

From glass plate to album: New Hebrides mission photographs in the album of Reverend William Veitch Milne

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Mission photography and missionary photographers have been neglected in histories of the medium in New Zealand, as have photograph albums. The wealth of mission photographs held at the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand (PCANZ) Archives in Dunedin from the mission fields of New Zealand, the New Hebrides (Vanuatu), China and India have yet to be thoroughly explored and studied. These photographs, the majority of which were taken by missionaries working in the field, were viewed by many New Zealanders in the form of postcards and magic-lantern slides, as reproductions in mission periodicals and newspapers, as well as in albums compiled by mission organisations and missionaries. It is this final manifestation of the mission photograph that interests me for, depending on its placement and framing on the album page as well as the uses to which the album was put, a photograph can take on meanings that go beyond the original intention behind its taking.¹ In this essay I will briefly examine one such mission album compiled by Reverend William Veitch Milne, missionary on Nguna from 1905 to 1937.

William Veitch Milne was born on Nguna in the New Hebrides in 1877. The son of Reverend Peter Milne, one of the first missionaries sent to work in the islands in 1869 by the Synod of Otago and Southland, William took over his father's field in 1905. He was one of the most prolific and, in my view, talented missionary photographers sent out by the New Zealand church. This was no small feat, as photography in the warm and humid climate of the islands was not without its frustrations, especially in the early years of the twentieth century when glass-plate cameras were used. In the loose-print folders of New Hebrides photographs at the PCANZ Archives around 14 per cent of the 647 photographs, dating from the 1880s to the 1950s, were taken by William.² This figure is impressive given that he stopped photographing during the early years



of World War I, when the cost of materials became too great, and he did not resume until the mid- to late 1920s.³ Although photography was never explicitly stated as one of his duties in the mission field, William showed a clear and consistent understanding of its importance as an aid to the mission. In the correspondence between him and various members of the Foreign Missions Committee (FMC) that spans the years 1902 to 1937, numerous references are made to William's photographs, in particular, requests from the FMC for prints to be sent for their use. And, indeed, his photographs were frequently reproduced in mission periodicals, and as magic-lantern slides and postcards.

The two-page spread I discuss in this essay comes from an album most likely compiled by William in late 1913 and/or early 1914. The majority of photographs in the album can confidently be dated to this period or earlier due to the events and people present in them. Another plausible reason for this compilation date is that in early 1914 William returned to New Zealand on furlough with his wife Jemima and their two sons.⁴ The tradition of the furlough was a key motivation for missionaries to get out their cameras and document their work and surrounds, and many of their albums would have been compiled with display in mind.⁵ By 1913 the New Hebrides mission was also being overshadowed by the mission fields in China and India. Funds were running low and in September Rev. Hewitson, the FMC convenor, wrote to William requesting that he 'do something to keep the New Hebrides before the minds of the people of the church'.⁶ Presenting images to the church-going public in the form of lantern-slide shows and postcards, as reproductions in periodicals, and in public presentation albums appears to have been the method of choice for ensuring the New Hebrides mission would not be forgotten. William was even explicitly urged to visit as many presbytery meetings as possible so 'that you [can] do all you can for the missions when you are here. You have a full knowledge and can show photographs as well as other island curios.'⁷

On arriving in New Zealand with his family in February 1914, William travelled around the country to attend meetings and give lectures on the mission.⁸ These speaking engagements were not only intended to educate audiences about the different cultures the missionaries encountered through their work, but were also for the direct benefit of the mission. It was hoped that they would induce the public to give generously to the mission's fund. One of the key drawcards for the lectures, as evidenced in newspaper advertisements from the time, was the magic-lantern slide show. At a lecture given by Rev. Watt in Timaru in February 1891 between 600 and 700 audience members were 'delighted . . . by the magic lantern exhibition of about 100 views of [the] New Hebrides'.⁹ However, it was not always practical to transport a lantern-slide projector around the country and some parishes may not have had their own. It therefore seems plausible that the album under discussion here was put to official use during the Milnes' furlough. As an 'instrument of collective show and tell'¹⁰ this relatively small album (26.2 cm x 19 cm), when displayed in meetings or during smaller gatherings at the manses where the Milnes stayed, would have prompted the telling of mission stories.

Indeed, the compilation of this album appears to have been guided almost exclusively by the imperative of helping the New Hebrides mission. William constructed a coherent narrative of



mission work in its pages, and took considerable care in presenting the photographs in a tidy and ordered manner. Captions have been written for most of the images, with care being taken that these are neat (a ruled pencil line can still be made out below most). The fifty-six photographs that remain in the album are predominantly fund-raising images, such as shots of mission buildings and boats, and agriculture, as well as photographs of converted islanders.¹¹ The photograph of Malapokasi School pasted onto page 13 of the album is one such fund-raising image (page 131, top). It also contains islanders who can be identified as converts due to their European-style dress – the two adults standing in front of the school building are most likely a ‘native teacher’ and his wife.

The juxtaposition of images on facing pages was also carefully thought out. The photograph opposite the Malapokasi image was taken on Wala Island, off the north-east coast of Malekula, in the north of the New Hebrides (page 131, bottom). *Wala man and wife* shows a man and woman seated on the ground in front of a dwelling. The man is sitting cross-legged on a woven mat to the left, while the woman, who is sitting at a distance from him to the right of the image, is preparing food. She is holding what looks to be a root vegetable, and various objects associated with food preparation are assembled around her. Both man and woman are looking at the photographer/camera, and appear relatively at ease with the interaction that is taking place. The image was most likely taken by William in March 1908, when he was on Wala with his wife for the birth of their son, Laurie.¹² There may have been other opportunities over the years for a visit to the island, but the photograph’s appearance in another album compiled by William in around 1908 seems to suggest that this is its date.¹³

While the photograph of the school house was likely taken by William to document ‘the advance of Christianity and material progress’,¹⁴ it would seem that ethnographic interest was the primary motivation behind his photographing the Wala scene. The presence and, in some cases, prominence of ethnographic images in the missionary visual archive has been noted by several scholars, and ‘was a reflection of anthropology’s popularity’¹⁵ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Christraud Geary notes, ‘the idiom formulated for depicting the “native” also influenced many photographers . . . who had no anthropological interest’.¹⁶ William Milne’s Wala photograph, then, fits into the established trend of representing the ‘other’ in colonial photography. Although, in contrast to missionaries such as Rev. George Brown who published anthropological articles and also sent his photographs to anthropologists, William’s ethnographic photography was more of a hobby, with the occasional image being sent to the FMC for their stock of New Hebridean views.¹⁷ This was the case with the Wala photograph, which was turned into a postcard, pasted into a public presentation album and reproduced in the September 1921 issue of the mission’s periodical for children, *The Break of Day*.¹⁸

It is telling that William decided to juxtapose the Wala photograph with the Malapokasi image, and not the Wala dancing ground that appears on page 16 of the album. In terms of the album’s ordering principle, it is obvious that geographic location was put aside in favour of the more explicit conversion narrative, or ‘before and after’ sequence, that appears throughout missionary imaging.¹⁹ Although the ‘after’ shot here comes first, when juxtaposed with the European-style



School at the village of Malapokasi Ngana

Rev. William Milne, *Malapokasi School*, c. 1908

GELATIN SILVER PRINT MOUNTED IN ALBUM, 10 × 15 CM (IMAGE AREA), 19 × 26 CM (ALBUM PAGE)
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND ARCHIVES, KNOX COLLEGE, DUNEDIN



A heathen native & his wife sitting in front of their house. Wala Is. Malakula.
The woman is preparing a yam pudding, but her husband cannot eat any
of it, for his caste forbids him to eat any food prepared by a woman.

Rev. William Milne, *Wala man and wife*, c. 1908

GELATIN SILVER PRINT MOUNTED IN ALBUM, 10 × 15 CM (IMAGE AREA), 19 × 26 CM (ALBUM PAGE)
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND ARCHIVES, KNOX COLLEGE, DUNEDIN

schoolhouse (albeit made with local materials), the dwelling in the Wala photograph as well as the semi-naked couple sitting in front of it become markers of the pre-Christian way of life that is being transformed by the missionaries. As it stands, this section of the album is entirely dedicated to the story of successful conversions. It begins on pages 11 and 12 with two group portraits of the missionaries whose hard work has led to the transformation of the island people. On turning the page the viewer then comes to the images of the school house and the Wala couple, before arriving at the photograph of the dancing ground mentioned above, which is juxtaposed with a Ngunese wedding group on page 15. Finally, on turning the page again, the viewer is shown images of the Ngun church and mission house, markers of Christianity's and 'civilisation's' hold in the islands.

Although geographic location was not an ordering principle of the album as a whole, it is nevertheless important in this section of the album. This becomes apparent when the caption that accompanies *Wala man and wife* is taken into account: 'A heathen native & his wife sitting in front of their house. Wala Is. Malekula. The woman is preparing a yam pudding, but her husband cannot eat any of it, for his caste forbids him to eat any food prepared by a woman.' Captions are an important element of photograph albums, not only because they describe the content and context of a photograph, but also because they indicate what it is that the compiler wanted the viewer to see. The caption for the Wala photograph not only draws attention to the fact that the subjects are 'heathen', but goes into detail, explaining that they are husband and wife, noting the location, indicating the type of food being prepared and commenting on cultural practices. By including such details William ensured that, even if he was not present at the album's showing, the message he wanted to communicate with this photograph and its companion on the facing page was not lost: there are still islanders living in a 'heathen' state, but not on Nguna. In the context of promoting the mission while on furlough in New Zealand, this translates to: work is progressing well, but more funds are needed for its continuation.

Mission photograph albums, such as the one compiled by Rev. William Veitch Milne, offered glimpses of foreign, 'exotic' lands and peoples to New Zealand audiences of the time. But more than this, as an object deliberately constructed to tell a story, William's New Hebrides photograph album presents a narrative that is tied to the needs of the mission. By closely examining the album and its uses, and taking into account the power of juxtapositions and captions to frame our reading of images, this narrative, to a degree, outweighs the original motivation behind the photographs. In this way, a seemingly straightforward ethnographic photograph becomes the contrasting image to Christian Nguna in the ubiquitous before-and-after conversion narrative. However, the meanings attached to the photographs in the album would have changed over the years, as the album moved from functioning as a tool for the propagation of the mission to being a personal belonging (the album was in the care of Jemima Milne until her death in 1972). The social and physical spaces the album inhabited shifted from public to private, and with this transition the meanings and readings attached to the photographs too would have changed.



6. For more on Crozier's activities in China see Cairiona Cameron, *Go Anywhere, Do Anything: New Zealanders in the Friends Ambulance Unit in China, 1945–1951* (Wellington: Beechtree Press, 1996).
7. This transformation of the city is discussed in Virgil K.Y. Ho, *Understanding Canton: Rethinking Popular Culture in the Republican Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
8. John Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007), 190–200.
9. James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 161. For an introduction to Thomson's life and photography see <http://www.nls.uk/thomson>.
10. Régine Thiriez, *Barbarian Lens: Western Photographers of the Qianlong Emperor's European Palaces* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1998), 121.
11. Nicholas Thomas, 'Colonial Conversions: Difference, Hierarchy, and History in Early Twentieth-Century Evangelical Propaganda', in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 34, no. 2 (1992), 366–95.
12. See, for instance, Leonard Bell, 'Eyeing Samoa: People, Places, and Spaces in Photographs of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', in *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire*, edited by Felix Driver and Luciana Martins (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 156–174.

Chapter 18: From glass plate to album: New Hebrides mission photographs in the album of Reverend William Veitch Milne

1. Antje Lübcke, 'The Photograph Albums of the New Zealand Presbyterian Mission to the New Hebrides', MA thesis, University of Otago, 2009.
2. P-A10, New Hebrides loose-print album, 1/5; P-A11, 2/5; P-A15, 3/5; P-A16, 4/5; P-A436, 5/5, Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand (PCANZ) Archives, Knox College, Dunedin
3. Letter to Rev. Barton, 15 October 1924, p. 2 in GA0146, New Hebrides Mission, Staff Files, Rev. W.V. Milne, 1923 to 1925, 1984/0018, AA 13/2/2, PCANZ Archives.
4. Furlough was when missionaries would take leave from their work in the mission field and, most often, returned home for a holiday and to give lectures on the mission.
5. This was confirmed when an attendee at the paper I presented at the Pacific History Association Conference in Suva, December 2008, mentioned his parents making such use of photograph albums on their furloughs.
6. Letter to Hewitson, 8 September 1913, p. 1, AA 13/1/5, PCANZ Archives.
7. Letter from Rev. Clark to William, 29 September 29 1913, unpaginated, AA 13/1/5.
8. Foreign Missions Committee, Minute Book 1914 to 1919, 10 February 1914, p. 1, and 10 March 1914, p. 10, GA0001, AA 4/1/2, PCANZ Archives.
9. *The Timaru Herald*, 24 February 1891.
10. Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 20.
11. Max Quanchi, *Photographing Papua: Representation, Colonial Encounters and Imaging in the Public Domain* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 150.
12. Letter from Rev. W. Milne to Rev. Hewitson, 31 March 1908, in GA0146 New Hebrides Mission, Staff Files, Rev. W.V. Milne, 1902 to 1914, 1984/0018, AA 13/1/5.
13. A-S30-163, Milne, W.V. (Rev.), album(s) of New Hebrides images, pre-1920, PA 42008/53, PCANZ Archives.
14. Christraud Geary, 'Missionary Photography: Private and Public Readings', in *African Arts*, vol. 24, no. 4 (October 1991), 50.
15. Quanchi, *Photographing Papua*, 157.
16. Christraud Geary, 'Photographs as Materials for African History: Some Methodological Considerations', in *History in Africa* 13 (1986), 96.
17. Helen Gardner and Jude Philp, 'Photography and Christian Mission: George Brown's Images of the New Britain Mission 1875–80', in *The Journal of Pacific History* vol. 41, no. 2 (September 2006), 175, 185.
18. P-A10, New Hebrides Mission loose-print album, 1/5, P-A10.62-53; A-L-2.55-142, A-L-2, Foreign Missions Committee, New Hebrides Mission Album, PA 496/34, PCANZ Archives; *The Break of Day*, vol. 13, no. 8 (September 1921), 10.
19. See, for example, Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 126; Kim Greenwell, 'Picturing "Civilization": Missionary Narratives and the Margins of Mimicry', in *BC Studies* 135 (Autumn 2002), 13; Richard Eves, "'Black and white, a significant contrast": Race, humanism and missionary photography in the Pacific', in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 29, no. 4 (July 2006), 728.

Chapter 19: The best of intentions: imaging and imagining Te Mata Road

1. James Belich, *Making Peoples* (Auckland: Penguin, 1996), 352.
2. R.T. Vernon, *Raglan* (Auckland: W.G. Vernon, 1984), 70, 124.
3. William Main and Alan Jackson, *'Wish You Were Here': The Story of New Zealand Postcards* (Wakefield: New Zealand Postcard Society, 2005), 73.
4. *ibid.*, 8.
5. E.E. Bradbury, *The Raglan and Kawhia Districts, New Zealand: Early History, Resources and Potentialities, Future Prospects* (Auckland: E. Bradbury, 1915), 5.

