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Explorers & co. in interior New Guinea, 1872–1928

Chris Ballard

Lagging behind interest in the exploration of central Africa and Australia, the interior of New Guinea scarcely featured in the imaginary of colonial exploration until the 1840s. Joseph Beete Jukes, naturalist and geologist on the surveying expeditions to New Guinea of HMS *Fly* under Captain Blackwood between 1842 and 1846, famously exclaimed that:

I know of no part of the world, the exploration of which is so flattering to the imagination, so likely to be fruitful in interesting results, whether to the naturalist, the ethnologist, or the geographer, and altogether so well calculated to gratify the enlightened curiosity of an adventurous explorer, as the interior of New Guinea. New Guinea! The very mention of being taken into the interior of New Guinea sounds like being allowed to visit some of the enchanted regions of the Arabian Nights, so dim an atmosphere of obscurity rests at present on the wonders it probably contains.¹

If the exploration of coastlines was founded on the ability to chart their material presence, interiors invited acts of imagination, projective leaps beyond the visible.² Johannes Fabian has identified the quality

1 Jukes 1847, I: 291.

2 Glen 2000.

of the anticipated interior as that of 'a political vacuum, nothing but "geography"';³ but the unfolding history of interior exploration witnesses an inexorable shift from geography to ethnography and then politics, from a concern for surveying the landscape accurately, to engaging its inhabitants and plotting their distribution and disposition, and then seeking to control them.

In the broadest of terms, the early exploration of interior New Guinea moved through a series of stages, with transitions from one to the next accompanied by transformations in the nature of the relationship with its inhabitants. Between 1825 and 1850, the Morse code of New Guinea's coastline was gradually replaced by a more bounded form, fixed in place by the method propagated by d'Entrecasteaux's surveyor, Charles-François Beautemps-Beaupré, which consisted of triangulating the heights of prominent landmarks from a distance of about 40 miles off the coast.⁴ Curiously, much of the earliest detailed cartographic knowledge of New Guinea was thus produced largely by standing off its shores, rather than landing, and the scope for engagement with local communities and consequent dependence on intermediaries were thus correspondingly limited. The chagrin of the naturalists on board HMS *Fly* and, later, HMS *Rattlesnake* under Captain Owen Stanley, who were frequently denied opportunities to land and collect, was almost palpable, evident in the youthful Thomas Huxley's declaration: 'If this is surveying, if this is the process of English discovery, God defend me from any such elaborate waste of time and opportunity.'⁵

When the time came (and it came relatively late in New Guinea), the earliest strategies for terrestrial exploration beyond the beach generally took two forms: either navigation by boat up and then back down the largest rivers; or walking to visible features, such as distant peaks, and returning. Few had struck out from the security of rivers or away from direct line of sight to a mountain peak. The earliest European attempts to move beyond the safety of rivers were cautious affairs by comparison with contemporary interior exploration in Africa and

3 Fabian 2000: 34.

4 Kingston 2007: 146.

5 Huxley 1936: 130.

Australia.⁶ As late as 1877, Andrew Goldie could make the proud boast that ‘I have the honour to be the first European ... to penetrate by land for a considerable distance into the interior of New Guinea’ – ‘considerable distance’ at this time being reckoned at about 40 miles.⁷ Over the next 30 years, others would go further: the indefatigable Lieutenant Governor William MacGregor ascended every major river in Papua to its navigable limit, crossed twice from Port Moresby to the Mambare River on the north coast of British New Guinea, and in 1889 climbed Mt Victoria, at that time the highest point reached by a European in New Guinea.⁸ Only later did explorers seek to strike out from one river catchment across the watershed to another catchment, placing themselves increasingly (if reluctantly) in the hands of local communities; it is the changes in relations with local intermediaries contingent on this transition that are the subject of this paper.

Following Driver and Jones, I adopt a generous notion of the intermediary in exploration, which encompasses the roles of locals and non-locals, guides, native police, carriers, paramours and other expedition members, amongst others, and introduces the possibility of more elaborate categories or hierarchies of intermediary than the simple opposition between explorer and auxiliary.⁹ This chapter addresses the ways in which intermediaries are produced or acknowledged at the intersection of narrative templates for exploration and the material circumstances (objectives, topography, distance, funding, and so on) that prescribe some of the terms for an expedition’s progress.

Unlike Africa or Australia, there was no ready supply on or near the coast of professional native guides for the interior of New Guinea. New Guinea’s celebrated linguistic and cultural diversity, and ubiquitous raiding and feuding, ensured that few assistants acquired on arrival were familiar with either the physical or social topography more than a few miles from the coast.¹⁰ Thus early expeditions leaving Port Moresby by foot were accompanied by relays of different guides

6 See Kennedy 2013 on Australia and Africa. Despite sporadic attempts at the establishment of government, trading and mission stations since the 1790s, sustained European settlement on the main island of New Guinea began only in the 1870s. Souter 1963.

7 Goldie 1877–78: 219.

8 Souter 1963.

9 Driver and Jones 2009.

10 Simpson 1975; Kennedy 2013.

and relied for their local information on double interpretation.¹¹ To an unusual degree, the early European exploration of interior New Guinea was undertaken with assistants from the broad region (carriers and police from elsewhere in British New Guinea or Papua, for example) but with few or no local guides for periods longer than a few days. The process of learning to travel in interior New Guinea required a degree of trust between explorers and local communities that was seldom achievable at the speed with which most exploring parties travelled.

Rather than attempt a comprehensive history of the European exploration of New Guinea's interior, I want to consider the contrasting experiences of a handful of different expeditions, spanning the period from the 1870s to the 1920s, but focused on just two of the largest Papuan rivers: the Fly and the Kikori (Figure 9.1). The series of ascents of the Fly River by the Italian naturalist D'Alberty, between 1875 and 1877, nicely illustrate the nature and the limitations of riverine exploration; administrator Staniforth Smith's disastrous attempt to cross the watershed between the Kikori and Strickland rivers from 1910 to 1911 is perhaps the textbook case of 'misguided' interior exploration; while the North-West Patrol from the headwaters of the Fly to the Sepik, led by patrol officers Karius and Champion between 1926 and 1928, follows the conventional narrative of perseverance and breakthrough. In each of these vignettes, the roles of intermediaries are critical and, in each case, these roles are brought into sharpest relief at moments of crisis, in which the entire enterprise of the expedition is at risk of foundering. Local knowledge remained critical to every expedition to interior New Guinea, but it was not just that this knowledge was effaced in European accounts; rather it was often actively disregarded and undervalued in the very act of exploration.¹²

11 See, for example, Forbes 1888: 407.

12 Burnett 2002.

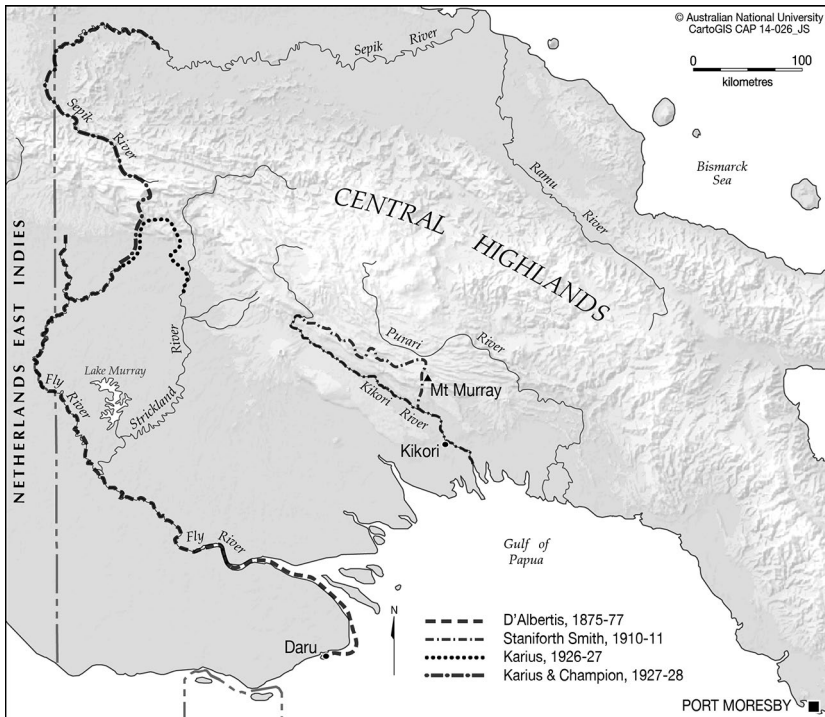


Figure 9.1: Interior New Guinea, showing explorers' routes.

Source: © The Australian National University CartoGIS.

If the shifting relationship between explorers and intermediaries is brought on or even forced in part by the changing nature of exploration, the second part of my argument is that the crises which illuminate these shifts are also an essential feature of the exploration narrative. Changes in the nature and structure of explorer narratives thus play an equally critical part in the transformation of the relationship between explorers and intermediaries. Fabian notes that the literary genre of travelogue reinforces the stereotype of the solitary hero, but it does so because the moral narratives of either transformation or unflinching maintenance of the self operate through the individual – other Europeans, as well as local actors, take a back seat.¹³ The first of my vignettes is a compact illustration of the role of these narrative conventions in the description, the deployment and the fate of local intermediaries.

13 Fabian 2000: 24.

Captain John A. Lawson, 1872–1873?

In June 1872, shortly before Captain John Moresby set out on HMS *Basilisk* to complete the coastal surveys initiated by d'Entrecasteaux, Blackwood and Stanley, Captain John Lawson landed on the south coast of New Guinea.¹⁴ Accompanied by a Lascar, Toolo, and two Australian Aboriginal 'bearers of baggage', Joe and Billy, he engaged the services of two Papuan assistants, Aboo and Danang, from the coastal village of Houtree. Together, they struck out on foot for the interior of New Guinea, crossing vast plains and wide rivers, and ascending a snow-peaked mountain, Mt Hercules. Disaster struck when they were attacked at an unnamed village just 30 to 40 miles from the north coast, and the expedition returned to Houtree, having walked for almost eight months. Of Lawson's five companions, only two survived: Toolo succumbed to madness and committed suicide, and Danang and Joe were killed in the skirmish near the north coast.

Lawson's companions featured prominently, if not always creditably, as porters, servants and dependents in his account of the expedition. Following Toolo's death, Lawson reflected on their three years together, during which Lawson 'had grown to look upon and treat him more like a companion and friend than a servant', reflecting Toolo's faithfulness and 'that remarkable attachment to my person which is so often found in natives of the East towards those who have treated them with kindness'.¹⁵ The deaths of Danang and Joe were lesser events; Lawson mourned the loss during their flight from the attack of most of his 'goods and chattels', listing the items of clothing and weapons, 'to say nothing of the loss of two faithful servants'.¹⁶ The two survivors, the Australian Billy and the Papuan Aboo, were studies in contrast: fearful, lazy, rebellious and prone to drunkenness, Billy was thrashed by Lawson on at least two occasions; Aboo, on the other hand, was both a reliable source of local information and interpretation, and a stalwart but submissive companion – still a dependent, but dependable; an 'ideal intermediary'.¹⁷

14 Lawson 1875a.

15 Lawson 1875a: 184–185.

16 Lawson 1875a: 215.

17 Kennedy 2013: 162.

Lawson's book, published in London in 1875, was roundly condemned by the majority of reviewers, who regarded it as a work of fiction and 'not even', sniffed Alfred Russel Wallace, the celebrated naturalist and early visitor to New Guinea, 'a clever fiction'.¹⁸ Moresby's return to London from his New Guinea surveys led to open warfare in the pages of the *Athenæum* between Lawson and his critics. When Moresby himself challenged Lawson's claims, point after point, Lawson retorted that, unlike Moresby, he had actually set foot in the interior, and was not to be contradicted on the truth of his experience.¹⁹

Unconstrained by the exigencies of reporting facts, Lawson's account of his companions served to elicit and illustrate different facets of his own character, as an idealised explorer, including his mastery of native truculence, his personal fortitude at the head of the expedition, and his capacity for benevolence towards servants. In terms of the structure of Lawson's narrative, the loss of his companions was both a necessary sacrifice and a measure of his own endurance and good fortune. Much like the disposable sidekicks of cinema and television, expendable companions emerge as an early staple of expedition accounts.

Luigi Maria D'Albertis, 1875–1877

The Italian naturalist Luigi Maria D'Albertis may have 'thrown aside with contempt the book relating Captain Lawson's travels across New Guinea', but his own adventures offer a number of close parallels.²⁰ By 1875, when he joined London Missionary Society (LMS) missionary Samuel Macfarlane's *Ellangowan* expedition up the Fly River, D'Albertis had been collecting intensively in north-west and south-east New Guinea for almost three years. For the next four years, he was consumed by the desire to penetrate further and collect deeper into New Guinea's interior than any before him, and in the course of two further expeditions up the Fly River, in 1876 and again in 1877, he largely succeeded in his aims. On both occasions, the expedition ascended the Fly on the shallow-draught steam-powered vessel *Neva*, with only occasional forays to the river's banks for wood, collection and

18 Wallace 1875.

19 *Athenæum* 1875; Lawson 1875b; Moresby 1875; Ballard 2009.

20 D'Albertis 1880, II: 2.

hunting, to the farthest point deemed either navigable or wise, before returning. If sufficient funds had been available through his sponsor, the Sydney-based physician and naturalist George Bennett, D'Albertis had also planned to walk from the Upper Fly to Port Moresby or Yule Island over six to eight months, a venture of Lawsonsque ambition.²¹

The map that accompanies his book carries annotations that are revealing of D'Albertis's optimism and ambition, and indicative of the harsh reality of early interior exploration, including 'Highest point[s] reached' by the *Ellangowan* in 1875 and the *Neva* in 1876; 'Gold probably to be found'; 'Attacked by Natives 1876'; and 'Natives hostile, several fights with them'. All three expeditions were marred by violence, both against local communities along the river and within the expedition parties, and D'Albertis played a central role in this violence. Attacks on his boats were common, but initial restraint quickly gave way to pre-emptive strikes. D'Albertis delighted in the use of dynamite charges timed to explode beneath pursuing canoes, or signal rockets loaded with dynamite fired into settlements or massed warriors. Heads from some of the victims of this slaughter were collected and pickled, joining mummified corpses and body parts stacked against the gunwales of the *Neva* in a macabre mobile tableau.

In his choice of companions, D'Albertis outdid Lawson. He arrived in south-east Papua with three servants: Tomaselli from Genoa, who quickly left his service, and two 'Cingalese', Tom and Arnold, recruited en route in Colombo. A large retinue of 'South Sea Islanders', drawn from New Britain and the New Hebrides, and acquired through exchange with Captain Redlich, also decamped from his earlier collecting station on Yule Island. Considering himself 'alone' after the departure of Tomaselli, D'Albertis joined Macfarlane, and Henry Chester, the police magistrate at Somerset, on the *Ellangowan's* Fly River expedition, along with six Queensland Native Police, four Loyalty Islanders and Maino of Mowatta village on the New Guinea mainland, as a local guide.²²

Assuming the leadership of the two subsequent expeditions, D'Albertis recruited men who he felt were capable of defending themselves, but who were also cheap to hire and susceptible to

21 Goode 1977: 156.

22 Macfarlane 1876.

his control. Three Europeans accompanied him on the second expedition: the engineer and naturalist Lawrence Hargrave, a seaman John Moreman, and a very youthful collecting assistant, Clarence Wilcox; but only one European, the engineer Clement Preston, could be induced to join the third expedition. At various times, D'Albertis had under his employ two Jamaican Africans (Palmer, a former naval hand, and the well-educated Jackson), Fiji Bob, John from Hawaii, Filipino Tommy Xavier, Johnny Caledonia, Samoan Jack, and a Chinese cook, Tiensin. Maino of Mowatta, who had made clear his reluctance to travel beyond the mouth of the Fly River on the first expedition, was pressed into service again, and induced through the judicious display of trade goods to persist. The most tragic figures amongst his recruits were the four Chinese men who joined D'Albertis's third expedition on the vague promise of a goldfield at the head of the Fly.

None of his companions survived unscathed. D'Albertis's volcanic temper and Kurtzian paranoia grew with each mile that the two expeditions progressed upriver, rising to a climax on both occasions when the decision had to be taken to turn back. Hargrave was hounded throughout the second expedition and blamed for every mishap before being discharged; Moreman was chained to the mast and whipped; and the Chinese were repeatedly flogged if they failed to collect specimens in sufficient quantity. Only the two youths, Clarence Wilcox and Tommy Xavier, were spared his public displays of temper, possibly because they served D'Albertis in other ways. On the third expedition, all four of the Chinese crew members (fully half his crew) died: one presumed executed, another beaten to death by D'Albertis, and the last two killed by local warriors when they deserted. Those that survived were broken: D'Albertis had Bob and Jack gaoled for theft, mutiny and rebellion on their return to Somerset; Preston developed epilepsy; and Hargrave nursed to his grave a grudge against D'Albertis.²³

Not surprisingly, D'Albertis was never content with his human colleagues, reserving his affection for pets, including his Newfoundland dog, Dash, whose death he mourned in terms of friendship; a pet snake he described as 'a true friend and companion' and – with another snake – as 'my friends, for I loved them and they loved me'.²⁴

23 Goode 1977: 205–6, 223–4.

24 D'Albertis 1880, I: 315, 376; II: 194.

For D'Albertis only pets and objects – a flag or a treasured ring – were singled out and named individually as 'companions' in what he evidently regarded as a rather solitary adventure. Distant friends in Italy or Australia could be recalled with fondness, and natives could be friendly and hailed as friends if they remained that way, but few of his companions on expedition were ever identified as such. Although D'Albertis employed it most frequently to describe the close confidants of others, 'companion' was a privileged term in his writing. He might on occasion refer to the other members of his expeditions collectively as 'companions', but only Tomaselli, perhaps as a fellow Italian, attained the status of an individualised companion. Instead, the other members of his expeditions were identified in terms of their functional roles, as appendages to his enterprise: thus Hargrave was always 'the engineer', Tiensin 'the cook', and most others were simply 'servants'. Without companions, or those with whom he felt some sort of social parity, D'Albertis could thus describe himself as 'almost alone in New Guinea, in the midst of savages'.²⁵

The security of riverine expedition – the protection of the water, the bounds of the expeditionary vessel, and the Ariadne's thread of an obviously reversible direction – also produced constraints. The feverish intensity of relations on board a small vessel, matched with D'Albertis's capacity for violence, strained bonds beyond breaking point. Contacts with local communities were fleeting and often violent, and once beyond the mouth of the Fly River, there were no attempts to seek local guidance. Each account of D'Albertis's Fly River expeditions rose with mounting excitement as he ascended the river, culminating in the crisis of the decision to return, forced upon him in every instance by the shortcomings of his assistants or equipment. D'Albertis is also exemplary in the way in which his narrative comes to efface all traces of effective metropolitan support, companionship or local assistance in focusing on his own agency.

25 D'Albertis 1880, II: 184.

Miles Staniforth Cater Smith, 1910–1911

The Staniforth Smith expedition of 1910–1911, which sought to cross from the Purari River to the Kikori and then to the Strickland River, is perhaps the classic example of misguided interior exploration.²⁶ In 1910, Miles Staniforth Cater Smith was the Commissioner for Lands in the Territory of Papua. Taking advantage of his position as Administrator in the absence of the Lieutenant Governor, Hubert Murray, whose post he coveted and whose authority he was actively seeking to undermine, Smith launched an ambitious expedition. His ostensible purpose was to confirm earlier reports by the Mackay–Little expedition of coal seams in the area of Mt Murray, on the watershed between the Purari and Kikori rivers.²⁷ Daunted by the flow of the Purari, Smith instead established a base camp at the highest navigable point of the Kikori, and then advanced north towards Mt Murray with a small overland party. Though inexperienced himself in New Guinea conditions, Smith was accompanied by a large party, including a number of officers more familiar with the Papuan bush.

The base of Mt Murray was reached after just two weeks on foot, but food supplies were already low. At this point, ambition got the better of Smith, and he decided to make a push for glory by traversing from the Kikori to the Strickland River, which he planned to descend by raft to the Fly River. He sent back the larger part of his team, including the most experienced of his officers, retaining just Resident Magistrate Leslie Bell and surveyor A. E. Pratt, who had been a member of the Mackay–Little expedition up the Purari, along with 11 native police and 17 carriers. In the well-populated Samberigi Valley, the expedition was able to acquire food supplies, and negotiated its contacts with the local community without reported loss of life. Thereafter, they struggled through limestone country in which rivers, which plunged underground or over waterfalls, proved impossible to follow or raft. When they met a river large enough to be the Strickland, it lay at the bottom of a 1,200-foot gorge, down which they scrambled to build rafts. Tragically, within 200 yards, all four rafts were overturned on

26 Smith 1911a, 1912; Schieffelin and Crittenden 1991: 33–40.

27 Mackay 1912.

the first rapid: seven carriers drowned, almost all of the equipment was lost, and the survivors found themselves washed up on opposing banks of the river.

Walking downriver, they encountered some 'wild savages, who had never seen a white man before', but who nevertheless held up baked sago and enticed Smith's small group across the river to eat their fill. Joined by the others, the expedition (if that is what it could still be called) was taken to a nearby village, where they were fed more sago and understood that the 'natives had evidently heard about us'.²⁸ After another month of walking with little to eat along the river, which was still too dangerous to raft, they were welcomed hospitably at a second village, and ventured onto canoes again, only to be overturned the following day. Reduced again to walking beside the river, they stumbled on the next day into a campsite of tents which they recognised, to their astonishment, as their original base camp on the Kikori. They had travelled an estimated 374 miles by foot and 150 miles by canoe or raft, in a circle.

For this feat of endurance, Smith was lionised in England on his return in 1912, addressing the Royal Geographical Society and receiving awards including the Society's Founder's Medal, and the British Empire medal from the King.²⁹ Back in Papua, Murray took particular delight in declaring the expedition 'disastrous': 'The loss of a third of the party is something quite unprecedented in Papuan exploration.'³⁰ Smith was much more generous than D'Albertis in his estimation of his companions, or at least of the European officials and native police; the carriers he tended to despise as insufficient to the task, though he made a show of endowing the orphans of the lost carriers with 10 pounds 'to pay the cost of their maintenance as long as I was in the Territory'.³¹ The hospitality of the local communities along the banks of the Kikori he ascribed to their knowledge of the 'great care we had

28 Smith's bluff and understated account of his travails contrasts strongly with that of his companion Bell, who described finding 'our leader sitting disconsolately on a heap of stones ... Mr Smith had aged considerably in the short time, and bore all the evidence of having endured great privations. His cheeks were sunken, and he was much thinner. He was clad only in a light singlet and a pair of trousers cut off at the knees. On his feet were sandshoes, with the soles nearly worn out. His legs were one mass of festering New Guinea sores, and he was in agony from the bites of sandflies.' Bell 1911: 60–61.

29 Bayliss-Smith 1992.

30 Murray 1911: 6.

31 Smith to Murray, 29 June 1911, NLA/MS1709, Folder 15.

exercised in seeing that those we had previously met had been justly treated'; hinting, in a rather backhanded manner, at the presence of webs of local connection.³² As W. N. Beaver, one of the officers charged with tracing the fate of the Staniforth Smith expedition by following their route, observed, 'communication and intercourse are maintained right from our starting point to our limit. The natives right along the course of the Kikori are in touch with one another.'³³ Long-distance trading routes and kinship ties connected communities at the mouth of the Kikori with all of the areas through which the expedition had travelled, and news of its passage had passed in advance and then back to the coast long before Smith's men emerged from their ordeal.³⁴

Beyond the corporal punishment inflicted on members of his own party either directly by Smith or on his orders, for which he was later chastised, neither the various written accounts of the expedition nor the local memories of its passage describe any of the conflict, either internally or with local communities, that shadowed the movements of D'Alberty;³⁵ but there was also remarkably limited consultation about direction, or guidance offered. In part, this reflected the confidence that Europeans of this period in New Guinea expressed repeatedly about their ability to overcome the challenges of the landscape, and about their sense of purpose and hence direction. Cutting across or against the social grain of the landscape, 'blindly ... like moles burrowing underground', as Smith later ruefully acknowledged, the expedition confounded local understandings of purpose and direction, and offers of guidance were frequently regarded by the expedition, in turn, as attempts at deception or obstruction.³⁶ Pratt's map, based on his salvaged survey notes, was later proved to be surprisingly accurate in its depiction of latitude but well wide of the mark on longitude, which accounts for the expedition's belief that it had reached the

32 Smith 1912: 319.

33 Beaver 1911: 185.

34 Schieffelin and Kurita 1988.

35 Little to Mahon, 8 February 1912, NLA MS 1709, Folder 11; Schieffelin and Kurita 1988.

36 Smith 1912: 313.

Strickland River.³⁷ The three relief parties sent out to find Smith's expedition covered much more ground and ultimately contributed more substantially to the exploration of the Territory.³⁸

Charles Karius and Ivan Champion, 1926–1928

The subsequent exploration of interior New Guinea was a task shared fairly equally between miners, missionaries and government officers, each with their own local staff and methods;³⁹ but it was the government patrol officer who became the crystallising figure, and frequently the author, of the New Guinea exploration narrative. If there was little by way of a scramble for territory in interior New Guinea, there was certainly a scramble to publish, and expeditionary tales by government officers became a small but significant literary genre in their own right. Perhaps the jewel in the exploratory crown in New Guinea was the first crossing of the island at its widest point, and Lieutenant Governor Murray was keen that this be first achieved by the staff of his Papuan administration. Appointing two officers with considerable experience in the bush for their age, Charles Karius and Ivan Champion, he directed them to cross from the headwaters of the Fly River to the Sepik River. Between December 1926 and June 1928, the North-West Patrol, as it became known, launched two attempts at this crossing.⁴⁰ The first was turned back by a seemingly impenetrable mountain wall, but the second succeeded in threading a path over the central range and down into the Sepik basin. The key to this success lay in the convergence of explorer and local interests.

Karius, as the senior officer, took it upon himself to lead the first attempt, delegating Champion to a support role at a base camp established on the Luap River, in the foothills around the head of the Fly River. Over 36 days, Karius and a small team worked their way

37 Bayliss-Smith 1992: 323.

38 The extended absence of the Smith expedition led to a major and wide-ranging relief effort coordinated by Judge Herbert, who sent several patrols up the Strickland River, the Kikori River and along the actual route taken by Smith; Murray happily published their lengthier reports along with that of Smith in the Territory's annual report. Herbert 1911; Beaver 1911; Massey-Baker 1911.

39 Nelson 1976; Radford 1987; Schieffelin and Crittenden 1991.

40 Champion 1932, 1966.

north, before being pushed eastwards by a massive wall of mountains; coming across a large river which they took to be the Strickland River, they followed it down to a point where they were able to purchase canoes at a village and proceed down to the Fly River.⁴¹ As Barry Craig has demonstrated, in a forensic analysis of the expedition diary, Karius – like most explorers in New Guinea without the requisite navigational equipment or experience – was wildly optimistic in his estimation of distance. In fact, he had neither reached a pass marking the watershed with the Sepik, nor joined the Strickland River until it had already debouched from the mountains.⁴²

Champion, who would later recall that ‘Karius didn’t have much of a sense of direction’, had been born and raised in Papua, and made more constructive use of his time at the base camp, establishing contact and talking with mountain people living nearby, gathering word lists and local names for the features already named by Karius for fellow patrol officers.⁴³ Ignoring his instructions to return to the Palmer River, Champion took it upon himself to explore the headwaters of the Luap. He came upon a series of hamlets where he recognised some of the young men who had been visiting the base camp, and they guided him over a pass into the Bol River valley. One of the carriers, Simodi, a prisoner from Goaribari Island, had inadvertently continued when the patrol made camp, and when they found him the following day, he was surrounded by a group of men and youths, whom one of the constables reported as describing a large river with sago (a lowland staple) to their north. Together they walked down to the more substantial village of Bolivip, and into what was perhaps the most significant encounter in the history of New Guinea’s exploration.

Out of the crowd stepped a short stocky man with Jewish features, huge chest and shoulders, wearing the customary cassowary plumes and Job’s tears. He embraced me, saying, ‘Num seno, seno, sene’. He then banged his chest with his open palm, and made a sweeping flourish with his arm, which included the people, the village, and the surrounding country; then stooped, and with his closed fist struck the ground, at the same time exclaiming loudly, and in a high-pitched voice, ‘Bolivip! Bolivip! Bolivip!’ He rose and patting my chest, pointed to my carriers, and then patting his chest pointed to his

41 Karius and Champion 1928.

42 Craig 2014.

43 Sinclair 1988: 55.

people talking the while, meaning that as I was the chief of my people he was chief of Bolivip. I looked at my subjects and then at his, and I must admit that I envied him.⁴⁴

There is no photograph of this moment, but an imaginative woodcut or linocut illustration published in a 1955 school primer edition of Champion's narrative meets all the requirements of convention, with Champion centrally positioned and a suitably noble chief in greeting (Figure 9.2). Over the course of a few further days of conversation and forays out from Bolivip, Champion established that two communities – the Feramin and the Kelefomin (Telefomin) – occupied large valleys to the north of Bolivip, in which the rivers flowed to the north and west, presumably as tributaries of the Sepik. People at Bolivip could also describe the sequence of river junctions to their south for 100 miles, indicating the regional extent of their knowledge and relationships.

Once Champion and Karius were reunited, much of their time between the two attempts was taken up by the onerous but vital task of relaying and staging rice and other supplies along their route in preparation for a final push. By April of 1927, the North-West Patrol was in position to make its next attempt, and this time Champion's route was followed, bringing the patrol back to an enthusiastic welcome at Bolivip. From Bolivip, the 'Chief' led them along a slender track up the precipitous mountain wall and over a high, waterless plateau to a grassy ridge above Feramin in the Sepik catchment. The panorama viewed from a small rock at the base of this ridge was breathtaking: 'Never before have I seen anything so wonderful', exulted Karius.⁴⁵

As soon as they had descended to Feramin, the 'Chief', now identified as Tamsimara (or Tamsimal), took complete control of the encounter, as he had at Bolivip, giving speeches both to the patrol officers and to the assembled Feramin. After one final word of advice to the Feramin, 'Suddenly, and seemingly in the middle of a sentence, he snatched his sling bag from behind him on the floor of the tent, rushed outside, called out for his Bolivip followers, and disappeared down the track at a trot. That was the last we saw of Tamsimara and the Bolivip.'⁴⁶

44 Champion 1928: 108.

45 Karius 1929a: 98.

46 Karius 1929a: 99.



Figure 9.2: Patrol Officer Ivan Champion meets the ‘Chief’ of Bolivip Village. Untitled illustration by Pamela Lindsay.

Source: Ivan Champion, *Across New Guinea*, Bonito Edition, Longmans Green and Co., p. 10.

Tamsimal of Bolivip

The success of the North-West Patrol turned upon a number of factors. The experience of the patrol officers and in particular Champion's willingness to engage with the region's inhabitants and anchor the patrol's route in local knowledge and toponymy were obviously critical, but the encounters and breakthroughs in understanding were substantially negotiated by a range of intermediaries including the carrier, Simodi; the policemen making enquiries of their own; the villagers who trekked down to visit the base camp and led Champion towards Bolivip; and of course Tamsimal. The question this now poses is whether any of these individuals regarded themselves as 'intermediaries'. To an important extent, Champion and Karius had been recruited as auxiliaries – companions even – in Tamsimal's rise to regional prominence, and the Bolivip community is dominated today by his descendants, as testimony to his prowess as a leader and his success in attracting wives.⁴⁷

In a misguided moment of my own, I joined some friends, led by Michael Bird, in a 70th anniversary re-walk of the 1926 North-West Patrol. Our goal, which was to follow as closely as possible the original route of the patrol (without Karius's detour) proved difficult, as the walking tracks and connections between communities had been radically realigned by the development of the large gold mine at Ok Tedi, to the west of our route. At every opportunity, we sought to confirm the authenticity of our own trip by taking photographs that matched exactly those taken 70 years earlier by Karius and Champion, whose negatives we had been able to copy. Less authentic was our reliance on a helicopter to relay our supplies, though we still depended heavily on local guides and carriers.

When we duly arrived at Bolivip, our presence was brokered in part by a resident anthropologist from Cambridge, Tony Crook. On the evening before we left Bolivip, Michael was ceremonially presented with a taro, much as Karius had been in 1927; and we were then treated to a series of three historical dramas or skits, performed in the church. During the day, various pieces of our equipment – a hat, a camera, some bags of rice – had been borrowed, and these

47 Crook 2007: 15–16.

resurfaced in the first skit, which re-enacted the meeting between Tamsimal and Champion. One Bolivip villager, dressed as Champion, led the patrol, taking photographs as he came (a wincingly accurate depiction of our own arrival). The Bolivip warriors approached these strangers, threatening them with drawn bows and whoops, only for Tamsimal to appear between the two parties, reassuring Champion on one side while trying to dampen the ardour of his men on the other. Finally, both sides acknowledged his authority, he shook hands with Champion, and peaceful contact was effected. The other skits dealt with subsequent events in the life of Tamsimal and the community, including Tamsimal's defence of one of his wives from a marauding policeman or carrier (possibly in 1942), and the community's acquisition of its first shotgun; situating the encounter with the North-West Patrol within a longer run of encounters, in each of which the central roles were played by Bolivip villagers.⁴⁸

Something of the contrast between Karius and Champion is conveyed in images taken at the Brumtigin rock overlooking the Sepik catchment. In the first image, of which there was more than one variant, Karius stands upright on the rock, pointing dramatically towards the Sepik, carriers and police posed before him and a crouching Bolivip man behind him (Figure 9.3). The second image, taken by Karius, shows Champion and Tamsimal in seemingly natural conversation, seated together on the rock (Figure 9.4). When we chanced upon the same rock in 1997, we could not resist the opportunity to recreate and rework these images, and shot off rolls of film with different members of our group posed more or less dramatically: Figure 9.5 shows geology student Philip Pousai as Champion, and one of Tamsimal's many grandchildren, Ray Kisol, as the great man himself.

48 The very lateness of European exploration of interior New Guinea has provided a wealth of Indigenous perspective and response that is perhaps exceptional globally. Connolly and Anderson 1987; Schieffelin and Crittenden 1991; Kituai 1998; Gammage 1998.



Figure 9.3: Charles Karius and company at Brumtigin rock, 1927. Photograph by Ivan Champion.

Source: By permission of the Champion family.



Figure 9.4: Ivan Champion and Tamsimal at Brumtigin rock, 1927. Photograph by Charles Karius.

Source: By permission of the Champion family.



Figure 9.5: Philip Pousai (left) and Ray Kisol (right) at Brumtigin rock, 1997. Photograph by Chris Ballard.

Source: Author's collection.

The intermediary position

I want to make just three brief points in conclusion, teasing out both the common elements and the transitions evident in this series of vignettes. The first point, returning to Fabian's observations on the conception of exploration as a matter of geography rather than politics, is that the early history of European exploration of interior New Guinea, from the 1870s to the 1920s, illustrates a shift from exploring the country to finding, and being found by, people – a slow and often painful process of discovering that ethnography, or a grasp of social relationships, and not geography was what mattered. Once the initial objectives of exploration had been achieved – mapping shorelines, ascending large rivers, and climbing mountain peaks close to the coast – explorers of this period found themselves almost entirely dependent on local knowledge, goodwill and food.

The second addresses the ascription of agency in narratives and the irresistible emergence in explorer narratives of the local intermediary. In each of the published accounts discussed here, a politics of accreditation – of the granting of credit or recognition – is at work. Lawson provides the literary templates: the faithful and truculent servants, the expendable companions, and the unreachable and savage locals. D'Albertis, for whom intermediaries are a practical and narrative hindrance, labours to deny companionship and effective agency to all around him. Staniforth Smith is more generous in his recognition of the roles of both his companions and local people – or perhaps has that generosity thrust upon him in the extremity of his situation on the banks of the Kikori. While Karius and Champion effectively submit to the authority of Tamsimal, placing their trust in him, and their narrative within his.

Finally, through the example of Tamsimal at Bolivip, the situated understandings of the role of 'guides' and other intermediaries invite us to reflect on the intermediary position. Narrative conventions play a central part in defining the intermediary, whether these conventions are those of the skits at Bolivip or the published accounts of gentlemanly exploration. Indeed, my selection of vignettes extends the enduring tradition of organising exploration history around its notional leaders. But the broader contexts for each of these expeditions reminds us that even the narrators, as the central figures in their own accounts

of exploration, are positioned as intermediaries in other narratives, whether D'Albertis in the context of his Sydney sponsor, George Bennett, or Staniforth Smith, Karius and Champion in Lieutenant Governor Murray's authoritative accounts of colonial exploration in Papua. Which of these figures – and indeed who amongst us – is not an intermediary in someone else's narrative?

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