A Library in Paradise: The deBrum Library on Likiep (Micronesia)

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During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the population centres on the Pacific Islands were small, with Honolulu being the largest town outside New Zealand. Some of the larger communities, such as Suva on Fiji, Apia on Samoa, and Honolulu on Oahu, had public libraries. Other communities may have had institutional libraries in schools, some of which extended their services to the public.

Communities at the edge of "civilization," in particular in situations where comparatively few expatriate women were present, were often deemed to be at risk of losing their national and cultural identity without continual cultural reinforcement through "good" literature. While part of this role was filled through the fiction components of weekly newspapers, the volume of literature thus provided was limited. At the same time, the market for commercial lending libraries was too small to make them viable. Colonial administrators tried to stem the perceived loss of identity by founding, and occasionally even personally staffing, public lending libraries. Examples can be drawn from both the British and the German administrators on Samoa.4

Smaller communities, however, particularly communities on smaller islands, were devoid of library facilities and too far from the few central libraries to be included in any circulation system. This holds particularly true for the German colonies in Micronesia, where a small expatriate community of fewer than 460 men, women, and children was scattered over a vast range of ocean encompassing some 1.5 million square kilometers. For the duration of the German colonial period there, 1886 (Marshalls) or 1898 (Carolines, Palau, Marianas) to 1914, only a single public library was established in Micronesia: from 1908 a company library operated on Nauru, which had one of the largest expatriate communities (over sixty people by 1913).3 While the main trading companies may have placed married administrators

3 Spennemann "Solitary Among a Crowd."

in charge of their main offices, the bulk of the traders operating in the islands were self-made men with an adventurous streak, often with limited education. While most of these men would have been readers, few would have acquired libraries of their own.

In this sea of "booklessness" one locality stands out: semi-remote Likiep Atoll in the Marshall Islands, where Joachim deBrum set up a personal library of some 1,500 volumes, which he made available to others on the island. This essay will briefly introduce the creator of the library, Joachim deBrum (1860–1937), and then address the origin, nature and composition of this library and set it against the background of events of the time.

**Joachim deBrum**

Joachim deBrum has been described as a sophisticated and urbane "Marshallese renaissance man who might have stepped out of a James Michener novel."^6^

DeBrum was born on Jaluit Atoll on 22 February 1869. He was the eldest son of the Portuguese whaler and trader José Anton deBrum and Likemeto. Likemeto was related to Jortoka, the supreme chief ("Iroij laplap") over much of the eastern island chain of the Marshalls. On the strength of this relationship José deBrum was able to purchase all rights to the very lowly populated Likiep Atoll, in 1877, for $1,250 worth of merchandise. In 1878, he transferred it to Adolph Capelle & Co. Capelle and deBrum formed a highly effective and enduring partnership that passed beyond a merely commercial arrangement. They both produced large and influential families that have since intermarried,"^7^ and between them they have founded what may almost be described as a Marshallese dynasty. Their social, political and commercial legacies remain very significant in the Marshall Islands today.

DeBrum's success as a self-taught businessman, builder, artist, engineer, shipbuilder, and amateur scientist is remarkable, especially considering the remoteness of his island home. It is astounding to consider that he also learned sufficient medical skills to provide basic medical services and established clinics at his own expense on Likiep and nearby islands.

The emerging science of photography fascinated him as both engineer and scientist. The potential of photography as an art form, as well as a means of recording images of his Marshallese heritage, seems to have particularly appealed to him. In what had already become a trademark characteristic, he focused on learning everything he could about photography and ordered several appropriate books, some of which survive in his library. He built, equipped and operated his own darkrooms to develop and print his photographs. He devised a simple and effective method


of cooling his darkroom to protect the stored chemicals and special photographic papers from the tropical heat. He became an artist of remarkable ability and vision, producing a spectacular portfolio of photographs that is highly significant from artistic, medical, cultural and historical viewpoints. Despite being exposed, developed, and stored in tropical conditions (in some cases for over one hundred years), more than two thousand glass plate negatives remain in good-to-excellent condition, illustrating his artistic and technical skills.

A prolific builder, many of the houses he designed and constructed between 1890 and 1920 are still used by descendants of those for whom they were originally built. Most remain substantially unchanged. Although a few houses use small generators to provide lighting, kerosene lamps remain much more common. DeBrum installed gas lighting throughout his house that was fuelled by a gas generator he built himself. (This was apparently not used after his death.) In many cases rainwater is stored in cisterns that are also original, and they remain the major source of drinking water. A near-to-original curtilage is a common feature throughout Likiep Village, and original coral blocks are still edging coral paths constructed more than one hundred years ago.

DeBrum died on 10 January 1937, aged seventy-seven, leaving his library and tools to his family. He stated in his will that all his tools and books should be “kept as a memorial” of him and that while both could be loaned out, they could “not be sold.” This simple request provides a fascinating insight into the man. He wanted his library and other tools to be used, not lost, sold or locked away. The memorial he wanted was a living and useful legacy of knowledge, and he even established specific rules, set out in his will, by which books could be borrowed, including a maximum loan period of “three weeks.”

Acquisition

Establishing a library in Micronesia at the beginning of the twentieth century was far from easy. The main difficulties faced were distance and access to information about new publications. The latter was actually not that great a problem, since publishers advertised in the back matter of their own literary and general-interest magazines (such as Century Magazine), some of which included pre-printed order cards for both publications and trade catalogues. Furthermore, most publishers included publication lists in the back of books issued by them. Once he was on the mailing list of a publisher, announcements of new publications would have been sent to deBrum as a matter of courtesy.

The distance, however, was a factor that added both to the delivery time and to the actual cost of acquisition. The average transit time for letters between the Marshall Islands and Europe could vary from forty-five to sixty-two days, with parcels taking

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8 Will of Joachim de Brum, held by the deBrum family.
fourteen to twenty-eight days longer.\(^9\) If an order was filled immediately, the book parcel could be in Jaluit after about one hundred to one hundred and fifty days, depending on sailing dates of vessels. Orders filled from Sydney would have been back in Jaluit after thirty to sixty days. Clearly, compared to somebody developing a library in, say, Sydney or Melbourne, deBrum had to spend more money and—especially—much more time on his collection.

Based on correspondence kept in the Alele Museum on Majuro, Marshall Islands, it appears that deBrum commenced collecting books in the early 1890s. In the beginning, most of his acquisitions seem to have been confined to copies of newspapers and weekly and monthly magazines, as well as books that he could obtain from other residents in the Marshalls. For example, Adolph Capelle wrote in May 1894 that he had posted copies of *Century Magazine* as well as *Forest and Stream* to deBrum in Likiep, and that he had received a packet of books from the trader James Milne in Ebon.\(^10\) We can assume that deBrum requested to be allowed to retain the items, for in December of the same year Adolph Capelle informs deBrum that he is prepared to let him have his run of *Forest and Stream* covering the years 1884 to 1889.\(^11\)

In addition to the books which will be discussed below, deBrum seems to have ordered large numbers of newspapers and magazines. The records are patchy: in 1911 he subscribed to *Cassell’s, Cosmopolitan, English Illustrated, Family Herald London, McClure’s, Munsey, Outing, Pearsons, Royal, Windsor, and Everybody’s*,\(^12\) while in 1914 his subscriptions comprised *Answer, Dresdner Anzeiger, British Medical Journal, Continental Times, Graphic, Home Cookery, Illustrated Carpenter & Builder, and Yachtsman*. The magazine *Yachting World*, which he also wanted, could not be supplied.\(^13\)

He obtained a fair number of books directly from Sydney via friends and business partners, with Frank H. Phillips being the main contact. DeBrum also obtained catalogues from book dealers as well as directly from publishers. On record are: The Verlagsgesellschaft, Berlin (1908), C. Boysen Booksellers, Hamburg (1909), Alfred Wilson, London (1912), Times Book Club (1912), Doubleday, Page & Co. (1912), Clarendon Press (1913), Rudder Publishing Co. (1910, 1912) and the Modern Book Society (1914). Some of deBrum’s book orders were very specific, most probably in response to advertisements seen in magazines. In 1911, for example, deBrum

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10 Letter, Adolph Capelle to Joachim deBrum, dated Jaluit, 16 May 1894. AMNA, DeBrum Papers, File 1894 #9P.
11 Ibid.; Adolph Capelle to Joachim deBrum, dated Jaluit, 27 December 1894. AMNA, DeBrum Papers, 1894 #9P.
12 Letter, Joachim deBrum to W. F. Fairland, Sydney, dated Likiep, 2 January 1911. AMNA, DeBrum Papers, 1910 #25P.
ordered a book on eyes and eye infections from the Neu-Vita Eye Institute, while in 1912 he ordered The Photographic History of the Civil War: Thousands of Scenes Photographed 1861–1865 (1911), produced by the Review of Reviews Co.¹⁴

Matters became more complicated after the beginning of World War I in August 1914. After the occupation of the Marshall Islands by the Japanese in October 1914, German administrators and traders were expelled, and the Japanese administration worked against a continuation of the shipping connections operated by Burns Philp.¹⁵

Soon after, trade and the postal connections with Australia were severed. This was a severe blow to deBrum’s Australian connections. On the other hand, he had certain windfalls, as some of the libraries of the expelled Germans came his way.

**Origin of the Books**

The bulk of the books in the deBrum library are British, with many of the rest from the United States of America. A few books came from other countries, such as Australia. We need to be aware, however, that most British–manufactured books would have been available in Australia. Thus it is likely that most of the British publications would have been sourced from Australian booksellers.

What is important to note, however, is the almost universal absence of books published in Germany. The imbalance is stark. Since the Marshall Islands was a German colony at the time, this is also somewhat surprising, especially as deBrum would have spoken fluent German. Indeed, in 1914 he had subscribed to the *Dresdner Anzeiger*, a daily newspaper. There are three possible explanations for this absence.

The first interpretation is that German publications once existed in the deBrum library, but that they were discarded from it after World War II, as none of deBrum’s surviving relatives spoke German and the Marshall Islands was administered by the United States from 1947. While possible, this interpretation seems implausible in the light of deBrum’s will, which specifies that the house, and specifically the library, should be kept together and not dispersed.

The second explanation is that deBrum had a range of German books, but that these were discarded after World War I, when the Japanese administration expelled all German traders, planters and missionaries and tried hard to eradicate any traces of German culture and influence in Micronesia. This is certainly a possibility.

The third interpretation is that deBrum did not have any interest in German publications and German (language) literature and deliberately did not order or collect any. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that none of the eleven journals and magazines subscribed to in 1911 were German, and that only one of the nine magazines subscribed to (or requested) in 1914 was German (see above).


Book acquisition over time

Figure 1 (below) plots the frequency of the imprint dates over time, with the major phases of Marshallese history indicated. The growth in acquisitions in the German period is evident, as is the continual growth during the same period. It appears that book acquisitions dropped dramatically before the end of the German administration. It must be remembered, however, that the graph represents the imprint dates and not the acquisition dates. It is likely that there was a lapse of about eighteen months to two years between the date of publication and the arrival of a book in the Marshalls.

It is evident that the abrupt drop in acquisitions coincides with the commencement of the Japanese military administration following the Japanese occupation at the beginning of World War I. Acquisitions pick up again slightly after 1922, when the Japanese administration in the Marshalls was transferred to a civilian administration and when mail services and outside orders were more easily accomplished.

The drop during the German period would have occurred in the mid-1890s, which may be attributed to the recession of that period and the slump in copra prices, which would have forced deBrum and others to tighten spending.

A comparison of the imprint dates of books sourced from the United Kingdom/ Australia and the United States shows some interesting features. The books sourced from United Kingdom publishers show an unremarkable distribution, with a gradual
rise from the 1830s until 1910 and then a gradual drop. A decline of book acquisitions in the early 1930s can be attributed both to deBrum's increasing age and to the increasing isolation of Micronesia from the outside world, which would have made foreign-language book acquisition even more complicated than it had been.

The books sourced from the United States show a bipolar distribution, with a peak in the mid-1890s and a second peak in the 1910s. The United States imprints drop off dramatically after Japanese occupation and remain low until the early 1940s, with the exception of a small rise in the late 1920s. This nicely parallels the overall trading situation as well as the political realities in Micronesia, when Japan terminated all direct and indirect access to United States markets. The British imprints, on the other hand, could be sourced from Japan, which had an amicable relationship with the United Kingdom until the mid-1930s, when Japan terminated the Arms Limitation Treaty and left the League of Nations.

**Composition**

In 2003, a catalogue was compiled of the known contents of the deBrum library.\(^{16}\) A total of 826 items were identified, made up of those books present in 1999, and those identified in correspondence or in previous reports on the deBrum house. Of these 826 items, about 16% remain unidentified because the item was so fragile, or the leaves were stuck together to such an extent that the recorder refrained from opening them.

At the time of the first conservation assessment of the deBrum house in 1977 the investigation team estimated that there were some 1,500 books then present.\(^{17}\) The 1999 investigation documented only 726 volumes, or just 48.2% of the 1977 total.\(^{18}\) While it seems likely that the 1977 total was only a rough estimate, it is unlikely that it was wildly inaccurate. It is unclear, then, where the remaining 700-odd volumes went.

New shelving was installed in 1983 as part of a conservation management exercise. This shelving was made to suit the volume of books then available. The 1999 assessment found six book cases with a total of thirty-three shelves. Five shelves contained books that could not be extracted for identification because of their fragile state, and a further five shelves were empty. The 726 books that could be identified occupied twenty-three shelves, suggesting that about 160 books would fit on the remaining ten shelves—assuming that the shelves were full in 1983—making a total

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\(^{16}\) Spennemann, O'Neill and O'Neill, *A Rapid Assessment*.


\(^{18}\) The rest of the 826 volumes were identified in the Alele Archives from correspondence or from the Jelks report.
of about 886 volumes. Overall, it seems likely that some 450 to 600 books, or about one third of the library, were lost between 1977 and 1983.

We can only guess where these books have gone. Some may well have been removed to the Alele Museum on Majuro, ending up in the Pacific Studies room, without specific notation indicating their provenance. Others may have been dispersed on Likiep, over time and in small numbers, while others may have been removed by unauthorized visitors. At least one instance of theft by visiting tourists is on record, an instance that relates to an item whose absence had readily been noted. It is very unlikely that the theft of other individual titles would have been noted. Yet these mechanisms can only explain a small number of losses.

In view of the fact that as much as 40% of the library may be missing, the discussion that follows needs to be read with some caution.

Two categories dominate the deBrum Library: religious books and pamphlets (30.4%) and fiction (24.4%). (See Table 1.) The next largest category, maritime books, is significantly smaller (5.2%). The range of books is wide, from Astronomy (albeit only one item) to gardening and medicine. Even within each subject, the range of books is broad, ranging, for example, from various texts on aspects of medicine and health to guides to surgery and dentistry and other “self-help” books.

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Table 1. Joachim deBrum’s Library in 1999: the subject area of the books.

19 That is, approximately twenty-three books per shelf. However, photographs taken at the completion of the project suggest that all shelves were not completely full in 1983. See Spennemann, O’Neill and O’Neill, A Rapid Assessment.
The percentage of fiction books is understandable, but is less than what might be expected in a private library composed mainly of divertive reading. The high frequency of religious books and pamphlets contained in the library tallies with deBrum's role as lay preacher and spiritual head of the extended family on Likiep. Even though originally a Catholic, deBrum converted to Protestantism in the late 1880s or early 1890s. The library reflects this orientation, with a number of mainstream Protestant texts as well as a mass of religious pamphlets, mostly of Protestant Christian literature.

The distribution of imprint dates suggests that the composition of the library changed over time. The acquisition of technical books went through several phases, with bursts of activity mainly in the period between 1895 and 1914. Intriguingly, the initial period of library development in the 1890s seems to also have the highest frequency of books of a general subject matter. It is possible that this trend indicates that, at that time, deBrum was acquiring as many books as he could, whereas he later became more selective and purposeful.

The “acquisition curves” for fiction and religious books, on the other hand, are markedly different from those for technical and general books. Both fiction and religious literature curves show generally similar development with a peak in the 1900-1910 period and a second, but less pronounced, peak in the 1920s, after the commencement of the Japanese civilian administration.

Based on the “acquisition curves” it would seem that deBrum first acquired locally any books that he could, which explains the large number of books concerned with general subjects from his early years. As he got older and his status increased as a spiritual leader in his community, he acquired more religious books. Parallel to this growth, and peaking soon after, is a major phase of acquisition of works of fiction. The acquisition of both fiction and, in particular, religious books increased after the commencement of the Japanese civilian administration in 1922, reflecting the eased restrictions on commerce in Micronesia. By that time, however, deBrum was in his sixties and, perhaps, no longer felt a need to acquire books concerned with general or technical subjects.

**Impact**

Until 1908 the deBrum collection was the only library in Micronesia. The only other significant library in the period, the Pacific Phosphate Co. library, founded on Nauru in 1908, was available only to expatriates living on Nauru. DeBrum allowed people to borrow books from his collection, mainly servicing his fellow citizens on Likiep but, presumably, also trading captains and fellow traders on other islands. In his will deBrum stipulated that the library be used and that books could be borrowed with a maximum lending time of three weeks. The library had a tremendous impact on the local community, certainly as long as deBrum set the example of an avid, if not frenetic reader. His children recall that he even read at dinner.
Significance

In a coastal tropical environment such as Micronesia organic artefacts dating from the 1880s to the 1930s do not often survive. Climatic events, such as typhoons, as well as biological agents, such as termites and fungi, damage what human neglect has not already destroyed. Moreover, much of Micronesia was ravaged by the fighting and bombing during World War II, resulting in widespread destruction. As a result, heritage properties dating from this period are rare. Even more rare are properties that have retained much of their original appearance and, especially, still contain much of the original furnishings.

The deBrum library on Likiep is culturally significant because: (1) it forms an integral part of the deBrum House, a unique entity comprising the building itself, outbuildings and curtilage, as well as the material culture associated with the property, namely the furniture, the glass-plate negatives, the phonograph records and recordings and, last but not least, the library; (2) it is associated with deBrum, a largely self-educated, true "renaissance man" who through his interests and activities was the "pater familias" for Likiep Atoll and, as such, shaped the fate of Likiep Atoll and its inhabitants during part of the German and the critical early part of the Japanese administration period; (3) it has been collected by an individual of mixed Portuguese and Marshallese parentage, thus bridging indigenous Marshallese and colonial European cultural traditions, against a background of German administrative and business concepts and the spiritual influences of American Protestantism via the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions; (4) it is the only surviving privately collected colonial-period library in Micronesia and, as such, demonstrates the reading habits of colonial planters in Micronesia and has informative value for the entire Pacific; (5) it spans the period from the 1890s to the 1930s and in its composition (through the imprint dates) is reflective of the political and trading history of the region in this important period.

Future

The deBrum house and its contents are listed on the United States of America National Register of Historic Places,\(^\text{20}\) which, in theory, ought to ensure preservation. But, given that the Marshall Islands are an independent nation (in a Compact of Free Association with the United States), management decisions on the fate of colonial-period heritage places are subject to political decisions.\(^\text{21}\) Furthermore, as

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Likiep Atoll is the only atoll on the Marshalls in private ownership (albeit by a very extended family) and as the deBrum House is in private hands (albeit managed nominally by a Trust), local political disagreements have a detrimental effect on funding and management decisions. The political constraints to management are impeding desperately-needed action in the face of adverse environmental conditions.

Environmental conditions on the Pacific Island are generally not conducive to the survival of organic materials. The deBrum library is being subjected to severe levels of environmental decay. Likiep Atoll is composed of sand cays with an average elevation of less than six feet above high water level. Ocean breezes are continually sweeping the island, depositing a fine film of salt on all surfaces. Books are not immune to effect of salt, and, due to the hygroscopic properties of paper, possibly even more prone to damage than other organic materials. The fact that books have been relatively tightly packed into the shelves has compounded the effects of moisture drawn form the ambient air, compressing the damp paper and bindings into one solid mass.

While Likiep is further north than other atolls from the main track of tropical cyclones and has consequently not suffered as much damage from tropical cyclones as have Majuro and Jaluit,22 it is not immune from such events.23 The deBrum house is not inhabited. Access to the house has been more controlled in recent years, but the absence of a permanent and diligent caretaker has given rise to unchecked environmental decay in the form of termites, silverfish, and bacterial growth, as well as structural problems such as leaking roofs.

Two conservation programs were carried out (in 1977 and 1983), but loss to the fabric of the buildings and to the inventory continues.24 Recent preservation programs seem to have focused on the glass-plate negative collection,25 with little concern for the material culture contained in the building, and no consideration given to the library. The books in the library are decayed to such a degree that much is well and truly beyond salvage. There is an urgent need to identify the books that remain in the deBrum library, since many were already (in 1999) so far decayed that their titles and editions could not be established. While the physical books may perish, their identity ought to be recorded.

24 O’Neill and Spennemann, “Conservation Assessment of the Joachim De Brum House.”
This is, in essence, the end game of the major privately-held library in Micronesia—a sad ending. Yet we should be grateful that it has survived long enough for much of its content to be recorded.

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