

Ambivalent Mobilities in the Pacific

"Savagery" and "Civilization"

in the Australian Interwar Imaginary

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Abstract

Australian travel writing of the interwar period expanded with the growth of tourism in the Pacific Islands and the development of publishing and literacy at home. This article focuses on how the Australian middlebrow imagination was shaped by the diverse travel accounts of Australian tourists, adventurers, executives, scientists, officials, and missionaries writing at this time. Many of their texts borrowed and blended multiple discourses, simultaneously promoting the islands as educational and exotic, and appealing to an Australian middlebrow readership. In this article I argue that not only was travel writing middlebrow in its content and style, but the islands themselves were a particularly middlebrow setting. This is evident in representations of the islander "savage" in the region of Melanesia, a prevalent theme in Australian travelogues. I argue that this middlebrow literature was characterized by ambivalent and often contradictory ideas about the civilized "self" and the savage "other."

Keywords: Australia, interwar period, middlebrow, Pacific Islands, tourism, travel writing

Following World War I, the Pacific Islands became increasingly accessible to the average Australian with improvements in transportation and the growth of trade and business, Christian outreach, and colonial administration in the region. Economic prosperity in Australia facilitated movement abroad, and the development of publishing and literacy encouraged the circulation of texts that generated excitement about travel and exotic foreign destinations. The varied experiences and impressions of Australians traveling to, and through, the Pacific Islands filled diaries, letters, books, magazines, memoirs, and travelogues, many of which found a receptive Australian audience. In this article, I explore Australian travel writing of the interwar period with a particular focus on the middlebrow imagination. I argue that travel literature often appealed to the middlebrow in content and style, and the Pacific Islands were a middlebrow setting. In doing so, I explore Australian representations of the islander "savage" in the region of Melanesia, discussing the tensions between the savage of fictional and scientific discourses, and identifying characteristics of the savage that travelers focused on during the 1920s and 1930s, namely, prim-



itivism, infantilism, and cannibalism. Travel was the ideal opportunity for travelers to negotiate notions of the civilized “self” and the savage “other,” and travel writing was a suitably ambiguous and diverse body of literature that allowed writers to draw on a wide range of discourses and styles, which resulted in a distinctively middlebrow perspective.

Travel Writing as Middlebrow

Once dismissed as a historical source because of the perceived unreliability of tourist accounts and their susceptibility to literary embellishment, travel writing has only recently been recognized as a valuable record. Unlike conventional histories of Australia’s political and economic relationship with the Pacific, studies of travel writing have offered new insights into Australian mobilities, identities, and transnational histories.¹ Travel writing itself is an ambiguous and contested category, loosely defined as “a discourse designed to describe and interpret for its readers a geographical area together with its natural attributes and its human society and culture.”² Within this discourse are multiple genres and styles of writing, including letters, monographs, memoirs, journals, guidebooks, travelogues, and magazines. My research alone identified more than 130 texts and 100 Australian travel writers describing the Pacific Islands from around 1880 to 1941.³

As demonstrated by the international popularity of Australian author Louis Becke in the late nineteenth century, the success of travel writing depended on the author’s ability to mediate between fact and fiction.⁴ Writers blended genres and styles from lowbrow and highbrow literature, simultaneously claiming an authority gained from firsthand experience and objective observations, while also offering the unexpected and fantastical, even if it tended towards the fictional.⁵ According to politician and traveler Thomas Henley in 1930: “My object in writing has been to present in as simple a form as possible some of the answers to the questions propounded to enquiring minds when travelling in the great archipelago of the Pacific in search of information and recreation.”⁶ Similarly, the Australian travel magazine *BP Magazine* claimed to “phrase the fascination from these varying activities and cull from the Markets of the World the best in Literature and Art for the entertainment and interest of its readers.”⁷ Richard White described this preoccupation with “respectability as rational recreation” as a clear marker of the middlebrow.⁸ Thus travel writing simultaneously appealed to middlebrow readers because it combined both highbrow and lowbrow sensibilities. The former valued travel as educational and informative (typified by the European “Grand Tour” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which was considered an activity of self-improvement), while the latter drew on popular fictional tales and stereotypes.

These middlebrow concerns were often expressed in the distinction between the “tourist” and the “traveler.” As John Urry, Dean McCannell, and James Buzard have shown, this distinction emerged in the late eighteenth century as the tourist became associated with conventional sightseeing, while the traveler was regarded as superior because he/she carved out their own routes rather than following the “beaten track.”⁹ In the interwar period re-nouncing the tourist label became increasingly important for Australian travelers, who were responding to the popularization of steamship routes in the Pacific and the growth of the tourism industry, which structured, commodified, and standardized routes and encounters. Few Australian travelers in the Pacific identified themselves as tourists in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1926 travel writer Elinor Mordaunt described one tourist boat as “fattened with Philistines,” and in 1937 Alan John Marshall observed “some seventeen hundred tourists vomited on to the beach” whereby the noise “caused the natives to flee in terror to the hills.”¹⁰ Similarly, journalist John J. Gay in 1931 criticized “the fevered chronicle of the typical globe-trotter who ... with smug complacency inflicts upon long-suffering humanity a medley of crude impressions, banal platitudes and ‘cheap’ criticisms mainly directed against his own country.”¹¹ Tourists may have been convenient subjects of critique because they opposed the romantic and heroic notions of a Pacific explorer, but those who disparaged them rarely acknowledged the importance of tourism in facilitating affordable travel to more remote islands in the Pacific, or the fact that their own accounts contributed to this trend.

This emphasis on distinguishing oneself from tourism may also be a sign of the middlebrow writer. Many of those critical of tourists were artists or professional writers, who had no set itinerary and often stayed at particular islands for prolonged periods of time.¹² They were also writing at a time when “over-seas travel became a more self-consciously cultural affair” and when “many travelers felt the need to demonstrate a heightened appreciation of culture.”¹³ In contrast, those willing to embrace tourism may have been more likely to be associated with highbrow culture (or were from a higher class that could afford to travel in luxury). William Ramsay Smith was a physician and anthropologist who, in 1924, promoted the importance of travel accounts over scientific study because they provided “much information of a scientifically trustworthy nature” that was different from “what is collected by an investigator in a central anthropological laboratory.”¹⁴ J. Mayne Anderson, whose background is unknown but was noted at the time for his “high literary taste,” identified key tourist sites in his 1915 travelogue *What a Tourist Sees in the New Hebrides*.¹⁵ Not all tourists were highbrow, however, and there are examples of middlebrow writers who subverted travel writing conventions and “willingly embraced the popular” by framing the “ordinary tourist as hero.”¹⁶

The term “middlebrow” does not only indicate a broad category of literature that addressed an audience that rejected both intellectualism and the

pulp fiction of cheap paperbacks and tabloid journalism. The middlebrow is also a cultural formation, argues Christina Klein.¹⁷ David Carter and Victoria Kuttainen have drawn attention to the need for further consideration of the Australian middlebrow imagination, and have identified the interwar period as a significant time for the development of Australian print culture, when a new urban and cosmopolitan middle class in Australia simultaneously drove demand for travel and literature. Facing increasing competition and a new “segmented hierarchy of taste cultures,” Australian publishers had to market their materials to a more diverse public, argues Carter.¹⁸ This shift is evident in the diverse content of Australian periodicals, including travel magazines such as *Walkabout* and *BP Magazine*, which catered to the “armchair traveler,” the “educationist,” the “busy city man,” “the squatter,” and the “miner.”¹⁹ It is also evident in the titles of published travel books of the interwar period, such as *South Sea Foam*, *Sinabada*, *The Black Musketeers*, *Stormalong*, *Backwash of Empire*, *No Longer Innocent*, and *Wine Dark Seas and Tropic Skies*. These were distinctive from the traditional cannibal or coral stereotypes of previous decades, and they may also reflect a broader weariness of overused and exaggerated Pacific tropes during the interwar period. This resonates with Andrew Hassam’s claim that the depression of the 1930s stimulated a more critical attitude in Australia, and produced a literature marked by a greater cultural maturity.²⁰

The Pacific and the Middlebrow

Of the numerous studies on tourism in the Pacific Islands,²¹ few have specifically examined the middlebrow. Klein, Kuttainen, and White have referred to Asian, transpacific, and Australian middlebrow connections respectively, yet I argue that steamships traveling to the Pacific, and the Pacific Islands themselves, could be considered distinctly middlebrow settings.²²

For many travelers, the journey by steamship was crucial in shaping expectations and representations of the Pacific Islands. Frances Steel’s work in particular explores the ways in which these vessels, crews, companies, and routes influenced European encounters and exchanges with the Pacific.²³ Since the first Australian tourist trip was offered in 1884 by Australian shipping company Burns, Philp and Company (BP), improvements in transportation made travel more accessible to a wider range of Australians.²⁴ By the interwar period, travelers could choose from three different classes aboard “the floating palaces of luxurious travel,” according to *BP Magazine*.²⁵ Despite the segregation of passengers according to the fare paid, the liminality of sea travel meant that there were frequent opportunities for encounters with different professions, nationalities, and classes. Thomas Allan McKay was typically middlebrow, a self-proclaimed “plain British-Australian business man,

wearing no political party labels, disowning all class prejudice” who gladly recalled being “thrown pell-mell into contact, one meets, to the confusion of many preconceived ideas, all sorts and conditions of men. They range from red-rag revolutionaries to artistically crusted Tories; from people whose mental horizons are rimmed by racehorses and film stars, to intellectuals copiously crammed with ‘perilous stuff’ that must out.”²⁶ In another case, two young Australian stowaways reported their “celebrity” status when they were caught, and “passengers ventured from the dim splendors of the first and second class to view the stowaways and to take photographs to thrill their friends at home.” One woman even told them: “the people are so much more interesting down here. Third-class passengers aren’t just holiday-makers or whisky-drinking business men. They’re more human. They’re poor people, and struggling, and courageous.”²⁷ These examples demonstrate that cultural and class intermixing on board facilitated a middlebrow sentiment among passengers that disowned social distinction in the very process of creating them.

This setting also encouraged diverse literary and cultural pursuits among the travelers. Reading, writing, and cultural discussion were important ship-board activities, with many passenger ships equipped with reading rooms and libraries. Communal smoking or dining rooms allowed new travelers to mingle with passengers more familiar with the islands, be it a missionary returning to his mission station, a colonial official sent on business, or a wealthy “globe-trotter.” Occasionally a lecture or magic lantern show was given on board ship.²⁸ These encounters influenced travel texts, as meteorologist Clement Lindley Wragge explained in 1906: “We follow to the smoking-room, hear the trader’s story from start to finish, take copious notes, and now reproduce it, pieced together with our own comments.”²⁹ Such an environment was conducive to the blending and borrowing of multiple discourses and themes by travelers and writers alike.

The Pacific Islands may also have been a middlebrow setting in the sense that travelers’ expectations reflected the varied influences of European explorers, missionaries, traders, colonial officials, scientists, and adventurers whose accounts covered the spectrum of high- to lowbrow literature. Tourism brochures and steamship companies took advantage of this by targeting a broad middlebrow readership, promoting travel as affordable yet luxurious, and the Pacific as a place of historical and intellectual significance, as well as a location for leisure and rejuvenation.³⁰ This resonated with early accounts of European explorers that characterized the Pacific Islands as sites of leisure and desire, and at the same time enshrined them as “passive receptacles of observation.”³¹ A suggested itinerary for a sightseeing trip to Levuka, Fiji, reflects these dual sensibilities, promising “old time sailing ships,” a “native village,” a Catholic mission station, the Waitovo waterfalls, the Totoga swimming baths, and a walk to the peak.³² Thus, a dichotomy was established that represented the Pacific as a place of exotic entertainment and scientific pur-

suits, as fictional and factual, as dangerous and safe, as unknown and known. This ambivalent depiction was quintessentially middlebrow in its attempt to appeal to both low- and highbrow tastes. As travelers became more aware of the pitfalls of the tourist trade, authors increasingly sought new destinations and alternative stories that would distinguish themselves in an increasingly competitive literary market from the predictable island tropes and tales of the past. The region of Melanesia was a lucrative opportunity for Australians, located relatively close to the eastern seaboard, yet much less explored or known than other islands to the east.

The Melanesian “Savage” in Science and Fiction

In the search for the “authentic” island experience, Australian travelers regularly referred to the “savage,” a prevalent and persistent trope in travel writing about the Pacific since the first European explorer accounts. Within the Pacific, the savage was a figure most commonly located in Melanesia, not only a geographical region, but a people categorized and typified by an increasingly racialized scientific discourse. This ambiguous figure reflected the tensions within the Australian middlebrow imagination between popular notions of the savage in fiction and newspaper reports, and scientific debates about the racial components of the savage.

In Australia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the term “savage” was commonly used to describe Aboriginal Australians and Pacific Islanders, but it was also applied to convicts, drunkards, politicians, vagrants, and people living in remote rural areas.³³ Rather than delineating a specific set of individual characteristics and behaviors, people were deemed savage according to what they lacked. It was ambiguous and versatile—other terms such as “cannibal,” “headhunter,” and “primitive” were used interchangeably to denote savagery. Travelers’ descriptions of Pacific Islander savages varied widely from “Nature’s gentlemen” to a people who were “warlike, aggressive and bold,” and marked by “barbarity, cunning and treachery.” In some cases travelers described themselves as savages too: “we are the old savages ... dreaming that we are the children of the Golden Age.”³⁴

The region of Melanesia was similarly ambiguous. Melanesia was a term firmly rooted in Australian understandings of the Pacific region, denoting race rather than geographical location. The category of “Melanesia” was based on earlier theories that the Pacific was inhabited by two races, one made up of Micronesians, Polynesians, and Malaysians, and one of Melanesians, distinguished by their dark skin (among other traits).³⁵ By the early twentieth century, Melanesia was commonly understood to refer to the islands of New Guinea, New Caledonia, the New Hebrides, the Solomon Islands, and Fiji, and these islands became synonymous with savagery. Journalist J. H. M.

Abbott's 1908 travel account (published as part of the educational children's series *Peeps at Many Lands*) was typical of many reports that described the "Black Islands" as inhabited by people who have "some almost indescribable glint of savagery and barbarism in their eyes."³⁶

As shown by Bronwen Douglas, Enlightenment ideas of progress and human difference became entangled with biological theories of race over time. Enlightenment philosophers often speculated that societies progressed through stages of increasing development, whereby agriculture and commerce set civilized people apart from the savages. "Savage" was not a particularly derogatory term, but a level in a developmental sequence. These ideas were increasingly challenged by a racialized science, which contested Christian and neoclassical beliefs in a common humanity and attributed progress to innate human deficiencies rather than environmental stimuli.³⁷ Yet many Australian travelers did not acknowledge the complex debates about human difference and development that were occurring in academic and medical circles. Through weekly Australian periodicals, journalists and politicians encouraged the popularization and simplification of scientific theories, argues Raymond Evans.³⁸ As a result, travelers used classificatory terms interchangeably and indiscriminately, with no clear distinction between groups such as "Negro," "Negroid," "Papuan," or "Papuasian." Even the widely used terms "Polynesian," "Kanaka," and "South Sea Islander" had different connotations over time, sometimes referring to specific regions within the Pacific, and other times used as a general category for all Pacific Islanders.

Middlebrow travelers and writers gradually adopted science and scientific language as a tool to authenticate their experience and legitimate their writing, allowing authors to claim their accounts to be educative and accurate. Travelers even engaged in pseudoscientific practices during their visits, such as collecting skulls and other "curios." For travelers seeking validation, physical proof of savage or cannibalistic peoples, such as skulls, bones, weapons, and burial or sacrificial sites, was considered essential, and the practice was encouraged by the tourism industry.³⁹ M. Kathleen Woodburn's account of her visit to Erromanga (in the New Hebrides) in the 1930s is typical of many Australian travelers, as she described becoming an amateur anthropologist, taking photographs and measurements of the islanders, compiling notes, and even searching a burial cave in order to acquire a human skull.⁴⁰

Australians were eager to justify their travel experiences as objective and accurate, yet writers (and readers) frequently succumbed to fictional preconceptions and stereotypes. Like most European travelers at the time, Australian writers were informed by children's literature of the late nineteenth century, with boyhood adventure tales set in the Pacific being very popular. These formulaic tales had mostly English authors and entrenched stereotypes of the savage by pitting courageous, gentle, chivalrous English gentlemen against cruel and barbaric Pacific Islanders.⁴¹ "Blackbirders" (or labor recruiters) be-

came familiar protagonists in Australian fiction because of the labor trade, which recruited Pacific Islanders for Queensland sugar plantations from 1869 to 1904. The recruited Melanesian laborers also featured in the public imagination, often as caricatures such as “Tommy Tanna.”⁴² The highly publicized murders of labor recruiters and traders, as well as missionaries, government officials, and other “innocent” Europeans, contributed to ideas of bestial savagery well into the 1920s.⁴³ For example, Malaita in the Solomon Islands was the site of several violent conflicts, including the ambush of the labor-recruiting ship *Young Dick* in 1886 and the murder of Resident Commissioner William Bell in 1927. As a result, travelers visiting the island frequently described it as the most savage and fearsome. Even if there was no visible evidence, travelers like Jack McLaren often assumed that Melanesians were unpredictable and instinctual, “liable to give expression to certain queer impulses which were their age-old heritage, and causelessly murder the stranger in their midst.”⁴⁴

The difficulty of access to the Melanesian islands, and the relatively late contact with Europeans compared to Polynesia, meant that Melanesia was generally regarded as a region of unknown possibilities, and “an openly imagined reality.”⁴⁵ Even with improved transportation technology by the 1920s, steamship services to the New Hebrides and Solomon Islands, for example, only left Australia monthly. Since the island groups were not on any of the major transpacific routes, ships were smaller, carried fewer passengers, and usually only stopped at each island for a few hours, the longest time spent at the colonial centers of Port Vila and Tulagi, usually no more than a day. Islanders were not as visible in the capitals, as sailor Alan Villiers noted in 1937: “Tulagi is frankly and plainly a headquarters for white living ... where white meets white, lives with white, thinks white.”⁴⁶ The difficulty of access due to mountainous terrain also gave passengers little time to explore beyond the beach. Combined with the pressure placed on writers to distinguish their work in a competitive publishing market, authors often wrote about the role that imagination played in their travel. For example, Joseph Dickinson acknowledged that “my own imagination had now been given every opportunity to exercise itself,” signaling to the reader the text’s entertaining qualities while also demonstrating an awareness of his own objectivity. In the same introduction, he stated that his account was a “plain unvarnished tale” that would not interest the ethnologist but could entertain him, a distinctively middlebrow claim.⁴⁷

Representations of the islander savage were also framed in relation to popular ideas about the Australian nation, with travel providing the opportunity for an individual to test the merits of Australian civilization in a purportedly savage, foreign environment. The majority of accounts confirmed popular beliefs in a racially superior white Australia, and racial theory provided a convenient justification for colonial exploitation in the region, particularly in the Australian territories of Papua and New Guinea.⁴⁸ In the 1938 *Handbook*

of Papua, the authors warned: "There is still room for heroism, endurance, and splendid adventure. But the country's more lurid qualities are fast disappearing under the steady spread of civilization under Australian rule."⁴⁹ While some travelers based their judgments on popular ideas of race, others turned to science, as Woodburn did when she wrote that "it is only a matter of time before science will overcome the inertia at the fringes of civilization" and "white man's knowledge" will bring benefits "to his brother of the stone age."⁵⁰

Science and fiction were intertwined in travel writing on the Pacific, and sometimes travelers were conflicted, torn between writing tales of excitement and adventure, while also being scientifically accurate and attempting to reconcile the savage of imagination with reality. These concerns resulted in a body of texts about the Pacific that were middlebrow in style and content. A number of visitors to the Pacific Islands did not necessarily embrace the dichotomy of the bestial savage and the superior white civilized explorer. Although holding his own racial convictions, McLaren perceived "degrees of savagery" in 1923, choosing not to "believe all these stories of barbarity and savagery" and instead finding that savagery "was after all a relative term."⁵¹ Marshall frequently referred to the islanders he met as savages, yet was unsatisfied with his own "civilization," arguing that "the people of the future will regard us as barbarians ... for the appalling way we have treated and are treating the primitive races whose territories we have taken."⁵² Smith also reflected, "we are as much the slaves of habit and the creatures of convention as they are, only we assume that our habits are good and our conventions are virtuous," and Woodburn asked the reader, "What right have we to interfere with the individual's freedom of thought and action?"⁵³ These particular voices were a minority in the broader corpus of travel writing, yet they highlight a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty about categories such as "savage" and "civilized" and the Pacific Islands more generally. The following section explores some of the themes that featured in middlebrow travel writing about the Melanesian savage, including their alleged primitive, infantile, and cannibalistic traits.

Sanitized Savages

For travelers during the 1920s and 1930s who visited Melanesia, the promise of encounters with imagined savages excited them, but the reality was much more sanitized. Islanders were familiar with steamship protocols and "noisy applauding tourists," observed Marshall in 1934.⁵⁴ Middlebrow literature about the Pacific (as always) was marked by a concern for authenticity,⁵⁵ and authors were encouraged to offer new surprises and entertainment for their readers, while still providing an educational and informative account. As these travelers searched for the "authentic" island experience, many found it in what they perceived to be the primitive and natural aspects of the islander

savage, rather than the bestial images that dominated nineteenth-century representations.⁵⁶ Australian travelers of the 1920s and 1930s reinscribed the primitivism of the eighteenth century, idealizing the primitive as a simpler, more natural state of human being. Mordaunt recalled her closeness to nature in Melanesia in 1937: "It delighted me to 'go bush' like Adam, to 'go walking in canoe.'"⁵⁷ Self-styled vagabond and writer Jack McLaren searched for the "Real Wild" in 1923 because he regarded civilization "with scorn," and was critical of city life because "people seemed unreal-artificial like" and were "denied the spice of existence."⁵⁸ Similarly, in 1927 trader Joseph Dickinson identified the islands with a freedom "from conventions, worry, trouble and drudgery" and attributed the "lure" of the islands to "a link with our long ago, primitive freedom."⁵⁹

Australian travel accounts were sometimes marked by a sense of nostalgia or regret that the primeval world was disappearing. Pacific Islanders were romanticized as primitive peoples from an idyllic past, sometimes specified as the Garden of Eden, a golden age, or a utopia. Australian travelers displayed concern that the purity and innocence of the Pacific Islands was threatened by the spread of civilization (and its vices), a fear heightened by the increasing presence of Europeans in the islands in the 1920s and 1930s. Woodburn was concerned that air travel would "destroy the charm of simplicity" she found in the New Hebrides.⁶⁰ The perception of widespread population decline in the Pacific reinforced these concerns, and gave scientific and statistical support to travelers' claims of the fragility of the primeval Pacific. Artist and writer Arnold Safroni-Middleton in 1919 lamented, "Islands that twenty years ago had populations numbering many thousand, to-day have a scattered population of a hundred or so!"⁶¹ This fascination with primitivism may point to a middle-brow concern with cultural values in Australia, and a broader dissatisfaction with the progress of European civilization and modernity.

Admiration for the primitivism of Pacific Islanders was reinforced by a missionary discourse that emphasized the infantile nature of the savage over the bestial. Through a diverse range of regular publications (such as church newsletters, magazines, missionary biographies and memoirs, and children's textbooks), missions were able to propagate a narrative of conversion and salvation to a broad Australian readership. Much of the literature it produced could be considered middlebrow, as its pastors were an educated elite in the Pacific who often wrote for geographical and anthropological audiences as well, yet also played upon popular images of savagery to justify their work (such as George Brown, Lorimer Fison, John Wear Burton, or John Gibson Paton). *The Southern Cross Log*, a regular periodical of the Auckland-based Melanesian Mission, was widely distributed in Australia and New Zealand from 1895 to 1972 and was typically middlebrow in that it contained fictional stories, poems, and travel accounts by lay passengers, as well as church propaganda.

Christine Weir's analysis of literature produced for Sunday schools in Australia identifies a general trend in children's materials toward a more child-oriented subject matter in the 1920s and 1930s, moving away from evoking pity for Pacific Islander children toward encouraging identification with them.⁶² Reverend John Wear Burton was a leading Australian Methodist who wrote at length on the Pacific, and his belief that "it is childhood with which we have to deal ... child-vices ... child-faces ... child-virtues" was typical of missionaries at the time.⁶³ These conclusive statements were repeated by ordinary travelers, who often met missionaries in the islands. Plantation overseer Eric Muspratt's "first impression" of the Solomon Islanders "was as big brown children," and Safroni-Middleton observed "a child-like expression" in an old woman's face, as if "one seemed to see the savage baby peeping through her brown eyes."⁶⁴ Not only did this reinforce the role of missionaries, or colonial powers, as civilizing influences, but perhaps this trend also reflects a broader rejection of the bestial, violent savage, an image that saturated Australian and European audiences since first European contact was made. It may also point to a feature of middlebrow culture in Australia, which emphasized education for self-improvement and moral betterment.

Australians may have been moving away from a bestial notion of the Melanesian savage by the 1920s and 1930s, but there was still a desire to find it, and savagery (even cannibalism) could be tolerated, and justified, because it was primordial and natural. Beatrice Grimshaw, popularly regarded as one of Australia's most famous travel writers, noted, "It is very gratifying, from a moral point of view, to see the clean, tidy, school-attending, prosaically peaceful folk that have replaced the original savage; but to the traveler, original savages are a good deal more interesting."⁶⁵ Thus the cannibal remained a prominent feature in the Australian middlebrow imagination, and rather than a feared reality, the cannibal of the early twentieth century was "picturesque, polite, and gentle-seeming"—it was a nostalgic symbol of a savage past (always hinting at the potential to revert to former behaviors).⁶⁶ By the twentieth century, firsthand encounters with cannibalism were rare. Yet cannibalism "was represented as a normalized, systemic, and casual practice of the everyday, and as constantly observable through every sensory perception," according to Tracey Banivanua-Mar.⁶⁷

When physical evidence could not be found, it was invented. Islanders were ascribed cannibalistic tendencies, with authors citing the historical record or hearsay as proof. Upon arrival at Malekula in 1933, businessman Joseph Hadfield Grundy first noted that "two months before we arrived there had been a murder and the victims had been eaten ... it is probable 10 other murders will be done."⁶⁸ Similarly, Winifred Ponder in Fiji in 1924 described being "the guest of an old savage who has doubtless enjoyed many a succulent joint of roast baby in his day."⁶⁹ To meet an ex-cannibal was the ultimate achievement, and Australians frequently expressed admiration rather than

disgust. Mordaunt recalled that “the Chief of Fishermen of Human Beings” said he did not like eating human flesh, and Dickinson fondly remembered Taki, “an old genial historic cannibal and headhunter chief ... a truly grand old man.”⁷⁰ Cannibalism was now a tourist attraction, possessing historical and scientific significance as well as exotic allure, and it featured regularly in travel writing because it simultaneously satisfied the intellectual pursuits and popular fantasies of a broad middlebrow readership.

In addition to cannibals, many travelers encountered Europeans residing in the Pacific Islands, and travel writing often focused on these characters and the lifestyles they had. These accounts negotiated between lowbrow romanticizations of a carefree life in the Pacific, and highbrow concerns about “going native.” “Beachcombers” were symbolic of the middlebrow, being vagrants who were simultaneously admired and vilified for rejecting the civilized world completely, blamed for corrupting, and becoming corrupted by, the islands. Beachcombers were more prevalent in the nineteenth century, when colonial governments had not yet established regulations on Europeans residing in the islands without employment. Yet ideas of a beachcombing lifestyle continued to feature in travel writing of the twentieth century.⁷¹

Australians disenchanted with social conditions or restrictions at home looked favorably on these residents, who were perceived to lead carefree, happy, and profitable lives. It was in this setting, surrounded by the primitive and natural, that the white resident or beachcomber was perceived to occupy a position of power and influence not possible at home, an idea that excited the Australian imagination. Accounts like Eric Muspratt’s encouraged this romanticism—he recalled feeling “like a king” when he worked on a coconut plantation in the Solomon Islands for six months in 1920: “I loved their savage, untrammelled ways, their wild, abandoned zest, simple and unspoiled as a child’s. I shed all the reserves and artificialities of civilization as easily as I shed my clothes. The only remaining difference was that I dominated and dispensed justice unswervingly.”⁷² Upon arrival, some travelers found instead a reality of debt, unpredictable and harsh climates, disease, and labor shortage. Sailor Alan John Villiers warned his readers, “they [the resident traders] live no lives of indolent ease, with grass-skirted maids to wait on them.”⁷³

The romance of the island lifestyle was also tempered by a fear of “going native,” a phrase that suggested that one could become decivilized and degraded, and one that was often repeated in travel accounts. These concerns regularly appeared in the publications of scholars, government officials, and missionaries who commentated on the progress of development in the Pacific. Travelers were only willing to shrug off the social conventions and norms of Australian (and British society) to a certain extent, fearing they could be consumed by the “red, raw, primeval barbarity” of the Pacific Islands.⁷⁴ Just as early settlers in Australia feared that civil society would be lost in a savage wilderness, so too did Australians visiting the Pacific feel vulnerable

away from familiar, civilized surroundings.⁷⁵ Rather than fearing the corrupting influence of savage islanders, the majority of accounts exhibited a fear of prolonged exposure to a savage and/or tropical environment (expressed in terms of disease such as “island rot” or, after World War II, in the phrase “to go troppo”).⁷⁶

Ambivalent Mobilities

This article has attempted to explore the complexities and ambiguities within Australian travel writing about the Pacific, which contributed to a popular Australian middlebrow imagination of the Pacific Islands. I have argued that travel writing favored the middlebrow because its authors sought to satisfy a broad readership of different tastes by simultaneously presenting their accounts as educational and entertaining. Travel writing and the middlebrow were ambiguous and ambivalent cultural forms, and were more often defined in opposition to other conventions. According to the preface by Bishop J. M. Steward in Dickinson’s 1927 travelogue, “This is not a missionary book, neither is it the book of a globe-trotter ... here is a genuine account of what life in the islands looks like to the ordinary man who goes about with his eyes open and has a good memory, the knack of spinning a stirring yarn, and a keen imagination.”⁷⁷ I have also argued that the Pacific Islands, and the steamships that connected them, were middlebrow settings. They were opportunities for travelers to test and appropriate multiple discourses, themes, and styles of writing that reflected the varied interests of missionaries, government officials, scholars, employees, entrepreneurs, businessmen, adventurers, and tourists scattered across the Pacific. This was based on a tradition of imagining the Pacific as a location for intellectual pursuits and personal development, as well as leisure and fantasy fulfillment. According to Smith in 1924, travel to the Pacific “gives the opportunity, and provides the means, of combining the spirit of [Robert Louis] Stevenson’s *Vagabond* with the philosophical injunction ‘Know thyself.’”⁷⁸

I have also attempted to highlight the ambivalent responses of Australian travelers to ideas of the “savage” and “civilized,” showing how increasing numbers of travelers to the Pacific in the 1920s and 1930s contributed to a more sanitized portrayal of the savage than in the past. As a result, travelers increasingly rejected bestial representations of the savage in favor of primitive, infantile, and cannibalistic traits in their search for authenticity. The Australian travelers mentioned in this article highlight a diverse group of travelers, of different ages, genders, and classes, with different purposes for travel and often ambiguous national affiliations. In trying to distinguish themselves from the tourist masses, these travelers produced a middlebrow literature that sought to convey a sense of authenticity and individuality, blending scientific

observations and firsthand experiences with fictional fantasies and romantic imaginaries. Though diverse, Australian travelers have much in common with other Europeans in the Pacific, and further studies of the middlebrow could enrich our understanding of broader representations of, and relationships with, the Pacific Islands.

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Notes

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