor as a visiting chief. All were quick to proclaim their friendliness, not only towards the new government but also towards their neighbours.

MacGregor saw the Trobriands as unique from elsewhere in British New Guinea on many levels and, like observers before and after,<sup>42</sup> was quick to note a seemingly Polynesian flavour: '[The Trobriand group] is the point of contact between Papua and the Pacific, tintured of both.' The chiefs' hospitality had the desired effect on MacGregor, as he summed up his sanguine opinion of the islands:

Altogether the impression produced on my mind by the people and country is a very favourable one ... In many ways they are a long step in advance of the natives on the north-east coast [of mainland New Guinea] ... the position of the chief is recognised and understood. They are industrious and well fed, and physically they are of superior build.<sup>43</sup>

Not fully aware of the regularity and variety of trade already established, MacGregor opined that '[i]f some new industry could be introduced which would create something for export, there can be no doubt that Kiriwina would become an important trading centre'. As for missionary prospects, 'it is not unlikely that these tribes may possess some trace of that religious sentiment which is so conspicuously absent in the Papuan generally. As a mission field it could be hardly surpassed.'<sup>44</sup>

While an insightful observer in many respects, MacGregor failed to recognise the relatively high status and independence given to women. His earlier remark that they were perhaps 'allowed too much freedom with strangers' might indicate offers of sexual hospitality – he noted in his diary that the missionaries Bromilow and Abel were offered such upon arriving with him on his third visit six months later,<sup>45</sup> or it may simply reflect more generally the social status and

---

42 For instance, Finsch (1888) speculated that Trobrianders were 'a mixed race', a blending of 'Oceanic' and 'Melanesian' blood, and the fact that they were 'noserubbers' (as a greeting) was 'again indicative of Polynesia'. Hagelberg et al. (1999) claim that genetic evidence of 'the remarkable affinity' between Trobrianders and Polynesians 'argues for a recent migration of people east from Polynesia into island Melanesia'.

43 MacGregor 1893a: 6.

44 MacGregor 1893a: 7.

45 MacGregor, Diary, 8 January 1892, NLA MS 38.

freedoms enjoyed by Trobriand women.<sup>46</sup> Regardless, MacGregor's impression of the standing of women, as stated in his conclusion, was mistaken; he concluded they had 'less influence and have much less to say than is the case in many of the ruder tribes on the mainland ... this is apparently a consequence of the superior position of the chief in the Kiriwina social system'.<sup>47</sup> It was certainly true that his misconstruction of women's roles had everything to do with the chiefs, but only in that MacGregor's nearly exclusive interactions with chiefs presented him with a limited view of Trobriand society.

MacGregor's experience in the Trobriands was not completely positive. Beyond the women's 'freedom with strangers', he had to deal with a theft whilst receiving Pulitala amongst 'a great crowd' on the beach west of Kavataria: 'A young man stole a looking glass from the travelling bag of one of my boatmen, and the latter promptly seized an ebony bowl belonging to the father of the thief.' A tug-of-war over the bowl ensued that threatened to ignite a 'disturbance' between locals and his crew, but MacGregor took possession of the bowl until, after some misunderstanding, the mirror was returned. He felt this episode worked to his favour: 'this incident established my position as superior chief, and it put a stop to all attempts at pilfering on the part of the natives'.<sup>48</sup> MacGregor literally flexed his muscles upon arriving at the large southern lagoon village of Sinaketa, where he found the people:

inclined to be somewhat more unruly than they had been elsewhere. One young man asked one of my party for some tobacco, and on being refused struck him on the back with his hand, more in playful impudence than in malice. I saw this, and went up to him and gave his head a wrench, which nearly threw him on his back. When he recovered his balance he fled out of the crowd ... after this I was treated with profound respect, and there was no further display of rowdyism.<sup>49</sup>

---

46 See Malinowski 1929; Weiner 1976, 1988; Lepani 2012.

47 MacGregor 1893a: 7.

48 MacGregor 1893a: 4.

49 MacGregor 1893a: 5–6.



This aggressive reaction to a minor display of 'rowdyism' reflects MacGregor's anxiety towards being surrounded by large crowds, which could quickly turn from friendly to violent. His strategy was to tolerate no such displays, even of the most minor sort.

But even at their most friendly, the pressing, noisy crowds that gathered around his camps and attempted to accompany him wherever he went proved tiresome. At Kaibola, '[t]he noise of babbling voices was so great ... that it was a great relief to be able to resume our journey down the west side of the island', and upon leaving Teavi to walk inland, '[s]ome 200 or 300 natives wished to accompany me as guides, and it was with the very greatest difficulty that I could reduce my escort to half a score, with two or three of my boat boys'. Later the same day, '[a]s usual, the whole village of Obweba [Obweria] would have gone on to guide me to the next tribe; only one man was constituted official conductor, but a large number followed behind'. Upon anchoring again at Kaduwaga on his third visit, 'a great crowd came out making a frightful row, selling food etc'.<sup>50</sup>

But these irritations were minor compared to the positive image of the Trobriands MacGregor came away with. The artfully managed reception of MacGregor by the chiefs had a long-term effect that is as yet largely unexplored. MacGregor's dispatches, published over 20 years before Malinowski set foot in the islands, were in large part the beginning of a European construction of the Trobriands as a special place in Melanesia, with political and social institutions perceived as akin to an idealised Polynesia. This conception would mark the islands for special treatment for the next 80 years of Anglo-Australian administration and missionisation, and may be one explanation for the oft-noted resiliency of traditional Trobriand culture in the face of those 80 years of colonial and Christian contact.

---

50 MacGregor, *Diary*, 8 January 1892, NLA MS 38.

## Acknowledgements

The research for this chapter was conducted with the support of the School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University. The author thanks Chris Ballard, Valerie Bichard, Jay Crain, Allan Darrah, Bronwen Douglas, Dario Di Rosa, Joseph Foukona, Elena Govor, Nicholas Halter, Anna Kwai, Latu Latai, Antje Lubcke, Gonzaga Puas, Cesar Suva, Graeme Whimp and Michael Young for helpful feedback on various drafts.

## References

- Austen, Leo 1936, 'The Trobriand Islands of Papua', *Australian Geographer* 111(2): 10–22.
- Beale, Thomas 1839, *The Natural History of the Sperm Whale... /, to which is added a sketch of a South-Sea whaling voyage... / in which the author was personally engaged*, second edition, John Van Voorst, London.
- Beautemps-Beaupré, Charles Francois 1807, *Carte des Archipels des îles Salomon, de la Louisiade et de la Nouv.le Bretagne; situés à l'est de la Nouvelle Guinée / redigée par C.F. Beautemps-Beaupré, hydrographe sous-chef du dépôt gal. de la marine en 1806*, Depot general des cartes et plans de la marine et des colonies, Paris, Plate 21.
- Campbell, Shirley 2002, *The Art of Kula*, Berg, Oxford.
- Finsch, Otto 1888, *Samoafahrten: Reisen in Kaiser Wilhelms-Land und Englisch-Neu-Guinea in den Jahren 1884 und 1885 an Bord des deutschen Dampfers "Samoa."* [Second Samoa Cruise: Travel in Kaiser Wilhelm's Land and English-New-Guinea in 1884 and 1885 on board the German steamer "Samoa."], Ferdinand Hirt & Sohn, Leipzig.
- Gammage, Bill 1998, *The Sky Travellers: Journeys in New Guinea 1938–1939*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.
- Gardner, Helen 2006, *Gathering for God: George Brown in Oceania*, Otago University Press, Dunedin.

- Hagelberg, Erika, M. Kayser, Marion Nagy, Lutz Roewer, Heike Zimdahl, M. Krawczak, Pietro Lio and W. Schiefenhövel 1999, 'Molecular genetic evidence for the human settlement of the Pacific: Analysis of mitochondrial DNA, Y chromosome and HLA markers', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London B: Biological Sciences* 354(1379): 141–152.
- Horner, Frank 1995, *Looking for La Perouse: d'Entrecasteaux in Australia and the South Pacific 1792–1793*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.
- Hunter, R. L. 1839, 'Gower's Harbour, New Ireland', *Nautical Magazine and Naval Chronicle* 8: 37–39.
- Joyce, Roger B. 1971, *Sir William MacGregor*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- Lepani, Katherine 2012, *Islands of Love, Islands of Risk: Culture and HIV in the Trobriands*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, TN.
- Lutton, Nancy 1972, 'C.A.W. Monckton's Trilogy of his Adventures in New Guinea: Fact or Fiction?', Hons thesis, University of Papua New Guinea.
- MacGillivray, John 1852, *Narrative of the Voyage of H.M.S. Rattlesnake*, vol. 1, T. & W. Boone, London.
- MacGregor, William 1890–1892, Diaries [Manuscript], National Library of Australia, NLA MS 38.
- 1892, 'Despatch Reporting Expedition to Effect Capture of Murderers of Two Traders at Murua (Woodlark Island)', in *Annual Report on British New Guinea 1890–1891*, Appendix B (16 September 1890), Government Printer, Brisbane, Qld, 4–8.
- 1893a, 'Despatch Reporting Visits to the D'Entrecasteaux and Trobriand Groups', in *Annual Report on British New Guinea 1891–1892*, Appendix A (4 August 1891), Government Printer, Brisbane, Qld, 2–7.
- 1893b, 'Despatch Continuing the Report of his Visit of Inspection to the Eastern portion of the Possession', in *Annual Report on British New Guinea 1891–1892*, Appendix G (9 February 1892), Government Printer, Brisbane, Qld, 27–31.

- 1898, 'Despatch reporting visit to Kiriwina', in *Annual Report on British New Guinea 1897–1898*, Appendix I (8 July 1897), Government Printer, Brisbane, Qld, 37–39.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw K. 1922, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An account of native enterprise and adventure in the archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*, G. Routledge, London.
- 1929, *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia: An ethnographic account of courtship, marriage and family life among the natives of the Trobriand Islands, British New Guinea*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- Monckton, Charles Arthur Whitmore 1921, *Some Experiences of a New Guinea Resident Magistrate*, John Lane, London.
- Mosko, Mark 1995, 'Rethinking Trobriand chieftainship', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1(4): 763–785.
- Nelson, Hank 1976, *Black, White and Gold: Goldmining in Papua New Guinea 1878–1930*, Australian National University Press, Canberra.
- Powell, Henry A. 1956, 'An Analysis of Present Day Social Structure in the Trobriand Islands', PhD thesis, University of London.
- Sinclair, James 2009, *Gavamani: The Magisterial Service of British New Guinea*, Crawford House Publishing Australia, Adelaide.
- Thomas, Nicolas 2010, *Islanders: The Pacific in the Age of the Empire*, Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Webster, Elsie May 1984, *The Moon Man: A Biography of Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic.
- Weiner, Annette 1976, *Women of Value, Men of Renown: New Perspectives in Trobriand Exchange*, University of Texas Press, Austin.
- 1988, *The Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea*, Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, New York.

This text is taken from *Brokers and Boundaries: Colonial Exploration in Indigenous Territory*, edited by Tiffany Shellam, Maria Nugent, Shino Konishi and Allison Cadzow, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.