

Christianise and Civilise:

Three Women in Nineteenth Century Fiji

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Abstract

Travel narratives up until the end of the 18th century were tales of adventure, conquest and imperialism, or of scientific expeditions. In the 19th century, some women (often accompanying their husbands) began to write their own travel narratives. This research explores three such women in Fiji. Mary Wallis wrote *Life in Feejee, or, Five Years Among the Cannibals by A Lady* published in 1853, Sarah Maria Smythe wrote *Ten Months in the Fiji Islands* in 1864 and Constance Gordon-Cummings wrote *At Home in Fiji* in 1881. These books straddle the signing of the deed of cession in Fiji (1874) and show the changes occurring in these Islands in the mid 19th century. The women all supported the Christianising and civilising efforts of missionary and later colonists, but their stories are different as they travelled at different times and during different stages of Western contact within the Fiji Islands. This paper looks at these three women, and how they have represented their experiences within the travel narrative.

Introduction

Three women who travelled at slightly different times during the mid to late nineteenth century each encountered missionary efforts in Fiji. This paper sets out to look at the relationship that these women formed with their missionary peers, and also seeks to compare the difference between them as they arrived at a dynamic political and social period of Fijian history. As white women in a Fijian society, was the ability to report clearly on what they were experiencing affected by missionary ethos? Or were these women able to contribute their own perspectives of what was occurring at this time in Fiji? All three women had favourable relationships with the missionaries who were living in Fiji, and supported the effort of converting, and then “civilising” the indigenous Fijians. To what end do their accounts reflect the attitudes typical of the Victorian age, of the “Centre”, a concept coined by Edward Said (1978) reflecting the idea that Western society saw itself as the centre with the newly explored and colonised territories at the periphery? Or did the women challenge this canon?

As the nineteenth century arrived, there was more opportunity for travel, for both men and women. The vast imperial endeavours of European powers had brought about the development of colonial outposts in many areas of the “New World” and new technologies of transport, steam in ships and railroads, had facilitated travel to these areas (Haywood 2003: 1286). Women travelled more independently or as part of a family unit during this time and they wrote about their travels, mainly through journals or letters. Women wrote about new lands and often saw things differently from their male counterparts, and women writers began to recognise that racial superiority was “complicated by gender or class position” (1288). Destination played a part in how women wrote, with those travelling to “exotic” locations positioning themselves as adventurers, exploring new territory at considerable risk to

themselves, while women travelling to Europe were positioned as tourists - “cultural or aesthetic inspiration” seekers (1287). Male and female travel writing developed different ways of structuring the narrative in the way they were viewing the destination. Pratt (1992) suggests that men write from the “objective viewer” point, that they are not participating in the experience but viewing it, while women may be writing as more “aggressive, interactive seeker (s) of knowledge”(163) and so put themselves into the narrative in a participatory way.

Mary Wallis *Life in Feejee* (1851)

The earliest white woman to publish a book about Fiji was Mary Wallis who travelled to Fiji and wrote journals covering two trips to the Islands, one written from July 1844 to July 1848 and the other from October 1848 to July 1850. The first edition of *Life in Feejee*, which included both journals, was published under the author name “A Lady”. The book was “Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1851, by Benjamin Wallis, Jr” who was Wallis’ husband (Routledge 1994: xi). It was an unusual occurrence for a woman to publish her journals, though common for them to be written. “While women writers were ‘authorised’ to produce novels, their access to travel writing seems to have remained even more limited than their access to travel itself, at least when it came to leaving Europe” (Pratt 1992: 106).

Mary and Benjamin Wallis came from Salem, Massachusetts, a busy trading centre and international shipping port at that time. Captain Wallis was a *beche-de-mer* trader of considerable experience in the Pacific having made trips to the islands of Fiji over several years, from 1835 (Wallis 1983: 117). They travelled to Fiji together, and then Captain Wallis continued travelling around Fiji to the *beche-de-mer*ⁱ interests he had, leaving Mrs Wallis on the island of Viwa which was a mission station.

There were very few European residents in Fiji during the 1840s. A small community had developed around the sandalwood trade, and missionaries had arrived in the eastern Fijian Islands in 1835 via Tonga (Routledge 1994: xxi). By 1844, there was a mission based on the small island of Viwa near to Cakobau, a chief with increasing power, who lived on the nearby island of Bau. Cakobau was one of many chiefs in the Fijian Islands at this time and, due to tribal politics, he was gaining more influence over sections of Fiji, which lead to him having a major role in the British cession of Fiji in 1874. It was in Viwa that Mary Wallis made her home while her husband continued his business in various other areas of Fiji (Wallis 1983: 27). Wallis indicates that much of what she recorded, particularly about the indigenous population, was a result of dinner table discussions with Mr Hunt, one of the missionaries in Viwa. She says of dinner-time:

This is the time when I inquire about Feejee and Feejeeans and Mr Hunt (who always delights to impart information,) never seems weary of answering my inquiries... appears interested to have me fully understand the subject of my inquiries. (44)

There had been little written about Fiji previously, with Wallis' journals only the second published book concerning Fiji. Charles Wilkes' *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, the third volume which included his time in Fiji, was published in 1845, only a few years before Wallis travelled (Routledge 1994: xiii).

When Mary Wallis ventured to Fiji, Missionaries had been in the Fiji Islands for ten years, with little outcome for their efforts. Fijian society was one where the chiefs had a lot of power over their people, and the political landscape was charged with warring families and areas. Whereas the Wesleyan mission in Fiji was uncompromisingly pacifist, unconverted Fijian warrior-chiefs were "devoted more to war than they were to life itself" (Campbell

1989: 106). Fijian people were described as “no romance, no poetry but heathenism in its lowest state of degradation” (Wallis 1983: 76). The focus of the missionary effort was the dual acts of converting or Christianising, and then civilising the people. The two outcomes of conversion and education could hardly be separated. “All who renounce heathenism are required to attend the day schools to be instructed in reading... Two hours are devoted, on Monday afternoons, to the examination of the natives upon what they have heard on the Sabbath” (p. 75). Wallis saw the missionaries as a positive influence on the Fijian people and society, though she was still racist, by contemporary measures, in the language she chose to describe the culture. For example, on being woken on Christmas Day 1844, with singing, Wallis wrote “The missionaries have taught the little tawnies this beautiful custom, which is extant in many parts of England” (29). This would indicate that the attitudes of society as a whole was that these “natives” needed to be civilised, and though Wallis showed an affection towards the Fijian people, it was still from the position of a civilised woman.

The writings of Wallis could have had overtones of superiority and a measure of condescension, but this is not the way her journals read. Instead, “the pages are pervaded by a genuine interest in, and seeking after knowledge of, the way of life of the people among whom their author spent... years” (Routledge 1994: xiii). Mary Wallis identified with the missionaries who she speaks so positively of throughout her book. We can only surmise that Wallis, while writing her journal, expected that it might have a wider audience, and noted that after ten years the mission effort could use more support. Wallis approached James Calvert, a missionary she had met during her time in Fiji, to gain his support for publication of the journals. Calvert in turn, wrote to a supporter suggesting the journals may be “capable of persuading the sympathetic to open their pockets... [Calvert continues] ‘This long neglected and deeply degraded people have excited much Christian sympathy, expense and effort’”

(xii). Wallis noted the argument that some may think it cruel to inflict a foreign religion upon these people, but she refuted this by stating “Is it *cruel*, I would ask, to come and tell these people that it is not good to eat each other, and that it is good to love the Lord Jesus Christ, of whom they cannot hear without a preacher, and he cannot preach unless he is sent?” (Wallis 1983: 85).

Wallis establishes that the old ways of the Fijians had not yet been “civilised”, but that the missions were having an effect. Early in her narrative, stories of the political scandal and intrigue on the island of Viwa were described, illustrating the need for a civilising influence. The retribution necessary for shaming a chief was that the person who shamed him would be put to death. The mission intervened, and attempted to protect the man. When he was actually killed, the missionaries took the body to prevent him from being eaten. And yet, Wallis mused, Verani the chief had admitted he was a “Christian a little, and by and by he intended to be a great and good one. When we sat at the table, he said ‘Why do you not ask a blessing? You are like the pigs to eat, and not ask God to bless your food’” (Wallis 1983:38). This juxtaposition of uncivilised and civilised behaviour, or civilised behaviour from an uncivilised “native” is employed at several points in Wallis’ book. Her writing showed that she really wanted to:

... show the Feejeeans as I found them, and to record truly their several traits of character as they came under my own observation. Little has been known of this people except they are cannibals. It is said that there is not one of the natives of Vewa (Viwa), over five years of age that has not eaten human flesh (81).

She was both revolted and intrigued.

Many theorists in the genre of travel writing have been influenced by the writing of Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978). His work formed a basis for subsequent

theoretical work in various disciplines including that of travel writing. In Said's words, "Orientalism [is] a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1978: 3). This, Said argued, happened through the accumulation of writings by Europeans that developed an idea of the Orient, as Other to a European ideal.

In some places, Wallis' writing supports Said's position. She wrote from a point of authority, and referred her readers back to the society they were familiar with. When describing a Fijian ceremony, she likened it to a church congregation relaxing after the minister had left the church. "The Lasakau ladies now proceeded to exchange their "lekus" with the Bau ladies, and began to chat and frolic as though the minister had departed" (Wallis 1983: 242). This type of representation is common to all three travel writers as they encountered the unknown and made sense of it by relating it back to the known.

Wallis was also factual, though sceptical, when she described the old beliefs of the indigenous people. She again used juxtapositioning of an account she heard, with evidence that the belief was nonsense (to her). Wallis was travelling with her husband after some months in Viwa and they landed at a place called Vesonga. A priest visited and was asked why the fishing for the *beche-de-mer* had not happened as planned. He replied that the people went fishing but there was a storm making it impossible to collect the fish. He continued "now he [Captain Wallis] has come, and the god had promised fine weather." The very next entry of the journal, four days later begins "The wind last night blew almost a hurricane" (98). This juxtaposition of belief and reality speaks more clearly than a logical argument against the old religion while also highlighting the need for civilisation.

Another instance of this type of juxtaposition is seen on 1st April 1845 when Wallis was visited by a “heathen” who went on to charm her with words. The old chief mentioned is probably Cakobau’s father – a figurehead chief of the Bau people:

April 1. Received a visit from Narnosi and the old chief who killed one of his women the other day, and sent her to Bau to be eaten. He is a great cannibal himself. He told Mr. Hunt the other day that he had killed and eaten a great many people, and that he expected to be killed himself, when his body would be eaten by Feejeeans, and his soul would go to the “bukuwaqa,” and burn forever. “Ah, Marama, (Madam)” he exclaimed, as they came into the house, “you are a god! — Truly, you are a god !” (Wallis 1983: 78)

Again the next entry begins with the words “Sabbath. Several of the heathen have renounced their gods today and several couples have been married” (78).

Mary Wallis makes the distinction between missionaries and other white settlers and travellers to Fiji. She was quite definite that the missionaries were there to work on civilising and Christianising the indigenous population, while the traders and others were not. Right at the beginning of her story, she relates her newfound understanding that the Fijians were using the word “missionary” to mean anyone who was white, or had been converted “who is not a heathen” (Wallis 1983: 98). She is scathing about some of the white population who are not missionaries (traders and beachcombers who made up a very small European population at that time) and about those who undermined the mission effort by only documenting the general white population’s way of life. When commenting on other travelogues she had read, she indicates that authors had taken the non-mission population’s point of view, that the indigenous population had been “degraded by their intercourse with Christians” (107). She adds, “There is such an artful mingling in these narratives, of the two classes, - the missionary and the white residents, - that the general and unreflecting reader sees no

difference; and feels almost insulted when he is asked to contribute something for the support of a mission” (107). Both Wallis’ close relationship with the missionaries, and her husband’s familiarity with Fiji give her account a certain authority, but few of the historical details outlined were witnessed by Mary Wallis herself.

Sarah Maria Smythe *Ten Months in the Fiji Islands* (1864)

The second woman who published an account of life travelling in Fiji was Sarah Maria Smythe, the wife of Colonel William J. Smythe, a British captain sent from England to consider an offer of cession (Smythe 1862: 191). By the 1850s and 1860s, Pacific Islands like Fiji had had contact with European traders and some residents for a number of years, and there was European intervention in the political landscape. An American, John Williams, successfully persuaded both Cakobau and other visiting British and Americans that the “King” (Cakobau) should be held responsible for a debt incurred when American property was destroyed. The amount of the debt was steadily increasing as Williams added interest each year. This debt led to the Fijian chief asking Britain, through the new British consul William Thomas Pritchard, to consider an offer of cession and was a symptom of Fijian leadership being undermined by European interests (Campbell 1989: 108). Colonel Smythe’s preface and introduction and interspersed chapters, as well as the inclusion of appendices from his work and references, create the feeling that the letters are simply a part of the official record he was producing, considering the cession offer. As he says, “Mrs Smythe’s Letters, written originally to friends at home, contain a personal narrative of our cruise around the islands, and of our subsequent sojourn of them” (Smythe 1864: xv). His wife’s letters are the story, but he provided the context and indeed the reason for the journey in the first place. Her letters continue to tell his story, rather than being a body of work on their own. Again, the letters were written probably without publication in mind.

Sarah Maria Smythe contributes a series of twenty letters. The first was written in Auckland on June 12, 1860 and the final one August 15, 1861. The first and last letters outline the ports of departure and arrival which bookend the journey. The second and penultimate letters describe the first and last glimpses of Fiji respectively. The book was published in 1864, three years after the Smythes had returned from their ten month adventure.

As there had been contact with and written accounts about the Fijian people, perhaps even the newly published Mary Wallis, Smythe had preconceived ideas of what she would encounter. She differentiated between those Fijians who had been Christianized, and those “true heathens” who had not been converted. Her experience in Auckland before she arrived in Fiji included spending time with Bishop Selwyn, the bishop who ran the Melanesian Mission. This Anglican mission was unique in that boys were taken to New Zealand to be educated to a level that would then be used to evangelise their home islands when they were returned (Campbell 1989: 136). In her first letter, Smythe summarised the Melanesian Mission in a way that indicates she clearly understood the barriers to communication and the numerous islands which were covered by Selwyn’s mission (Smythe 1864: 5-6). However, her comments indicate that she is reporting the success of this mission strategy back to the Centre, to an audience who have a limited experience of the Pacific, and have made assumptions about the lifestyle which is experienced by missions into the Pacific and the training of Islanders as Pastors. “The lads, being brought away to New Zealand, are removed from the evil examples which surround them at home, and they go back to tell their people what they have seen and heard, and of the loving treatment which they themselves have experienced” (6). This quote assumes that the Islander’s community is filled with evil. As a “heathen” population, the Christianised Smythe could now fathom a possibility of good. Her

mention of the loving experience they have had is juxtaposed against the assumed non-loving experience of their villages. This could also be an allusion to the cruel experience in the same Melanesian Islands due to the blackbirding industry which was operating at the same time period as the Selwyn's Melanesian Mission. The Melanesian Mission is afforded an appendix by Colonel Smythe at the end of the book which focuses more on the results of the mission than on the experience of the mission trainee "lads".

In contrast to Wallis, who described both Fijian and missionary life, there is more of a focus on the domestic nature of expatriate lifestyle that Smythe encounters in the mission. The mission has been established for nearly 30 years, and has become the centre for civilised society as well as outreach to the indigenous population. Her landscape is less populated than Wallis' and more focussed on the microcosm of white lives within Fiji. Smythe presents the afternoon tea that she partook in while visiting Bau as the highlight of her trip. Smythe spends some time describing Cakobau and his wife, and the meetings that take place on the island of Bau, but at the end of the letter is gleeful about an afternoon tea offered to her by the missionaries stationed there. Her description tells us a lot about the lives of missionaries (especially their wives) in this time of flux between early contact and a fully Christianised Westernised Fiji (which was the aim of missionaries). The initial hardships of European women in Fiji, as described by Wallis, have been replaced by the hardship of training their daily household staff. Smythe's unintended juxtaposition of words in the following excerpt show an irony in the "primitive" hour one must take the "civilised" tradition of afternoon tea:

After doing the honours of the island, Mr. and Mrs. Martin very kindly pressed us to stay for tea. And now a word about Wesleyan teas. We have all heard of Scotch breakfasts and Russian dinners, but for tea, we can unhesitatingly affirm that nothing can surpass a Wesleyan Methodist tea. Imagine in Fiji, tea, coffee, excellent home-made cakes, preserves, honey, fruit, and delicious bread and butter! We are, I may add, pretty well

disposed to these social repasts, as dinner here takes place at a very early hour. The missionaries' wives tell me that if they did not adopt these primitive hours they would have a very good chance of getting no dinner at all; for their half-domesticated native servants consider the afternoon of each day as their own, in which to bathe, gossip, go to the reef, or otherwise amuse themselves. (Smythe 1864: 32)

Smythe continues her descriptions of mission living with more comments on the work ethic of Fijians and the difficulty of taming Fijians to be acceptable workers within the mission homes. "Mrs Binner has a good deal of trouble with her domestics, who, of course, are all natives... To convert a wild Fijian girl into a neat parlour-maid is not an easy task" (Smythe 1864: 156). She comments that it is not unusual for the Fijian girls to tire or get bored of their work and so run away. The Fijian work ethic, when compared to the white Protestant work ethic, comes up very short. Mrs Smythe also comments on the men who her husband hired to help with the gardens. "They require... constant watching for they will often move (in their own favour) the pegs placed in the ground to mark off the portion of work they have got to do, and are not in the least disconcerted when their roguery is discovered, as of course it is at the first glance" (p. 155). Her tone is one of an amused teacher who has caught her young students doing the wrong thing, but with a sure knowledge that the teacher's way is best.

The influence of Christianity portrays the converted as more civilised than those who have not converted. In one section of the book two chiefs are directly compared: "George" chief of the area of Bua and Ritova ("Retova"). The chief of Bua, on the island of Vanua Levu is called Tui Bua, or George. He is described by one of the missionaries as "quiet, intelligent, and of a peaceful disposition. He was partly dressed in European costume, and though hatless and shoeless, looked very dignified" (Smythe 1864: 100). The effect of converting to Christianity, and also to European style of dress gave "George" the stamp of civilisation.

However, further north on the Vanua Levu coast, the area of Macuata is found to be in a state of terror as Ritova is threatening war against Tui Macuata, that is, the chief of Macuata.

Ritova is described as “a specimen of a Fijian chief of the very worst stamp, - a cruel, treacherous cannibal” (107). Ritova has had a history of trying to overthrow the chief and gain the position for himself as he killed the father of the current Tui Macuata and is plotting war against that chief’s son who was then installed as chief. Ritova was also a chief with whom Captain Wallis had many dealings in the *beche de mer* trade (Wallis 1983).

As she drew closer to the end of her time in Fiji Smythe expands her thoughts on the missionary effort in Fiji, and how it has affected the native population. We find these pages a reflection of how much society expected that a conversion to Christianity also meant a conversion to a civilised state for the native populations touched by mission societies. Mrs Smythe actually defends the residing mission organisations in the Fijian Islands for their focus on religious endeavours and not just on educating the people on civilised life. That she feels the need to defend the mission reveals that the common thought from the Centre would be that the mission societies would be doing their proper job by combining both:

The missionaries in Fiji confine their efforts almost entirely to imparting religious instruction, making little or no attempt to teach the arts of civilised life... It is natural, too, where subscribers to Mission Societies are so expectant of highly-coloured reports, and so clamorous for a yearly tale of converts, that the missionaries should rather direct their efforts to collect recruits than to train soldiers (Smythe 1864: 173).

But as a critique of the mission societies, Mrs Smythe continues to say that they (her husband and her, the reader presumes) believe the Wesleyan Society has mistakenly insisted on missionaries being married before they come to the Fijian Islands (173). While she suggests that “doubtless the example of a Christian household is not without a wholesome influence on the minds of the natives” (173) she goes on to argue that unmarried people would be more

single minded in their mission (echoes of the apostle Paul) and in fact the married missionary has no support from his wife as she is busy with family. This argument seems quite contrary to common societal beliefs, but Smythe adds that part of the mission wife's job is to educate her children properly or run the risk of them being brought up as uncivilised natives. In fact the missionaries' children, "from the time that they begin to understand the native language (which they do before they can speak English,) *durst not* be left with the *half reclaimed* domestics without *imbibing much* that is *extremely hurtful* to their tender minds" (173-174). Although the emphasis here is mine, one understands that Mrs Smythe does not feel it beneficial for these missionaries' children to be encouraged in Fijian language and culture study, and is mimicking what Wallis had also claimed:

It is next to an impossibility to keep [missionary] children free from the deleterious influences of heathenism; and the sooner they are sent away the better it is for them, though hard is the parting. This is not one of the least of the trials of the missionary (1983: 377).

A final example of the relationship between Christianity and civilization follows with Mrs Smythe telling her reader of the "wonderful difference between the outward appearance of the Christian natives and that of their still heathen brethren" (1864: 174). Note the difference is in outward appearance and not in behaviour, attitude or faith, confirming again that Christian equals civilised.

Constance Gordon-Cumming *At Home in Fiji* (1883)

Colonel Smythe and his party suggested Britain not take the offer of cession in the 1860s but less than ten years later a deed of cession was signed and Fiji became an English colony. The third woman to be discussed writes at this turning point of Fijian history. *At Home in Fiji*

(Gordon-Cumming 1883: 56) is a series of 28 chapters written by Constance Gordon-Cumming as she accompanied Sir Arthur Gordon and his family to Fiji. Sir Arthur had been appointed the first Governor of the newly ceded state of Fiji in 1874. Although they share a name, Gordon-Cumming is not related to the Gordon family (Ewins 2013). Of the three authors discussed, in this paper, Gordon-Cumming is most easily classified as a woman travel writer. She had travelled widely before her trip to Fiji, having just had “eighteen months of the most delightful wanderings in every corner of beautiful Ceylon” (Gordon-Cumming 1883: 10) and then was back in England for just six months. This book is the result of her travelling again “in spite of the remonstrances of my sisters, who consider it quite unnatural of me to leave home again so soon” (10). She is also single, the only one of the three women to be travelling without a husband.

In the 1870s, Fiji was still an imagined place in the Victorian minds of the era. Gordon-Cumming says that she would toss out the option of going to Fiji to anyone who asked where she was travelling to next, as if it was “the most absurd answer that suggested itself to so foolish a question – a place known to me only as being somehow associated with a schoolboy song about the King of the Cannibal Islands” (Gordon-Cumming 1883: 10). It is a place that is so far from the Centre that it is nearly mythical. Even when she gets to Sydney she states, “Anything Fijian is really as great a curiosity here as it would be in London” (17). This also indicates that the white settler colony of New South Wales is included as a part of the Centre and not of the periphery. In Sydney, the identification of values and expectations align with London and not with the Pacific Islands which are much closer in physical proximity.

Gordon-Cumming’s first chapter is dated April 17, 1875 and the penultimate is dated September 4, 1877, so her experience spans two and a half years. The book however, was

published in 1881 and the 2nd edition in 1883. The final chapter is notes on Fijian folklore and mythology and is not a letter. While the chapters have a diary structure, it is common for her to digress and write in detail about one particular aspect of life or nature she has experienced in the Islands. Gordon-Cumming's letters include large sections which comment on aspects of Fijian life including churches, plants, *meke* (dance), houses, sports, labour, brewing "yangona" (the kava plant which is made into a drink) and language. These mini-essays show a careful consideration and observation of life in Fiji, and go past the typical travelogue or letter, and suggesting that she was planning to publish the collection of letters.

Constance Gordon-Cumming recognises that colonisation and mission work have effects on the native culture in both positive and negative ways, and that they occasionally clash. An example is seen as an offering is being made to the chief near the mission Gordon-Cumming is visiting. She lists the offerings with deference to the Fijian culture "1000 women advanced single file, each bringing a mat, or a bunch of live crabs... one brought a ludicrous roast parrot... Then followed all the usual graceful dances..." But at this point she mentions the "ungraceful traces of British trade appear. Here one man was dressed in a large union-jack pocket-handkerchief! And a woman wore the foot and the stalk of a broken wine-glass as an earring!" (Gordon-Cumming 1883: 209). Her tone is surprised, and seems slightly disdainful of these people, but also, by the inclusion of the phrase "ungraceful traces" she is clearly negative about the British influence on this otherwise traditional ceremony. In some sections of her writing, Gordon-Cumming seems to be seeking the more adventurous and remote locations and experiences. She says that she is leaving a "most hospitable district, and sufficiently uncivilised even for me" (210). She seems to relish the shocking interface between the improvements in civility that are shown and the evidence of the still uncivilised, missing perhaps the Fijian tradition of mimicry and self-deprecating humour:

This morning a horrible old ex-cannibal crept close to Mr Langham, and then, as if he could not refrain, he put out his hand and stroked him down the thigh, licking his lips, and exclaiming with delight, “Oh but you are nice and fat” (Gordon-Cumming 1883: 210).

Gordon-Cumming supports and cheers on the mission effort both in the time she is visiting, and with many references to the savage past the Fijians had turned their backs on. “I often wish that some of the cavillers who are forever sneering at Christian missions could see something of the results in these isles. But first they would have to recall the Fiji of ten years ago...” (66). She goes on to outline the wars, killing of prisoners and cannibalism even in peaceful times, sacrificial live burial, and general disregard for life. This she then compares to her experiences in 1875: “Now you may pass from isle to isle, certain everywhere to find the same cordial reception by kindly men and women. Every village... has built for itself a tidy church, and a good house for its teacher or native minister...” (66).

She mentions that the missionaries have “wisely made use of native customs when practicable” (86) noting that the missionary meetings are “simply great days of native merry-making, when the missionaries very wisely encourage the people to keep up the most popular and innocent of their national games and dances” (88). While she is quite negative about the impact of white contact in general – “Alas for the vulgarising influence of contact with white men!” (91) – and the risks of continued contact with a poor and disillusioned white population, she also is very positive about the civilising work the missionaries are doing: abolishing polygamy and human sacrifice, but retaining *meke*s (dance), songs and games. One of the results of becoming Christian was that monogamy replaced polygamy, and so there were many weddings, both of men choosing their main wife, and also as a result of the measles epidemic which has left many without a spouse (Gordon-Cumming 1883: 98).

Gordon-Cumming records various weddings, though is disappointed in a group of weddings she witnessed as part of her trip up the Rewa River with the mission couple, the Langhams. She wrote “I am sorry to observe that some of the brides are both ugly and old!... They do not wear such quantities of pretty white and brown cloth as the brides on the coast; in fact they wear exceedingly little of anything... Anyhow, this is rather a dingy lot of weddings” (95).

As a single woman, Gordon-Cumming seems to think that a wedding should be a romantic and bright occasion based on love alone. The reality for these “dingy” Fijians, was that the unions were probably more of a practical occasion than a romantic one. In some places, Gordon-Cumming quotes past missionaries and settlers, though she recognises that this is not true Fijian agency, but surmised records. One such example describes the Fijian religious practices before missionary contact. It is not described by a Fijian, but from the notes of Mr Williams, an early missionary. While Williams states that he has collected a large number of the legends of the Kai Colo (“Kai Tholo” or highlander) people, but understands that his list of over 50 such stories and names might be incomplete. An early missionary would be looking at the customs with an educated lens yet unable to accurately describe what he is seeing. Gordon-Cumming comments that some people were even offering money for Fijian cultural intelligence: “Possibly the reward of £100... for a collection of such lore, may induce someone to find time to make one before it all dies out, as it invariably does when the people become civilised or Christianised and ashamed of old superstitions” (143). There is a sense of fatalism found in Gordon-Cumming’s writing about the inevitability of the Fijian culture disappearing particularly with the influence of Christianity. In the very last chapter of the book, Gordon-Cumming wrote that she wished more had been written down about the past religion and customs of the Fijian people. She wrote:

Perhaps it is already too late, for the *lotu* [Christianity] has brought in such a flood of newer stories, that doubtless the old fables have fallen into disrepute, and probably (just as in Scotland) the dread of a sneer or a rebuke from their teachers will cause those who know them best to shrink from uttering them (349).

By the time Gordon-Cumming wrote, the missionaries were synonymous with civilised society in Fiji. The new government party, who Gordon-Cumming was travelling with, would expand this “civilised” society as the machinery of colonial government developed. At various times, Gordon-Cumming wrote about how the colony was being developed into a satellite of the Centre, leaving the missionaries slightly outside. A description of the Governor’s household having tamed the physical landscape (by building a fine English house) and the indigenous people (to servants, something that since Wallis has been perceived to be a challenge) so that the family can imitate life in the Centre in the periphery of Levuka, the new colonial capital: “Coffee is brought to our rooms at seven A.M., and breakfast follows about nine; luncheon at one, tea at five, dinner soon after 7” (148). However, she does reiterate that Sir Arthur Gordon has adapted the traditions to suit the climate and economy. “I must tell you of one triumph of common-sense in the adoption... namely dispensing with the misery of a coat, and substituting a bright-coloured silken waist-sash for braces; now all the gentlemen look fresh and cool” (148).

Conclusion

Mary Wallis was the earliest woman writer who travelled to Fiji and published her account of her experiences. For her, the missionary presence created a base for her and gave her a place to live as her husband continued his trade affairs. She was able to establish a home with the mission families on Viwa without being part of the mission. Wallis was extremely

sympathetic to the mission cause, and used her journals as a fundraising effort for the families and cause to which she had lived within and supported. Her ability to write clearly about Fijian life was affected by mission accounts of Fijian things, making her account mostly second hand and influenced by the values that lay behind the mission. The strong sense by European society at the time was that the Fijian “heathens” must be converted and then civilised. This aim affected every interaction between the Fijian people and the early missionaries. For Wallis, the mission efforts had an overwhelmingly positive effect on the Fijian people. The aim of the mission continued, approximately ten years later, when Smythe wrote about Fiji. For Smythe, Fijian missionary society was well established, making more of a gap between first hand interactions with indigenous people and the account Smythe wrote. Her descriptions are certainly affected by the continuing perception that the Pacific is the periphery, and England the Centre. Smythe’s writing continues to confirm the generalisations about the “heathen savage” that Wallis had begun. When Fiji became a colony, and Gordon-Cumming wrote, mission life had settled into a civilised outpost and this European society became the basis of a newly required colonial capital. This caused the link between Christianising and civilising to strengthen, as church and government shared one European circle of people, particularly in the new capital of Levuka.

Evidence of these women writing back to the Said’s “Centre”, or Europe, is strong. With numerous examples of documenting the new and unknown by making sense of it with old and established experience each of these women was, unintentionally, reinforcing the cannon of the Other for their audience in the Centre. Gordon-Cumming challenged the hegemony in some places, including her reservations about the loss of Fijian culture, religion and folklore only decades after initial contact with this people group.

Three women, who arrived on the shores of Fiji within thirty years of each other, each portrayed the indigenous people interacting and negotiating with European and mission influence. During these years, the narrative of their early contact with the indigenous people of Fiji is overlaid with the lens of Victorian Europe. The women can only decipher what they were seeing by relating it back to their own society. In all three cases they were reliant on missionaries to decipher for them, with lots of the story being told by missionary and not Fijian people. Both their femininity and their imperial values create three pieces of work with unique viewpoints of this pivotal time in Fijian history and early Fijian contact with European mission.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ *Beche-de-mer* refers to large sea cucumbers.