

IMAGING AND IMAGINING THE PACIFIC

A journey through myth, beauty and reality



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

The Pacific Islands are in many respects naturally paradisiac; favoured as holiday



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

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.⁴

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.⁵ The native belle reinforced notions of the assumed availability and promiscuity of Polynesian women.⁶

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.¹

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 1916-1923.² 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.

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Old Hawaiian, nd

R J Baker, Hawaii, photograph



MACMILLAN BROWN CENTRE
FOR PACIFIC STUDIES

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