

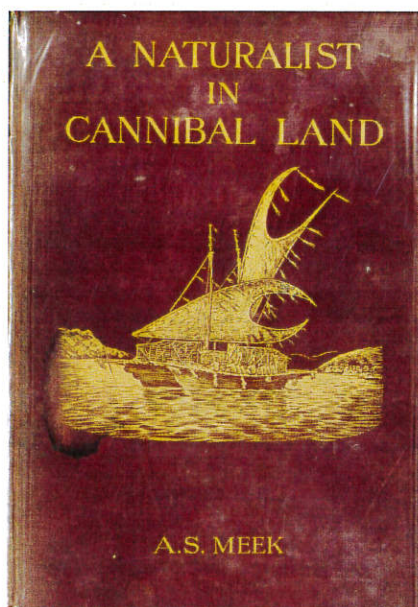
A Naturalist in Cannibal Land

by A. S. Meek. Reviewed by David and Renia Ferguson.

It has been one hundred years since "A Naturalist in Cannibal Land" was published, written by Albert Stewart Meek reflecting upon a period of life, just past, as a professional field collector of natural history and ethnographic curiosities from Papua New Guinea and adjacent islands. His father, an owner of a curio and natural history gallery in London, had organised with one of his Australian clients, an owner of a pastoral property in far outback Queensland, for Albert to stay and receive some employment. He arrived in 1889 and went to work as a stockman and kangaroo hunter. This could be seen as an apprenticeship of the Australian work-ethic that subsequently transformed his life.

When the opportunity arose he would collect natural history specimens, these were later sent back to his father, which created quite a stir amongst the collecting fraternity there. Subsequently Albert was very pleased to receive a sizable sum of money and a request to collect directly for The Hon. Walter Rothschild, director of the Tring Museum (p.43). This was a catalytic moment for Albert that fast tracked a career change to professional field collecting, with Papua New Guinea his collecting grounds.

Most of the natives of Papuan New Guinea at that time, particularly the inland communities, had not had any contact with Europeans. The coastal communities had had contact, but generally the inland native peoples "were much less used to the white man ... [and the] native ways and customs were now gradually being lost through contact with whites" (p.53). Albert, in response to this, noted many firsthand observations that formed a sub-text story, woven through the main story, about his adventures experienced while collecting natural history. This is what makes this book great: the incidental accounts that capture a period of history when few accounts like this



where made. These include head-hunting, ethnographic adornments and fashion, sorcery, marriage, attitudes to strangers, and so on. The editor recognising the great value contained within added a comprehensive index over five pages in length.

Several interesting accounts that stand out are; from the Solomon Islands, "the tablets made of petrified clam shell, were rows and rows of carved figures and designs in scroll work ... the present generation have no idea of carving in this way. Nor can they tell where these tablets came from, except that they are found in caves in the hills" (p.99). On a trip to the Giriwa River [Northern Province], "secured ... a small stone which was evidently a relic of a prehistoric race ... the story they told me of the image was this: that a very, (Continued on page 11)

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very old man, a man of a time so far remote that they could not recollect his name ... The old man had seen the image at the bottom of the river ... it was a rough image of a man – a little suggestive of the Buddha ... with hands crossed on the belly ... among the hill tribes of the present day the art of carving is unknown, either in wood or in stone ... are a relic of an older people” (p.176-177) About skulls; “the New Guinea natives at that time set no great value on the human skulls and was able to purchase three for a stick of tobacco, while in the Solomon Islands the natives put a very great value on the human skulls, will hardly part from them at any price. With a small piece of iron one could get very great quantities of native shell-money, and rare curios which it is now almost impossible to secure” (p.188) ... “as soon as he comes to possess iron, [this] promptly degenerated his old art of carving. The native who has an iron tool never does as good carving as he did before with his rough implements made of shells and animal teeth” (p.189).

This book would be of great value to students and researchers of

Dubu, Solomon Islands.



anthropology, entomologists, ornithologists, zoologists and ethnographic collectors etc., and of course those who enjoy reading about the early exploration of Papua New Guinea and the Pacific region.

Published: 1913; Editorial: Frank Fox; Introduction by: The Hon. Walter Rothschild. Publisher: T. Fisher Unwin; London, Adelphi Terrace. Thirteen chapters, 36 black & white photographic plates

(of architecture, people groups, canoes etc); foldout map; 5+ pages of index; 238 pages; Author: Albert Stewart Meek 1871-1943.

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1. The Hon. Walter Rothschild, founder of the Tring Museum would classify, name and describe species that were published in the scientific journal, *Novitates Zoologicae*.