

Up Close and Personal: James Edge-Partington in Australia in 1897

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ABSTRACT. British ethnologist, collector and author, James Edge-Partington visited Australia twice in the late 19th century. His first Australian sojourn was marked by sight-seeing and social events, with his travels interrupted by side trips to Fiji and Tonga, where he developed a passion for artefact collecting. In contrast, his second journey was focused on gathering information and sketching Pacific Islander and Australian Aboriginal artefacts held in museums and private collections. These drawings were later published between 1890 and 1898 in three volumes that became a major reference source for museum curators and researchers. This paper outlines Edge-Partington's 1879–1881 visit before focusing on his 1897 trip which included visits to five public museums and one university museum and produced more than 600 sketches of cultural material. This trip also produced many drawings of objects held in private collections. The paper documents Edge-Partington's visit to the Queensland Museum where he spent most of his time examining and sketching objects from the field collection of Sir William MacGregor, the colonial administrator of British New Guinea. Edge-Partington's motives for focusing on this particular collection rather than others held by the Museum are discussed and the possibility that Edge-Partington later acquired artefacts from the MacGregor assemblage for his personal collection is also considered. The paper shows how his sketches can be used to improve the documentation for existing museum collections, such as the MacGregor collection that is now dispersed through several museums.

Introduction

The British ethnologist James Edge-Partington (1854–1930) (Fig. 1) made two visits to Australia and the Pacific region in the last quarter of the 19th century. His first visit in 1879–1881 sparked an interest in collecting ethnographic artefacts that continued for the rest of his life. Although he published more than 40 papers on aspects of Pacific material culture between 1896 and 1922, Edge-Partington is better known for his contribution to the work titled '*An Album of the Weapons, Tools, Ornaments, Articles of Dress of the Natives of the Pacific Islands*' (also known as the *Ethnographical Album of the Pacific Islands*, hereafter *Ethnographical Album*) which he published privately with his friend Charles Heape between 1890 and 1898 (Edge-Partington and Heape, 1890, 1895, 1898a). Comprising sketches of Pacific artefacts

from private collections and museums, this work was an essential reference source for many 20th century museum curators trying to establish the provenance of undocumented artefacts. Two facsimile editions published in 1969 and 1996 attest to the *Ethnographical Album*'s enduring legacy (Edge-Partington, 1969; Edge-Partington and Heape, 1996).¹

Aspects of Edge-Partington's life, work, travels and collecting activities are documented through several published sources (Dalton, 1931; Edge-Partington, 1883; Neich, 2009; Neich and Kaufmann, 2011). Close scrutiny of these sources, and, in particular, Neich's (2009) seminal paper reveal that while Edge-Partington's travels in Australia, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa and New Zealand between 1879–1881 are well-documented through his published account (Edge-Partington, 1883), details pertaining to his trip to Australia and the Pacific in 1897 are rather more elusive. The main

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