

Palmerston Atoll; A tale of survival over 117 years by one family

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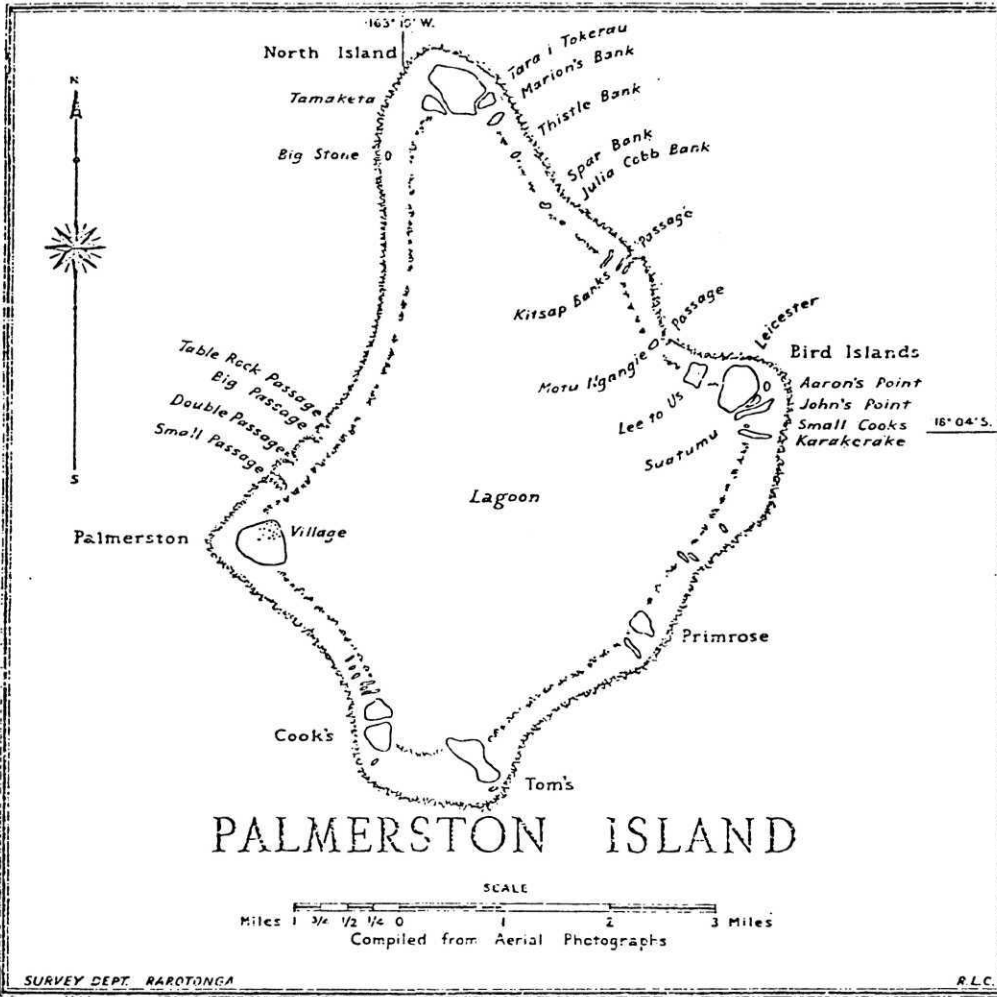
I. VOYAGE AND ARRIVAL

Even school children in the Cook Islands are aware that everyone they meet named Marsters must be from Palmerston Atoll or at least must be a descendant of the original Englishman who set up life there with three wives in the middle of the last century. Since then the community has remained largely isolated, living for the most part on surrounding natural resources. Life there remained technologically simple until the 1970's, somehow avoiding or being by-passed by the sweep of cultural changes, the materialism and the worldliness that have affected even more remote and much older communities throughout the Pacific.

Palmerston is 270 miles northwest of Rarotonga. The sea voyage takes three days in calm weather. Passengers aboard the government fishing vessel sleep on top of diesel drums and building supplies surrounded by bananas and oranges or, on the way back, on bags of copra surrounded again by more copra (which has a highly unpleasant stench), bosun birds, bags of clams and occasionally live turtles. The misery of the voyage ends marvelously, however. The arrival in Palmerston was a truly rewarding experience.

At first it was difficult to make out even the atoll's tree line against the horizon, let alone the slim slice of land just slightly elevated above the enormous lagoon, but soon the vessel was motoring along the western shore seeking the "passage", often led by flying fish which leapt in schools before the bow. The engineer and crew will watch their trolling

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lines for the tell-tale snap of a hooked fish, for Palmerston is renowned for its abundance of marine life. Passengers are struck by the sight of the sparkling blue lagoon rimmed with coconut covered islets or motus. While the passage through the reef was narrow, the welcoming beach on Home Islet was wide and spotted with people eager to take a guest home and to show off the place that they loved.

Approaching the beach, the water was very clear; one could see the sandy bottom 30 feet below. Reef fish scuttled away, multicolored corals and even giant *Tridacna* clams were visible with no effort at all. Within this tranquility there was a sense of excitement as the vessel cast anchor and boats left the beach to come alongside. The welcoming Palmerston islanders didn't just climb aboard; they clamored aboard. They brought baskets of food and coconuts and in turn were given oranges and tangerines. They were just as pleased to savor these treats as the visitors were to drink from fresh green coconuts.

Only the men came out in the boats for this greeting: the acting Clerk in-Charge, Tuakana Marsters, the head of the second lineage, John James Marsters, and the head of the third lineage, Bob Marsters, and other male members of their respective families. On the beach, the women were waiting to greet the visitors with shell leis and kisses. After the supplies had been unloaded, visitors were escorted home where a lovely spread of food was laid out: suckling pig, three kinds of fish, and pumpkin pudding in coconut milk sauce, the first of many such meals.

Walking from the beach to a home the visitor passes scaevola shrubs, young heliotrope trees at the high water mark, and then past pockets of mixed woodlands on higher ground. These characteristic mixtures of plant varieties are the result of water-carried seeds being randomly assembled on the beach and then pushed over the berm by higher tides or storms. Inland there are the coconuts which occupy most of the acreage on the larger motus, most of them resulting from copra plantation activity.

In addition to those obvious species, there are many imported plants on Home Islet. The settlement area itself is shaded and protected by the coconut trees on the lagoon side, with little or no ground cover. The "main street" is cleared with a church, water tanks, the original old Marsters' house and another old house lining both sides. Further inland, around the other houses, there are breadfruit trees, some obviously old. There are also ornamented plants such as plumeria, the Tahitian gardenia ("tiare maori") and hibiscus in this area. Some papaya trees grow to considerable heights but the fruit is small.

The home of the visitor's host was quite modern and similar to the new houses of Western design found on Rarotonga, large with four bedrooms, a living room, kitchen, dining room, bathroom and a verandah. It had a concrete foundation, pinex walls, a corrugated iron roof and many louvered glass windows. It was well furnished with beds, couches (made on the island) and even a flush toilet. While there was no running water in the bathroom or kitchen (one simply filled a bucket of water and used a cup for bathing), there was running water into the toilet cistern. It was a very comfortable home and quite unlike anything one expected.

The Palmerston people are very friendly and hospitable, making one feel at ease and very fortunate to be with them. They are cheerful, quick to crack a joke, and enjoy the company of their visitors.

II. EARLY HISTORY

Palmerston's early history is not well documented, but on June 16, 1774, on his second voyage around the world, Captain James Cook discovered the atoll.

About half an hour after sunrise this morning, land was seen from the topmast-head. We altered our course, and steering for it, found it to be another reef island, composed of five or six woody islets connected together by sand-banks and breakers, enclosing a lake into which we could see no entrance. We found no anchorage, nor saw we any signs of inhabitants. There were plenty of various kinds of birds, and the coast seemed to abound with fish. I looked upon it as a new discovery and named it Palmerston Island in honour of Lord Palmerston, one of the Lords of the Admiralty.¹

Cook then left without landing, but returned on his third voyage on April 13, 1777. It was not until the next day that four boats went ashore. They landed on a motu on the southeast of the atoll and returned with young coconut palms as food for the cattle aboard and "scurvy grass" (purslane) which Cook thought prevented scurvy.

Captain Edward Edwards of the *Pandora* and his crew were the next visitors to Palmerston, arriving there on May 21, 1791. Captain Edwards and his party were searching for the mutineers of the *Bounty* and his Lieutenant Corner actually found a yard marked "Bounty's Driver Yard" and spars with *Bounty* markings but these must have drifted to Palmerston from the Austral group. While a thorough search for the mutineers was being made, a strong wind forced the *Pandora* out to sea. The schooner which accompanied the *Pandora* along with a jolly boat containing five men became separated. The jolly boat and the five men were never seen again, but the schooner with its crew was found by Edwards in Samarang, Java, later.²

On April 1, 1797, the London Missionary Society's ship *Duff* called at Palmerston, a Tahitian aboard swam ashore and claimed the atoll for

King Pomare II of Tahiti. On July 15, 1811, Captain Michael Fodger landed a group of men on uninhabited Palmerston to collect beche-de-mer and shark fins to be shipped to the China market. Fodger never landed at Palmerston again, and the men presumably perished.³

In 1850 the *Merchant of Venice* called at the atoll and found four white men headed by Jeffrey Strickland. They had been employed to collect the same commercial valuables and were in a starving state. They made arrangements with the captain to give them passage to Rarotonga in return for their rights and titles to the island. The captain passed on these rights to John Brander, a Scottish planter and trader who had settled in Tahiti.⁴ It was Brander who hired William Richard Marsters to be his agent on Palmerston: this was the beginning of the modern history and the continuous habitation of Palmerston.

William Marsters was born in Birmingham, England in 1821. At eighteen he went to sea, serving for some time on whaling ships, going ashore in California to join the gold rush. By 1850 he was on a vessel in the South Pacific and jumped ship at Penrhyn Island (Tongareva) in the northern Cooks where he married the chief's daughter. He visited other Cook Islands and Samoa then returned to Penrhyn where he took another wife, a cousin of his first wife. He was taken to Palmerston by the ship *Aorai* which belonged to Brander along with his two wives and his old friend named Jean Baptiste Fernandez and his wife Matavia (who was also the wives' cousin), on July 8, 1863. From this time until 1870, Brander sent ships regularly to Palmerston at six-month intervals. Fernandez is thought to have signed on some of these vessels and spent much time away from Palmerston. He and his wife had one son named Mahuta; but while her husband traveled, Matavia had three more children who must have been fathered by Marsters. Fernandez finally confronted Marsters with his suspicions and then abandoned his wife and went to Atiu and Rarotonga where in 1895 he drowned while drunk. Marsters then took Matavia as his third wife, and also took a fourth wife who is generally not mentioned. She was Arehata, and with her he had a daughter named Ritia who married William Ford, a trader from Penrhyn. Only the descendants of the first three wives are recognized today in discussions of the Marsters lineage.

From his wives Marsters raised a family of 17 children, who produced 54 grandchildren. By the fifth generation the immediately related family had reached over 1,000 people, most having emigrated from the atoll. The Rev. W. W. Gill who visited Palmerston (possibly in 1875) reported that Marsters was "one of those waifs so common in the Pacific who after years of wandering in the Line Islands settled in Palmerston."⁵ He described Marsters as a short, well-set man about sixty years old, who

was very active "but with an uneasy expression of countenance". He started that Marsters always carried a loaded revolver. "A few years ago, a plot had been laid to kill Marsters while asleep and to drown his children in the lagoon. The women were engaged in the plot . . . and this may have accounted for the presence of two large fierce dogs. Marsters' word is law, and must be implicitly obeyed." Gill claimed that the people had lived in "heathenism until a few months recent, when an accidental visit of a Christian chief and deacon led Marsters to think it desirable to secure religious instruction and secular education for the young people, several of whom were verging on maturity." Marsters invited the London Missionary Society to send a missionary, the first being a Penrhyn islander named Akarongo who was the school teacher and parson. Marsters allowed only English to be spoken, an archaic form prevailing until recently.

Shortly after Marster's arrival at Palmerston, the sailing ship *Annie Laurie* was wrecked on the reef. From the timbers of this and other recks Marsters built his house which has withstood all the storms and hurricanes and still stands today. The foundations and wall studs are 18 by 18 inch ship's timbers. He sank them to 14 feet (to water level) and bolted 6 by 12 inch timbers to form the walls. He used galvanized iron for the roof. Afterwards, he planted 80,000 coconut trees⁶ and used the coconuts for food and making copra which in the earlier years he shipped to Brander in Tahiti. Marsters was a hard-working man and a competent shipwright and house carpenter. He found a market for firewood, salt pork, dried fish, coconut oil and fresh foods in the visiting vessels. The families' main source of subsistence was the ocean and the youngsters soon became skilled seamen, learning to handle boats early in life.⁷

By the 1880's the provedore trade had practically died out and copra became the main source of cash income. Marsters gave each son half of the value of the copra that the son made, but of that half the son had to give one-third to his mother.⁸ The sons formed themselves into three groups for copra-making, based along lineage lines. This custom of giving a one-third share to each mother was continued by most children until all three wives were deceased. Before his death Marsters devised a system whereby the land would be divided between the three families instead of dividing the income from joint production. He declared that the lagoon and reef was common property of all inhabitants.⁹

Marriage partners for his children presented a big problem and Marsters refused to allow the marriage of a full brother and a full sister, although marriage between half-brother and sister were allowed. When possible, marriage took place with people from another island, particu-

larly Penrhyn, Manihiki, Rakahanga, and Aitutaki. Marsters had authoritarian control over the island and the families; as this was such a unique arrangement, it obviously could not be continued after his death.

William Marsters died on May 22, 1899. Within two years of his death problems arose, caused mainly by the uncertainty of the new leader and the organization of the three families on the island. Marsters had nominated his eldest resident son to succeed him as head of the island before his death and in 1921 the resident commissioner of the Cook Islands reaffirmed "administratively, rather than legally, the head of the first lineage is head of the atoll."¹⁰ This has been the case ever since.

Palmerston is geographically isolated from any main governmental center; the closest is Rarotonga. The southern group of the Cook Islands were declared to be under British protection in October 1888 but this did not include Palmerston. Then in 1901, the islands including Palmerston were officially annexed by New Zealand.

After some dispute caused by previous licenses issued to other people who had not occupied the atoll, Marsters applied to the High Commission for the Western Pacific in Fiji for a lease on January 6, 1888 and was issued a temporary lease on July 24, 1888. On May 23, 1891 he was granted a license to occupy the atoll for 21 years. Marsters claimed exclusive rights to the atoll based on long possession and the fact that he claimed to have planted 200,000 coconut trees. In 1913 a lease was granted by the Cook Islands administration which expired on January 1, 1933. For nine years thereafter the occupants had no legal claim. However, their rights were never challenged. Another 21-year lease was drawn up on December 31, 1941, and in 1954 the Cook Islands Amendment Act, Section 2 passed by the New Zealand Parliament vested the atoll permanently in the "Native inhabitants of the island of Palmerston and their descendants". An area of ten acres was reserved for government use. In April 1965 the Cook Islands became an internally self-governing territory of New Zealand including Palmerston under the umbrella of the central government in Rarotonga. Interestingly, the eligible voters of Palmerston elect political candidates from the main constituency in Rarotonga. Although the Palmerston people are represented in the Cook Islands Legislative Assembly, administration the island itself is carried out by the local Island Council with minimal participation by the central government.

III. THE FAMILY AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT

In 1975 there were nine homes on Palmerston, ranging in size from 12 to 3 persons with 28 males and 27 females in residence. (In 1959

there were 16 households).¹¹ In July 1975, seven people left the island. The community included a good mix of age groups, ranging from 73 years old to a baby of two months. However, there were only 2 babies under one year old, and the school roll had declined from 34 in 1964 to 17 in 1975. Population figures show a peak in 1924 of 102 people with a steady decline until, in 1975, only the 58 remained.

The preferred marriage partner is one from within the clan, while the marriage of a male Marsters to a non-Marsters woman is accepted, but not ideal. Marriage of a Marsters woman to a non-Marsters man is not highly regarded, and when it occurs, the nuclear family involved usually does not live on Palmerston. However, with the declining population it is becoming more and more difficult to find a marriage partner from within the atoll and this is becoming a serious problem for the young people. In 1975, an engagement had taken place between one of the young men of the first lineage and the school teacher who was from Rarotonga. He was 17 and she was 30 but she was the only female that would have been eligible for him. There was a second young school teacher from Rarotonga who was courting another of the young men (he was 15) and had just given birth to a child. For the other young men and women there were no eligible partners.

When the missionary Akarongo left Palmerston in the 1870's old William picked three of his sons to each take the services. To this day, the services are conducted by one of the males of the family. A minister of the London Missionary Society visited Palmerston about 1958 and explained that the Society could not afford a full-time pastor on Palmerston. Again the most suitable member of the family took over the services. The minister noted, "The man who was once the acting pastor was soon in trouble for stealing, so his Sunday sermon was based on the theme, 'Stealing is sometimes wrong and sometimes right'. We quickly had to find someone else."¹²

The church has been a unifying force in Palmerston, especially in the times after hurricanes; once when the building was one of two that survived. The original church still stands today. It is a marvellous structure made of ship's timbers and very tastefully furnished. Dawn services are held every Wednesday and Friday morning. On Sundays there is one service at 10:00 a.m. and another at 2:00 p.m. At 6:00 p.m. every evening the church bells ring for home services, an event which also acts as curfew for everyone to return to their homes.

While William Marsters was alive, he would not allow his children to speak any language other than English. The resulting language was a "brand of English, spattered with archaisms"¹³ with a "distinctive old English Gloucestershire accent".¹⁴ In 1975 the accent was certainly

detectable although probably not as distinctive as in earlier years. (I recall hearing this language which sounded like pidgin English when I was a child growing up with some Palmerston Islanders; it was barely intelligible to me). Recordings made in 1975 of the older people were reviewed by a Linguistics professor at the University of Hawaii who is interested in "creole" languages. He felt that while the language is not really a creole, it is interesting in that the tempo is very slow for people who speak English as their first language. Some archaic terms still used are:

"Bin clum a tree" — climbed a tree
"Take a dodge" — take a nap
"Tromp it" — press it

Also, some naming procedures are unique. For instance, each person (at least of the last generation) had a common name in addition to their Christian names, such as Spoon, Time, Carry, Bed, and Turn.

Although most of the older people speak at least Rarotongan, and some also speak Manihikian, none of the young people speak any of these languages. They would sing Rarotongan songs with great skill and then ask the visitor from Rarotonga to translate for them. In 1953 the school teacher expressed this difficulty: "Children here find it very hard to read native books but I'll try my best to teach them. But I know they will surely pick up in native." In fact, this ambition proved unsuccessful and the effort was abandoned.

The general state of health on Palmerston in 1975 appeared to be excellent. There are no medically trained doctors on the atoll, but the medical assistant (a Marsters, known commonly as "Doctor") was in charge of health. He worked out of a small, well-kept dispensary in the middle of the settlement and dispensed medicines freely to those who needed them. His supply was limited but seemed to be sufficient. Presumably he had had some earlier training in Rarotonga. Dental care, however, is not as good. Although the diet is excellent and most people's teeth appeared to be in acceptable condition, the last time a dental technician visited was in 1972.

In 1975, a typical day in one Marsters household began at 6:30 a.m. with family prayers led by the father, Papa John. The eldest remaining daughter, Sare, would then begin preparing for breakfast while the three older boys prepared the boats, nets and gear for the day's fishing. Papa John would walk across the main "street" to the radio station where he would open communications with Rarotonga. By 8:00 a.m. Sare would have a huge breakfast prepared, usually doughnuts, bread or rice, and at least two different kinds of fish steamed in sea water. Coffee and tea

were served for the beverage and after prayers, the meal began. It was a very social occasion. Usually there were a minimum of 15 people for each meal and Papa John, a true patriarch, sat at the head of the long table and led the conversation. This included stories about William Marsters, innuendos about sex, and directions to the boys regarding the day's fishing activities. After he had delegated each person's duties the meal ended. All through the meal, Sare would be serving extra tea and coffee, clearing off dishes, etc., only sitting down towards the end of the meal to eat herself. She did all the cooking, and Mama Aka proudly stated that *she* had previously done those chores and now it was "Sare's time".

Most of the food was prepared solely by Sare with occasional assistance from Mama Aka, and the girls from the teacher's household because they often would eat in Papa John's household. Sare cooked mostly with the *umu*, or earth oven which was built in the cookhouse about 50 yards from the main house. This was a small structure with iron roof and sides. The *umu* was a hole about four feet wide and two feet deep. The sides were lined with corrugated iron, with imported black volcanic stones placed in the middle. These lined sides gave it a more permanent feature, as the sand then wouldn't fall into the rock area. Sare built a fire for the *umu* three times a day, baking fish, bosun birds, or bread in it. The bread baking process was especially interesting. After the stones were hot, and after she had prepared the dough, she placed small containers (old corned beef cans) filled with water directly on the rocks, then placed the bread pan on top of these. This prevented the bread from becoming burned on the bottom and added a little moisture. The pans were then covered with a piece of iron and the usual leaves and burlap sacking placed over the top. The bread, when cooked, was delicious and very close to regular bread. The other method of cooking was with a two-burner kerosene stove; all boiling and frying was done on this. This method is dependent on the supply of kerosene and wouldn't be used during long periods without a boat call.

After breakfast which always included fish, Papa John discussed the fishing plans for the day with Aka and their sons. The young men were instructed where to set their nets. It was decided then what [fish] should be taken for use at lunch and dinner. Papa John sometimes would arrange to be left on a rock with his spear where he would stand for a couple of hours, plucking the fish previously chosen for the meal as they swam within reach.

When the government fishing vessel is waiting offshore to be filled with fish for sale in Rarotonga, harvesting the lagoon takes approximately 80 percent of the boys' daylight hours. Working the lagoon is a very

tiring and demanding task, but the boys started at 8:30 a.m., usually spearing, take a break for lunch around 1:00 p.m., then resumed their work. Often in the afternoon the whole family would cooperate in a fish drive. By the time the fish had been brought in and put into the freezer, it was usually dusk.

Atoll lagoons are praised in the literature of the Pacific from early adventure tales to contemporary travel brochures, but no account adequately expresses the tranquil purity of those acres of water or the cornucopic variety of the life within them, especially as seen by an inhabitant who relies on that blue pasture for a portion of each meal. Besides the beauty, the abundance, and the relative stability of the lagoon there is one more characteristic of this environment to be mentioned. It is the physical diversity of the motus themselves. Strung out towards the horizon in a loop like giant pearls on a necklace, they offer the human resident (and perhaps the bosun bird) an inviting prospect, an opportunity to leave the place where you spend most of your time. The visitor may be invited to join a family who is heading off for one of the motus. Even on a cold, wet day one accepts with pleasure. Somewhere to go! The whole gathering goes by boat to Bird Islet where they will collect ("pick") bosun birds.

Palmerston is a perfect natural habitat for birds and the abundance of bird life was noted by Captain Cook when he visited. However, at least three species have ceased breeding on Palmerston since Cook's visit, due mainly to hurricane damage of the plant and bush cover. The bosun bird (*Phaeton rubricauda*) and the common noddy are collected for food. Burland¹⁵ noted 25 species of birds during his stay. The appearance of some birds is heralded as the occurrence of an unpleasant event, usually a hurricane or bad winds, but sometimes indicates that there is a school of fish where a bird dives out at sea.

On other occasions the boats would go to North Islet where the women would dig for clams while the boys took a net out to the reef to catch mullet. These excursions were sometimes made through rough waters in the driving rain. One marvelled at the boys' stamina and ability to ignore the cold. They could be wet for practically the whole day in fairly cool temperatures but would say they weren't cold.

On Palmerston the evening meal, usually around 6:30 p.m., was relaxed and jovial. It would consist of rice, bread, doughnuts or pancakes, or pumpkin pudding, and several kinds of fish, either steamed in sea water, or in coconut sauce. Again, coffee and tea were offered, and again, Sare would serve everyone. Papa John would lead the conversation enquiring about life in Rarotonga, or would ask other visitors about life in America. In a more serious mood, he was especially concerned about something he

had heard which was called "marijuana". "Did it really make a person go crazy?" A previous visitor from Rarotonga had told him about it and he was concerned that people in America took it, then just laid around on the grass under the trees, usually with no clothes on! He had lived in Rarotonga for a few years while he was being trained as a wireless operator and had a very enquiring mind, but he knew that life on Palmerston was better than any other place.

After the meal was over, the boys usually brought out the guitar and ukuleles and two or three hours could be spent playing music and dancing. Some of these festive occasions lasted until after midnight. Sometimes, other young people from the other lineages would filter in, especially other boys who wanted to see some new dancing. The two American girls who were visiting in 1975 made a great hit with their version of the latest styles of discotheque dancing.

There is a concept of cultural ecology which postulates that economic, social and environmental conditions will shape the life-style of a community. Many Polynesian groups had discovered atolls and stayed to live; eventually these societies gained a balance with their area and its resources. The typical day of a Marsters family is surely representative of both the academic principle and the historic fact of humans learning to occupy these slices of earth surrounded by ocean.

Sensing that the balance between human and habitat is precarious and very much dependent on the day to day behavior and attitudes of the occupants, we seek to see how narrow that balance is. Convinced of the abundance of marine life in the water of the lagoon, we then look to the soil of the land to measure this margin. The soil zones correspond with vegetation zones, forcing the most salt tolerant plants to grow near the seashore, leaving the central part of the motu for gardens. In his book *Atoll Environment and Ecology*, H. J. Wiens states: "Atolls are at the very margin of non-fertility. None of the nutritive elements is abundant and fertility is unbalanced. With abundant rainfall the vegetative growth is greater, the resultant plant residues are greater, and there is an exaggerated appearance of fertility and vegetative well-being."¹⁶

On Palmerston there are considerable stands of tamanu trees (*Calophyllum inophyllum*), both large older trees and young seedlings. As a contribution to the community the visitors in 1975 transplanted 100 of these seedlings to the western shore of the islet to add to the wind-break. This tree has hard, workable wood and is valued for house building. It is also a superb shade-tree, being tall and well foliated. Its fallen leaves are sometimes carefully collected to provide mulch to assist in the growing of starch crops. In the middle of Home Islet, as in many other atolls in the Pacific, the soil has been excavated to the water lens

level and then built up into a circular mound called the "mountain" which is about 20 feet high. In the center there is a pit where leaves and other degradable debris are accumulated to form fertile soil. It is here where puraka (*Cyrtosperma chamissonis*), a large cultivated tuber similar to taro is farmed. Sweet potatoes and bananas are also grown in this pit.

Around and on the "mountain" are stands of bamboo, which were used for fishing rods and sailboat booms.¹⁷ Pandanus (*Pandanus odoratissimus*) fruit is used for food and the leaves for mat-making, although it is not as plentiful on Palmerston as on other atolls. Pumpkins are grown for making different kinds of breads and puddings. Arrowroot (*Tacca pinnatifida*) was grown for many years and after the 1926 hurricane, it was planted in larger quantities. The crop takes three to five years to mature but it can be harvested in small quantities, the remainder left in the ground until required. "Some land where arrowroot was planted has been left for many years unplanted and the planters have gone away. There is some difference of opinion about whether such land belongs to the lineage or to the absentee."¹⁸ Today the arrowroot is not as plentiful; neither is it served for any meals. Perhaps with the recent imports of staple foods, it has lost importance as a starch source. If this is so it would be interesting to measure the quantity of imported starches and compare these with amounts previously grown. The availability of this single foodstuff might well be a determining factor for the population size of an atoll community. Realization that there are only a few such survival factors adds emphasis to the sense that this is a harsh environment and that the community exists on a bare margin. That they do so with so much good health and pleasure is surely a tribute to human spirit.

IV. LEADERSHIP, OWNERSHIP AND DISASTER

When William Marsters died in 1899, the question of succession of leadership became a heated issue. He was succeeded by his eldest son Joel who then moved to Aitutaki after a period of conflict. The Resident Commissioner of the Cook Islands had declared that the head of the first family should be the head of the atoll, so leadership passed on to Joel's brother William II. William continued to manage atoll affairs through the difficult periods of hurricanes, isolation and low incomes until his death (about 1946) when he was succeeded by his son, Ned Marsters, who is still the official head of the atoll. When Palmerston became part of the Cook Islands in 1954 this title was changed to "Clerk-in-Charge" and an annual stipend was paid for the responsibilities. Although Palmerston was now incorporated into the Cook Island group, it continued to operate as previously, adhering to laws that were

written by the original William Marsters and modified by later leaders. This set of laws are written in the Rarotongan language in a book held by Mr. Ned Marsters, and pertain to exploitation of resources, codes of behavior, punishments and constraints.¹⁹

Although Palmerston is officially part of the Cook Islands and represented in the Legislative Assembly, the people still adhere to their own laws, and in this respect can be said to be partly autonomous. They identify at a national level with the Cook Islands in many respects, but there is still a very strong feeling of a direct link with the United Kingdom, and especially with the Royal Family. They pride themselves in knowing a lot about the changes in the Royal Family and were even visited by Prince Phillip, the Duke of Edinburgh, husband of Queen Elizabeth II in 1971. This occasion is warmly remembered by the people, especially because he invited the whole island population aboard the Royal Yacht *Britannia* for tea. The school has a portrait of H.R.H. Queen Elizabeth II and a whole scrap book of recent Royal happenings.

Although representation of Palmerston is minimal at the national level, the atoll gets its fair share of government expenditures due in part to the efficient lobbying done by the Palmerston people resident in Rarotonga. The government paid jobs are much coveted and seem to be fairly evenly distributed among the three lineages. The question of who should succeed the Clerk-in-Charge is still hotly debated. Ned Marsters is now about 73 years old and unable to carry out the full duties, so his son Tuakana has assumed most duties, asserting his power over the other families. This situation has led to a lot of feuding and suspicion which affects daily life and is felt by everyone. For instance, the land division of Home Islet is so strict that the older members of one lineage will not cross the imaginary line separating them from the next family for fear of trespassing. The restrictions on younger people and outsiders is less rigid, although if one is living in one family, one tends to remain within their boundaries. This fragmentation of society is heightened by the declining numbers of the population, the lack of eligible spouses and the more intense exploitation of the resources for export. Even an outside visitor is subject to these feuds and one must be careful not to move too freely around the islet. Paradoxically, there is a feeling of oneness and cooperation that pervades the island and is demonstrated by their ability to survive disaster in the past and by their rule about the life of the people: "if one gets a coconut, every person must get one."

Palmerston's history of hurricanes and their effects is a record of devastation. The first recorded hurricane was in December 1883.²⁰ In 1914 a hurricane and tidal wave that had caused much damage through-

out the Central Pacific struck Palmerston with great impact. In 1923, many houses were destroyed and crops diminished. On March 31, 1926, a disastrous hurricane hit Palmerston again, with waves sweeping through the settlement. Everyone took refuge on the "mountain". One woman was killed that night. The next morning the people found the coconut trees gone. The entire settlement with the exception of the original William Marsters' house and the church had been swept away. The church had been carried 200 yards inland and had to be moved back to its former position by using coconut log rollers.²¹ In 1931, the island was again damaged heavily, and in 1935 another hurricane swept away the young coconut trees that had been replanted after the 1926 storm. Houses were again washed away. In 1942, Palmerston was struck again by a hurricane and the latest disaster was in December 1967 when seas "swept the boat sheds away, but did not do great damage to the village".²²

It is during times of environmental catastrophe that the lagoon assumes its greatest importance. Ronald Powell writes "There have been disastrous hurricanes which have reduced the population (of an atoll) down to a few people. . . . One can well imagine that these survivors must have lived entirely on fish for over a year before anything green grew again."²³ The Palmerston Islanders expect a hurricane at intervals of about ten years, but fortunately the lagoon environment is affected only slightly as indicated by this description of the effects of such a storm on Jaluit atoll in 1958.

On the bottom of the lagoon below low-tide there was no evidence of disturbed conditions. Even delicate corals were not broken. In contrast, it seems likely that the outer reef front suffered pronounced changes, at least in some sections, because more than 75 percent of the coral rubble forming the new ocean-side bar off Jaluit Islet is comprised of materials newly wrested from the outer reef.

The storm seems to have had no great effect upon the fish life in the lagoon. The inhabitants report better fishing since the storm than there was before; but it is possible that they gain this impression through having to fish more intensively than before, since vegetable food is in short supply.²⁴

If you have ever experienced even a mild hurricane on a high island, you can appreciate the accounts of people who have endured such a storm on an atoll:

I thought I was in a strange land, a land I never saw before. There are no nice houses as it used to be. People live in small thatch houses. There are very few coconut trees left, most of them were rooted and destroyed by that horrible storm.²⁵

Powell, an Englishman living on Rarotonga is married to Elizabeth Marsters who is a granddaughter of the patriarch William Marsters. Talking of the future of new developments such as aquaculture as a possible hope for the improvement of atoll living, he described the savage fury of the hurricane at Suwarrow in 1942 where he had tied himself to

a coconut tree, watched the sea sweep beneath, washing away all but a few trees. Afterwards, there was almost nothing; no possessions, no coconuts, no garden crops and briefly even no fish life. He said that on an island like Palmerston it takes months to build their life again. He spoke of the building process with great respect for the courage and persistence needed and then pointed out that the improvements provided by any new technology would have been swept away. How much easier it was for people to recover when they had so little to begin with. If they had more, perhaps a lot more, the hurricane would take away too much. The courage to start again might be tested too far. It became clear, listening to him that Palmerston was not only an example of an isolated community adapted to its environment, but also a community that is regularly swept clean of the artifacts of its civilization.

V. THE FUTURE

In the past Palmerston Islanders were able to live in isolation on the natural resources available to them; however, now they have chosen to become dependent on goods acquired with cash from Rarotonga. In addition, they have become more dependent on the government to provide them with facilities, salaries, services and emergency aid. What lies ahead for the Palmerston people? The rate of emigration is such that it is not difficult to imagine abandonment of the atoll by its inhabitants, especially if they are badly struck by natural disaster again. The unavailability of marriage partners, the social strain of constant feuding between lineages, and the limited opportunity for education and entertainment will probably make emigration to the "urban" center of Rarotonga attractive, traveling routinely by boat to the atoll that was once their home. There are real constraints that may prevent this from happening. The Palmerston people own their atoll. It is theirs as long as they are willing to exploit it wisely but if they move to Rarotonga they will be landless, living with friends and relatives but unable to ever own land for a home or garden. Rarotonga land is acquired by descent. It is because of this that many of the older people of Palmerston who have either visited or lived on Rarotonga for a period of time have ended up returning to Home Islet.

What is the future for them? At this point one can only predict a precarious balance. Here is a community which has historically accommodated itself to limited natural resources and which has exhibited the sort of resourcefulness and endurance that has carried our kind through from the beginning. For a brief and recent period they have even enjoyed the luxury of radios, outboard motors and plentiful canned goods. One

has a sense that the grip that the descendants of William Marsters have on their atoll amounts to a poetic recapitulation of our human grip on this planet. We live with the certainty of declining resources. We gain temporary but costly relief with our technological advances. And, since the dawn of the nuclear age, we have all of us lived with the probability of near total disaster. But we live on. With hope, with vigor, and with faith. What is their future and what is ours? It might sound strange but it has to be said: they may be the survivors.

NOTES

- ¹ M. B. Syngé, *Captain Cook's Voyage Round the World: Cook's Second Voyage* (Honolulu, 1903), p. 56.
- ² E. Edwards, *Voyage of H.M.S. Pandora, dispatched to arrest Mutineers 1790-1791* (London, 1915), p. 132.
- ³ H. E. Maude and M. Crocombe, "The Rarotonga Sandalwood Trade", *JPS*, Vol. 71, pp. 32-56.
- ⁴ A. S. Helm and W. H. Percival, *Sisters in the Sun* (London, 1973), p. 73.
- ⁵ W. W. Gill, *Jottings from the Pacific* (London, 1855), p. 87.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ A. S. Helm and W. H. Percival, *op.cit.*
- ⁸ R. G. Crocombe, "Land tenure in a test tube: the case of Palmerston Atoll." *Land Tenure in Oceania* edited by H. P. Luundsgarde (Honolulu, 1974), p. 226.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 224.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 225.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 239.
- ¹² B. Thorogood, *Not quite Paradise* (London, 1960), pp. 66-71.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- ¹⁴ A. S. Helm and W. H. Percival, *op.cit.*, p. 129.
- ¹⁵ J. C. Burland, "Some notes on bird life of Palmerston." *Notornis* (Dunedin, N.Z., 1964), Vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 143-154.
- ¹⁶ H. J. Wiens, *Atoll Environment and Ecology* (New Haven, 1962), p. 180.
- ¹⁷ R. G. Crocombe, *op.cit.*, p. 230.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 228.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 259.
- ²⁰ S. S. Visher, *Tropical Cyclones of the Pacific*. BMB No. 20 (Honolulu, 1925).
- ²¹ A. S. Helm and W. H. Percival, *op.cit.*, p. 151.
- ²² A. S. Helm and W. H. Percival, *op.cit.*, p. 163.
- ²³ R. Powell, "Hurricanes Wake." *SPC Quarterly Bulletin* (New Caledonia, 1956), Vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 21-29.
- ²⁴ H. J. Wiens, *op.cit.*, pp. 185-186.
- ²⁵ Elizabeth Marsters, letter to the Department of Education, October 26, 1928. (Cook Island Archives).