

OBJECTS AS INSIGHTS: R. H. Codrington's Ethnographic Collections from Melanesia. *British Museum Research Publications.* By Nick Stanley. London: The British Museum Press, 2021. vi, 103 pp. (Maps, B&W photos, coloured photos, illustrations.) US\$30.00, paper. ISBN 978-0861592357.

R. H. Codrington is probably most known for his pioneering 1891 book, *The Melanesians*; however, the present book, *Objects as Insights*, examines in particular his material culture collecting. The ambiguity in the title invites the inference that “insights” relate equally to the originating cultures, the collector himself, and the collections in which the objects reside today.

There are six chapters covering four broad themes: 1) biography; 2) collecting and collections (chapters 1 and 2; 4 and 5), including details of the objects themselves and their dispersal to various collections; 3) his perceptiveness of form and artistic achievements; and 4) analysis of his continuing significance today, including a review of various re-evaluations of his work, a century after he was active.

Born in Wiltshire, UK and educated at Oxford, Codrington undertook missionary work in Melanesia. He was not always kind in his judgement of others involved in the Pacific, but he was collegial with a small group of missionaries who shared his interest in the nascent field of anthropology. Many of his more enlightened and liberal views he owed to Bishop J. C. Patteson, his first and most influential mentor and friend. Patteson imparted great tolerance and understanding of local people and their customs and a keen interest in local languages—especially Mota, the language of the Banks Islands. Their adoption of this as the local lingua franca was similar to the Fiji Wesleyan missionaries' adoption of Bauan as the language of religious instruction. Patteson and Codrington rejected the use of Pidgin,

preferring to use the people's own "real language" (8). Interestingly, Mota also provided Codrington with a vehicle for personal emotional expression, as revealed in his letters to former students, quite unlike the austerity of his writing in English (13). Finally, his familiarity with local languages allowed him to understand the names, functions, and significance of many of the objects he collected (77).

Much of the book is concerned with Codrington's avid collecting. His interest was not particularly remarkable—missions routinely sold artefacts for revenue-raising, and collecting island "curios" was all the rage among Westerners throughout the Pacific at that time. What *is* remarkable, is the sheer volume of his total collection, and (*most* unusually) his accurate, detailed, and insightful documentation of the objects.

Moving with the "Anglican Mission to Melanesia" from New Zealand to Norfolk Island, Codrington became the founding headmaster of St. Barnabas School. This limited his travel in pursuit of objects, but actually facilitated collecting by proxy, bartering trade goods via the agency of his students and their relatives (particularly from Vanuatu and the Solomons).

Codrington started collecting in the 1860s so as to send objects back to the Blackmore Museum in Salisbury, not far from his hometown. Though little interested in museums in his youth, he *was* in touch with the Blackmore Museum prior to his time on Norfolk Island. Perhaps Blackmore himself, or his curator, Stevens, initiated contact, seeing in his appointment to "primitive" lands an opportunity to further their preoccupation with "stone age" material. The museum closed when both Stevens and Blackmore died in 1878, but as Codrington's understanding and collection grew, so did the range of his contacts. By 1874, his main attention had already transferred to the British Museum. Then, between the opening of the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1886 and 1920, he achieved his wish that much of his collection be displayed by his alma mater. His correspondence from 1890 on with the founding curator of the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, Baron Anatole von Hügel, resulted in significant material going to that museum. Three appendices in the book list the objects in the British Museum, Pitt Rivers, and MAA Cambridge. Edge-Partington visited Codrington in 1889 and drew 82 objects from his personal collection. Eleven plates, showing an even more varied range of objects than those sent to the museums, appeared in Edge-Partington's 1890 magnum opus: *An Album of the Weapons, Tools, Ornaments, Articles of Dress etc. of the Natives of the Pacific*.

Codrington's drawings show natural ability and keen observational skills. The author commends his "seeing eye"—"This ability in both making and thinking distinguishes [his] anthropology substantially from other work, both of his time and subsequently" (58). Unsurprisingly, missionary Codrington's interest was aroused by "magic" charms and the efficacy (*mana*) attributed to them. He collected many war arrows—their *mana* imparted by human bone tips affixed with special incantations—comprising fully 12 percent of

the Pitt Rivers objects (68). His analysis of the “slippery concept” (76) of mana as it related to other objects and individuals, was nuanced.

In the final chapter, the author examines debates about the value of Codrington’s contribution. First, the “complex history of engagement and frequent strife between anthropologists and [missionaries] in the field...” (71). Codrington himself criticized both sides—the “willful ignorance” of other missionaries, and the “scientific men [who] fit their evidence to their preconceived ideas of how things ought to be” (6). Several critics of missionaries have specifically exempted Codrington. Certainly there is a notable absence of religious rhetoric in his writing. His approach was practical rather than doctrinaire, and it seems hard *not* to see him as a respecter, rather than a destroyer, of local cultures.

The author enlists the UNESCO category of “Intangible Heritage” to suggest that Codrington was “a promoter of both tangible and intangible culture in conversation with each other” (76). Thus he “assiduously collected and documented what he termed ‘folklore’ to set beside the objects” (77). His “collection of artefacts provides the bedrock upon which his accounts and theories are constructed” (78), and are “of real importance for the history and study of Melanesian culture today” (80). That is an enviable epitaph.

This clearly-written, interesting, and thought-provoking book is a research tool and mental stimulus for serious scholars, rather than a mere coffee table book. But happily, like other British Museum publications, it recognizes that books on material culture need to be well-designed and have excellent illustrations *as well as* insightful texts. I unhesitatingly recommend this book to anyone with a more than casual interest in the Western Pacific, material culture, missions/missionaries, museology, and collectors/collecting.

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