

“Queen Emma” in 19th Century New Guinea. Part 2.

In the last episode, Emma Coe and her partner Thomas Farrell, had left Samoa in late 1878 and settled on Mioko Island in The Duke of York Island group midway between New Britain and New Ireland in New Guinea. It was from Mioko Island that they were to start a large trading empire.

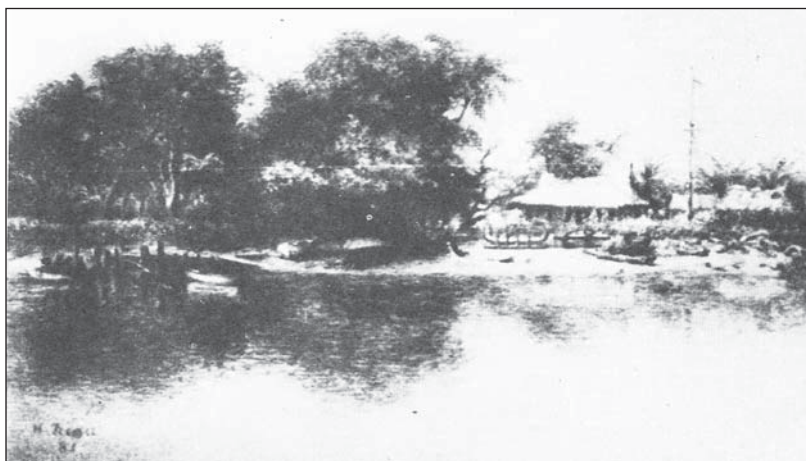
Mioko, which the Farrells chose as their home, is within sight of New Britain and New Ireland. The Duke of York group are in the centre of a vast region of big and little islands, of palm-shaded beaches, fertile coastland and plateaus, jungle-clad mountains, shining seas and swift rivers. It looked like an earthly paradise; but the questing Europeans of the 1870's, trying to settle into this area, found that socially it more nearly resembled hell.

The jungles of the New Britain mainland swarmed with a Melanesian people rated then, among the most ferocious and treacherous cannibals known. If the stranger escaped the axes, spears, clubs and cooking-fires of the prowling natives, he inevitably collected one or other of the virulent local diseases - malaria, dysentery, or well-nigh incurable tropical ulcers.

Behind the cannibals and diseases there was a terrifying line of smoking and often belching volcanoes. This line actually extends from the East Indies (Indonesia), eastward along the north coasts of New Guinea and New Britain, and on into what then was unknown and forbidding Bougainville.

When Emma took her first long look at eastern New Britain, about 1878, there was not a dozen Europeans domiciled in the whole region. There were four emaciated Wesleyan missionaries (who had been led into the merciless place by the Reverend George Brown in 1875), and five or six other traders who hovered off the coasts in little schooners and sought tortoiseshell, pearl shell, rare woods and the allegedly aphrodisiacal sea-slug, *beche-de-mer*, eagerly sought for markets in China. They were always liable to a sudden attack from the natives and when they were killed, they usually were eaten.

Two or three Godeffroy traders already were there in 1876, with a small schooner, and a head station in Mioko. That same year another merchant from Hamburg, Edward Hershheim, arrived in The Duke of Yorks and established a trading station in Makada Harbour.



The trading station and ship supply depot of Thomas Farrell and Emma Coe on Mioko Island, 1881

The natives, bounteously supplied by nature, wanted of life little more than they had – except protein. If they could capture a stranger, white or black, and get him into their primitive kitchens, they were well satisfied. It was noticed that whenever a choice had to be made, for culinary purposes, between the Europeans and their native crew-men, the dark-skinned bodies were preferred. The cannibals said the white-skinned meat was ill-favoured.

Despite appalling risks, the traders came in increasing numbers, for the trade was lucrative. The natives developed a great desire for beads, red cloth, mirrors, knives and tobacco. The Godeffroy men, as they had done already in Samoa, showed them how to dry coconut kernel and make copra, and this the medium of exchange. One palm-frond carrying-basket would contain from three to twelve pounds of very dirty copra and the rate of exchange was one thimble-full of coloured beads for one pound of copra.

The traders also sought tortoiseshell, pearl shell, candle-nuts, and the bark of the “fow-bash tree” which was taken to Europe and made into paper. A trader could hire a native boatman for a stick of tobacco, or a clay pipe, per day. There were 28 sticks of twist in one pound of tobacco.

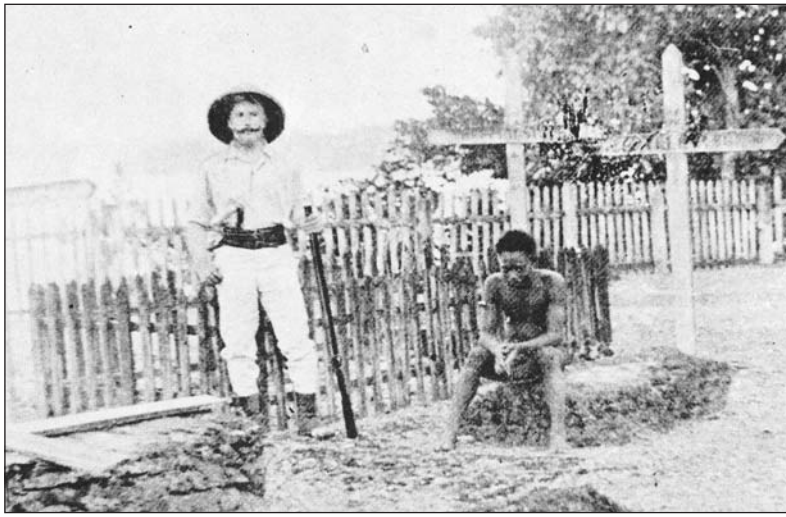
It scarcely seemed an environment to be sought by a handsome, cultured, ambitious young woman. But Emma knew where she was going and welcomed the opportunity. She and Farrell were experienced traders and sailors, Emma by now having become a confident navigator. They were accustomed to handling difficult island natives, but these in the New Britain area were something quite new, and they did not underestimate

them. Both went armed with revolvers, always.

By arrangements with Godeffroys, a German brig from Samoa met the Farrells at Mioko, and provided them with goods and equipment. Thus they were able to erect buildings of native materials, stock a trade-store, and put a handy little cutter, the *Lelea*, into commission, all in a short time. The German brig had also brought Emma's brother, John Coe, then aged 20, and three Samoans, two of them married, who became trusted servants and station staff. Fijian sailors joined them later.

Farrell himself went straight into trading and recruiting, and soon was competing actively with the Godeffroy and Hershheim men. Early in 1879, shortly after their arrival, he left for Samoa with a shipload of labourers for the German plantations there. His partner (Emma), with equal energy, attacked the problems of organising a household, a trading station, a supply of fresh food, and security. Emma found no difficulty in directing trading operations; but her Coe vision reached far beyond the raw little trading station, to the exciting possibilities in those wild fertile plains around Blanche Bay, over there on the Gazelle Peninsula. She knew why the Germans had planted coconuts in Samoa. But even Emma was staggered by the tales of brutality, murder and treachery which reached her, as she came closer to terms with her scattered white neighbours.

Emma had seen unclothed folk in many Pacific islands, but none like these in New Guinea. They were completely naked, and so dirty that they stank. Their skin was covered with the scaly disease – *grille* – peculiar to that area, and their teeth were stained black with betel-nut and lime, which they chewed



The European graveyard at Mioko Island, 1898

constantly. The women carried the burdens, while the men, darting suspicious glances in every direction, never let their spears or clubs or stone axes out of their hands. Emma knew their reputation. She and her brother kept their hands on their pistols.

Only a few weeks earlier, the explorer, Wilfred Powell, ran his ketch, *Star of the East*, up on a beach of Utuan Island, for repairs, and wandered into the scrub by himself, examining plants. Suddenly he was confronted by a chief and three or four men, who obviously planned to catch him. Revolver in hand, he began to trot backwards, down to the track. The chief followed, his spear at the ready.

Powell tripped and fell, and the chief ran in for the kill. Powell tried to shoot, and his weapon misfired. He diverted the next spear with his hand, which was grievously wounded. It looked like the end of Mr. Powell, when Rover intervened. Powell carried three big dogs with him on the ketch, and his favourite, Rover, had followed him up the track. Before the next spear thrust came, Rover had seized the chief's ankle. The chief screamed, and struck at Rover, but the dog dodged and while the natives were thus diverted, Powell sprang up and ran and got onto the beach. His companion came running from the boat with a musket, and put the natives to flight.

Powell later sent an appeal across the Channel to Nodup, on the New Britain shore, and his friend, Chief Torotoru, came over with a party of warriors, and hunted the murderous Utuans until they paid a fine of 100 fathoms of *diwara*, the native currency of the day, made of shells ground into flat discs and strung on pandanus fibre. The natives on the Duke of York and Mioko islands were not regarded as very dangerous, but Emma knew that these Utuans were a constant menace.

A few days later, Emma had a visit from one of

her most trusted friends from her earlier days, the Reverend George Brown, who had sheltered her in Savaii in 1864, and who had tried to guide her in 1873. In the tempestuous years since 1869, her contacts with clergymen – and clergywomen – had not been friendly. But she, like most people

who knew him, admired and revered Brown, whose tolerance of sinners and readiness to sacrifice himself for others placed him high in the Pacific's list of honoured Christian missionaries. He had always been the trusted friend and adviser of Emma's father, and of her husband, James Forsayth.

Mr. Brown spoke optimistically of his work among the incredible savages of that area, (New Britain), but warned her to go always armed and guarded. There was no law, he told her. She was liable to be seized at anytime by primitive men from the jungle, who would eat her, and by "civilized" men, from the trading ships, who would make another use of her body. Brown told Emma of an incident in April, 1878, where he sent a Fijian ordained minister, and three Fijian teachers to establish teaching-posts in villages on the tablelands beyond Simpsomhaven (across the harbour, opposite to where Rabaul now stands). Because they trusted a notable and powerful chief, Taleli, Brown directed the party to go in from Rataful, Taleli's village on the north shore of Mother-and-Daughter peninsula.

On what they afterwards discovered were Taleli's orders, the party of four were ambushed and murdered, and their bodies cut up and distributed among the cannibal villages of that district. "They had no arms (guns), and no chance," the missionary told Emma. "It was a horrible massacre. One died from a spear, driven through his back to his chest. Another was clubbed to death and a third dodged and fought with his bare hands, but fell with many spears in his body. The last Fijian, fought like a lion. He grabbed an unloaded fowling-piece from one of the savages, and used it as a club, and got away from them. He ran to Taleli's village, for protection...he did not guess that Taleli had ordered the massacre. Taleli beheaded him, and divided his body between the villages.

The incident had stirred up all the local villagers, and the missionaries and traders were in grave danger. Taleli, having settled the missionaries, then set out after the teacher's wives and children but a Godeffroy trader, got them away just as the cannibals were actually creeping upon them, and handed them over to Brown. As a reprisal the Europeans went out in two punitive parties on April 18, 1878.

The avengers had moved in so quickly that the natives had no time to prepare their usual defence – the spear-pits at the entrances to the villages, cleverly camouflaged with leaves and branches on top and with spear-heads and needle-sharp bamboo splinters at the bottom, waiting to impale those incautious enough to fall into them. The punitive parties got right into the villages and burned the houses to the ground, destroyed gardens and canoes, and shot at least a dozen natives. It was real 19th century justice, and understood by both parties.

Brown had other horrors, apart from recalcitrant natives, to warn Emma about. The bad fever of the area was, in most respects, even more dangerous than the local cannibals. He warned her to keep away from the swamps and never sleep on damp ground. Malaria was believed then to be carried in a miasma that came out of wet, rotting vegetation. They knew quinine as a cure, in 1879, but had not yet learned the source of malaria- of how the tireless *Anopheles* mosquito carried the malaria parasite from one person to another. And this is what Emma Coe walked into, a life among cannibals, murderers, and deadly diseases.

Note: Mioko Island, in the Duke of York Island group, is approximately 3 km long and 2 km wide at its widest point and has a small but wonderful protective harbour at its southern end – shaped like a fish-hook. It is at this harbour where Emma and Farrell set up their first trading post.

To be continued...

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