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### HELEN SMAILL'S PHOTOGRAPH ALBUM: Traces of care in the mission archive

Antje Lübcke

**F**or my thirtieth birthday my mother gave me a photograph album she had compiled using an online template that was then printed and sent to her home. She had spent hours looking through old photographic prints that she keeps in a cupboard in her study and in large sealed plastic tubs under her bed as well as digital images she stores on an external hard drive. The photographs were scanned and copied and then lovingly ordered, juxtaposed and captioned to tell the story of me, my place in my family and my adventures out in the world. I was living in Australia at the time, working on my PhD dissertation, and the arrival of this book of personal and shared memories moved me to tears.

While the album I discuss in this chapter differs in significant ways to the album my mother made for me in 2011, like my album it was produced by a mother from photographs that were taken, collected, gifted and then lovingly kept safe over the years. In both albums we see the work of women as transmitters of family memory, taking care to preserve images that connect past and present.

Helen Smaill, a Presbyterian missionary wife and fellow worker in the mission field, lived and worked on Epi in the New Hebrides (present-day Vanuatu) between 1890 and 1906. A servant of God – unlike the role performed by Melissa Matutina Williams's grandmother or the ayah figure described by Jane McCabe – she found her *raison d'être* on the mission field. At the time, women who embarked on mission work found a usefulness for their talents that may have been unavailable at home. Missions have since

come under severe historical scrutiny for the disruption they caused to indigenous communities, but in 1890 service on the mission field was held in high esteem. That service by missionary wives, which was often central work to the enterprise, reflects the injustice of the invisibility of women's work. Susan Moller Okin suggests this injustice resides in traditional family structures. Missions were structured on the idea that women performed caring work in the family and the community and did not require payment; the work was its own reward.

Unlike the other New Hebrides mission albums I encountered while undertaking research in 2008, in which the photographs were typically ordered and captioned to tell a succinct story of mission success, Helen Smaill's album caught my attention because of the haphazard composition of its contents and because of the many photographs that included her daughter Nellie, who was born in November 1899. At first it seemed a random assemblage of pictures compiled merely to prevent the loose prints from going missing or being damaged; but the very act of keeping and then selecting and cropping the photographs to fit into the pages' pre-cut windows showed how important they were to Helen and the story she wanted to tell.

The conversations sparked by individual images in the pages of Helen's album and others like it in the mission archive have now become 'suspended', to use Martha Langford's description; all that is left for the historian is to 'look closely at [these] object[s] and ... imagine [them] in use'.<sup>1</sup> My analysis of the album constitutes an act of archival recovery and speculation on meaning. What I demonstrate is that the ways in which we engage with photographic archives influence the stories we read out of them. In the case of the mission archive, the work and the lives of missionary wives have too often been overshadowed when the textual archive is given precedence over the visual sources to be found there.

Helen travelled to Epi from New Zealand in 1890 with her husband, Presbyterian missionary Thomas Smaill, to assist in the work of converting the New Hebridean 'heathen'. She worked alongside Thomas until 1902 and, during that time, gave birth to four children – only one of whom survived. Helen returned to New Zealand with her daughter for a brief period after Thomas died. However, she found it a struggle to be away from the islands and the work they had left behind, so she and Nellie went back

to Epi to work alongside Thomas's replacement before they finally returned to New Zealand in 1906.

I do not know exactly when Helen compiled her album, for whom, or exactly how she engaged with it. But when her correspondence is read alongside the album and critical attention is turned to its contents, it tells us of the way Helen valued the work she undertook in the New Hebrides. A close examination of the album further exposes the blurring of the boundaries between a 'public' form of care that was integral to the mission work she undertook and the family or 'private' care embodied in her relationship with her daughter, as represented in the numerous photographs of Nellie inserted in the album's pages.

## Introducing Helen Smaill and her photograph album

While white male missionaries, particularly missionary pioneers, were often memorialised in celebratory biographies written by their colleagues, missionary wives received limited attention in the published literature of the church.<sup>2</sup> They are also conspicuously absent from the mission archive because, unlike their 'missionary husbands', missionary wives were not expected to correspond with the Foreign Missions Committee (FMC) in New Zealand or to submit annual reports for the work they undertook. Brooke Whitelaw, in her study of single women missionaries stationed in the New Zealand Presbyterian Church's mission field in India between 1910 and 1940, notes the difficulty of tracing the life and work of missionary wives as 'their participation was unofficial and often went unrecorded'. Their single female colleagues, on the other hand, reported to the FMC as 'part of their missionary duty' and 'occupied a rare and privileged position in the church as paid workers'. From 1906, the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union (PWMU) began publishing a bimonthly periodical, *Harvest Field*, that frequently contained letters written by missionary wives.<sup>3</sup> Helen Smaill, however, was no longer active in the mission field in the New Hebrides by 1906. For her, compiling, displaying and safeguarding her photograph album was therefore the means through which she was able to leave a record of the story of her life and work in the islands alongside her husband, and then with Nellie at her side after Thomas died.

The album is held in the archives of the Presbyterian Research Centre (PRC) in Dunedin, which is where I first encountered it (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> When I was shown the album by the photographic curator Donald Cochrane there was no information about the compiler.<sup>5</sup> It had been assigned an accession number, A-S18-85, and ‘Smaill, T. Rev.’ is the sole entry in the ‘Provenance’ column for the photographs in the online databases, accessible through the PRC’s website.<sup>6</sup> The album has 30 thick card pages with four pre-cut windows on each page: it contains a total of 121 small-format and cropped photographic prints. The photographs date from the 1890s to at least 1911, and the album itself most likely dates to sometime in the first two decades of the 1900s, judging by the distinctive art nouveau design on the cover. However, dating the album, while it is useful in establishing the date of compilation, does not provide clear evidence of this, as the album might have been purchased by or presented to Helen several years before the images were placed into its pages.<sup>7</sup> As for the subjects in the individual photographs, the photographic database at the PRC lists the contents of the album as: ‘Images of New Hebrides, people and places’. This lack of contextualising information is unsurprising, as it is common practice in archives to describe and catalogue individual photographs rather than the entire album. Thomas took several of the photographs contained in the album’s pages, which accounts for the provenance recorded in the PRC database.

Thomas and Helen had been married only five months when they landed at Nikaura on Epi on 3 July 1890. They quickly set to work establishing their mission station with the help of New Hebridean teachers from the Tongoa and Nguna districts, where the New Zealand missionaries Oscar Michelsen and Peter Milne, respectively, were stationed. The district that was to be Thomas’s, which included the neighbouring islands of Paama and Lopevi, was notorious for cannibalism and for deadly wars between the various villages. As in most parts of the New Hebrides, malaria and other sicknesses were a constant burden. The people of Epi, for the most part, welcomed the new white residents and the message they preached, as there was an expectation that the missionaries would bring about peace. By 1897 Thomas had built another outstation on Lamenu Island and the Smaills were able to report a ‘flood tide’ in worshippers and Bible scholars. By 1900 only three ‘heathen’ villages were left in their district.<sup>8</sup> This was in no small part aided

by the work Helen undertook alongside her domestic duties, establishing and running an English school for children and teaching Bible classes.

Helen and Thomas suffered their share of setbacks, including the death of three of their children and repeated bouts of malarial fever over the years. During one such period of sickness in April 1902, when both he and Helen were run down by fever, Thomas was called to provide medical assistance to a woman in another village who had sustained injuries during a hurricane that swept through the district. Already weak from the fever, Thomas spent a night on the floor of a village hut in his damp clothes as he could not make it back to Nikaura before dark. When he finally made it home the following day his condition had worsened, and he passed away several days later, on 12 April 1902.<sup>9</sup> Helen wrote to his siblings to tell them of his death: 'My darling laddie has gone home after a week's illness.'<sup>10</sup> Maurice Frater, the missionary on Paama at the time, wrote a letter to accompany a 'biographical sketch' of Thomas Smaill published in the missionary periodical *The Outlook*, in which he noted that Helen had suffered a 'heavy, heavy blow' and that she was 'very loath to leave Nikaura'.<sup>11</sup>

The Smaills in many ways epitomised the model missionary couple. Thomas undertook the public work of itinerating and preaching, opening up new areas in which to spread the Gospel, building outstations and reporting back to the FMC, while Helen tended to the home and spent the time she had left teaching English and Bible classes and giving sewing lessons to the local women. Several scholars have drawn attention to this particular aspect of the division of labour in European missions, in which women's and, in particular, missionary wives' duties were bound to the mission home and family while the men did the primary work of 'missionising'.<sup>12</sup> In the British evangelical worldview, as Cathy Ross observes, 'the role of the missionary wife was clear – to serve in the home, to help her husband and then if there was any time left over, to be involved in other areas'.<sup>13</sup> These 'other areas' were predominantly in the sphere of education: running schools for the indigenous women and children and equipping the women with the domestic skills required of a 'civilised' Christian wife. Such work 'was perceived to fall within the nurturing and caring aspects of women's nature and was considered as suitable missionary involvement according to the evangelical worldview'.<sup>14</sup> The centrality of the domestic realm in Helen's New Hebridean life is signalled on the first page of the album, which contains two



Figure 1. Helen Smaill's album, 27 x 22.5 x 3.5cm. A-S18-85, 3/100 Smaill T. (Rev.) and H. (Mrs), New Hebrides Photo Album, PA 42001/56, Presbyterian Research Centre Archives, Dunedin

photographs of unidentified infants in baskets (one European and one New Hebridean in each), a group portrait of mission girls whom Helen taught European domestic skills and who assisted her in the home, and a still life of a tropical plant arranged in a vase on the porch of a mission house (Figure 2).<sup>15</sup>

In letters to his mother and his siblings in New Zealand, Thomas painted a picture of a partnership in marriage and in work. He acknowledged the toll the work took on Helen in mid 1897, when she continued her daily English classes despite feeling unwell and exhausted. 'Now she has begun her daily



Figure 2. Page 1.

A-S18-85, Presbyterian Research Centre Archives

English school from 9 till 1 o'clock, but today the [children] spun it out to 1.30 and that together with her housework, and her not over strong makes too big a day.<sup>16</sup> On 7 January 1902 Thomas wrote that he and Helen 'have been much too busy to have time to get sick', and in November 1900, when Nellie was just one year old, he informed his siblings that Helen had not been well but that 'she would still put to shame most of her sisters in law'.<sup>17</sup> Presumably this was in reference to the travel and work Helen undertook in addition to her domestic and motherly duties. Indeed, as Ross has argued,

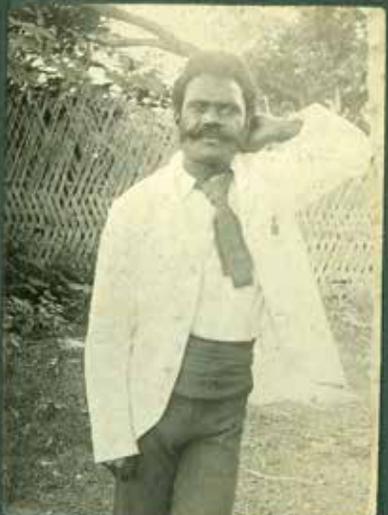


Figure 3. Pages 18 & 19. A-S18-85, Presbyterian Research Centre Archives





Figure 4. Page 15. A-S18-85, Presbyterian Research Centre Archives



Figure 5. Page 5. A-S18-85, Presbyterian Research Centre Archives



Figure 6. Page 3. A-S18-85, Presbyterian Research Centre Archives



Figure 7. Page 6. A-S18-85, Presbyterian Research Centre Archives

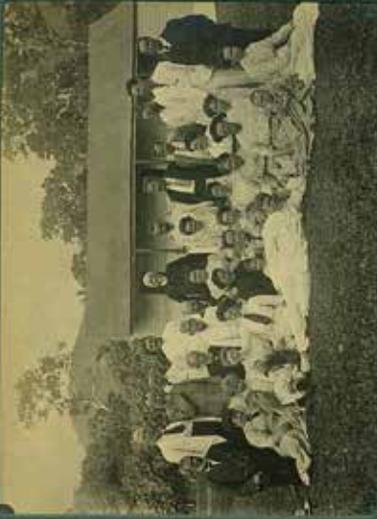


Figure 8. Pages 26 & 27. A-S18-85, Presbyterian Research Centre Archives



given the multitude of tasks that fell on missionary wives – as mother, nurse, cook, seamstress, laundress, hostess and teacher – ‘their workload was even heavier than that of their husbands’.<sup>18</sup>

The burden of the emotional, mental and physical investment of missionary wives’ work in such places as the New Hebrides begins to crystallise out of such traces in the mission archive. But the rewards were great: by 1900 Helen’s school had become a ‘useful agency in preparing teachers’ and ‘[had grown] in status into a training school’ for candidates for the official Teachers’ Training Institute on Tangoa, which Thomas had helped to establish in 1894.<sup>19</sup> Helen’s pride in this achievement and the vital part her school played in the growth of the indigenous church in the islands is displayed in the portraits of New Hebridean students and teachers in her album. The teacher standing in a relaxed posed in the portrait in Figure 3 is Supabo. Thomas Smaill mentions Supabo in his correspondence with the London Missionary Society, and he appears in at least one other portrait in another of the Smaills’ photograph albums held at the PRC.<sup>20</sup> Supabo was converted at the age of 13 and attended Helen’s school before transferring to the Teachers’ Training Institute in 1898.<sup>21</sup> He became Nikaura’s most prominent leader and stories about him were told in the village for many years after his death.<sup>22</sup>

## Compiling the album: Enshrining acts of care

Mission albums have been and still are a crucial site for the construction of narratives of the church’s work in New Zealand and abroad. While at first glance Helen’s album may appear to be yet another collection of standard mission images of converts, colleagues and mission stations, if we look closely at its contents and the way the individual photographs are framed within its pages it becomes clear that the album tells a distinctive story of Helen’s experiences in the New Hebrides. Susan Stewart identifies the resonance of the handcrafted object as a result of ‘its connection to biography and its place in constituting the individual life’, and argues that ‘it becomes emblematic of the worth of that life and of the self’s capacity to generate worthiness’.<sup>23</sup> Like the letters of the single women missionaries in India which, Whitelaw argues, constitute the women’s ‘attempt to make sense of experience through the means of selection and arrangement’, for Helen the act of compiling her

album was, we might speculate, a way of enshrining the public and private acts of care that defined her life.<sup>24</sup>

The album belongs to an important subset of photograph albums in the Presbyterian Church's archives in that it allows the historian access to a missionary wife and mother's construction of life and work in the islands. Its way of telling is less ordered than the public presentation albums compiled by the FMC and the PWMU that are also held in the PRC, in which the photographs are arranged geographically and thematically and convey a story of mission progress.<sup>25</sup> It contains many of the same official images as the public albums, such as portraits of missionaries, New Hebridean converts and mission workers neatly posed before the camera, as well as views of mission stations. However, the photographs in Helen's album are in no apparent order and are often in different orientations and odd juxtapositions on the pages, so that no clear narrative can immediately be deduced from them (see Figures 3, 4 & 8). There are few captions, and those that do appear are in ballpoint pen and were almost certainly added later than at the original compilation of the album.<sup>26</sup>

What immediately stands out in Helen's album, aside from the disorganised appearance of its contents, is the scope of subjects contained in its pages. This may be explained by the fact that this album was compiled after Helen had left Epi in 1906. Over the years, the photographs that she and Thomas took would have been added to as Helen collected pictures and was sent them by friends still working in the islands. The resulting pool of images available to her when she began compiling would, therefore, have been made up of a broader range of subjects. Helen's connection with the islands remained strong throughout her long life (she passed away in Hastings in 1966 at the age of 99).<sup>27</sup> In 1932 she ends a letter to the FMC secretary with the comment: 'We are always deeply interested in anything from the New Hebrides.'<sup>28</sup> Graham Miller noted that when he first met Helen in 1944, 'she was grateful for news of Epi ... and retained to the end her prayerful interest in Epi'.<sup>29</sup> These traces of Helen's voice in the archive and in the remembrances of subsequent mission workers testify to the 'level of emotional investment [mission] work demanded' and imbue the album with further significance for the reconstruction of her experiences in the New Hebrides.<sup>30</sup>

Images of mission colleagues and friends appear regularly throughout the album, but one face in particular dominates the photographs: that of Nellie,

who appears in 39 photographs. Nellie was Thomas and Helen's fourth child, born on 18 November 1899. They had already lost three infants, so her birth and the first few months of her life must have been an anxious time for them. In most of the photographs she appears to be around three or four years old – or, at least, older than the 18 months she would have been when Thomas died in 1902. Several of the images also include Thomas Riddle, the missionary who replaced Thomas. This would suggest that Helen took many of the photographs in the album herself after she returned to Epi with Nellie in 1903 to assist Riddle as his housekeeper. Indeed, given the demands of her work as a teacher as well as the time she spent fulfilling her domestic duties, she might well have taken most of her photographs in the few months before she and Nellie returned to New Zealand in 1906. On 27 September 1905 Helen wrote to the FMC secretary: 'We do not go at once to New Zealand but are to spend some months here with our friends in the islands before going up. The fold here have been coming in great crowds to take farewell of us & bringing large presents of yam, they wish to do something to show their love.'<sup>31</sup>

In a family portrait on page 5 of the album, taken when Nellie was a newborn, a mixture of exhaustion, concern and cautious joy can be read on her parents' faces (Figure 5). Their first daughter did not survive the birth and two sons died during malaria epidemics in the Smaills' mission district.<sup>32</sup> The remaining photographs on this page of the album are all of Nellie at around four years old, very much alive and playing with mission friends. Although she is not always the primary focus of the photographs in the album, she is a persistent presence among the subjects. She was photographed alongside friends from other mission stations, such as Isobel Milne and Nettie Frater, as well as with groups of islanders and with the New Hebridean housegirls who assisted Helen in her domestic duties and helped care for Nellie (see, for example, Figures 3, 5, 6 & 7).

Nellie's frequent appearance in the album requires little explanation given that she was the beloved daughter and constant companion of Helen, particularly during the three years she spent on Epi after Thomas's death. She was a sickly child, and a health scare in late 1900 meant the Smaills had to take an unplanned trip back to New Zealand early the following year. Nellie was nursed 'back from the grave', but Helen's concern for her daughter remains a theme in letters she wrote once she was back in New Zealand after

1906.<sup>33</sup> In one instance, she reported to the foreign missions secretary that Nellie was 'laid up' as a result of 'over work at school'.<sup>34</sup> It might have been the case that Helen and Nellie sat down together to compile the album during such periods of fatigue or, at least, looked through old photographs of their island home and the many friends they left behind. It was with heavy heart that Helen left the islands, and she and Nellie no doubt remained homesick for Epi for many years.<sup>35</sup>

Images of missionary colleagues posed in groups, as well as individual portraits of Helen's co-workers and friends, make up 35.5 per cent of the album. When you add the many photographs of island helpers, villagers and converts, around 70 per cent of the images are of people. The photographs of missionary colleagues linked Helen to the community of carers she worked alongside for 15 years. Although it may be difficult to view the work of missionaries from this perspective today, in the evangelical worldview mission work was, at its core, centred on caring for 'heathen' souls and improving their lives through evangelism.<sup>36</sup> According to Whitelaw, 'a maternal concern for the world around them' often shaped the work of missionary women with indigenous populations, and they would write of their interactions with potential female converts in a manner that 'closely resembled a mother and daughter relationship'.<sup>37</sup> Infantilisation is well documented in the paternalistic rhetoric of nineteenth and early twentieth-century missions in which 'heathen races' were regarded as 'children' in need of guidance from their civilised Christian 'guardians'.<sup>38</sup>

Not long after Helen and Nellie returned to live in New Zealand permanently, increasing numbers of single women were sent to work as missionaries overseas. In 1902 the FMC resolved to look into extending women's work in the mission fields, and consulted with the home churches to provide more financial support to this end.<sup>39</sup> Until Thomas's death, Helen's role as a missionary wife was clear: she supported her husband's work by tending to the domestic duties of the home and participated in the mission work in her capacity as a teacher. She was not paid and she was not officially acknowledged as a missionary, although the FMC did give her £130 to 'assist' her on her husband's death.<sup>40</sup> When Helen insisted on returning to the work she knew and loved, the church found itself in an awkward position. While the FMC was committed to facilitating mission work for single women, Helen's status in December 1902, when she wrote

to the FMC convenor with her request, was not 'single' but 'widow'. It seems that she was acutely aware of this and, in her petition to William Hewitson, she stressed the assistance she could give as a caregiver to the 'natives' and to the missionary who had temporarily taken over the work on Epi until a permanent replacement was found:

I have a great desire to go back to the work until the new missionary is got. I have been praying much about it & feel there is nothing to hinder me going if the Committee will give their consent. It is hardly fair for Willie Milne [missionary from Nguna] to be their [sic] alone for he will have everything to do for himself as the natives are very little use unless there is some one to guide them. If he takes fever or anything else there will be no one to care for him the natives are just helpless at such times & then I know I could be a great help to him & the natives & would be far more useful there than here ... I would not be a burden to you. I could quite well take my little girl back with me. I would not be in the way of the new missionary when he arrived for I have no doubt he might not care to have me about but I could go over to Paama for a time & be near if I could help him in any way.<sup>41</sup>

That Helen believed she might be a 'burden' on the FMC is a sad indictment of the church for its lack of recognition of the work that missionary wives did alongside their husbands. By the 1910s the situation was improving, however, and in October 1912, Hewitson's wife Margaret published a letter in the PWMU's *Harvest Field* in which she noted the heavy workload under which the wives often struggled: 'I sometimes wonder if we enter as sympathetically and understandingly into the life and work of our missionaries' wives as we should ... [T]hese women are not only wives of missionaries but are missionaries themselves, and take their full share in the work.'<sup>42</sup>

The church finally granted Helen permission to return to Epi after she entered into a 'private agreement' with Riddle that she would go as his housekeeper. The mission report of 1903 further stated that Helen would 'also take some part in mission work.'<sup>43</sup> She resumed the work she had begun in the New Hebrides with Nellie at her side and in 1905 was put in charge of the Lamenu mission station when Riddle took a short furlough. When Helen finally made the decision to return to New Zealand at the end of 1905 the committee offered her an honorarium of £50.<sup>44</sup> In a letter to the FMC dated 27 September 1905, in which Helen thanks the FMC for their 'generous gift', she writes: 'I neither looked for nor wished for any recognition for the work

I have been doing. My one great desire was to be allowed to come back to the work & that was granted.<sup>45</sup> Her apparent gratitude was at odds, however, with her private view that she had been undervalued and underpaid. She felt her situation was unjust and she criticised the mission organisation for not providing her with a stipend, which meant Riddle had to pay her out of his own wages:

I may be worth the money to Mr Riddle but am I not doing the Church's work? I think they ought to have paid me from the first. Mr Hewitson's excuses seemed very poor at the time but I could not say anything. First of all he said if they paid & we did not get on it would mean they would have to stand by their missionary. Isn't that risk taken with all assistants? Then the other about complications with Mr M. I don't see it at all. The Church is paying Mrs Neil 30 a year. She is assisting Mr M. I think I can say without boasting that I do far more for them than she does ... Mr H said something about them not wishing to have me working for them without payment & that they would do something, give me a present of some thing. I don't like that. If I am worth being paid why not pay me? I would gladly do anything I do down here for my food & home but I know that would not be allowed. Well why not the Church pay me if I am to be paid? I think I do more for them than for Mr Riddle.<sup>46</sup>

To underline the statement that her contribution to the mission work outweighed her work as a housekeeper, Helen included a cutting from the previous year's annual report written by Riddle:

In closing this report I should like to testify to the great help I have received from Mrs Smaill. Her knowledge of the natives and her experience of the work and language have prevented much blundering. Throughout the year she has conducted the children's English school, and the sewing and Bible classes.<sup>47</sup>

Helen's photograph album provided a window of remembrance of these tasks when she was back home in New Zealand. The album contained the faces of the many people Helen cared and worked so hard for. It is easy to imagine her recounting the hardships and triumphs of the mission field and the particular part she played in evangelising.

That Helen's album gives a glimpse of her life and work in the New Hebrides, as opposed to an official narrative of mission progress such as in the FMC and PWMU albums, is further evidenced by the inclusion of photographs that on technical grounds or artistic merit might otherwise

have been omitted.<sup>48</sup> As Patricia Holland writes: ‘the photographs we keep for ourselves are treasured less for their quality than for their *context*, and for the part they play in confirming and challenging the identity and history of their users.’<sup>49</sup> The badly discoloured and faded portrait of a woman standing on a garden path on page 19 is a good example of Helen’s everything-included selection process (Figure 3): the desire to include the image of a friend (most likely Mrs Annand, the wife of Joseph Annand from Nova Scotia who was stationed on Santo) was of far greater importance to Helen than the quality of the image.

Aside from portraits of missionaries and New Hebrideans, the images that stand out in the album are those that depict leisure activities or recreation. Around 10 per cent of the photographs are of activities that are not immediately related to mission work, such as scenes of missionaries having picnics together. These outings were likely connected with the annual Synod meeting, an event that was eagerly anticipated by the missionaries who often had very little contact with the workers on other islands. In a letter printed in *The New Zealand Presbyterian* in 1891, Thomas Smaill wrote:

I cannot tell you what benefit the annual meeting of Synod is to us. If it were nothing more than to get a real good laugh, its worth would not be small, for owing to our isolation one seldom gets a real good laugh – at least we rarely hear a good story; our own stock gets run out.<sup>50</sup>

The strains of mission work and the importance of such events for the mental health of missionaries are evident in such statements. Scenes of missionaries reclining in cane chairs or sitting on the ground drinking from china cups also provide a counterpoint to the formal Synod portraits that are more common in the photographic output of the mission, and they give valuable insight into the social life of missionaries in the New Hebrides.

While Nellie’s constant presence and the many photographs of mission colleagues and New Hebridean converts in the album are easily explained in relation to Helen’s position as mother and mission worker, there are several images that, at first sight, do not appear to sit comfortably alongside them. Helen inserted a small number of photographs of ethnographic subjects in the album – for example, Figures 4, 7 & 8 – but with no captions to assist the contemporary viewer, her reasons for including these images are not immediately apparent. Given the prevalence of ethnographic, or quasi-ethnographic, representations in the photographic output of other mission

fields of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, what is striking about her album is the relative lack of such subjects. The private albums compiled by missionaries in Papua that Max Quanchi analyses in his book, *Photographing Papua*, were 'overwhelmingly focused on ethnographic documentation, to a lesser extent on mission life, and hardly at all on picnics, husbands and wives, social or domestic activities, visitors, gardens or views from the veranda.'<sup>51</sup> The picture of the New Hebrides presented to New Zealand audiences in the church's periodicals, postcards, publications and magic lantern slideshows also catered to ethnographic curiosity, but not to the same degree as that identified by Quanchi for Papua.<sup>52</sup>

Ethnographic subjects are rare in Helen's album, and where they do appear, they are often juxtaposed with photographs that render the images more complex and ambiguous. For example, on page 6 of the album she included a photograph of *kastom* stones with human skulls placed on them alongside images of Nellie and a friend in dress-ups, Nellie with a dog on a garden path, and a portrait of herself and Thomas with another missionary couple (Figure 7). When the album is opened out to pages 26 and 27, the two photographs inserted into the one window stand out, as does the photograph on page 27 of the New Hebridean youth standing in front of three carvings in an outdoor setting (Figure 8).<sup>53</sup> The two photographs in one window are from India: one shows washermen in what looks to be a studio portrait; the other is of potters on a street. These photos look remarkably out of place alongside images of people Helen knew, the house they lived in on Lamenu Island and the housegirls who worked on the mission station. However, they comprise a part of the story of Helen's life as a mission worker, and they relate to the theme of care, as she might have known the boy posed in front of the carvings, and it is even possible he was a student at her school. As for the photographs from India, Riddle could have sent these to Helen after he transferred to the Punjab mission field in 1911 and they may therefore have signified the enduring ties established between missionaries who worked in the church's overseas fields.<sup>54</sup>

The use of an album to 'explore, construct, and confirm identity',<sup>55</sup> both in terms of community and individual identity, is evident in Helen's album. The many photographs of missionaries in the New Hebrides, as well as of Nellie, link her in an intimate way to these people as well as to the islands. By including picnic scenes and other photographs of leisure

activities, interspersed with Synod groups, indigenous helpers and portraits of prominent missionary celebrities, Helen was showing the viewer the wider missionary community she was a part of, and the people they cared for and worked to bring into the Christian faith.

## Encountering the album: Visual and material traces of care in the archive

Helen Smaill's album functioned first and foremost as a personal memory storehouse – an object closely tied to the past and necessary for its rejuvenation through the telling of stories prompted by the individual photographs on the pages. As Rosemary Seton and Robert Bickers observe, 'the first things records tell us concern the people who created them.'<sup>56</sup> In my discussion of the album, the attempt to answer the question of why it appears as it does brings us closer to the compiler of the album. This is a valuable line of enquiry, and reveals a little of Helen's personal experience in the New Hebrides and of her recollection of it once back in New Zealand. The next step in the engagement with the album is to consider its trajectory before it was deposited in the PRC archives.

As albums are both a collection of photographs and a narrative, ideally, the album requires Helen's presence to reanimate the story she was trying to construct in its pages and to make sense of the uncaptioned images.<sup>57</sup> In Helen's possession, the album might have been placed on the lap or in the hands of a relative, friend or parishioner to be discussed, gazed at and pointed to as Helen recounted her stories. In this manifestation the photograph album is an aide-mémoire or, as Langford argues, 'an oral-photographic performance' in which individual images jog the memory of its presenter, refreshing connections with the past as each page is turned.<sup>58</sup> Helen kept the album with her in her home and it is easy to imagine it being brought out to display to family members and friends curious to know more about her and Nellie's life in the New Hebrides. When the pages were turned and the viewers were confronted with images such as the kastom stones and the boy with the carvings, Helen had the opportunity to act as cultural intermediary, explaining the complex customs of the New Hebrides to her audiences. More importantly, displaying the album gave Helen the chance to assert her identity and worth as a mission worker in her own right.

Helen's album bears the 'physical traces [that] are manifestations of the presence of, and the relationship between, maker and reader'.<sup>59</sup> These are visible in the bent corners, loose binding, and the tears in some of the pages. It is uncertain whether the majority of the wear happened while it was still in Helen's possession. She no doubt viewed the album often for, as Alfred Lichtwark notes, 'There is no work of art in our age so attentively viewed as the portrait photography of oneself, one's closest friends, and relatives, one's beloved.'<sup>60</sup> This album and two other photograph albums that Helen and Thomas compiled of their time in the islands were among Helen's most treasured personal possessions.<sup>61</sup> Following Nellie's death in around 1940, Helen is likely to have looked through them on many occasions.<sup>62</sup> They remained with her until the mid-1960s, when they were entrusted to the care of Graham Horwell, the missionary on Epi at the time. Helen was moving into a rest home in Lower Hutt, and after family members had deliberately destroyed her husband's diaries, she feared her photograph albums would suffer a similar fate.<sup>63</sup> She therefore contacted Horwell, who was more than happy to accept the Smaills' albums which, he noted, 'had been their own record of activities on Epi in the New Hebrides, and they are a fine collection'.<sup>64</sup> Unlike the contemporary viewer of the album, Horwell had the privilege of experiencing these albums in Helen's presence as she presented all three to him while he was on furlough in New Zealand. He writes that he 'spent some time with Mrs Smaill at Lower Hutt', during which he may have looked through the album with her and compiled the index sheet that is kept with it in the archives.<sup>65</sup>

In Horwell's care, it seems Helen's album was maintained almost in its original form, with some extra wear and tear bearing testimony to continuing viewings, and the index sheet indicating a desire to preserve as many details of her story before she forgot them and before she died. By this time some of the faces had faded in her memory, but throughout its life the album remained a treasure worth safeguarding until it was deposited in the archives of the PRC in 2000 to be cared for and preserved for years to come.

When I first encountered the album, its significance as a container of memories and a testament to Helen's mission work in the New Hebrides was in danger of being overshadowed as a result of its location alongside presentation albums compiled by the church for propaganda purposes, as well as collections of loose photographs that had been amassed by the FMC

and other church organisations. Photographs were regularly sent from the overseas fields of the church to be reproduced in mission periodicals, pamphlets, histories of the mission and biographies of individual pioneer missionaries. As already mentioned, Helen's album does contain similar and, in some cases, the same photographs (or duplicates) as in the presentation albums and other forms of propaganda disseminated by the church. However, after spending some time with the album, it became clear that it was not originally intended as a propaganda album for the New Hebrides mission. The narrative contained in its pages and the uses to which it was put while it was in Helen's care emerged as more intimate, familial and domestic.

The current context in which the album exists frames it as a cultural and historical document, whereas it was once an 'instrument of collective show and tell' and/or a 'repository of memory'.<sup>66</sup> In so far as its original function was to prompt stories of life and work in the New Hebrides, and thereby connect its compiler/narrator and viewers in an environment of faith sharing, in its afterlife in the archives the album has become a 'new' object. The afterlife of albums is closely tied to, and shaped by, the practices and role of the archives in which they are housed.<sup>67</sup> As Edwards and Hart note, archives 'are active environments for participating in the histories of objects, active environments that ultimately shape histories, through the preserving contexts that they themselves constitute'.<sup>68</sup>

The images contained in Helen's album, once it was deposited in the PRC, thus became part of the story of the New Zealand Presbyterian Church's work in the New Hebrides mission field. From the point of view of the collecting practices of the PRC this is its meaning and significance. However, Edwards and Hart write that albums are 'natural' objects that 'remain in [archives] as discrete singular entities'.<sup>69</sup> This is in contrast to, for example, a box of ethnographic photographs in a museum that has been arranged, rearranged, accessioned and described over the course of its life. Helen's album was exposed to similar treatment during its time in the PRC archives. While its physical form has not been radically changed, the process of accessioning, numbering the pages and photographs, as well as describing them for the photographic database, constitutes a reinscription of meanings onto the album-object. Edwards and Hart claim that this is 'simple taxonomic description', but considering that these processes have enabled the digitisation of the photographs in the album (making it more

widely accessible and preserving the physical object), the album, like the box of photographs, has begun to move 'into a set of changing values ... into a framework of policies, strategies and practices.'<sup>70</sup>

## Conclusion

In 2000, Helen's album was finally deposited in the PRC archives, far removed from its original context. This could have been where her personal narrative was lost. Even before the age of digitisation, albums such as this one in public archives were most often mined for illustrations. However, by looking closely at the album, it is possible to get a little closer to Helen Smaill and to the story of this portion of her life that she wanted to tell. What emerges is a picture of a woman dedicated to the work of evangelising in the New Hebrides and to maintaining her record of the past for herself and for her daughter. As Andrew Walker and Rosalind Moulton observe, 'for ordinary people, collections of photographs are more significant than are singular photographs.'<sup>71</sup> Therefore, no matter how 'disorganised' Helen's album may appear, it nevertheless represents her ordering and understanding of her experiences as a missionary wife, a mission worker and a mother. The theme of care weaves through the story of the album: from its compilation and display through to its preservation and safeguarding in the face of destruction. The photographs contained in its pages tell a story of mission work and of Helen's connection to a community of evangelists, and her daughter's persistent presence in the images reveals the extent to which public/mission and private/family care were intertwined for Helen in the mission field. Her love of God and her care for the children, women and men she worked with and, of course, the continual love and care of a mother for her daughter brought Helen's album into existence and ensured its survival in the archives today.

## Notes

- 1 Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The afterlife of memory in photographic albums* (Montreal & Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 18.
- 2 See, for example, Alexander Don, *Peter Milne: Missionary to Nguna, New Hebrides, 1870 to 1924 from the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand* (Dunedin: Foreign Missions Committee, 1927).

- 3 Brooke Whitelaw, 'A message from the missahibs: New Zealand Presbyterian women missionaries in the Punjab, 1910–1940', MA thesis, University of Otago, 2001, 2, 19–20, 66, 67. The paucity of sources by or about missionary wives across denominational boundaries is noted by several scholars: see Whitelaw, 'A message from the missahibs', 3, 67; Cathy Ross, *Women with a Mission: Rediscovering missionary wives in early New Zealand* (Auckland & London: Penguin Books, 2006), 18; Regina Ganter & Patricia Grimshaw, 'Introduction: Reading the lives of white mission women', *Journal of Australian Studies* 39, no. 1 (2015), 4; Patricia Grimshaw, *Paths of Duty: American missionary wives in nineteenth-century Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1989), xxi; S.J. Goldsbury, 'Behind the picket fence: The lives of missionary wives in pre-colonial New Zealand', MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1986, i.
- 4 Antje Lübecke, 'The photograph albums of the New Zealand Presbyterian mission to the New Hebrides', MA thesis, University of Otago, 2009.
- 5 A-S18-85, 3/100 Smaill T. (Rev.) and H. (Mrs), New Hebrides photo album, PA 42001/56, Presbyterian Research Centre Archives, Dunedin (PRC).
- 6 [www.presbyterian.org.nz/archives/missions/photodatabases/pre1900nhimages.htm](http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/archives/missions/photodatabases/pre1900nhimages.htm); [www.presbyterian.org.nz/archives/missions/photodatabases/1900to1909nhimages.htm](http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/archives/missions/photodatabases/1900to1909nhimages.htm); [www.presbyterian.org.nz/archives/missions/photodatabases/1910to1920nhimages.htm](http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/archives/missions/photodatabases/1910to1920nhimages.htm)
- 7 In letters dating from 1914 Helen noted that her eyesight was failing, which further points to a compilation date between c. 1906 and 1915: Helen Smaill to Alexander Don, 12 November 1914, GA0146, New Hebrides Mission Staff Files, H.J. Smaill Staff File 1902–1932, AA 13/5/2, 1984/18, PRC.
- 8 J.G. Miller, *Live: A history of church planting in the Republic of Vanuatu. Book 5* (Port Vila, Vanuatu: Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu, 1987), 340, 388, 395, 398.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 400, 401–02.
- 10 Helen Smaill, transcribed unsigned letter, 17 May 1902, Smaill family: Letters and obituary notices, Misc-MS-0440, Hocken Collections, University of Otago, Dunedin (HC).
- 11 *The Outlook*, 24 May 1902, pp. 33–34, Misc-MS-0440, HC.
- 12 See, for example, Regina Ganter, 'Helpers–sisters–wives: White women on Australian missions', *Journal of Australian Studies* 39, no. 1 (2015), 7–19; Emily J. Manktelow, 'The rise and demise of missionary wives', *Journal of Women's History* 26, no. 1 (2014), 143–49; Dana Robert, 'Evangelist or homemaker? Mission strategies of early nineteenth-century missionary wives in Burma and Hawaii', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 17, no. 1 (1993), 4–12.
- 13 Ross, *Women with a Mission*, 14.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 173.
- 15 Given the particular focus of this paper, I have not been able to include a discussion of the pivotal work undertaken by New Hebridean 'house-girls' or domestic servants. For more on this, see Margaret Rodman, Daniela Kraemer, Lissant Bolton & Jean Tarisesei (eds), *House-Girls Remember: Domestic workers in Vanuatu* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).

- 16 Thomas Smaill, letter to 'Bob & Aggie', 7 June 1897, Misc-MS-0440, HC.
- 17 Thomas Smaill, letters to 'Bob & Aggie', 7 November 1900 and 7 January 1902, Misc-MS-0440, HC.
- 18 Ross, *Women with a Mission*, 175.
- 19 Miller, *Live*, 399–400.
- 20 See Helen Smaill, letter to Alexander Don, 2 August 1918, AA 13/5/2, PRC. Helen's letter contains transcribed sections of Thomas Smaill's letters and diaries.
- 21 Helen Smaill, letter to Alexander Don, 2 August 1918, AA 13/5/2, PRC; Miller, 399.
- 22 Michael Young, *One Hundred Years of Christianity in Nikaura 1890–1990* (unpublished manuscript written at the request of the Centenary Celebration Committee: October 1990, held at Vanuatu Cultural Centre Library, Port Vila, Vanuatu), 8.
- 23 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 139.
- 24 Whitelaw, 'A message from the missahibs', 66.
- 25 The narrative of mission progress, conveyed in images of converts and churches, is necessarily tempered somewhat in these albums by, for example, photographs of hurricane damage, as the compilers no doubt wanted to ensure that viewers not get the impression that the work there is complete and there is therefore no need for further funds for the mission. See A-L-2, Foreign Missions Committee, New Hebrides Mission Album, PA 496/34, PRC; A-S3-9, Foreign Missions Committee, New Hebrides Mission Album (Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union), PA 496/37, PRC.
- 26 The ballpoint pen did not come into common usage in New Zealand until at least the 1950s, possibly even the 1960s.
- 27 Miller, *Live*, 408.
- 28 Helen Smaill, letter to Rev. Mawson, 20 September 1932, AA 13/5/2, PRC.
- 29 Miller, *Live*, 408.
- 30 Whitelaw, 'A message from the missahibs', 1.
- 31 Helen Smaill, letter to Chisholm, 27 September 1905, AA 13/5/2, PRC.
- 32 Thomas Smaill, letter published in *New Zealand Presbyterian*, April 1891, 186, GA1 FMC, Published letters, Thomas Smaill, 2008/197/17, AC 10/3, PRC. See also Miller, *Live*, 389, 391.
- 33 Thomas Smaill, letter to 'Bob & Aggie', 13 July 1901, Misc-MS-0440, HC; Miller, *Live*, 400.
- 34 Helen Smaill, letter to Alexander Don, 12 November 1914, AA 13/5/2, PRC.
- 35 The sources I have consulted in the archives do not state why Helen returned to New Zealand indefinitely in 1906, but Nellie's education was likely a factor.
- 36 Whitelaw, 'A message from the missahibs', 1.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 20, 122.
- 38 See, for example, Nicholas Thomas, 'Colonial conversions: Difference, hierarchy, and history in early twentieth-century evangelical propaganda,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 2 (1992), 377.

- 39 Whitelaw, 'A message from the missahibs', 45.
- 40 Miller, *Live*, 403. The 'problem' of Helen's status is reflected in her entry in the 'Roll of Presbyterian missionaries to the Central Islands, 1881–1920' that appears as an appendix in Miller's book. Here Helen is listed as 'Honorary asst. to 1906' (Miller, 445).
- 41 Helen Smaill, letter to W. Hewitson, 26 December 1902, AA 13/5/2, PRC.
- 42 M. Hewitson, *Harvest Field*, 8 October 1912, i–ii, quoted in Whitelaw, 'A message from the missahibs', 68.
- 43 Miller, *Live*, 404.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 407.
- 45 Helen Smaill, letter to Chisholm, 27 September 1905, AA 13/5/2, PRC.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 Max Quanchi, *Photographing Papua: Representation, colonial encounters and imaging in the public domain* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 140.
- 49 Patricia Holland, "'Sweet it is to scan ...': Personal photographs and popular photography", in Liz Wells (ed.), *Photography: A critical introduction*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2004), 117 (italics in original).
- 50 Letter dated 5 June, *The New Zealand Presbyterian*, August 1891, 23 (cutting included in GA1 FMC, Published letters, Thomas Smaill, AC 10/3, PRC).
- 51 Quanchi, *Photographing Papua*, 134.
- 52 See Max Quanchi, 'The power of pictures: Learning-by-looking at Papua in illustrated newspapers and magazines', *Australian Historical Studies* 35, no. 123 (2004), 37–53.
- 53 This photograph was almost certainly taken on Epi, as the two carvings on the right closely resemble drawings done by the Russian anthropologist Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay in 1879 on the island: see Joël Bonnemaïson, Kirk Huffman et al. (eds), *Arts of Vanuatu* (Bathurst: Crawford House Publishing, 1996), fig. 15.
- 54 J.S. Murray, *A Century of Growth: Presbyterian overseas mission work 1869–1969* (Christchurch: Presbyterian Bookroom, 1969), 28.
- 55 Patrizia di Bello, 'Albums', in Robin Lenman (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to the Photograph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 21.
- 56 Robert Bickers & Rosemary Seton (eds), *Missionary Encounters: Sources and issues* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996), 6.
- 57 Andrew L. Walker & Rosalind Kimball Moulton, 'Photo albums: Images of time and reflections of self', *Qualitative Sociology* 12, no. 2 (1989), 169.
- 58 Langford, *Suspended Conversations*, 20.
- 59 Stephanie Snyder, *Snapshot Chronicles: Inventing the American photo album* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006), 33.
- 60 Quoted in *ibid.*, 26.
- 61 A-S17-79, 3/100 Smaill, Rev. T. and Mrs H., New Hebrides Album, c. 1900, PA 42000/33, PRC; A-S17-78, 3/100 Smaill, Rev. T and Mrs H., New Hebrides Album, c. 1895–1902, PA 42008/53, PRC.
- 62 Miller, *Live*, 400.

- 63 This information comes from the copy of a letter written by Rev. Graham Horwell to Misses C. and A. Smaill, dated 1 July 1976. Horwell writes: 'You may know that Mr. Smaill's diaries and other valuable historical material was lost forever'. (Letter to C. and A. Smaill, 1 July 1976, 'Dunedin' section, GA0101 Joint Interim Board for Missions, folder no. 1976/6, AC 4/2/3, PRC). In discussions with Donald Cochrane and Yvonne Wilkie at the PRC archives about this reference, I was told what Rev. Horwell had told them (i.e. that the diaries and other documents had been destroyed by the family members who were shifting Helen's belongings to the rest home).
- 64 G. Horwell, letter to Lewis Wilson, 24 March 1976, 'Dunedin' section, GA0101 Joint Interim Board for Missions, folder no. 1976/6, AC 4/2/3, PRC.
- 65 Horwell, letter to Misses C. and A. Smaill, 1 July 1976, AC 4/2/3, PRC.
- 66 Langford, *Suspended Conversations*, 20; Martha Langford, 'Speaking the album: An application of the oral-photographic framework', in Annette Kuhn & Kirsten Emiko McAllister (eds), *Locating Memory: Photographic acts* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn, 2006), 223.
- 67 For discussions on the roles and influence of collecting institutions see, for example, Bickers & Seton (eds), *Missionary Encounters*; Joan M. Schwartz, "'Records of simple truth and precision": Photography, archives, and the illusion of control', *Archivaria* 50 (2000): 1–40; Joanna Sassoon, 'The politics of pictures: A cultural history of the Western Australian Government Print Photograph Collection', *Australian Historical Studies* 35, no. 123 (2004): 16–36.
- 68 Elizabeth Edwards & Janice Hart, 'Mixed box: The cultural biography of a box of "ethnographic" photographs', in Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (eds), *Photographs, Objects, Histories: On the materiality of images*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 49.
- 69 *Ibid.*, 49.
- 70 *Ibid.* Photograph albums have also frequently been taken apart on their arrival in museums, archives and in the possession of private collectors. The pages and images were removed for display as well as storage purposes: see Glenn Willumson, 'Making meaning', 72–74; Holland, 130, footnote 6 text.
- 71 Walker & Moulton, 'Photo albums', 158.