



Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay (1846-1888), often described as the earliest ethnographer of Melanesia, lived and travelled widely throughout the region between 1871 and 1886. His published diaries illuminate Melanesian lives to an extent unmatched by previous European accounts. Perhaps the least well known of his exploits is his 1879 visit to the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu), a period for which none of his diaries have survived. However, albums of Miklouho-Maclay's field sketches are held at the Russian Geographical Society in St Petersburg, and a complete digital scan has been made of the album containing his sketches from the two months that he spent in the New Hebrides (full story inside, page 7).

Vuorbalasa, of Vanua Lava Island, Banks Island group. Vuorbalasa literally means 'woman made of pigs'. Drawn by Miklouho-Maclay.



ni-Vanuatu ancestors found



(Left) Kai, a chief from Mele Island off Efate. Drawn by Miklouho-Maclay.

(Centre) Virunza of Malo Island off Espiritu Santo. Drawn by Miklouho-Maclay.

(Below) The drum for the father of Uni or Coshi at the batu sacred place of the village of Burhu, Ambrym, central Vanuatu, 30 May 1879. NN Miklouho-Maclay, 'Melanesia 1879', Album No. 21, Folio 58. Russian Geographical Society, Saint Petersburg.



NN Miklouho-Maclay as Anthropologist: the 1879 New Hebrides trip

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Macleay Museum Miklouho-Maclay Fellows 2008

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Our research project, conducted as joint holders of the Macleay-Miklouho-Maclay Fellowship for 2008, has revolved around close analysis of this album, both for the light that it sheds on this little-known period of Miklouho-Maclay's field research, and for the analysis that it enables of the relationship between texts, images and 19th century encounters in Oceania. With an extraordinary degree of realism, the sketches on the album's folio pages depict men and women, houses and artefacts, landscapes and elements of the natural environment. Unusually for the times, Miklouho-Maclay took great care to identify each of his subjects by name, while also noting local terms for places and artefacts.

For the first time, Miklouho-Maclay's extensive notes in Russian on the margins of the folios have been transcribed and translated into English by Elena. These texts, together with the images, were then introduced by Chris to living ni-Vanuatu descendants of the communities originally visited by Miklouho-Maclay, with remarkable results. Almost every individual depicted in the sketches is still recalled today by direct descendants, many of them bearing the same personal names as their ancestors. The detail of the sketches has also allowed for extensive commentary on traditional custom by the modern custodians of Vanuatu's cultural heritage, the filwokas of Vanuatu's National Museum and Cultural Centre. Copies of the images have been returned to each of the communities depicted, where they continue to elicit further comment and recall.

Our tenure of the Macleay-Miklouho-Maclay Fellowship has enabled us to draw on the extensive archive of documentary, artefactual and photographic materials held at the Macleay Museum and the Mitchell Library that relate to Miklouho-Maclay's Melanesian travels. A public talk at the museum on 9 July 2008 described some of the preliminary results of our research, which will be published in full as academic papers and in the form of an extensively illustrated monograph. The success of this pilot project, and in particular the enthusiasm with which these materials have been greeted by ni-Vanuatu communities, has encouraged us to seek further funding for an expanded project on Miklouho-Maclay's notebooks and albums for other parts of Melanesia, and we anticipate an extended relationship with the Macleay Museum as this broader project unfolds.

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