

“Sailor, Novelist, and Scientist—Also Explorer” Frank Burnett, Canada’s Kon-Tiki, and the Ethnographic Middlebrow¹

There is a people living within the zone of civilization and Christianised influence, upon islands composed of almost magic formation, scattered in strange and tiny groups in the midst of an ocean whose waters are continually being traversed by ships of every nation; withal, a people who, though presenting most other characteristics of their remote ancestors—they are semi-savage, superstitious, crude, and primitive, yet have such a legendary and traditional conception of, and belief in their own advancement and development, that one is forced to reflect anew upon the theory of evolution, and the pristine state of the first created being, who was their, and our common ancestor.

—Frank Burnett, *Through Tropic Seas*

Norwegian explorer and writer Thor Heyerdahl’s 1947 expedition across the Pacific Ocean was a spectacular success story. A favourite in the Book-of-the-Month Club, *Kon-Tiki* (1948), the account of Heyerdahl’s journey from Peru to Tahiti by raft, was reprinted over two dozen times and translated into many languages as well as adapted for television and two films. But although *Kon-Tiki* captured the imagination of the world, Heyerdahl was not the first to bring scientific theories of the origins of Pacific peoples mixed with tales of derring-do and high seas adventure to a broad readership. Through the first three decades of the twentieth century, Canada’s own writer, amateur scientist, and adventurer Frank Burnett self-funded sailing trips across the Pacific between British Columbia, Canada, and Queensland, Australia, to explore similar theories about the origins of the Polynesian people and the mysterious monoliths on Easter Island (Rapa Nui).²

Like Heyerdahl, Burnett sought evidence to support his scientific hypothesis that the Polynesian peoples had originated from the west coast of the

Americas. But in stark contrast to the longevity of Heyerdahl's success, Burnett's name and books have fallen into complete obscurity. Yet both authors appealed to wide readerships in their day. Drawing from a small body of work on the non-fiction middlebrow by Janice Radway; Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins; and Kate Macdonald, I explore Burnett's texts in terms of a genre I call the ethnographic middlebrow. I suggest that the disciplinary as well as transnational border-crossings of this class of texts have placed Burnett's work beyond the bounds of recognition as the disciplines of English, Canadian literature, anthropology, and museum studies developed. I tentatively outline the genre's changing scales of value in relation to emerging literary and scientific establishments in two national readerships in the first decades of the twentieth century in an attempt to account for the rise and fall of Burnett's celebrity authorship and Heyerdahl's enduring success.

Books of this category bundled the prestige of science and ethnography with the popular appeal of travel and adventure stories. They were connected to a class of travel books of the early twentieth century associated with personal and social improvement. In their bid for cultural authority, these books and their writers, as Peter Hodgins has shown, affirmed the supremacy of modern industrial and scientific progress but were also driven by and appealed to desires for the "untamed, exotic, and the sublime" (154). Hodgins argues that these texts reveal as much about "the complex nature of the desires and perceptions" of their authors and readers as they do about the lands they describe (155). As such, changing tastes are also discernible in studying them. The focus of Hodgins' research are books about science travel to Canada, and the fact that Burnett's work focused on travel from Canada suggests a straightforward account for why Burnett has escaped the attention of theorists of travel writing; after all, as late as 1965, in the first volume of the landmark *Literary History of Canada* edited by Carl F. Klinck, travel writing was understood to be works written by foreigners about this land. Yet an appeal to this explanation alone overlooks a rich set of other factors that are also observable in accounts of the rise and fall of Burnett's reputation.

Burnett's books include the non-fiction ethnographic travelogues *Through Tropic Seas* (1910), *Through Polynesia and Papua* (1911), and *Summer Isles of Eden* (1923), as well as a short novella published with a collection of interconnected tales and Native island legends, *The Wreck of the Tropic Bird and Other South Sea Stories* (1926). Throughout his books and travels, Burnett pursued a quest that was both modern and anti-modern. As the epigram to this essay potently suggests, the islands he explored and the

peoples he encountered were conceived at once as lands of magic, full of mystery, and zones of fieldwork entirely penetrable by science. Relatedly, the Pacific as Burnett imagined it was a basin crisscrossed by modern liners that opened up the region to industrial progress; at the same time, it was regarded as an archipelago of islands that remained remote, pre-modern paradises untouched by the ravages of development and in need of protection from them. Their peoples were paradoxically conceived as the apogee of a more dignified, pre-lapsarian civilization and yet also within the “zone of . . . Christianised influence” (*Tropic Seas* 5), even as the Pacific region sheltered the Galapagos Islands, those marvelous test-labs of Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theories. As a hobby science-traveller with a hypothesis, undertaking exotic sailing adventures to prove it, Burnett’s oeuvre and pursuit were marked throughout by ambivalence and contradiction.

Though his books are replete with the racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and exoticism of their era, Burnett’s work is worth reclaiming, not because of its literary quality (which it does not assert), but because it highlights the twin vectors of science and popular narrative as they converge during the first half of the twentieth century and draws attention to changing scales of value. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s articulation of the social formation and reformulation of taste, it is possible to see that the rise and fall of the ethnographic middlebrow in the early to mid-twentieth century was deeply connected to changing scales of social and cultural value. Read alongside Heyerdahl’s work, which provides a diachronic and comparative perspective on the shifting market for this kind of literature, Burnett’s books represent readers’ and writers’ changing relationships to science, ethnography, and literary value in the first half of the twentieth century, and display uniquely Canadian ideas about the Pacific on the cusp of colonial modernity.

Frank Burnett was a retired industrialist who had made a fortune in salmon-canning and West Coast real estate, and his books were based on his voyages as an amateur salvage ethnographer who collected curios from Fiji, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Kiribati, Samoa, Tonga, Tahiti, and Cook Islands. He displayed these relics in a collection room in his home on the edge of the university overlooking the Pacific Ocean, before donating over 1500 of these items to the University of British Columbia (UBC) where they formed the nucleus of the Museum of Anthropology. Though Burnett undertook his travels, curio-collecting, and ethnography as an amateur, he sought the respect of established academics and worked hard to cultivate the



Figure 1
Frank Burnett theatrically posing amidst skulls from Fiji in the collections room in his Vancouver home (City of Vancouver Archives Ref. AM54-S4—Out 647).

esteem of the general public; even as Burnett did win provisional academic respect in his day, eventually his ethnographic collection and books would languish, almost forgotten in the basement of the university library. Yet, all of his books were reprinted several times and collected by libraries across the world, suggesting that they found in their own time wide-ranging readerships that crossed class differences, educational backgrounds, and national boundaries.

Even as Burnett aimed to be taken seriously by academics, he was also a canny self-promoter, making use of his business connections to make a name for himself as a local celebrity. His exploits frequently made the front page of the Vancouver daily, *The Province*: “The Schooner *Laurel* Bought,” “*Laurel* Will Sail Saturday,” “Frank Burnett Back,” and “Will Cruise in the South Seas.” He was also featured in longer magazine articles, including a 1922 article in *Popular Mechanics* by prolific Vancouver-based non-fiction author Francis Dickie³ and a curious magazine called *Progress* (see Burnett, “Voyaging”). These magazines appealed to progressive, aspirational readers who can be tentatively associated with the middlebrow. In literary circles, Burnett attempted to gain credibility within the newly formed Authors’ Association in Vancouver. At this time, hobbyists such as Burnett were still welcome in these associations, but Burnett traded on the cachet of authorship throughout his press. He died addressing the “Authors’ Club” in Vancouver, and news of his death splashed spectacularly across the paper, noting that he was “Sailor, Novelist and Scientist; Also Explorer” (“Burnett Dies” 1-2).

Heyerdahl also appealed to the public imagination and made clever use of newspaper, magazine, and Hollywood coverage that opened the doors of diplomats, financiers, and military men. Both writers therefore employed publicity and other organs of authorial legitimation. In Heyerdahl’s case, the publicity contributed to the book’s sell-out within fifteen days, and subsequently to wider distribution through the Book-of-the-Month Club; his success was commercial. Frank Burnett’s success was academic, if only fleetingly so. Before his work and collection almost disappeared, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of British Columbia.

These two authors’ differing relationships to the scientific establishment suggest slight but noteworthy differences in aims, readership, and market in the first decades of the twentieth century. Though Burnett actively sought and won provisional respect among scientists in the early decades of the twentieth century, Heyerdahl began his career doing so, but later disassociated himself from the establishment. Chapter 2 of *Kon-Tiki* cheerfully details the indignant reaction from academics to his hypothesis about the origins of the Pacific peoples: “You’re wrong, you’re absolutely wrong” notes the head scientist of the Museum of Natural History, adding further, “You can’t treat ethnographic problems as a sort of detective mystery,” “the task of science is investigation pure and simple . . . [n]ot to try to prove this or that” (22). Further, Heyerdahl is told that in the late 1940s

modern scientists must be specialized for their work to be taken seriously (23). Heyerdahl notes repeatedly that not a single scientist would read his initial manuscript that contained his theories; and when he presses for an explanation, he is dismissed by the simple observation that it had not yet been proven possible to sail a primitive vessel across the vast Pacific. Heyerdahl comes to see this rejection as an adventurer's challenge.

Abandoning the scientific elites, Heyerdahl builds a crude raft and assembles a crew of more practical scientists: engineers, explorers, and military men, those for whom, as Colonel Lewis explains to Heyerdahl in the wake of World War II, "courage and enterprise count" (39). These represent a muscular, pragmatic, and popular science relatable to the readership to which he pitched his scientific adventure tale. Heyerdahl happily concludes, "where science stopped, imagination began" (16). Science may have motivated the Kon-Tiki expedition but its narrative appealed to a mid-century postwar readership characterized by heightened respect for self-reliance, inclination toward survivalism, and esteem for intelligent yet physically robust masculinity. The phenomenon Nanette Carter calls the post-Second World War "man with a plan" released and directed Heyerdahl's travel narrative into a distinctly different register than Burnett's books, which were published just decades earlier. Though both writers engaged with science as hobbyists who courted the approval of the scientific establishment, Heyerdahl succeeded through the narrative of an amateur whose sheer doggedness revealed the intellectual arrogance of the academic elites who rejected him, and this was part of his story's appeal. In contrast, Burnett relentlessly pursued and eventually won the honours of academic degrees only to be sidelined after his death as the fields of anthropology, archaeology, museology, and literature professionalized in the decades to come.

Burnett's narratives make explicit note of his correspondence with leading scientists of his day; he reads their books and cites their work throughout his own, ingratiating himself with the scientific establishment. The sheer number of times the word "theory" appears in Burnett's travel books suggests the degree to which he aligned his writing with science. As Carol Mayer observes, as a Fellow of both the Royal Geographic Society and the American Geographic Society, Burnett took meticulous records of the specimens he collected ("Traveller" 218), ensuring that his work as a self-taught amateur ethnographer and archaeologist was perceived as credible ("In the Spirit" 223). The quality of his scientific work received praise from educated readers. In *Through Tropic Seas*, prominent British Columbia jurist

and author Bram Thompson describes Burnett in the preface as a writer who exceeds the old-fashioned “legends and romances of the South Seas” by adding to them “the eye of an Ethnologist, Antiquarian, and Artist,” in which Thompson perceives “no attempt to impart a false glow or gloss to the narrative” (qtd. in Burnett 3). Burnett’s apparent adherence to the facts and avoidance of narrative flourish earned the respect of modern readers suspicious of Romantic and sentimental posturing. Readers were primarily impressed by the ethnographic and scholarly aims of these books to which readable adventure had been subordinated; as one fan of this genre wrote, “To me, [your books] are ethnological studies; and in the writing of them I note that you have also made them narratives of adventure” (Eley qtd. in Dixon, *Prosthetic Gods* 106). Burnett appealed to readers’ taste for plain-speaking unadorned prose and cannily promoted his work as pleasurable, instructive, and unaffected. As he writes in his introduction to *Through Polynesia and Papua*, “If this volume is received at all favourably it will not be on account of its literary merit. I claim none of it” (ix). The *Winnipeg Tribune* took this as a point of promotion: “Mr. Burnett never laid any claim to literary merit” (qtd. in “Burnett Dies” 2), adding “[a] great charm about Mr. Burnett’s work is his frankness” (2). Burnett’s plain writing style, scholarly aspirations, and emphasis on fact were notable generic attributes.

On the other hand, Heyerdahl’s work emphasizes adventure, and reclaims the genre of science writing from the elite preserve of the scientific establishment for a readership newly primed for escape after World War II. Heyerdahl’s prose is replete with the narrative “personalism” (336) that Janice Radway discusses as a key feature of middlebrow narratives by the mid-century. These books, Radway explains in her brief discussion of non-fiction, “[c]onstructed a picture of the world that, for all its modern chaos, domination by abstract and incomprehensible forces and worries about standardization, was still the home of idiosyncratic, individual selves” (283). More than seventy percent of Heyerdahl’s narrative takes place on the open ocean where the seas spill their glorious marvels and bounteous provision of flying fish, eels, and dolphins upon the raft’s crew and the reader. The text therefore offers a paradigmatic example of the “immersion and connection” (117) that Radway discusses as attractive to the postwar mid-century reader. Heyerdahl’s personal story of adventure is affective, exciting, and inspiring, interspersed with theory, scientific maps, and photographs of specimens.

While Heyerdahl addresses a firmly middlebrow mid-century readership, most of Burnett’s publications appear before the first noted appearance of the

term “middlebrow” in print, when *Punch* makes their famously satiric announcement in 1925 that “[t]he BBC claim to have discovered a new type, the ‘middlebrow.’ It consists of people who are hoping that some day they will get used to the stuff they ought to like” (“Charivaria” 673). Nonetheless, the category of the middlebrow is helpful for understanding Burnett in relation to changing social values and shifts in the readership of ethnographic and scientific travel narratives.⁴ As Melissa Sullivan and Sophie Blanch argue in their introduction to *Modernist Cultures* “Special Issue on the Middlebrow,” the category itself has been a “product of contested and precarious assertions of cultural authority” (2) which has been critically derided for being “neither one thing nor the other” (4) and for this precise reason has been reclaimed by scholars as a way to understand the “strategic, experimental and entertaining cultural variability” (4) of early to mid-century print culture. Whereas Nicola Humble has connected the middlebrow to the female reader of domestic fiction in her *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (2001), the non-fiction middlebrow, as Radway introduces the category, interpellated a male, middle-class aspirant reader. Instead of finding a readership of domestic fiction between the categories of romance and highbrow literature, the genre of the ethnographic middlebrow finds a readership balanced somewhere between adventure stories and elite science. Considering the terms of the ethnographic middlebrow is one way to advance Sullivan and Blanch’s call to open up “fresh lines of inquiry for both modernist and middlebrow studies alike” in expanding modern textual studies beyond “fetishized notions of the ‘literary’” (7).

Despite the welcome and significant work the field of middlebrow scholarship has undertaken to shift the terms of literary study toward discussions of non-canonical texts and tastes, it has remained in thrall to fiction, and non-fiction texts such as Burnett’s, though widely read in their own day, remain understudied. Radway’s discussion of C. W. Ceram’s *Gods, Graves, and Scholars* acknowledges that literary fiction was for earnest readers “only one category among many” equivalent to “other sorts of knowledge, such as knowledge to be found in works of science, political affairs, or history” (274). Radway suggests that the non-fiction middlebrow appealed to a class of readers who understood its codes of geographical and class mobility as interchangeable, but her brief treatment of non-fiction texts is not expansive enough to consider the relationship of general science books to the domain of fiction that is her focus. Certain kinds of archaeological, historical, and scientific travel writing also played an important, formative

role in cultivating the subjectivity of middle-class readers of an earlier era and in shaping their views about the world.

Ethnographic and travel writing exploded across the South Pacific from the 1920s, as Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins explain in *Reading National Geographic* and as Richard Lansdown concurs in *Strangers in the South Seas*. In the case of ethnographic science-focused travel writing, the emerging middlebrow of this period might be defined against imperial adventure or romance on the one hand (Kipling, Buchan, Stevenson, and Becke), and the intellectually or formally theoretical work of scholars writing for an academic readership on the other (Boas, Haddon, Malinowski, and Rivers). Drawing on the tropes and topics of old-fashioned colonial adventure yarns, early twentieth-century non-fiction narratives attempted to redeem and modernize their somewhat escapist tales of exotic adventure by intellectual work in archaeology and ethnography. *National Geographic* was formative of the way in which American readers imagined the non-Western world, as Lutz and Collins have persuasively argued. By mid-century, then, the magazine seems to have become a touchstone of the non-fiction middlebrow.

Kate Macdonald's *The Masculine Middlebrow* is the first book-length study that takes the non-fiction middlebrow as its topic. Its focus is "the implied and inferred masculinity" of readers and writers of these texts, which it defines in terms of their "moderate aesthetic" (2). This class of texts, Macdonald explains, functioned neither to provide "mere escapism" nor "intellectual challenge" (2) but both, in a way that sutured story and imaginative projection to intellectually rigorous texts that provided "sustenance rather than distraction" for men of substance (Habermann qtd. in Macdonald 2). Relatedly, the ethnographic middlebrow, as Lutz and Collins broadly outline, was a mixture of fact and fantasy deeply invested in its non-fiction status that offered some of the appeal of adventure narratives in a modernized, progressive, scientific form. As a remediation of an earlier genre described by Robert Dixon in *Writing the Colonial Adventure* that had become passé by the twentieth century, this class of text retained the fascination of the old-fashioned colonial adventure, but worked hard to conceal its investments in fantasy.

The effort Burnett went to cover latent elements of colonial fantasy can be most clearly seen in the photographs that illustrate his texts. As Mayer perceptively observes, "[b]y the time Burnett was travelling in the early 1920s he knew the exciting and romantic world of the Pacific about which he had read did not exist" ("Traveller" 226), but his photographs of island belles fed

appetites aroused by these outdated, imperial and *Boys' Own* adventure stories. Black-and-white photographs of bare-breasted Native women in Burnett's books illustrate and offset his sophisticated, elaborate, and scientific-sounding prose. Readers could effectively peruse these without the disgrace of low-class peep shows because of the values associated with scientific photography and ethnographic writing. However, the photographs were laden with concealed fantasy. As Mayer explains, Burnett purchased most of these pictures from collectors who had taken them in studios, and they are not at all candid ("The Traveller" 226). The women in these photographs would have worn modern dress by the time Burnett arrived, but he indulges his readers' fantasies by presenting posed, bare-breasted, grass-skirted women as if they were contemporary. Despite his commitment to scientific accuracy in recording and collecting archaeological and ethnographic specimens, where the fantasy no longer exists in the Pacific, Burnett feels free to reinvent it. Evidence also suggests that despite meticulous record keeping, he also approached his writing as a professional jobber, copying large sections of one book into another, for instance in his sections on privateer "Bully Hayes." Burnett may have believed in the legitimacy of his research from an historical and ethnographic point of view, but he was adept at capitalizing on and eliding elements of make-believe. His appeal to science and his concealment of fantasy indicate the way Burnett was highly attentive to modern public reading tastes, the aspirational values of science, and the enduring appeal of South Seas fantasy despite its down-market taint.

In countering the spectres of massification, Burnett's and Heyerdahl's narratives appealed to a public fascination with the last basin to open up for ocean travel, where tourism remained rare and travel remained exclusive. They also waterproofed their books against the taint of massification and feminization by sealing their narratives within the vehicles of readable science and masculine pursuits. While Heyerdahl offers a realized figure of self-sufficient rugged masculinity, Burnett offers an aspirational masculinity associated with elite intellectual pursuits and bookishness. Heyerdahl finds key investors among the upper echelons of New York society; his journey and his education begin on the East Coast of America, where Hollywood visions of the Pacific had by now penetrated the imagination of the general public. "We had been to the movies and seen Dorothy Lamour dancing about in a straw skirt among palms and hula girls on a lovely South Sea Island," writes Heyerdahl, and his shipmate, Torstein gestures toward these films: "That's where we must go" (69). It is likely that Heyerdahl even saw

these films in Radio City Music Hall's cinema, which had been purpose-designed to emulate the style of a passenger liner, projecting Hollywood's gaze across the ocean in over one hundred films set on liners or islands of the Pacific during the interwar years.⁵

Burnett's gaze is framed not by Hollywood but by his Pacific Northwest British Columbian outlook from his home on the edge of the ocean. Burnett's readership was an emerging, aspirational class, and his personal story as a self-made millionaire-industrialist inspired aspirational readers to believe that the elite echelons of travel and scientific pursuit were attainable by hard work. While he linked social, class, and geographical mobility to science and education, as Heyerdahl did, Burnett did not thumb his nose at the establishment as a renegade hero but rather sought to enter it. He presented elite science and the Western frontier of the Pacific as equally penetrable. As such, his books expanded the imagined domicile of the Canadian reader not only across the Pacific but also into higher social and class echelons.

Heyerdahl appealed to a later, more well-established massified middle-class readership—the firmly established American reader of the middlebrow Book-of-the-Month Club who sought good reading infused with entertainment. In Heyerdahl's day, a firmly middle-class, postwar, Americanized modern readership is transported back in time—science and progress are affirmed and the Pacific is found mostly empty of people. Heyerdahl's book follows his journey across the Pacific by primitive raft and includes Indigenous islanders only briefly at its end, when the raft founders on the Raroia atoll over 4,000 miles and 100 days from the point of embarkation. Arriving on one of the most isolated islands in the Pacific, Heyerdahl finds it in a pristine state, “like a bulging green basket of flowers, or a little bit of concentrated paradise” (196). “We had arrived in a new world” (197), states Heyerdahl, adding that “every footprint which dug itself into the virgin sand beach . . . led to the palm trunks . . . and luxuriant bushes [that] were thickly covered with snow-white blossoms, which smelled so sweet and seductive that [he] felt quite faint” (197). In the brief chapter that includes his encounter with Polynesian people (“Chapter 8: Among Polynesians”), Heyerdahl describes most of the islanders as pure and untouched by civilization. Island Chief turns out to be directly descended from Tiki, “their first chief who was now in heaven” (215). Heyerdahl's hypothesis apparently confirmed, the trip's mission is complete; the narrative satisfies an anti-modern quest for romantic adventure, but manages in the end to confirm the supremacy of

practical science redeemed from elite academic preserves by doggedness and muscle. Lutz and Collins observe in their study of *National Geographic* that the magazine's ethnographic content privileged the South Pacific for this very reason: it enabled a modern Americanized readership to satiate their nostalgic yearning for primitive worlds but ultimately confirmed the advances of science.

Like Heyerdahl, Burnett depicts moving further westward as moving further back in time. But rather than empty, his Pacific is full of Natives intersecting at various points with the civilizing process. Throughout his books, modernity and its others collide in complex ways that connect Burnett's ethnographic middlebrow narratives to investments in the fantasy of a Canadian civilizing mission. As Lutz and Collins explain, a significant paradox in evolutionary thinking appeared at the turn of the twentieth century, when people who had been educated in positivist notions of progress and development were exposed to colonial peoples who "remained subordinate, exploited, and unfree" and thus "challenged the myth that 'civilisation was associated with the triumph of liberal principles and the equal freedom of all individuals'" (18). *National Geographic* resolves this paradox, according to Lutz and Collins, by advancing an "optimistic" brand of social evolutionism that focused on "the evolutionary guarantee" (18) of progress through the increasing triumph of rationality over instinct. The purpose of this narrative is to show how far the West has come, and this is exactly what Heyerdahl's narrative does when he demonstrates how his engineering adventure confirms a hypothesis. Further, his first act upon arrival on an island in the remote Pacific is to cure a dying island boy with modern medicine. Burnett resolves the paradox differently, by conjuring a vision of corrupted progress, which forms an object lesson in the rise and fall of civilizations. As American power rises to its ascendancy in the interwar years in which Burnett pens his books, he scapegoats Americans as frontier mercenaries who corrupt the civilizing ideals of British imperial progress.

Burnett seems to find the Pacific as neither East nor West but as a magical place where snapshots of Britain's heyday as an empire with a civilizing mission can still be glimpsed, where the advance of American modernization might be halted, where the corrupting aspects of modernization can be forestalled, and where he reorients his own identity through a Western Canadian ethos of a middle way that emplaces him as a citizen of the Pacific Rim. He notes the ravages of American progress on his first approach to Honolulu, and associates American development with waste and garish taste:

A great change has come over the Hawaiian group, particularly in Honolulu, since the annexation to the United States. The American element is there in full force, and with its characteristic push and energy, has changed completely the appearance of the city. In place of the low, old-fashioned buildings, with their iron shutters, such as were common in older portions of Canada, for instance in Montreal or Quebec . . . there have been and are still being erected the modern “sky-scrapers” with all their external adornment and internal conveniences. One of these, in particular, a mammoth hotel, cost, it is said, over three million dollars; all of the stone required in its construction having been imported from California. (*Tropic Seas* 6)

Burnett seems to suggest that a gentle form of Canadian modernity such as could be found in Old World Montreal or Quebec may offer a modulating influence on the advance of the decadent and corrupting effects of American-style modernity that is not only ruinous, but tasteless as its push for standardization erases not only beauty but difference and class:

[O]ne of the most attractive and beautiful spots in this Paradise of the Pacific, [Waikiki] has now, with its modern residences, built regardless of expense, and in many cases of taste, become . . . a suburban district of a typical American city. (*Tropic Seas* 7)

While Heyerdahl encounters the descendants of an ancient race alive and well, eager for the fruits of progress such as radio and medicine, Burnett mourns the passing of a regal Hawaiian race, and predicts a similar fate for all Polynesians. His reasoning is not guided by the typical logic of dying race theories informed by Social Darwinist thinking; rather, Burnett blames urban and implicitly American-style civilization for decline and decadence: “[d]ispossessed of his lands,” the Hawaiian “drifts into the city, where he is thrown into contact with civilization and its accompanying vices” (*Tropic Seas* 7).

These concerns underpin Burnett’s role as a salvage ethnographer, undertaking a mission similar to the role of the late colonial taxidermist described by Pauline Wakeman, preserving the Native artifact from supposedly inevitable death and decline, and drawing on the advances of science and industry to do so. While an earlier generation of colonial adventure writing often omitted mention of development or industry, Burnett strove to inspect and celebrate the industriousness he saw emerging in the Pacific. He praises the Grieg plantation at Fanning Island for its production of copra at an annual rate of over four hundred tons (*Tropic Seas* 30). He also praises the employment of over two hundred Indigenous labourers there “under strict supervision of the British authorities of Fiji” (30), as a counterpoint to the “wild-west” era of Blackbirding and maritime-

frontier exploitation. While Burnett finds the traders he meets and lives with amiable, insofar as they protect Natives from missionary exploitation or corrupt colonial outpost officials, in general traders receive the same scorn he associates with these lowly profiteering types: “the trader is generally a low, beach-combing type, and a disgrace to his nationality” (*Tropic Seas* 59). On the other hand, mercenary missionaries who live “in luxury and ease, with all the adjuncts of civilisation” and access for travel to “a palatially fitted auxiliary schooner” (59) represent the decadence of civilization and are depicted as the real primitives:

fallen from his high estate that was attained by his archetype. His ideals have undergone a complete change. He worships at the shrine of, and his example encourages the native to offer homage to . . . the God Mammon. This world's goods have now a great fascination for him to such an extent that the present Missionaries themselves . . . are to be found in the front rank of capitalists. (*Tropic Seas* 74)

As such, Burnett's Pacific becomes a mirror of his understanding of Canada in late colonial modernity: the middle way, the peaceable kingdom, the pioneering ethos and industriousness of the West, counterbalanced by the good governance of the British empire. It is unsurprising, then, that Burnett's laboratory of race becomes a kind of laboratory of Western-Canadian identity, as well. As Nicholas Thomas notes, “Pacific Islanders have been described and depicted by Europeans in innumerable texts and visual images” but these sources “frequently reveal more of European prejudices” than the people they sought to describe (n. pag.). In Burnett's case, the Islanders he encounters reveal to readers his distinctly Canadian prejudices, and he develops an idea of the Pacific as an extension of his Western Canadian domicile.

“It seems impossible to get away from Canadians . . . even in an out of the way Pacific Isle like Tongareve” (*Tropic Seas* 18), observes Burnett. Unsurprisingly, then, Burnett not only finds exemplars of primitive peoples in the South Pacific who support his thesis of descent, but also through his westward gaze across the Pacific, glimpses views of alternative paths for civilization's future ascent, noting opportunities for Canadian expansion:

Everything in the way of provisions consumed throughout Polynesia seems to be American; but there appears to be no reason whatever why Canada should not be a participator in this trade, the American having no better means of access than Canada has to the distributing centres of New Zealand and Australia. . . . One has only to travel through Polynesia and Papua to realize how vast are the possibilities for increasing in these respects their volume of trade.

Tatua, the principal South Sea Island village, and a fair example of its kind, puts one very much in the mind of a Lower Canadian one. (*Tropic Seas* 16)

Burnett conceives of the Pacific Basin in Canadian terms, as within the zone of Canadian influence, and as an extension of his land-based domicile.

As Macdonald explains, in the “masculine’ reading of the period” following the First World War, “new cultural values begin to find a voice: science, business, living independently” (17), and this sense of independence can be extended to a Canadian settler colonial context. Middlebrow masculine writing had a grown-up aspirational appeal, and ethnographic middlebrow drew these characteristics into the colonial domain. Canadian readers and writers of the ethnographic middlebrow could situate themselves as co-labourers in an imperial, scientific global project which inscribed and addressed Canadians as moderns and equals alongside England. Further, in its petition to the seriousness, progressivism, and factuality of science, it may have been regarded by readers as a mediating solution to emerging literary critical voices such as A. J. M. Smith’s call to reject the “inspiration stuff and He-Man Canadiana” that Daniel Coleman notes “dominated Canadian literary tastes up to the late 1920s” (128). By translating those popular values to a more genteel register and into the elite domains of science, the ethnographic middlebrow preserved their charm while repackaging them in realist and intellectual terms that gave them a modern, postcolonial though still colonizing, cross-class appeal. Burnett’s writing appealed to readers with ambitious scientific pursuits, but in so doing he concealed elements not only of the colonial fantasy that appealed to an enduring appetite for narratives of South Sea adventure but also to the latent wish fulfillment of frontier expansion and co-labouring in a British civilizing mission.

Yet ultimately, Burnett’s vision did not become the vision of the future. While he managed to secure the respect of Canada’s westernmost university in his day, the first anthropologist the University of British Columbia finally appointed generally overlooked Burnett’s collection of curios as the field of anthropology developed in distinctly different directions from museum studies (Mayer, “In the Spirit” 219; also see Mayer, “Oceanic”). Similarly, he did not capture the imagination or longevity of postwar mid-century readers like Heyerdahl did. Even as Burnett’s last work was fiction, and attempted to reinvigorate the buccaneering narrative of Louis Becke and Robert Louis Stevenson with a modern touch, it did not receive wide acclaim. As Leavisite ideas became widespread after the 1930s, evaluative criticism rose to prominence and was formative in professionalizing the study of literature in the university. As in the professionalization and separation of museum studies and anthropology discussed by Mayer, developments in literary criticism distanced the project

of preserving Canadian texts from the project of evaluation and subsequent theorization (“In the Spirit” 219). The academic acceptance he sought thus turned out to be Burnett’s downfall, as the fields of literature, anthropology, and museum studies developed to exclude the kind of work Burnett undertook. When Canadian Literature finally entered the academy in the 1960s, literature of and in Canada was increasingly seen as a means by which Canadians could “know themselves” and their nation (Lecker 662). As Nick Mount has demonstrated, Canadian literature in the university has long been tied to what he has identified as a “topocentric axiom” (26). Burnett’s work fell outside of this scope. His texts would have been overlooked by subsequent academics not only because of their polyvalent literary and scientific registers, but also because they could not be summoned for the purposes of nation narration. Even as Canadian literary study moved beyond thematic nationalist studies to embrace other kinds of writers and voices, writers such as Burnett, whose racial attitudes are a preoccupation of his work, are difficult to accommodate within postcolonial studies and alongside gestures toward reconciliation and inclusion of Indigenous voices.

Yet Burnett’s work spectacularly illustrates the collision of the imperial adventure genre with late colonial modernity in its embrace of science and evolution as well as Christianity and the sublime, its critique of American progress, and its cautious embrace of the moderating forces of British imperialism. In this, Burnett’s work is a splendid example of Canadian settler colonial visions that continued to gaze westward in the name of progress and advancement. This gaze was distinct from the vision exerted over this region by the commercially motivated fantasies of Hollywood. In contrast, Heyerdahl’s story of the renegade hero was Hollywood-friendly. His ocean basin was empty and he encountered “simple” Natives in need of the industrial advances of modern medicine and technology. As middlebrow ethnography, part fact and part fiction, part academic and part mainstream, part science and part adventure, the middle way was therefore both a trope and the generic substrate of Burnett’s work. Educative yet leisured reading characterized all of Burnett’s oeuvre from the early 1900s to the late 1920s. Frontier administrators and traders are corrupt, and missionaries are decadent, but somewhere in the midst of these extremes Burnett seeks a balance where leisure is not sloth and industry is not exploitation. Burnett’s work paired aspects of the emerging middlebrow with what Stephen Slemon once called the “middle ground” of Canadian culture, uncomfortably located between colonizing and colonized culture. Yet while Burnett’s vision

resonates with this recognizably Canadian perspective, his work disappeared from view. As the scientific and literary academy professionalized, middle-class aspirant readerships were gradually replaced by firmly middle-class readers, and the emergent postwar alliances between commercial fiction, entertainment, adventure stories that continued to favour Heyerdahl's mix of science and literature left Burnett and his vision out to sea.

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NOTES

- 1 My title comes from "Burnett Dies Suddenly."
- 2 Despite similarities between their research and projects, there is no evidence that Thor Heyerdahl was aware of Frank Burnett, though both writers were likely influenced by general ideas about the origins of the Polynesian people that were circulating in popular culture in the interwar period. These ideas, as Sean Brawley and Chris Dixon explain in *Hollywood's South Seas: Searching for Dorothy Lamour*, partly accounted for Hollywood's fascination with the Pacific region in the early days of film, and explained how films about white men and native women set in the South Pacific were able to escape censorship prohibitions against depicting miscegenation: Polynesians were commonly assumed to be of Aryan descent. Reidar Solsvik, Curator of the Kon-Tiki Museum in Oslo has confirmed these points (Personal communication, 14 Aug. 2014).
- 3 For further discussion of the West Coast Canadian writer Francis Dickie, see Kuttainen 150-51.
- 4 Drawing from the work of Andrew King, Kate Macdonald suggests that complex market segmentation is evident as early as the Victorian era, and that the cultural divisions culminating in the so-called brow wars were evident before the 1920s (6-8).
- 5 Information about the design of Radio City Music Hall is freely available in the architectural and social history tours given by the Radio City Stage Door Tour. For more information, see "Radio City Music Hall."

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