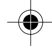

The traveller and the island belle

Frank Burnett's photography in the Pacific

Carol E Mayer

Abstract

Frank Burnett donated his collection of 1500 Pacific Island objects to the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada where it was housed in the library until 1947 when it became the founding collection of the Museum of Anthropology. His unpublished photos were organised in a series of albums and he kept a scrapbook containing letters, newspaper clippings about events that interested him and articles about himself. Burnett's books and archival material became separated from the collection of artefacts and relegated to the archives, where they lay unseen and seldom examined. This essay situates Burnett's travels through a contemporary context of objects, archival material and photographs. Burnett's published photography can be viewed as sites of discourse and interaction with potential to question, arouse curiosity, and introduce different ways of seeing and telling. How this is articulated as places, people and events are symbolically revisited will depend on contemporary cultural settings and trends in the wider discourse of anthropological practice.

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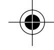
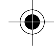


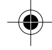
In 1927 Frank Burnett, Canadian writer, photographer and traveller, donated his collection of 1500 Pacific Island objects to the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. It was housed in the library until 1947 when it became the founding collection of the Museum of Anthropology.[1] His unpublished photos were organised in a series of albums and he kept a scrap book containing letters, newspaper clippings about events that interested him and articles about himself.[2] Burnett's collection did not attract attention until 1997 when its founding status secured its position as the focus of the museum's 50th anniversary celebrations and research began on the exhibition 'Pasifika – Island Journeys'.[3] Burnett's books and archival material had been separated from the collection of artefacts and relegated to the archives, where they lay unseen and seldom examined. The exhibition therefore was an opportunity to situate Burnett's travels in a contemporary context that examined objects, archival material and photographs as evidence of his encounters during his more than twenty years of travel.

Frank Burnett wrote four books about his travels to the Pacific and used two hundred and sixty photographs to accompany and illustrate his narrative (1910, 1911, 1923, 1926). His books belong to the genre of travel narratives of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and they can be viewed as mediators between fact and fiction, autobiography and ethnography, imperialism and anti-colonialism. Museums have viewed travel narratives and their associated photographs as peripheral and unreliable sources of information and there has been resistance to their acceptance as a focus for serious exhibition or study. Burnett believed that while he was a traveller and not an anthropologist, he was recording the last objects and vestiges of an indigenous past, a past that salvage anthropologists of his time declared was on its way to extinction. He wrote, 'It can only be a matter of a few years before his island home will know him no more, and he will form a part of antiquarian lore, and rank among the extinct races of mankind' (1910:6). Seeing himself as an amateur anthropologist, he thought it incumbent to record the existence of indigenous people before they disappeared forever (Ryan 1997:140; Schmidt 1997). Paradoxically, he wrote positively about the very forces that would seem to be responsible for this disappearance: 'The state of affairs, political and social, existing at the present time on the Gilbert Islands is an astonishing illustration of the wonderful genius possessed by the British race for exercising



dominion over, and in the interests of, native races, whose territory has, for one reason or another, been either annexed or brought under the protection of the Crown' (1910:121). By the end of his travels he recognised that Pacific Islanders were not going to disappear and British governance was not so wonderful. In Fiji he wrote, 'Since 1873 [sic] the Group has been a British Crown Colony and suffers from all the evils attending that system of Government' (1923:2).[4]

This paper concentrates on Burnett's published photographs, specifically those he took in Polynesia – the home of the 'Island Belle'. It is an investigation of photographs as cultural artefacts that reflect the changing motivations, biases and opinions of one man who lived during a time when colonial influences were being keenly felt in the Pacific. It recognises the interpretation of historical photographs as a subjective exercise that needs to be approached with careful and sensitive analysis (see Edwards 1992:4) including examination of Burnett's life history and the relationship between his photography and anthropological discourse. Frank Burnett's photography has been discussed briefly by Nicholas Thomas (1993) and Max Quanchi (1996:131–50).[5] After examining the photographs located in *Through Polynesia and Papua* (1911) both authors remarked on the contrast between the contrived poses of Polynesian Island Belles and the natural semi-nakedness of Melanesian natives, concluding that the former were presented as 'exotic', the latter as 'savage'. Island Belles, depicted as demure females, were considered beautiful 'not least because of their lighter skin colour' but also much appreciated by early travellers for their amorous and uninhibited ways. Melanesians, usually depicted as aggressive males, were 'uniformly characterised by their blackness and hostility' (Connell 2003).[6] Other than Thomas's and Quanchi's brief references to the photographs in *Through Polynesia and Papua* there has been no previous analysis of the photographs in Burnett's other books – *Through Tropic Seas* (1910), *Summer Isles of Eden* (1923), *Wreck of the Tropic Bird* (1926) – or the photographs in Burnett's albums in the museum collection. My interest was prompted by changes in the analysis of contemporary photographs and how this was influencing the perception of historical photographs. Today, photographs, documentaries and docu-dramas are part of mass communication and most viewers are aware they are being manipulated. The audience knows images are constructed yet paradoxically, is willing to accept the fantasy and buy the product or the



story – perhaps in the belief that fantasy will become reality, regardless of the fact that there is no evidence to support such expectation. This entangled logic is a far cry from the early twentieth century book reader's belief that photographs were depictions of truth. Even during the early days of photography, realism was heightened by a degree of theatricality that did not lessen the viewer's impression of 'authenticity of experience' (Edwards 1997). Add to this the display of lyricism of language and often imaginative 'projection beyond the observational' found in Burnett's writings, and the reader is left wondering where the truth lies; in the photographs or in the text, in neither, or in a complex interplay between the two?[7]

Burnett's history

Frank Burnett was born at Peterhead, Aberdeenshire, Scotland in 1852, the son of a sea captain of a Greenland whaler. At age 14 he was apprenticed to a sailing vessel and sailed as an ordinary seaman, travelling many parts of the world. In 1870, he immigrated to Canada where he stayed with an uncle, the Archbishop Bennett Bond, living in Montreal. There he worked as a purser on a steamer on the Ottawa River. A year later, in Montreal, he became a broker and built up a small fortune only to be wiped out in the crash of 1879. In 1880 he moved west to the Souris district west of Winnipeg, with his wife, Henrietta, his eight-month-old son Frank and his two-year-old daughter Nina. They moved by a horse-drawn lumber wagon because the railroad did not yet extend so far west. He worked variously as a farmer, a grain dealer and a private banker. He held the reeveship of South Cypress Municipality for six years and was the first police magistrate in that part of the country. One entrepreneurial venture, as a grain dealer, led him to invest his savings and take out a loan to finance the storage of grain in a silo along the banks of the Assiniboine River in an attempt to alleviate transportation difficulties. The river flooded, wiping out the silo and leaving him broke and in debt. After fifteen years of mixed fortunes he packed up and moved west to Vancouver, British Columbia. There, in 1895, he became first a pilot commissioner, then a pioneer in salmon canning, and then he sold real estate, amassing another 'small' fortune. In 1895 he made his first trip to the South Seas, to the Hawaiian Islands. He probably travelled aboard one of the ships run by the Aotearoa/New Zealand shipping company (Union Steam Ship Company of

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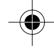
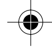


New Zealand). At this time, travellers on South Sea cruises indulged in what has been referred to as the 'mercenary activities of photography' (Hayes 1997:30).[8] The only photographs that might be attributed to this trip were blurry, taken at a distance and with a camera that clearly had limited capabilities. But this first trip stimulated his interest to 'see the South Sea Islander in his native habits and primitive state' to do which 'islands out of the ordinary course of excursion, holiday, or commercial traffic must be visited' (Burnett 1910:2). In 1901 he outfitted an 80-ton schooner, the *Laurel*, and set sail on the first of about ten journeys to the South Seas.[9]

Burnett had a personal library of travel books, a genre of literature that was very popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of his books that now reside in the UBC (University of British Columbia) library predate his early trips. Written by privileged groups, mostly Westerners, during the time of colonial expansion and imperialist aspirations, these books were rarely viewed as dispassionate and scientific recordings of the habits and culture of others; rather, as already stated, they seemed as mediators between fact and fancy (Edmond 1997; Fausett 1993; Clifford 1997; Gilbert & Johnston 2002). As a literary genre, they had certain conventions. Readers were generally seeking the exotic, the 'other', the 'different'; they wanted to learn about head hunters, killer sharks, devil houses – not fishing techniques and insect species. Burnett's reading matter told tales of adventure where writer after writer encountered (or hoped to encounter) pirates and rogues such as the famous 'Bully' (William Henry) Hayes; beautiful, erotic yet childlike women; missionaries who were spoiling everything; and natives who were friendly one minute and treacherous the next. Much of the mythology and imagery relating to these encounters was repeated in Burnett's own writings.[10] Other popular writers of the day wrote avowedly fictional stories of almost mythical locations, far-away in place and sometimes time: *Treasure Island* (Robert Louis Stevenson 1883), *King Solomon's Mines* (Rider Haggard 1885) and *The Jungle Book* (Rudyard Kipling 1894). Burnett lived in a time when travel writing and popular fiction told similar stories; a time when reality and fantasy became inextricably entangled. In his own writings Burnett quotes passages from the poetry of Walt Whitman (1819–1892) and Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809–1892) who both wrote about the moral and intellectual values of their times. Biblical references appear throughout his books.

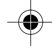


Burnett's library, in concert with evolutionary and anthropological thinking of the time, foretold the demise of indigenous peoples. For example, Ernest Way Elkington wrote:

> Let us look into the quaint lives of the natives – the last relics of barbarism; let us see their huts and join in their weird ceremonies and listen to their songs and learn their superstitions, for in a few years these things will be gone, and the cyclist and the tripper will be crowding these savage islands, whilst the sturdy head-hunters will be dead, and their sons will be cadging pennies, whilst the dark, shy girls will be bold and talk with nasal accents. (1907: 15–16)

Whilst writers lamented that '"savages" and their traditional and natural way of living were becoming irretrievably lost,' photographers concentrated on recording their 'alleged original state' (Schmidt 1997:40). Photography sought to suspend time, to document a vanishing world and conserve the cultures 'in print' for future investigation. Authors used these photographs of exotic far away places and people to enhance their text.[11] Photography, plus the lure of a good (if lengthy) title such as *Two Years among the Savages of New Guinea* (Pitcairn 1891) or *Wanderings in a Wild Country: or, Three Years amongst Cannibals of New Britain* (Powell 1883) – both of these titles found in Burnett's library – helped draw attention to their publications.

Edward Reeves, a New Zealander who travelled in 1895–1896, maintained that 'the photograph taken from the quick is truth itself compared to drawings made in England, even by the best artists, who illustrate from the verbal description, hazy recollections, and crude sketches of a traveller after his return from a long voyage' (1898; see also Pitcairn 1891; Elkington 1907; Turner 1861). These early writers admitted photographs were the preferred medium of illustration but there was in many pictures a 'false glamour'. They needed correction by cold criticism and then a 'faithful picture of these lovely islands and their inhabitants' would be placed before the English public that would reflect 'real current life and action' (Reeves 1898:11). At the same time authors, did not seem to worry whether they had taken the photographs themselves or borrowed from other photographers. With no qualm, HW Walker said of his 1909 book: 'With forty-eight plates from photographs by the author and others'. None is identified. H Cayley-Webster, on the other hand, declared in his book: 'The majority of illustrations are from photographs

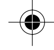


taken by myself, but for the few which were not I am indebted to Richard Parkinson, of Ralum, and other gentlemen with whom I met, and who kindly presented them at a time when I was without plates, or those I had were useless owing to the severity of the climate' (1898: vii–viii). Burnett echoes this sentiment in the introduction to *Through Polynesia and Papua*: 'The illustrations are from photographs, which, with few exceptions, I took myself. They will, perhaps, be considered as not the least attractive feature of the book' (1911:ix). Photographs by other photographers were seldom acknowledged in captions so the provenance of photographs was not always established. In Burnett's first publication, *Through Tropic Seas* (1910), studio photographs of Sâmoans posed against idyllic Cytherean backdrops are scattered throughout, even though he never visited Sâmoa during that trip. Generic captions such as 'an Island Belle' and 'Island Beauties' commodified the subject. Other captions misidentify people or places and bring forth questions of authenticity that might be applied to images in his other publications or, for that matter, in any of the travel books of this time period.[12]

In sum, Burnett was a man informed by a library of travel books full of tales of adventure. He professed to have read some of the popular classics of the time and he read the Bible and was aware of evolutionary theory. He was described as a person who 'sees with the eye of an Ethnologist, Antiquarian, and Artist, hears with the ear of a Student, talks with the tongue, and writes with the pen of a Philosopher' (Thompson 1910:xiii). He lived in a city on the edge of the Pacific Ocean – where distant islands of 'Edenistic' wonder accommodated cannibalism and headhunting as customary practice, and whose continued existence colonial expansion and missionary fervour endangered. He was not a systematic collector and he did not seem to have a collecting mandate. He was not an academic yet he epitomises the majority of early twentieth century collectors who donated their collections to museums.

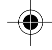
Photography and anthropology

The development of photography coincided with the major European colonial expansion of the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Edwards 1992; Ryan 1997; Poole 1997; Grimshaw 2001; Pinney & Petersen 2003). It recorded the progress and achievements of the



colonial powers and produced an archive that can be seen to represent a form of 'collective colonial memory' (Edwards 1992:12). At the end of the nineteenth century Europeans were already avidly buying mass-produced European picture postcards featuring themes that included landscapes, wonders, disasters, politics, patriotism, physical types and erotica (Baranowska 1995). The last two themes, of physical types and erotica, fitted well with an audience already intrigued by exotic and little-known peoples; commercial photographers were soon tapping into a market hungry for images of the 'other' from distant places (Ryan 1997:140). Such photography was also associated with discourses in anthropology, a discipline that owed its existence in large measure to colonial expansion and the subsequent opportunities to travel to distant places to study allegedly primitive and native peoples (Mackenzie 1986, 1990; Schwartz & Ryan 2003; Landau & Kaspin 2002; Pinney & Petersen 2003).

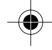
These studies were underwritten by the contemporary belief in evolutionism and diffusionism that placed the 'other' in phases already experienced by Europeans; Polynesians, with their lighter skin and impressive stature, were positioned closer to Europeans than the darker and shorter Melanesians. This belief, to some extent, influenced the type of photography that was taken; physical types were identified and viewed as 'raw data' for anthropological research. Responses to the non-European world were based on a set of assumptions that presumed the superiority of the white male and the subsequent responsibilities and rights this superiority bestowed (Edwards 1992:4).[13] Hand in hand with late nineteenth century evangelical expansion, Europeans had new worlds to save and this resulted in a climate in which they could assert their assumed superiority. Relationships were unequal and maintained as such by the assimilation of the 'other' into the lower levels of European structures. Contemporary postcolonial discourse views these earlier photographs as evidence that 'evolutionary anthropology offered convenient and comforting solutions for what were really racist assumptions and prejudices' (Cooper & Harris 1997:16). It is little wonder that anthropologists had different opinions about the value of photography as an analytical tool. Margaret Mead, anthropologist, referred to anthropology as a 'science of words' that relied on the memory of informants who had witnessed what was now gone (Mead 1975), FE Williams left few accounts of



his 2,000 Papuan photographs (Young & Clark 2001:56) and Bronislaw Malinowski 'put photography on the same level as the collecting of curios' (quoted in Young 1998:7). Photographs recorded surface, anthropologists provided the depth and were trained to observe and record. Only over time did photography and film escape being considered ephemeral to the written word (Edwards 1997). The person, the object of the anthropologist's attention, was largely invisible to the wider public except when displayed as a curiosity in museum exhibitions where his or her reality, alongside that of the artefact, served to validate the 'rightness' of the text. By the turn of the twentieth century anthropology fieldworkers were better trained in photographic skills and were taking advantage of advances in photographic technology. The role and status of visual recording in anthropology were changing and photography ceased to be a ritual and became a 'reflex' (see Berger 1991; Young 1998; Scherer 1992). Today this unmediated, naturalistic style of photography is viewed by many as an appropriate tool for 'the recording and understanding of culture(s), both those of the subjects and of the photographers' (Scherer 1992:202). Photographs are no longer 'of' something, but 'as' something to think about, and have become active agents in recording and constructing history. If we accept that photographs do not have exclusive or prescribed meanings but resonate various meanings within different historical and cultural settings, then Burnett's published photography can be viewed as sites of discourse and interaction with a potential to question, arouse curiosity and introduce different ways of seeing and telling. As places, people and events are symbolically revisited their articulation will depend on contemporary cultural settings and trends in the wider discourse of anthropological practice (Ryan 1997; Edwards 1997).

Framework for analysis

Burnett's earlier photography appears to have been taken with a hand-held, fixed-lens camera, probably mass produced by Kodak.[14] The first grouping of photographs in *Through Tropic Seas* (1910), taken in Hawai'i during his first trip, consists of small, unsharp snapshots of places – 'Scene in Honolulu' – and events – 'Women Native Riders' – taken at a distance. Long-distance lenses were not available so Burnett could not use technology to take him closer to the site. These early photographs identify Burnett as a distant observer and



tourist. There is no indication in the narrative of any contact between Burnett and the subjects of his photography. The quality of his photographs, however, improved in concert with the growing sophistication of the equipment available, and there is evidence he used a tripod and a flash during later trips. 'I excluded as much as possible of the light that penetrated into the building through the doors, and, after focussing my camera, applied a match to the flash-light' (1911:189). Many of the models in his later photographs are looking at Burnett, suggesting some relationship between the subjects and the photographer. The connection between traveller–cameraman and indigenous subjects might have been fleeting, lasting only as long as it took to persuade the subjects to pose, or perhaps, in cases when the subjects are named and referenced in the text, having persisted for longer. Burnett also purchased, borrowed or loaned from studios, photographers and other travellers, close-up studio portraits and group photographs *in situ*. Purchased photographs appear in all four of his publications although they are more numerous in the first two than in the later two books.

By the time Burnett was travelling in the early 1920s he knew the exciting and romantic world of the Pacific about which he had read twenty years earlier did not really exist. His purchased photographs reflected what he hoped to see but did not; his own photographs reflect what he was able, or chose, to document. His criticism of missionaries and colonial administrators, for example, is vividly expressed in his narrative yet not evidenced in his photographs. The people he travelled with are occasionally mentioned in the narrative but they do not appear in photographs taken beyond colonial enclaves. Burnett's photographs therefore cannot be viewed as a complete record, a single artefact of his experiences. Nevertheless, they do form, even in their incompleteness, sites of 'multiple, contested and contesting histories' (Edwards 2001:22). The University of British Columbia's partial and provisional analysis of these sites began by organising Burnett's personal and purchased photographs into three broad yet entangled categories: romanticism, realism, documentary.[15] The three images (figures 1–3) are illustrative of this categorisation.

The first category, romanticism, is concerned with the world of quintessence, translated into 'art' and upheld by principles of idealism.

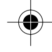


Figure 1 'An Island Belle in Full Dress' (used in *Through Tropic Seas*)

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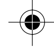

The Sâmoan woman depicted in figure 1 – a photograph purchased from the Apia photographer Thomas Andrew and later captioned by Burnett 'An Island Belle in Full Dress' – gazes away from the photographer, but assertively and proudly. This studio portrait, part-ethnographic, part-voyeuristic – or possibly commissioned by a Sâmoan family – was taken circa 1893 so by 1911 when Burnett published it, the unnamed sitter would have been more than eighteen years older.[16] She is partially clothed but there is no implied passion or allurement. A weapon is resting dormant across her lap: no agency or power is implied, the viewer has the power. She is not named, she is isolated and decontextualised; 'served up' as an anonymous commodity. Burnett's purchased studio portraits of 'island belles' were not about the individual sitter. These romanticised, exotic and sometimes erotic 'island belles' reflected the Western fascination with indigenous female bodies and 'beautiful, compliant women posed and pictured in exotic surrounds with a view to erotic allure' (Ryan 1997; see also Sturma 2002). Such ideas were also reflected in the captions, sometimes supplied by Burnett and sometimes imposed by the publisher.

Realism, the second category, is concerned with the world of fact – empirical reality informing science, a mix of purchased and self-produced photographs. The Sâmoan woman in figure 2, 'A Chief's Daughter', stares at the camera; she knows she is being watched by a male and unlike the seated woman, she is defiant and bold, weapon at the ready. She is photographed outdoors with other Sâmoans in the background and no sign of European presence. The third category, documentary, is concerned with a world of action that relates to social science and technology and implies social or political comment. The Sâmoan woman in figure 3, 'Samoan Chief's Daughter', stands stiffly for the camera, eyes lidded, unmoving, detached. Unlike in the previous two photographs, the content of the background clearly indicates the colonial context, featuring a house with a corrugated iron roof and a colonial officer speaking with a Sâmoan dressed in a combination of traditional and Western dress. This photograph might be a true representation of the young girl's existence (realism), a comment on assimilation and changing housing styles (documentary) or, by association, an elegiac comment on the passing of traditional ways (romanticism).

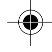

Figure 2 'A Chief's Daughter' (used in *Through Tropic Seas*)

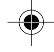

Figure 3 ‘Samoan Chief’s Daughter’ (used in *Summer Isles of Eden*)

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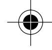
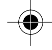


Deciding how Burnett's photographs might fit within these entwined categories generates a number of possible avenues of enquiry that are underpinned with the recognition that the nature of any single 'true' meaning is indefinable; historical photographs are artefacts and as such are subject to constant analysis and reappraisal (see Scherer 1992). As Burnett's personal and purchased photographs also reveal elements of his attitude towards and relations with Pacific Island peoples that he visited, his moral, political and religious stance is significant and gives a new resonance to what might otherwise be a stale collection of familiar images from the Pacific. He entered the Pacific with a set of assumptions based on his readings of travel literature and the generally accepted religious and moral conventions of his time.

Burnett sought and sometimes thought he found a world free from Western moral constraints. During his time in a village in Sâmoa prior to 1911, he was massaged by young women and his language of description is rather telling: 'The guardian angels then proceeded to loma loma (massage) our weary limbs, after which they laid down beside us and fanned us to sleep. I may state, however, that a light was kept burning in the house all through the night, no doubt in deference to the proprieties' (1911:114). His travelling companion, his daughter Nina, had decided to remain behind in a hotel in Apia and there are no photographs of his time in this particular village. There is one photograph of Nina taken with an unnamed Sâmoan woman but no record exists of her impressions or opinions about her co-sister or about anything else to do with the Pacific. Burnett's continued preoccupation with the notion of the 'island belle' is evident in *Through Polynesia and Papua* (1911) in which he included eight photographs of Tahitian women. These show women in various states of undress and only one is of a group of women in missionary clothing. These photographs are situated randomly throughout the book and are not referred to in the narrative: four, clearly studio portraits that he purchased, fit the 'island belle' romantic category.

Today the display of erotic images from the colonial era is controversial as curators are alert to the danger of perpetuating the gendered power relations that created many of these photographs. Yet removing them from a collection going on display might 'compound the current complicity of



silence around colonial histories, and make difficult an understanding of how colonialism operates' (Hayes 1997:32). In Burnett's larger personal and purchased photograph collection, and the smaller published set of photographs, there are portraits of displacement with subjects removed from their own landscapes and placed in the constructed studio set, often decorated with a combination of real indigenous plants and, as noted, with Cytherean backdrops. Belles and fierce warriors posed with weapons and dressed for battle presented culture 'through an aestheticizing grid' (Edwards 1992:9) of overlapping categories of art, ethnography and pornography (Ryan 1997:45). This genre rendered 'both bodies and landscape as available to a colonial gaze' (ibid.) and was popular in early postcards, satisfying the traveller's desire for fantasy. The belle image, as prints or postcards, also had pretences of being an authentic representation of real villagers, but this was already a cliché by 1907 when Burnett began travelling (Quanchi 2006:3).

It is the other four photographs in this volume that are of particular interest. Burnett spent a day or so in a village where he was 'entertained by the daughters of the Chief of the district of Variea, their father being absent at Papeete' (Burnett 1911:25). He choreographed a photograph of the daughters clothed in their missionary garb with flowers in their hair; two of them holding babies wearing white Western style dresses (figure 4). This was not particularly remarkable except that he also photographed and then published a young girl carrying a baby, with her clothing rearranged to expose one breast (figure 5). He then photographed what appears to be the same young girl with her upper torso fully exposed (figure 6) and either photographed or purchased another of a girl bathing under a spring completely naked in a posture reminiscent of Gauguin paintings (figure 7).[17] These photographs were all published and although the sequencing may have been the work of an editor it is tempting to consider, beyond voyeurism, what oppositional categories Burnett wanted to suggest to readers.

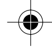


Figure 4 'Daughters of Chief of Variea Tahiti' (used in *Through Polynesia and Papua*)

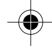


Figure 5 'Tahitian Girl and Chief's Child' (used in *Through Polynesia and Papua*)

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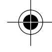


Figure 6 'Tahitian Girl, in deshabille' (used in *Through Polynesia and Papua*)

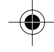
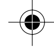
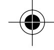


Figure 7 'Tahitian Girl Bathing' (used in *Through Polynesia and Papua*)



This sequence from missionary garb to Edenistic nakedness is intriguing because it is not discussed in Burnett's narrative; the viewer is left to surmise. In his first book, *Through Tropic Seas*, Burnett devoted a chapter to 'the missionary question'. Echoing the 'opinion of most medical investigators' he blames the decrease in population in the Pacific on the 'ridiculous theory that modesty and good morals are dependent upon a civilized mode of dress' (1910:164). Islanders who wore European clothing would become soaked by tropic showers and sit 'cowering with wet and cold, until the garments are dried out by the sun's heat, or by the fire in the hut, with the result that phthisis, a disease unknown amongst the Islanders previous to the advent of the Europeans, has been generated, and has increased the death rate to an appalling extent'. Confronting this scientific reasoning, one may ask whether Burnett was exploiting an opportunity to photograph women to demonstrate that 'rain and dampness have no perils for, nor does any danger lurk therein' or was he 'making real' the studio portraits he purchased wherein the subjects were 'enwreathed with a smile' (loc.cit.)? Perhaps he was attempting to collapse historical and contemporary – and even mythical – temporalities, or to recreate a past time through his own lens rather than accept only that recorded through another. The women he photographed were members of a colonised population affected by missionaries, traders, travellers and colonial administrators, but the mix of factual and constructed fantasy apparent in these photographs suggests he was inventing a memory of something he never experienced but wanted to believe had once existed.

This mix of fact and fancy persists throughout his four books. In *Through Polynesia and Papua* he wrote about the Solomon Islands, where his association with a trader, Norman Wheatley, made it possible for him to stay in one place for many months. This is the closest he came to what might be described as fieldwork. His intimacy with the place and the people resulted in photographs that have an ethnographic rather than an eroticised character (Thomas 1993:49). There are no purchased studio portraits or Melanesian belles in choreographed poses. Melanesian women were photographed in family groups outside huts or in village settings, and with the exception of those who were married to traders, all the women were shown in traditional or improvised Western clothing – usually a simple loin cloth. The traders' wives,



in contrast, were photographed in Edwardian dress and posed in accordance with Western convention. Their clothing Europeanised them and subjected them to the same codes of moral conduct and rules of propriety appropriate to a Western wife; there is a sense of occasion in these photographs – the making of family portraits for the record. This is missing in the photographs of the women in the villages. Melanesian women were not angels about to massage the photographer's weary limbs. Burnett does not comment on the sharp contrast between the white Edwardian dresses worn by the trader's family and the Garden of Eden costumes 'without even the proverbial fig leaf to cover their nakedness' worn by the villagers (1911:77). While the photographs contain a wealth of ethnographic information, Burnett's narrative concentrates on the favourite subjects of his travel books: the aggressive male, tales of warfare, cannibalism and pirating. This discord between the photography and narrative takes us back to a consideration of Burnett's photographs as worthy subjects of investigation rather than careless appendages to an easily dismissed convention of travel writing. Burnett's albums and published photographs, whether staged or not, and regardless of the motivations of the photographer, are accessible to today's museum audiences as impressions and memories of his journeys. Despite the presence of purchased and staged belles, here there is also solid and useful cultural evidence, and in the photographs taken beyond the studio can be found documentation of otherwise unwitnessed events, preserving them from oblivion. Burnett's photographs are about his impressions, his history and his Euro-American upbringing, but they also offer glimpse beyond the frame to multiple histories of the places and people he visited, and as such they can now continue to exist in time and be revisited.

Notes

[1] At the time of its donation the Burnett collection was the largest and most representative of Pacific Island cultures held in a Canadian museum. Other museum collections focused on particular areas, notably Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, whereas Burnett travelled more widely and collected in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Kiribati, Sâmoa, Tonga, Tahiti and the Cook Islands. The strength of the collection, in terms of both numbers (over three hundred items) and cohesiveness, originated from the Solomon Islands, where he stayed for nearly a year. He brought back over two hundred objects from Fiji and a further two hundred and sixty from Papua New Guinea. The rest of the collection contains smaller quantities of objects from Kiribati, Sâmoa, Tonga, Tahiti and the Cook Islands.

[2] Malgorzata Baranowska suggests that mass-produced photographs when gathered in one place become part of a single unique object (1995:177).

[3] The exhibition 'Pasifika – Island Journeys' was installed in the university's Museum of Anthropology from June 2003 until May 2004.

[4] Fiji had become a crown colony in 1874.

[5] The broader subject of 'Island Belles' is discussed in Michael Sturma (2002). I am grateful to Max Quanchi for alerting me to this recent monograph.

[6] John Connell puts the oversimplified 'exotic' versus 'savage' paradigm into a larger discussion examining the entangled notions of utopia that inform popular culture.

[7] Max Quanchi notes that we cannot be sure that the reader has equally absorbed both image and text or is predisposed to accept the truth of one over the other (2006).

[8] As Michael Hayes's discussion points out, the language of photography includes 'pointing', 'shooting', 'take' and 'capture' (see Hayes 1997:29–30). Images of the 'other' have been central to discussions about photography, particularly led by Susan Sontag.

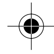
[9] The exact number of journeys is unclear; examination of information in his books, newspaper clippings and scrapbook would seem to indicate he took ten journeys that varied between eight and eighteen months in duration.

[10] Michael Sturma suggests the literature of the South Seas might be viewed as a giant chain letter 'in which writer after writer repeated treasured myths and romantic images' (2002:104).

[11] Examples include RW Williamson (1912) with 91 photographs, Ernst Fuhrmann (1922) with 180 photographs, Charlotte Cameron (1923) with 44 photographs, and Hugo Adolf Bernatzik (1934) with over 100 photographs (though not always exactly the same ones in each edition).

[12] Burnett, for instance, inaccurately captioned Sâmoan dancers as Fijian and Mâori men as Cook Islanders.

[13] Photographers of this time period included Edward Horace Man, Everard im Thurn, Emil Torday, Edgar Thurston.



[14] When Burnett arrived in Vancouver in 1895, Bailey Bros Photographic Supplies store existed on Cordova street (Vancouver City Archives #BU P5051). By 1903 Edwards Bros Photo Supplies was established on Granville Street (ibid., # BU P497) and by 1910, Timms Studio Lab on Charles Street (ibid., #CVA 677-657).

[15] Edwards (1992:8) quotes a version of these categories originally proposed by Rochelle Kolodny in her 1978 McGill University MA thesis, 'Towards an anthropology of photography: frameworks for analysis'.

[16] This photograph was used (unacknowledged) as a cover illustration for a recent collection of postcolonial essays (see Mageo 2001). It also featured in a series of exhibitions in 1995–96 (see Blanton 1995:126–7).

[17] See Paul Gauguin's 1892 painting *Vaïraumati tei oa (Her Name is Vairaumati),* Collection: Pushkin State Museum of Fine Art, Moscow.

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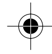

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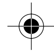

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