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## NEWSLETTER

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OBJECT *history*

### Men of Faith: by Catherine Elliott

### A Pentecost Island Mask and The Reverend Morton



“As kids, we played with it in the garden,” reminisces the Australian former owner of a Pentecost Island mask, a hint of laughter and incredulity in his voice. The mask—which sold on November 17, 2006, at Sotheby’s, New York, for \$228,000 against an estimate of \$60,000-\$90,000—had long been displayed in the consignor’s boyhood home alongside other Oceanic objects in a series of custom-made alcoves. It was only in the 1970s that his mother, whose collection expressed her wide-ranging interests, began to suspect that her most prized conservation piece, the Pentecost Island mask, was rare and might have significant monetary value. “Everyone had an opinion about it,” he recollects. “It had a presence.”

Carved by a master sculptor, this archaic and extraordinary object originated on Pentecost Island in present-day Vanuatu (formerly known as the New Hebrides). The mask belongs stylistically to a small corpus of wooden face-held masks, indigenously called *juban* or *chubwan*, from the southern part of the island. Little is known of their function, although it is recorded that they were used “in certain rituals relating to the sacred relationship between men and yams” (Huffman in Bonnemaïson 1996: 23).<sup>1</sup> The mask is of considerable age and radiocarbon tests

FIG. 1: The Reverend Alexander “Sandy” Morton (b. August 25, 1858, Scotland - d. April 13, 1948, New Zealand).

Photograph by Denton, Wanganui, New Zealand, after 1903. Image courtesy of the Orbost Museum.

indicate that the wood dates from the seventeenth or early eighteenth century. The teeth are highlighted with dots of gold paint. If this was done indigenously—and there is no good reason to believe otherwise—it indicates that the mask continued to be used for some time after trade contact was established with Westerners (Harding 2006: 48).

Family history recalls that the mask was given to the consignor's mother by her aunt. Mrs. Marybell Glasgow (nee Rowe), who, in turn, had inherited it from her parents, Mr. and Mrs. John Rowe. The Rowes were early settlers in Orbost, located on the Snowy River in the heart of East Gippsland, just inland on the south-eastern coast of Australia. In this remote outpost in the Colony of Victoria, the Rowes met and almost certainly befriended the Reverend Alexander "Sandy" Morton (1858-1948), a Presbyterian missionary from Scotland. Morton and his wife, Jane (born Anderson Smith), were instrumental in establishing the Orbost Presbyterian Church, the records of which show that John Rowe was one of the twenty-eight communicant members who celebrated the church's first communion service in 1892, and he was ordained and inducted as an elder on March 5, 1899 (Gador-Whyte 1986: 3 & 5).<sup>2</sup> Family lore has Morton giving the mask to the Rowes in 1898. This is likely to be accurate, since Morton would almost certainly have presented the mask to them before 1903, the year he and his family left Orbost to settle in New Zealand.<sup>3</sup>

Morton was educated at the University of Glasgow and the Free Church College in that city. As a student he was already considering becoming a missionary to Livingstonia when he heard an address in 1885 by the well-known and widely travelled Reverend Dr. John Gibson Paton (1824-1907), who was making a lecture tour of Britain. Paton was an early missionary in the New Hebrides, and undoubtedly inspired Morton, who, along with fellow divinity student, Thomas Watt Leggatt, volunteered for the New Hebrides Mission. They underwent medical training to equip themselves for the rigors of the mission field. The young missionaries and their wives reached Australia in 1886. Both men were ordained in Scots Church, Melbourne, on August 17 and shortly thereafter set sail for Malekula Island under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria on board the New Hebrides Mission sailing schooner, *Dayspring II*.

Along with the other northern islands of Vanuatu, Malekula was virtually unknown to Europeans at that time. The first Western contact with the island was made by the French navigator Louis-Antoine de Bougainville in 1768. Statements by Helen Gillan, a descendant of the Reverend John Gillan (another missionary, who in the late 1880s arrived in Uripiv, just off Malekula), emphasize just how valuable the Mortons, Leggatts, and other of their ilk were. In terms that would unlikely be used today, she refers to them as "pioneers on cannibal isles," and goes on to state that "'Man Malekula' had little contact with white people before 1887" (Gillan 1988: 89). The Malekula site of Pangkumu was agreed upon as a base for the Mortons, and the Leggatts went on to Aulua (Miller 1989: 290). Once the Mortons' mission house was

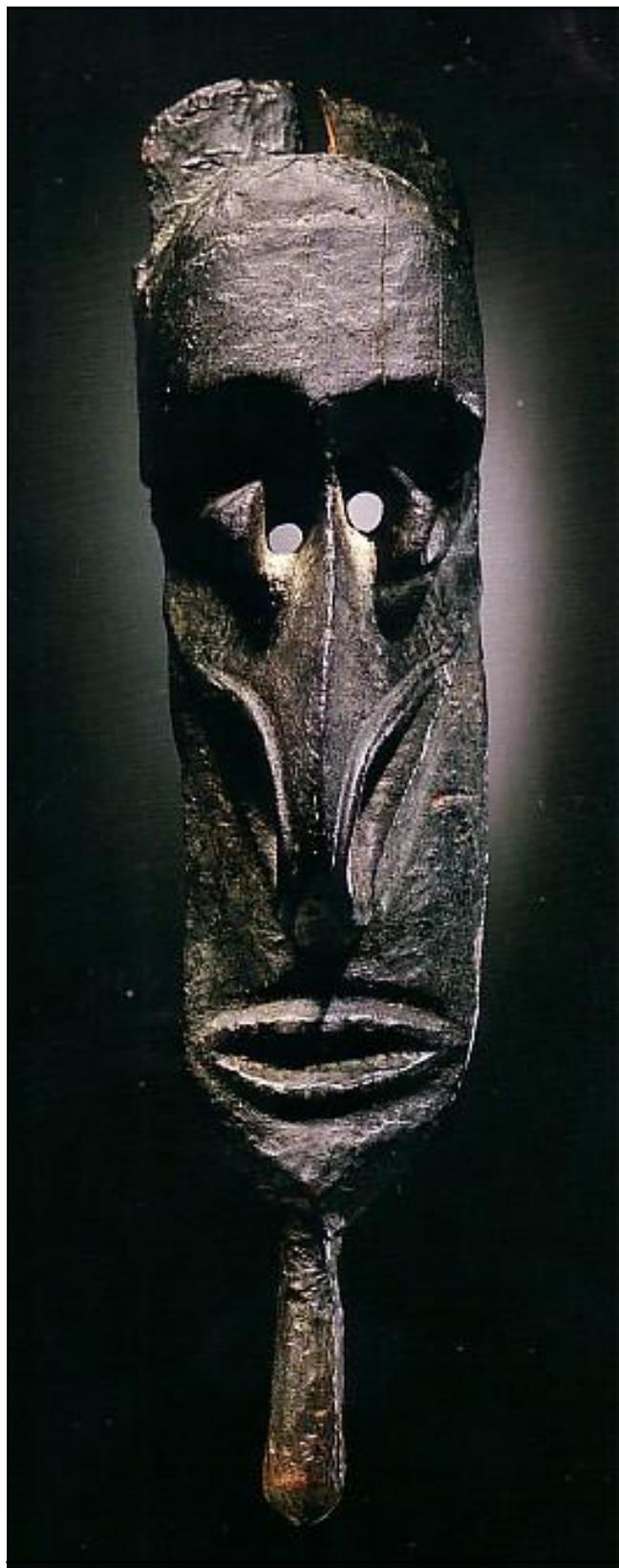


FIG. 2: Mask, *juban/chubwan*. Pentecost Island, Vanuatu. 17th-early 18th century. Collected by the Rev. Morton no later than 1892.

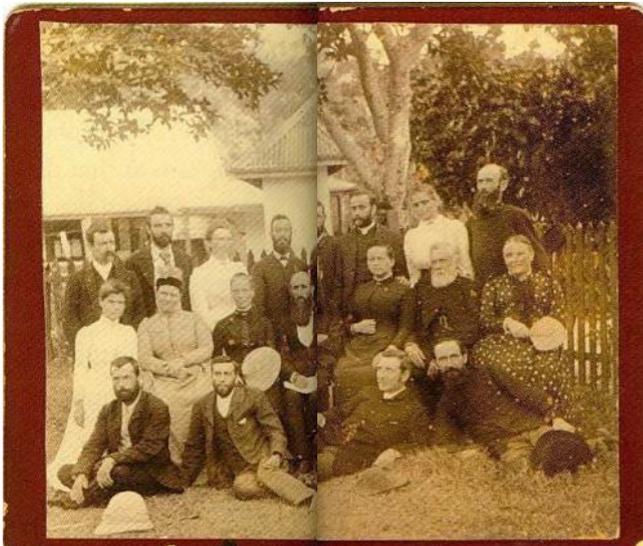
Wood, gold paint.

Photograph courtesy of Sotheby's.

ready, their goods—which crucially included barter material—were sent ashore and *Dayspring II* departed.

Like other missionaries to the islands before and after them, the Mortons endured great adversity and privation. Their work in Vanuatu was a step in the advent of Christianity in the archipelago, a process that had been inauspiciously marked almost five

decades earlier by the killing and subsequent ritual consumption of London Missionary Society leader Reverend John Williams (1796-1839) by the inhabitants of Erromango. Williams' fate did not deter "Christian persistency"<sup>4</sup> in the region, and other Protestant and French Catholic missionaries continued to establish missions, there, even though the islands remained perilous. In 1861, the Reverend George Gordon and his wife were killed on Erromango (Langridge 1934: 76), and reports of cannibalism continued well into the twentieth century.



**FIG. 3: New Hebrides Mission synod meeting, 1892. Morton can be seen standing in the back row, fifth from the left.**

Photographer unknown. Image courtesy of The Presbyterian Church Archives of Aotearoa New Zealand, Dunedin, New Zealand

The arrival of Christianity, a major turning point in the history of Vanuatu, was preceded by another "C" synonymous with colonization—commerce. While Christian missions can be seen historically as having both positive and negative aspects, the commercial exploitation of the area's resources had a disastrous impact on the indigenous population. The discovery of sandalwood in the region in 1825 led to external trade in this commodity, which lasted until 1865, disturbing the delicate ecological balance of the islands and introducing new and deadly foreign diseases that decimated the population. The period from 1863 until the early twentieth century was further blighted by "blackbirding,"<sup>5</sup> also referred to as "Kanaka Traffic." Many missionaries, Paton notable among them, opposed this practice, which they rightly saw as tantamount to slaving. Similarly, the missionaries generally opposed white traders who dealt in alcohol and guns, commodities that resulted in predictable impact. Existing tensions between missionaries and locals were sometimes stirred up by such traders, who wished to rid themselves of opposition (Langridge 1934: 76).

Disease and recruitment to plantations led to severe depopulation of the islands. Though the missionaries often tried to intervene, for example by offering medical assistance, they were met with justifiable suspicion. Whether serving the interests of Christianity or commerce, Caucasians came to be

seen by many islanders as something akin to bogeymen. "Be a good boy, now. If you are naughty, look out ... for the white man will get you!" goes a mothers' saying recorded in Vanuatu in the 1930s (Harrison 1937: no page).

Despite hardship and resistance Morton's Pangkumu mission was quite successful. In 1890, he reported having ninety regular church attendees and, notwithstanding "many drawbacks" and some "strong opposition," he remained optimistic, saying, "we think the work hopeful on the whole" (*Dayspring*, 1891: 16). *The Messenger*, a newsletter of the Presbyterian Churches of Victoria and Tasmania, describes how Morton, who was "honoured by all who knew him," had established a school "and various church buildings in his wide district" (1900: 610). The report adds that Morton "prospected for other mission stations" and "had the honour of assisting at the settlement" of several other missionaries (*ibid.*). During his time on the islands, Morton learned several of the languages and is credited with having translated the New Testament into the Malekula language (Ward & Prentis 2006: 162).<sup>6</sup>

The Mortons officially worked in Pangkumu from 1887-1892, when they were forced to return to Australia due to Jane's ill health. *The Messenger* observed that Morton did so "with the keenest regret" (1900: 610), though their efforts in Orbost served as a continuation of their life's work.

In contrast to Paton, Morton does not appear to have chronicled his own life. Published information on him is scant and his own firsthand accounts appear to be limited to contributions to Synod reports, an extract of a personal letter published in *The New Zealand Presbyterian* (March 1, 1887), and another extract of a personal letter written in 1947 (Gillan 1988: 90).<sup>7</sup>

There seems to be no record of what Morton thought of the objects created by the people he evangelized but, unlike Paton, who advocated the destruction of what he termed "idols" by fire or burial, he does not seem to have had an iconoclastic bent. Though it is not known where, when, or how Morton obtained the Pentecost Island mask, the movement of people through the islands, both pre- and post-contact, is well documented and Morton himself speaks of traders and war canoes visiting Malekula (*Dayspring*, 1891: 16). *The Messenger* tribute to Morton also states that "traders and captains of vessels, both of the royal and mercantile marine service, were impressed by his zeal and self-denial, and were in many ways constrained to be helpful to the mission" (1900: 611). Since the mask most certainly originates from Pentecost Island, a which neighbours Malekula where Morton established his Pangkumu mission station, it could have arrived on one of these vessels, or he could have acquired it during his travels in the region, although Pentecost was not within the area encompassed by the Presbyterian missions. However it came into his hands, he obtained it before 1892, well in advance of Felix Speiser's landmark expedition of 1910-1913 to the region.

Although we do not know with certainty exactly when

or why the Rows were given the mask, or even how they responded to the object, it appears to have been a deeply personal gift. Vanuatu was arguably Morton's defining missionary experience and he is recorded as having sustained a life-long interest in the New Hebrides and the work of the mission. When he and his wife presented a pulpit to the Orbost Presbyterian Church in memory of their infant son, who had died in that settlement, significantly they chose panels carved from Aneityum Island kauri, a wood valuable throughout the islands and Melanesia. Leggatt, who remained on Malekula after the Mortons' departure, commented on the memorial during a visit to Victoria. He noted: "Thus Sabbath after Sabbath in the place of prayer, minister [Morton] and people are reminded of the islands. To him and his wife such remembrance is unnecessary, for we and our people are never absent from their hearts" (New Hebrides, 1901: 25-26; Gillan 1988: 91). *The Messenger* describes how even when far removed from the New Hebrides, Morton "never lost his interest in the work there, and [had] carried a load of curios fifty miles through the [Australian] bush to interest and instruct a small audience" (1900: 610). This collection, which included a large number of seashells, is now dispersed, though several objects from it are in the Orbost Museum. At least one of these is recorded as having been given to the museum by another congregant of the Orbost Presbyterian Church, indicating the Rows were not the only ones to receive a memento from him.

In his report to the Synod of 1894, Morton's successor to the Pangkumu mission, the Reverend Fred Paton (son of the Reverend J. G. Paton), paid tribute to his predecessor saying, "The earnest labour of the Rev. A. Morton, former missionary, is now bearing fruit" (*Dayspring* 1894: 17). Morton may not have written a book detailing his relatively brief experience in Vanuatu, and information about him is sparse, but the legacy of missionaries such as he lives on. That legacy can be found both in the alteration of the cultural fabric of the areas they impacted as well as the objects they have left to posterity. Miller notes, "today it is the practice of most districts of Vanuatu to remember, with a special service of celebration, the arrival of the Good News" (1989: 290). The provenance of the Pentecost Island mask speaks eloquently of encounters between men of faith, both islander and missionary.

#### **Acknowledgments:**

Mr. Julian Harding, London, and Mr. Donald Cochrane, Presbyterian Church Archives, Dunedin, New Zealand; Mr. Paul Dawson, The Orbost Museum, Victoria, Australia; The Reverend Peter Gador-Whyte, Australia; Mrs. Chris Palmer, Presbyterian Church of Victoria, Australia.

#### **NOTES**

- 1 See Margaret Jolly, also in *Arts of Vanuatu* (1996: 264-277) for the distinction between men's and women's cultural production in Vanuatu and the gendering of art. For an appreciation of the mask, see the essay written by Julian Harding for Sotheby's (2006: 48).
- 2 Rowe was also a head teacher at the Orbost State School until 1908.



- 3 It is known that gifts were exchanged on the occasion of the Mortons' departure. The Orbost Church Guild, for instance, gave Mrs. Morton an embroidered commemorative cloth "as a sign of their friendship and their appreciation" (Gador-Whyte 1986: 4).

- 4 To use the title of the book by A. K. Langridge, Honourable Secretary of the John G. Paton Mission.
- 5 The term given to the practice of taking people from Vanuatu and other parts of Oceania, often against their will, to work as indentured labourers on sugar plantations in Queensland and as labourers in Fiji and New Caledonia.
- 6 According to Miller, Morton actually translated only the Gospels of Mark and John and reduced the language to writing.
- 7 There may have been other documents, but the mission records of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria were destroyed in the 1970s at the time of Church union (personal communication with Mr. Donald Cochrane, curator at the Presbyterian Church Archives, Dunedin, New Zealand).
- 8 See Bonnemaïson, J. et al. for comparable masks (1996: 24 & 25).

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According to the records of the Orbost Museum, the Rev. Morton left the mask to the builder of the Orbost Presbyterian Church, a Mr Cameron. Robert Pullar Cameron (b. 1861 Geelong, d. 1949 Orbost) was a descendant of a prominent settler family who had bought virgin land on the Snowy River estuary at Orbost in 1877 (Duplain 1979: 536). In 1967, his son Alexander Finlay Cameron (b. 1899 Orbost, d. 1983 Orbost) gave the mask to the Orbost Museum, which is administered by the Orbost and District Historical Society. Morton's association with the town of Orbost began in 1893, the year he settled in what was then a remote outpost in the Colony of Victoria located in the heart of East Gippsland. There he took up an appointment as minister of St Andrew's Presbyterian Church.

- Catherine Elliott, April 2008



These three photographs depict the Orbost and District Historical Society's Pentecost Island Mask

