

# IMAGING AND IMAGINING THE PACIFIC

*A journey through myth, beauty and reality*



First Published in November 2010 by the University of Canterbury Macmillan Brown Library  
and the School of Fine Arts in conjunction with the Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies  
as part of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations of John Macmillan Brown.

ISBN: 978-0-9864670-1-1

Cover illustration: *Samoa Woman* c. 1880–1934, A J Tattersall (1861–1951), photograph

## IMAGING AND IMAGINING

*'I opened my eyes in a world no feature of which I could recognize. Everything around me was of the most dazzling beauty' <sup>1</sup>*

John Macmillan Brown

The Pacific Islands are in many respects naturally paradisiac; favoured as holiday spots for their beautiful sandy beaches, enticingly crystal clear water and all-year-round warm temperatures. Despite the relatively rapid settlement of Westerners in the Pacific, the transition from Western ethnocentric and anthropological viewpoints to understanding indigenous cultures has been slow.

As a form of documentation, photography is often misleadingly perceived as truthful. Because photographic images are taken at a particular point in time and represent the real world it is easy to forget that the photographer has made crucial compositional and stylistic decisions.

This exhibition explores a range of Western representations of the Pacific in the early twentieth century; from R.J.Baker's romantic portraits charged with emotion to the sexualised and sensuous poses of A.J.Tattersall's idyllic women. John Macmillan Brown's photographs are distinct from the ones of professional photographers because of their inherent snapshot quality evoking the nostalgia of family albums. Contrasting photographs of the Pacific makes explicit the imagining and illusion embedded in photographic historical records.

On the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Macmillan Brown endowment, this exhibition is a fitting reminder of the goals and inspirations of John Macmillan Brown.

LYDIA BUTLER  
*Curator*

1. John Macmillan Brown. Published under the pseudonym Godfrey Sweven. *Limanora; the island of progress*. Putnam, New York, 1903, pp.1.



*Very old Hawaiian from Kanai, 1918*  
John Macmillan Brown, Hawaii, photograph

# THE DOUBLE BARREL GUN

## *Representations of 'The Other' in Colonial Photography*

Photography is employed as a tool to record, document and classify. The camera faithfully captures everything in view, which contributes to photography's association with reality. This objectiveness is taken for granted, as some photographer's beliefs may manifest into their photographs. Terence Wright claims that, "On the one hand, the *reality* of the photograph is considered largely unproblematic, allowing "transparent" access to subject-matter; on the other, the *language* of the image is regarded as conventional, highly constructed, its understanding determined by Western culture."<sup>1</sup>

Wright's quote demonstrates the double barrel gun of photography, in the medium's ability to illustrate an objective reality whilst also harbouring an underlying ideology that informs the creation and interpretation of photographs. The use of photography by Europeans in early photographs of non-Europeans or "the other" demonstrates how the objectiveness of the camera's eye was exploited to affirm the perceived superiority Europeans had of their race over other ethnicities.

Earliest photographs of "the other" were those of anthropologists taken in the second half of the nineteenth century. These photographs employed the Huxley and Lamprey methods in which the subject is photographed next to measuring devices demonstrating the subject's anatomical measurements.<sup>2</sup> These photographic techniques were impersonal and obtrusive as subjects were required to pose naked whilst their personal information was omitted from the photographs captions. Subjects were identified in generic terms of their age, race and gender. When identified it was by allocated European names such as the photographs of a young Australian Aboriginal woman titled "Ellen".<sup>3</sup>

Anthropologist's photographs provided visual documentation of different ethnic groups as well as indicating European belief of the inferiority of "the other". The photographs were undertaken in the anthropological practice of anthropometry which compares the physiognomy of different ethnic groups and measures them against European physiognomy. Charles Darwin's theory

1. Terence Wright, "Photography: Theories of Realism and Convention", from *Anthropology & Photography 1860-1920*, edited by Elizabeth Edwards, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 18.

2. Henry Huxley devised the method of photographing subjects naked in certain viewpoints as front on and in profile, next to rulers. J.H.Lamprey, secretary of the London Ethnographical Society, formulated the use of a grid in which subjects stood in front of, which allowed for easier cross referencing of different peoples.

3. The four anthropometric photographs of "Ellen" were photographed in the Huxley method, c. 1870, photographer unknown.

of evolution was hugely influential during this period and Europeans placed themselves at the apex of the evolutionary process. Anthropometric photographs affirmed European thought by comparing their physiognomy to that of non-Europeans whom Europeans perceived to be at differing stages of evolution.<sup>4</sup>

The growth of tourism in regions such as the Pacific fuelled the demand in the commercial market for photographs of “the other.” New Zealand photographers, John Davis, Alfred Tattersall and Thomas Andrew set up studios in Samoa to cater for the tourist market. Photographs most popular were those that were elaborately staged, succumbing to European beliefs of “the other.” In contrast to New Zealand traveller, John Macmillan Brown who photographed the contemporary reality of the Pacific, tourist photographs disregarded their subject’s identities in favour for scenes informed by stereotypes.

Stereotypes included the warrior, the native belle and the cannibal. People photographed after a stereotype were portrayed as stranded in a pre-European past wearing native costume and props which emphasised their exoticness. The staged cannibal scene and the native belle were propelled by false myths Europeans held of the Pacific. The cannibal stereotype conformed to European belief of Pacific people as barbaric and uncivilized.<sup>5</sup> The native belle reinforced notions of the assumed availability and promiscuity of Polynesian women.<sup>6</sup>

This photographic “truth” indicated moral lack of the Pacific people which reaffirmed the moral superiority of Europeans and their assumed advanced evolutionary state. Tourist photographs also served to document the dying races, the European idea that the customs and cultures of the Pacific would eventually decrease as proposed by Darwinian notions of the survival of the fittest, where the assumed weaker indigenous peoples would either die out or be incorporated into the colonial enterprise. Macmillan Brown challenged colonial thought in his endeavour to understand and support the diversity of the Pacific.

4. Anne Maxwell, *Colonial Photography & Exhibitions: Representations of the “Native” People and Making of European Identities*, London and New York, Leicester University Press, 1999, p. 40.

5. The idea of cannibalism came from missionary sources which were based on rumours.

6. The belief of sexual promiscuity of young Polynesian women dates back to early encounters between European voyagers and Polynesians, most notably that of the French voyage of Captain Bougainville in 1766, in which assumptions and misunderstandings occurred which led to the voyagers’ belief of young Polynesians practicing a cult of love.



*Tubuai girl, ND*

L. Gauthier, Austral Islands, photograph

# AN EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

## *John Macmillan Brown in the Pacific*

An insatiable desire to learn more about the world led John Macmillan Brown (1846-1935) to undertake a series of journeys around the Pacific Ocean in the first decades of the twentieth century. The eminent scholar and teacher devoted the later years of his life to intensive study and a better understanding of the peoples and cultures of the Pacific.

Macmillan Brown played a key part in the early history of New Zealand's tertiary education. With a natural aptitude for study he excelled at Oxford's renowned Balliol College where he acquired vital skills that influenced his teaching career. In 1874 he emigrated from Scotland and became one of the three founding professors (of Classics and English) at the newly established Canterbury College where he remained for twenty years. Macmillan Brown's classes became extremely popular and his detailed study notes were published right across New Zealand by enterprising students.<sup>1</sup>

In 1895 Macmillan Brown and his wife Helen Connon (the first woman in the British Empire to graduate with honours) both retired from their respective teaching posts, although he remained involved in university administration as Vice Chancellor of the University of New Zealand from 1916-1923.<sup>2</sup> Following Helen's death in 1903 and despite his advancing age, Macmillan Brown embarked on nearly forty years of travel throughout Europe, Asia, America and the wider Pacific region.

Writing his memoirs in 1930, Macmillan Brown stated that New Zealand was "going to play a large part in the ultimate drama of the Pacific Ocean and of the world."<sup>3</sup> He became fascinated by this topic and published nearly thirty books and articles relating his anthropological theories to a Westernised audience. Ethnographic theories at the time lingered on traditional or romantic notions of the 'noble savage' via a more scientific and exploratory edge. Not only do the photographs he took during his travels indicate the medium's growing popularity in recording new discoveries, but they also reveal as much about the photographer as his subject. Each photograph represents the eye of the curious

1. W.J. Gardner, E.T. Beardsley, T.E. Carter, *A History of the University of Canterbury, 1873-1973*, Christchurch, University of Canterbury, 1973, pp.104-105.

2. Macmillan Brown then became Chancellor of the University of New Zealand in 1923, holding the post until his death in 1935.

3. John Macmillan Brown, *The Memoirs of John Macmillan Brown*, Christchurch, Whitcombe and Tombs, 1974, p.1.

European, focussed on exotic lands and cultures yet refusing to view them in autonomous terms.<sup>4</sup>

This perspective is present throughout Macmillan Brown's writings where he attempted to provide theoretical proof of his ideas. These were increasingly viewed with scepticism, particularly those regarding the physiological appearances of Maori, where he saw many similarities with the Aryan race.<sup>5</sup> In his 1919 *Future of the Pacific* Macmillan Brown considered contemporary scientific theories in this study of migratory patterns, geography and use of materials by Polynesian societies. A year later, he wrote about the origins of Maori and Hawaiian myths in terms of ancient Greek mythology, comparing Poseidon Earth-Shaker to Pele, a volcanic Hawaiian deity.<sup>6</sup>

Pursuing his belief that science and study were invaluable in order to improve society, Macmillan Brown wrote two Utopian novels, *Riallaro, the archipelago of exiles* (1901) and *Limanora, the island of progress* (1903).<sup>7</sup> Reflected in these novels are themes of human advancement, exploration of unknown shores and the search for a noble purpose, all of which may also coincide with ideas that many immigrants held of New Zealand.

Macmillan Brown's endowment, comprising over 15,000 items to Canterbury College allowed for a special area of research. In 1988 his wish for a focus on the "investigation and research of the history, traditions, customs, laws and ideas of the peoples of the Pacific" was finally achieved.<sup>8</sup> For a man so deeply fascinated by the life of the Pacific, the Macmillan Brown legacy was an ideal way to develop his interests and share them with present and future generations. With his contribution, New Zealand would indeed "play a large part" in the realm of the Pacific.

LAURA DUNHAM

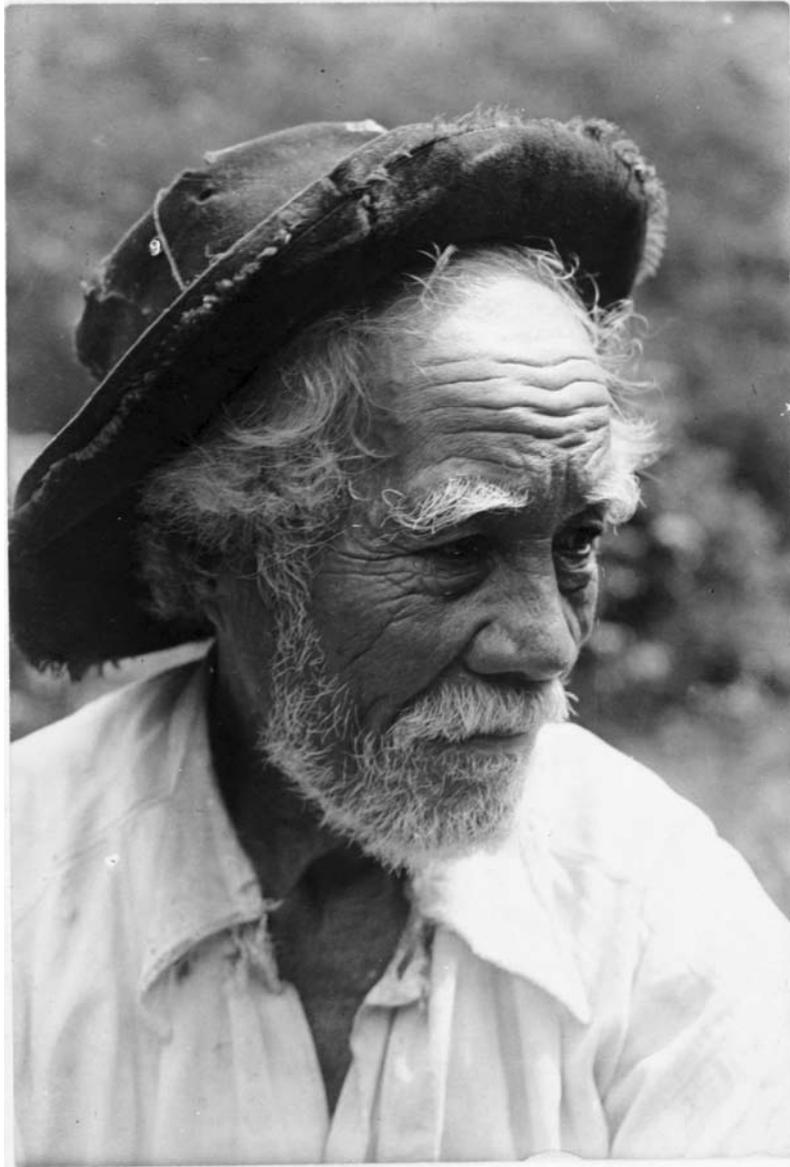
4. Michael Belgrave, *Archipelago of Exiles: a Study in the Imperialism of Ideas: Edward Tregear and John Macmillan Brown*, MA Thesis (History), University of Auckland, 1979, p.vi.

5. *Ibid.*, pp.67-74, 81.

6. John Macmillan Brown, 'Mythology of the Pacific,' *Mid-Pacific Magazine*, Vol.19, 1920, pp.34-36.

7. Macmillan Brown published these two novels under the pseudonym Godfrey Sweven. A third Utopian novel was also written but remains unpublished.

8. <http://library.canterbury.ac.nz/mb/mbhist.shtml>



*Old Hawaiian, ND*

R J Baker, Hawaii, photograph



MACMILLAN BROWN CENTRE  
FOR PACIFIC STUDIES

Acknowledgements

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*Curator:* Lydia Butler (Current student in Postgraduate Art History Programme)

*Curatorial Team:* Lydia Baxendell (Curator of the UC Art Collection),

Jill Durney (Macmillan Brown Library Manager),

Emilie Sitzia (Senior Lecturer in Art History and Theory)

*Contributing Writers:* Laura Dunham, Janine Bruce

*Editor:* Emilie Sitzia

*Catalogue Design:* Aaron Beehre

UC's Macmillan Brown Library and the Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies would like to thank: the Art History Postgraduate Curatorship Programme, the School of Fine Arts, as well as all those who have volunteered their time and assistance on this exhibition.

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Opening night: Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> November  
Exhibition date: 25<sup>th</sup> November – 14<sup>th</sup> December

