
REVIEWS

Robert L. Welsch, editor and annotator, *An American Anthropologist in Melanesia: A. B. Lewis and the Joseph N. Field South Pacific Expedition, 1909–1913*. Volume 1, *Field Diaries*, pp. xxi, 632, maps, photographs, references, index; volume 2, *Appendices*, pp. 287, bibliography. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998. US\$125 cloth.

Reviewed by Nick Stanley, University of Central England

THIS IS A FEAST of a book with many courses and a highly varied fare, and like all such offerings deserves to be savored, one course at a time, to avoid surfeit. The interplay of elements provides a sensuous experience. But this is no quick meal. The reader needs to invest time and energy to appreciate its true worth.

At face value the work is fairly straightforward. The editor has had access to the collection made by Field Museum anthropologist and curator Alfred Buell Lewis (1867–1940) during his extensive field research, mainly in New Guinea in the four years leading up to the First World War. The advantages that Welsch has enjoyed include Lewis's artifact collection, field notes, diaries, drawings, and photographs. As Welsch puts it: "A. B. Lewis's most tangible legacy to the anthropology of Melanesia is his collection of 14,385 objects and his 1,561 surviving photographs from the field. Together with his diaries, field notes, and other documentation, these objects and images provide the only comprehensive museum collection from Melanesia in the United States and one of the most systematic collections from the region before the Great War" (p. 573). Put simply, this is one of the world's great collections of Pacific art and the premier single collection from Melanesia.

What Welsch has done is to bring together all the elements into a narrative that takes the reader along the same journey that Lewis himself undertook in those four arduous years. Welsch's contextual depth is astonishing. The "Who Was Whom in Melanesia 1909–1913" not only lists but gives considerable biographical detail of a host of men and women that Lewis dealt with during his sojourn. As Lewis was exploring the interstices of major European colonial possessions just before they were to be transformed by the European war, we get highly privileged views of the workings of the Dutch, German, and British colonial administrations and the considerable impact they had on Lewis's process of making collections. The simmering disgust that the German administration displayed toward Field Museum personnel became a major problem for Lewis, and he was virtually ostracized in German New Guinea, the main site of his operation.

But Lewis has a dogged determination and, despite frequent lengthy bouts of malaria and a near-fatal attack of blackwater fever, he pressed on, bargaining virtually every day for four years. His tenacity, curiosity, and sheer stamina cannot but be admired. Over the period he develops an eye for continuity and change in local, domestic artifacts in the villages and the trading patterns between them, particularly on the coast to the west of the Sepik River. There is a somewhat manic quality to this collecting—it becomes Lewis's very *raison d'être* that draws him ever forward to new feats of endurance. It also reduces him to extremes of poor health. As one reads through the diary entries, the increasingly laconic tone is a testament to the sheer exhaustion that he feels, especially during the last few months. But it is an obsession that will not release him from its grasp. Certainly Lewis raises interesting questions for a psychology of collecting.

The chief joy in this work, however, is to be found at another level. What we experience in this account is a complex interweave of elements that constitute an anthropology of collecting. There is more than a surface resemblance between *An American Anthropologist in Melanesia* and Michael O'Hanlon's *Paradise*. Admittedly, this work has a historical focus while O'Hanlon's account is contemporary, but both are distinct in the attention paid to the very process of collecting itself. Their jointly edited *Hunting the Gatherers* adds to this approach.

Lewis's apologia for collecting is unremarkable. On the one side there is a standard "salvage ethnology" justification: "Specimens are getting scarce in these islands, now, and unless we get the things soon, there will be nothing left." But in the same letter to the director of Field Museum in 1911 he adds another rationale for his collecting strategy: "The specimens from these islands may not be as showy as those from New Guinea, but they are rare and worth much more than they cost" (p. 375). This distinction is a crucial

one for Lewis. While Lewis has always in his mind's eye the exhibition that he was to mount in 1921 in the Field Museum, and for this he needed "showy" items, he was also intent on making a representative collection wherever he went, irrespective of its aesthetic appeal. For Lewis this was to be a scientific collection, one that would provide a snapshot of the life of Melanesians in the villages, in the bush, and on the coast. Welsch has been able to draw on this systematic approach in his parallel fieldwork expedition in 1993–1994 in the West Sepik. Welsch assembled a further two thousand items and interviewed current inhabitants of the villages visited by Lewis, bringing back to the field copies of Lewis's photographs to help upgrade the documentation. While Welsch's research falls outside this work, it would have been fascinating to have had some of the linkages between the two projects further amplified.

It is Lewis's dealings in everyday collecting that give some tantalizing glimpses into the forming of his collection. Some local people flatly refused to sell: "In afternoon tried again to buy some of the good plank and carved figures in Orokola, but all refused to sell, as they said they were made by their fathers, who were now dead, and no one could now make so good ones. One figure esp. had the best modeled face I had seen in New Guinea" (p. 475). The wistfulness is clear in Lewis's account. Other locals could be persuaded with heavy pressure:

I now asked to buy one of the crocodiles. They said they would not sell one. I finally spread out a dozen large knives and two hatchets on the floor, and said I would give that for one, only I was to pick it out. After some talk they seemed to agree to it, and let me go up to the platform (about 8 ft. from the floor) and look at the figures. I then found that all the best masks had been removed. I selected the crocodile I wanted, and the men agreed to its sale. Two rather inferior masks I also succeeded in buying. Another crocodile they would not sell. (P. 279)

Of course, some locals could be very enthusiastic traders, as Lewis discovered to his cost: "The men were quite bold, almost impudent, in the way in which they pressed their things upon one. They were also given to thieving, and stole my note book of specimens, which I had carelessly left in my pocket when I left the ship" (p. 312). Others were happily making objects that Lewis might like. Local interpreters could provide an added complication: "my interpreters lied so much I could believe hardly anything they said, as if they had an idea I would value a thing more if it came from a certain place. They always said it came from there" (p. 268). There were other

complications as well. He was not always a sole trader as this account exemplifies: “Immediately on going ashore a brisk trade sprung up, the natives being very anxious for tobacco, and myself, Dr Klug, and the captain’s representative, all interested in buying specimens, while many of the police boys wanted kundus [hand drums in Pidgin]” (p. 166). Furthermore, the ships carrying Lewis might also be involved in conscription, and the captain might have stripped a village of decorative artifacts in a previous visit. Welsch also draws attention to the crucial and largely unexplored role that Chinese traders played throughout Melanesia, living in villages with local wives.

A final, but highly significant, feature is apparent that restricted Lewis’s collecting mania—the necessity to pack items safely for onward transit. As he confesses at the end of one trip: “I have no hopes of being able to get anything more. I have had so much trouble trying to pack up what I have, that I am not very anxious to get more anyway” (p. 298). But he got round this apparent obstacle by commissioning traders and missionaries to make and forward collections directly to Chicago. At least thirteen hundred of the fourteen thousand objects were acquired in this way, particularly in the last year of his travels.

What do we get from Lewis’s adventure? We hear, not always fortissimo, his interrelationship with local people. On the whole, he is fairly scrupulous not to overstep the bounds of hospitality in his desire to see everything. We see him in relation to colonial personnel, and he does not live in their pockets. He is always ready to go to villages, however remote, if the chance to view a sing-sing is available. He seems happier with missionaries with their ambiguous relationship to colonial authority. But he seems most happy with his own company.

The mystery is how such a significant four years’ worth of work should have had, until the publication of this book, so little impact on postcolonial anthropology. Welsch addresses this topic in an essay at the end of the first volume. The burden of his argument is that Lewis’s work appeared at precisely the time that a new (or, as Welsch would argue, not so new) approach became fashionable. Welsch maintains that narrow village-based fieldwork, championed by Malinowski among others, has averted our gaze from regional and historical studies. The argument is conducted in a spirited fashion. But Lewis’s failure to produce little more than a catalogue to the Field collection during his life has farther banished him to the footnotes of anthropological history. This is a great shame, as this monograph demonstrates. This book completes the work that Lewis failed to do himself—to link material culture with an analysis of change and exchange. This restores Lewis to a proper place in the pantheon not only of anthropology but also museology.