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Of Medusae and Men: On the Life and Observations of Alfred G. Mayor

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Of Medusae and Men: On the Life and Observations of Alfred G. Mayor

BY LESTER D. STEPHENS

IN 1896, on his first voyage to the Pacific Islands, the noted marine biologist Alfred Goldsborough Mayor recorded in his journal that the Polynesian possesses a “superbly symmetrical” physique and “a clear rich brown” complexion.¹ From that point through his eighth expedition to Oceania in 1920 and to his untimely death in 1922, Mayor expressed special admiration of the Polynesians. Although he spoke favorably of other South Pacific Islanders, the scientist saw a physical perfection in the Polynesian that resembled the beauty of the coelenterates, with which he was intimately familiar. An authority on the coelenterates (radially symmetrical invertebrates), Mayor had often viewed elegant medusae, or jellyfishes, gently pulsating in a glassy sea, and watched graceful ctenophores, or comb jellies, rhythmically propelling themselves by beating the tiny rows of ctenes that fringe their fragile forms. He had also observed a host of coral reefs, each consisting of colonies of symmetrical corallites formed by secreted aragonite. Mayor implicitly transferred his admiration of the esthetic balance and beauty of those primitive organisms to his notions of physical perfection in humans.

Certainly, Mayor recognized beauty in other marine invertebrates, but he viewed their beauty in gradations. In fact, he applied the same conception to ethnic groups of humans, placing the Polynesian peoples above all in physical attractiveness. In Mayor’s eyes, even white Europeans fell below Polynesians in beauty of form and color; the people of darker skin fell lowest on the scale of comeliness—their “sooty color” and their disproportionate bodily forms, in his perception, representing types of inferior

1. Alfred G. Mayer, “Journal of a Journey Around the World by Alfred G. Mayor,” 22 March 1896, Alfred Goldsborough Mayor Papers, Syracuse University Library (hereafter Alfred G. Mayor Papers, SUL).

Lester D. Stephens, professor of history at the University of Georgia, specializes in the history of science in America. He is the author of *Joseph LeConte, Gentle Prophet of Evolution* and a forthcoming volume on science, race, and religion in nineteenth-century Charleston, South Carolina.

appearance.² Yet to Mayor, degrees of bodily beauty were not necessarily correlated with intelligence and culture, for, in his judgment, the European type epitomized the highest stage of both. Alfred G. Mayor discussed this subject in several published articles, as well as in manuscript journals and in an unfinished typescript of a book titled “Pacific Island Reveries,” now located in Syracuse University Library’s Department of Special Collections.³ Mayor’s comments on the Polynesians do not represent those of an anthropologist, of course, but they are nevertheless interesting because they emanated from the mind of a distinguished scientist and reveal not only some of the racial stereotypes of his era but also his genuine concern over the plight of the peoples of Oceania under the domination of their imperial masters.

Born on 16 April 1868, Alfred Goldsborough Mayor was the son of Katherine Duckett Goldsborough and Alfred Marshall Mayer, one of America’s greatest physicists during the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁴ The change in the spelling of the son’s name from Mayer to Mayor came about during the first world war, when Mayor decided to alter the Germanic form in order to show his disdain for the nation he considered responsible for starting the war and for committing heinous acts against civilized countries.⁵ In any case, Katherine Mayer died within a few hours after Alfred was born. In June 1869, Alfred senior married Maria Louisa Snowden, who displayed great affection for her stepson and strongly encouraged him to develop his interest in nature and in drawing. Eventually, however, the father prevailed in his desire for his son to study mechanical engineering and physics, and in 1885 young Alfred entered Stevens Institute of Technology, where the elder Mayer was a professor of physics. Upon graduating from Stevens Institute in 1889, young Alfred became an assistant to a physics professor at Clark University. After serving in that capacity for one year, he accepted a similar position at the Uni-

2. Alfred G. Mayor, “Journal of a Journey Around the World by Alfred G. Mayor,” 22 March 1896, Alfred G. Mayor Papers, SUL.

3. Alfred G. Mayor, “Pacific Island Reveries,” [1921] typescript, Alfred G. Mayor Papers, SUL.

4. Harriet Hyatt Mayer, *The Mayer Family, 1604–1911* (Annisquam, Mass.: privately printed, 1911).

5. Alfred G. Mayer to Robert S. Woodward, 10 January 1918, Carnegie Institution of Washington Archives (hereafter CIW); Alfred G. Mayor to H. S. Jennings, 2 November 1918, H. S. Jennings Papers, American Philosophical Society Library; Alfred G. Mayor to Joseph A. Cushman, 3 March 1919, Paleobiology Division Manuscript Collection, United States National Museum.

versity of Kansas. Although he was an exceptional student of physics and mathematics, Mayor could not shake his strong desire to study biology. After the Kansas professor informed Alfred M. Mayer that his son had his heart set on doing advanced study in zoology, the father conceded that his son would never be happy unless he pursued his passion. Thus, in 1892 the young man set out for Cambridge, Massachusetts, to study zoology at Harvard University and at that institution's noted Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ).⁶

Long interested in butterflies, Mayor first studied with Charles B. Davenport, a young instructor who quickly recognized the scientific ability and artistic talent of his new student. The two men became lifelong friends as well. In 1896 and 1897, Mayor published two monographs on color patterns in the wings of butterflies and moths. In addition, he drew and colored the figures for the monographs, which were published in the prestigious *Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology*.⁷ At the time, the MCZ was under the direction of Alexander Agassiz, the son of its famous founder, the great naturalist Louis Agassiz. Like his father, the junior Agassiz was mainly interested in marine invertebrate zoology. Admiring the artistic ability and writing skill of Mayor, Agassiz encouraged him to concentrate upon the small jellyfishes known as hydromedusae, the generally larger jellyfishes known as scyphomedusae, and the comb jellies, or ctenophores. Mayor accepted the challenge and soon established himself as an authority on those animals. In fact, he accompanied Agassiz on a major collecting expedition to the Caribbean Sea in 1892–1893, and on scientific expeditions to the South Pacific in 1896, 1897–1898, and 1899–1900. Meanwhile, he collaborated with Agassiz as coauthor of four major articles on the medusae, all of which were published in the *Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology*, and he drew the 145 figures and thirty-six color plates included in those articles. In 1895, Agassiz appointed Mayor as curator of the collections of specimens in a phylum known then as Radiata. Mayor excelled at that job as well, and in 1897 Harvard University

6. H. H. Mayer, *The Mayer Family*; Charles B. Davenport, "Alfred Goldsborough Mayer," *National Academy of Sciences Biographical Memoirs* 21 (1926): 1–4; Alfred Marshall Mayer to Alpheus Hyatt, 19 February 1892, Hyatt and Mayer Correspondence, Princeton University Library (hereafter PUL); Lucien I. Blake to Alfred Marshall Mayer, 7 March 1892, Alfred Marshall Mayer Papers, Syracuse University Library.

7. Alfred G. Mayer, "The Development of the Wing-Scales and Their Pigment in Butterflies and Moths," *Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology* 29 (1896): 209–36; Mayer, "On the Color and Color Patterns of Moths and Butterflies," *ibid.*, 30 (1897): 169–256.

officials took the extraordinary step of bestowing upon him the honorary Sc.D (doctor of science) degree.⁸

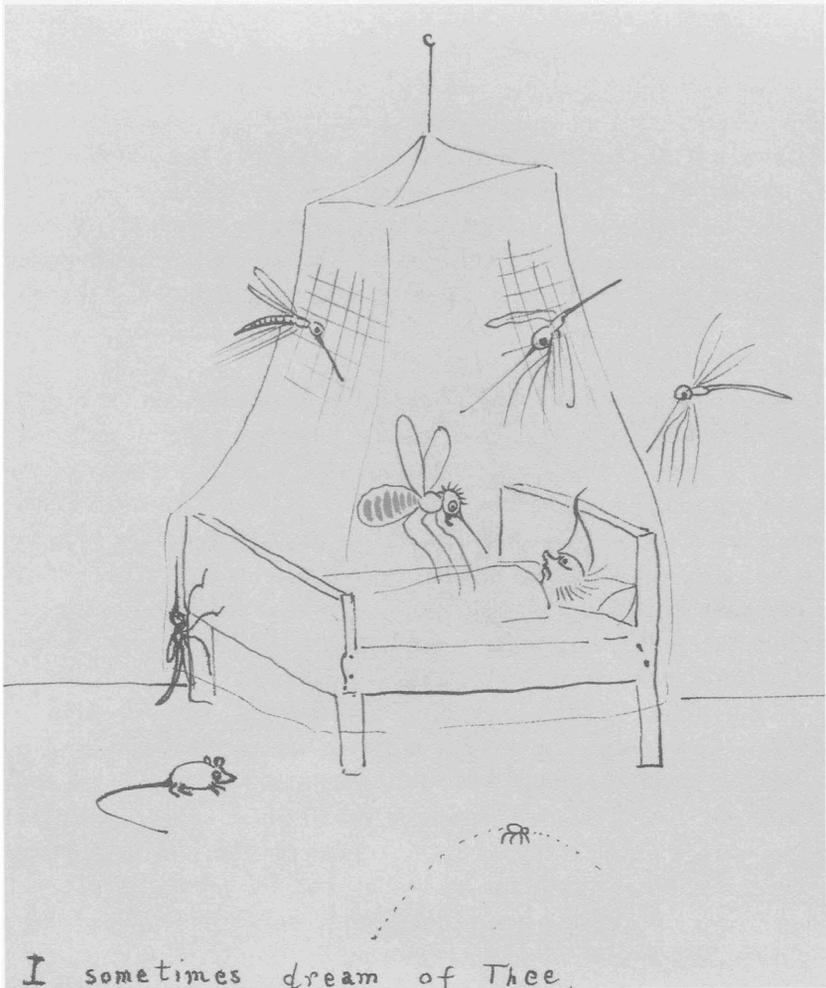
Agassiz planned to work with Mayor in producing a comprehensive volume on all of the world's medusae known at that time, but, although most of the burden of writing the descriptions and drawing the figures of all of the species fell upon Mayor, Agassiz was too occupied with other matters to hold up his end of the agreement. Mayor found this disconcerting and frustrating, and he also chafed under the authoritarian manner of the aging Agassiz, who, throughout his long tenure as director of the MCZ, tended to treat his subordinates as though they were graduate students, and, like his father before him, forbade them to publish any studies completed during their association with the Museum without his express permission. Privately, Mayor referred to Agassiz as "Alexander the Great," and, although he admired him as a zoologist and even wrote a sympathetic biographical sketch of him after his death in 1910, he aptly characterized Agassiz as "combative, resolute, quick to anger and slow to forgive, purposeful, and full of subtle resources."⁹

Meanwhile, in 1894, Mayor fell in love with Harriet Randolph Hyatt, a daughter of the prominent naturalist and MCZ faculty member Alpheus Hyatt. Born on 16 April 1868, and thus only a few days younger than Mayor, she had become, like her younger sister Anna, an accomplished sculptor. By 1896, Alfred and Harriet had decided to marry, but their concern over the possibly adverse reaction of Agassiz to what he might perceive as Mayor's intention to go his own way, their desire for Mayor to finish the work on the world's medusae, and their realization that Alfred's prospects for a new position were poor at the moment led them to keep their engagement secret until early in 1900.

In the meantime, Mayor seized every opportunity to visit his true love, and he and Harriet corresponded frequently whenever he was away on

8. Mayor, "Pacific Island Reveries," typescript, Alfred G. Mayor Papers; Alexander Agassiz and Alfred G. Mayor, "On Some Medusae from Australia," *Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology* 32 (1898): 15–19; Agassiz and Mayer, "On Dactylometra," *ibid.*, 32 (1898): 1–11; Agassiz and Mayer, "Acalephs from the Fiji Islands," *ibid.*, 32 (1899): 157–89; Agassiz and Mayor, "Medusae of the Tropical Pacific," *Memoirs of the Museum of Comparative Zoology* 26 (1903): 139–75.

9. Alfred G. Mayor to Harriet R. Hyatt, 28 August, 10 September, and 27 October 1897, 12 and 17 July and (n.d.) September 1898, and 28 May, 23 and 26 June 1899, Harriet Randolph Hyatt Mayor Papers, Syracuse University Library (hereafter Harriet Mayor Papers, SUL); Alfred G. Mayor, "Pacific Island Reveries," typescript, Alfred G. Mayor Papers, SUL; Alfred G. Mayor to Alexander Agassiz, 14 May 1899, Hyatt and Mayor Correspondence, PUL.



Sketch made by Alfred G. Mayor in a 1 June 1897 letter to his wife Harriet. He writes: "Fleas are not the only attraction on the reception committee of Key West. Mosquitoes are also cordially inclined." All illustrations in this article are from the Alfred G. Mayor Papers, Syracuse University Library.

field trips. Alfred wrote often from the places where he was collecting specimens of medusae and, fortunately, most of the letters he exchanged with Harriet survive, not only for the period of their long courtship but also for the years from 1900 to 1922, when he was away on scientific expeditions. The letters are among the rich reserve of Mayor and Hyatt papers in the Syracuse University Library. The correspondence between

Alfred and Harriet reveals the remarkable literary ability of each, and they contain several charming pencil sketches that humorously depict the agonies and frustrations of being apart during their engagement. In addition, their letters are replete with interesting commentaries upon a variety of subjects, not the least of which was Alexander Agassiz. For example, on 8 October 1897, Harriet expressed disgust over Agassiz's decision to take Mayor along with him on a forthcoming voyage to the South Pacific. "The lesser Agassiz, your Alex the Great," she penned in a moment of frustration, "is to me Ivan the Terrible." Harriet added, "He seems spider-like, [ready] to absorb all the men who fall in his great web, the Museum."¹⁰

Good news came to Mayor in April 1900, however, when the trustees of the Brooklyn Institute offered him the position of curator of the natural sciences in its auxiliary organization, the Brooklyn Museum. By the fall of that year, he and Harriet had married and were in Brooklyn. The energetic Mayor set about to elevate the status of the Brooklyn Museum by enlarging its collections, developing an educational program, and arranging for the regular presentation of lectures by noted scientists. In every way he succeeded, meanwhile continuing his own research on medusae and writing scientific articles and a popular book titled *Sea-Shore Life*.

Although his success endeared him to the trustees of the Brooklyn Institute, Mayor longed to hold a full-time research position, and he yearned to leave Brooklyn, which, in his judgment, was deficient in intellectual and cultural affairs. Increasingly, after the birth of his son Alpheus Hyatt in 1901 and his daughter Katherine Goldsborough in 1903, Mayor viewed Brooklyn as especially undesirable because he believed his children would not receive a good education in the city. He never revealed his feelings about the city to the trustees of the Brooklyn Institute, however, and when he resigned in 1904 they not only accepted his decision with regret but also appointed him as honorary curator for life.¹¹

10. Harriet Hyatt to Alfred G. Mayer, 8 October 1897, and 6 July 1899, Harriet Mayor Papers, SUL.

11. Alfred G. Mayer to Mrs. C. B. Davenport, 18 April 1900, and Alfred G. Mayer to C. B. Davenport, 23 January 1901 and ca. 8 February 1904, Charles B. Davenport Papers, American Philosophical Society Library (hereafter Davenport Papers, APS); Alfred G. Mayer to Franklin W. Hooper, 22 November, 30 May, and 2 July 1901, and 23 April 1902, Alfred G. Mayor Correspondence, Brooklyn Museum Archives; Alfred G. Mayer to Harriet Hyatt Mayer, Harriet Mayor Papers, SUL; Alfred G. Mayer, "The Variation of a Newly-Arisen Medusa from the Western Atlantic," *Science Bulletin, Museum of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences* 1 (1902): 1-27; Mayer, "Effects of Natural Selection and Race-Tendency Upon the Color-Patterns of Lepidoptera," *ibid.*, 1 (1902): 31-86; Mayer, "The

Although he desired to hold a position at the MCZ or in Harvard's zoology department, Mayor recognized that he was unlikely to be appointed to either. So, the ever-astute zoologist kept his eyes open for other opportunities. One started to unfold in 1903, when the trustees of the Carnegie Institution of Washington began to entertain thoughts of supporting research in both experimental and marine biology. Mayor's former professor and old friend Davenport was ideally suited to direct the first program, and, in 1903, the Carnegie trustees selected him to serve as director of the Department of Experimental Biology, to be located at Cold Spring Harbor, on Long Island. In the meantime, Mayor quietly launched a campaign to get the Carnegie trustees to establish a marine biology station on Loggerhead Key, situated at the end of the string of small islands extending from the southern tip of Florida into the Gulf of Mexico and commonly called Dry Tortugas, or simply Tortugas. Having worked extensively in the Tortugas, Mayor was aware of the rich diversity of marine life that flourished in the abundant coral reefs of the Keys and in the nearby Gulf Stream. Persuasive and charming in manner, he succeeded in his effort, and the trustees not only agreed to establish the Tortugas Marine Biological Laboratory on Loggerhead Key but also to invite Mayor to serve as its director.¹²

Generous allocations from the Carnegie Institution allowed Mayor to erect a dock and buildings for the laboratory and living quarters, to purchase a yacht and other vessels and equipment, and to pay the expenses of biologists for traveling to Loggerhead Key for research. Mayor succeeded in attracting six to twelve researchers each year to spend up to six weeks at the laboratory. In addition to making arrangements for each season's work at the laboratory, overseeing operations, and editing the volumes in which many of the research reports were published, Mayor continued to conduct research himself. More than two hundred reports were published

Atlantic Palolo," *ibid.*, 1 (1902): 93–103; Mayer, "Medusae of the Bahamas," *Memoirs of Natural Science, Museum of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences* 1 (1904): 1–33; Mayer, *Sea-Shore Life* (New York: New York Zoological Society, 1905); *Prospectus and Yearbook of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences*, 1900, 1901, 1902, 1903, and 1904.

12. Alfred G. Mayer to C. B. Davenport, [1 May 1902?] and 14 February 1903, Davenport Papers, APS; Alfred G. Mayer to "President [Charles D. Walcott], Carnegie Institution," 7 April 1902, Mayer to Hooper, 2 and 7 May and 3 June 1902, Mayer to Davenport, 3 June 1902, and Mayer to Alexander Agassiz, 6 March 1903, Alfred G. Mayer Correspondence, Brooklyn Museum Archives; Charles D. Walcott to Alfred G. Mayer, 25 January 1904, Alfred G. Mayor Papers, SUL; A. August Healey to Alfred G. Mayer, 12 February 1904, Hyatt and Mayer Correspondence, PUL.



A view of the interior of the main laboratory building of the Carnegie Institution of Washington Department of Marine Biology, Loggerhead Key, Tortugas, Florida, ca. 1918. Photograph by Alfred G. Mayor.

in the *Papers from the Tortugas Laboratory of the Carnegie Institution of Washington* while Mayor was in charge of the station, and more than one dozen of them were reports of Mayor's own research.

In 1910, Mayor completed the great work he had begun with Agassiz, though the latter decided to withdraw from the project because he could not find time to carry out his responsibilities for it and because Mayor had in fact done most of the descriptions and all of the figures and plates for the volumes. Published by the Carnegie Institution, the three-volume work, titled *Medusae of the World*, contains 735 pages of species descriptions,

425 text figures, and seventy-six beautifully rendered colored plates. The work became a classic and remains useful to specialists today. Two years later, in 1912, Mayor published a splendid volume titled *Ctenophores of the Atlantic Coast of North America*, also under the auspices of the Carnegie Institution.¹³ Mayor wrote all of the species descriptions and drew all of the seventy-six figures for it, including several colored plates. As with his work on the medusae, it contains descriptions of several species new to science, and it is still an important source of reference for specialists. At least seventy of Mayor's taxa of medusae and ctenophores are currently valid. In addition to other studies, Mayor conducted a number of experiments on scyphomedusae, especially on the species known as *Cassiopea xamachana*, one of the so-called upside down jellyfishes.

Meanwhile, Princeton University had appointed Mayor to an adjunct position on its faculty, and eventually he moved with his wife and his four children, including Brantz, born in 1906, and Barbara Snowden, born in 1910, to Princeton, New Jersey. During the fall and winter of the academic term of 1910–1911 and again from 1915 to 1922, Mayor held the adjunct appointment at Princeton and continued to plan each season's work at the Tortugas Laboratory. As a consequence of his association with Princeton, a considerable number of his papers are in the special collections department of the Princeton University Library, complementing the extensive collections of Mayor and Hyatt papers at Syracuse University.¹⁴

If the Tortugas Laboratory was ideal for certain types of biological research, it was personally far from perfect for the scientists who conducted research there. The windswept little island on which the laboratory was situated kept visiting researchers isolated not only from their families but also from anyone except the small group of fellow laborers for up to six weeks, occasionally longer. Mayor strove to break the monotony of the nearly barren landscape and the blinding brilliance of the sand by shipping many tons of New Jersey soil to the laboratory site and by planting shrubs and trees from the mainland around the grounds. A more seri-

13. Alfred G. Mayer, to Harriet Mayer, 29 June 1904, Harriet Mayer Papers, SUL; Alexander Agassiz to Alfred G. Mayer, 6 and 11 August 1904, Alexander Agassiz Letterbook, Museum of Comparative Zoology Library; *Carnegie Institution of Washington Yearbook, 1904* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1905), 50–4; Alfred G. Mayer, *Medusae of the World*, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1910); Alfred G. Mayer, *Ctenophores of the Atlantic Coast of North America* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1912).

14. See Davenport, "Alfred Goldsborough Mayor," 4–5, 12–3.



Aerial view of the laboratory buildings of the Carnegie Institution of Washington Department of Marine Biology, Loggerhead Key, Tortugas, Florida, July 1921. Mayor's note on the back of this photo points out (left to right) "the dock; the kitchen (this side); the dining room (far side of dock); the men's quarters (crew, etc.); water tank and toilet beneath; the old lab (tar paper roof); the dormitory." Photograph by Alfred G. Mayor.

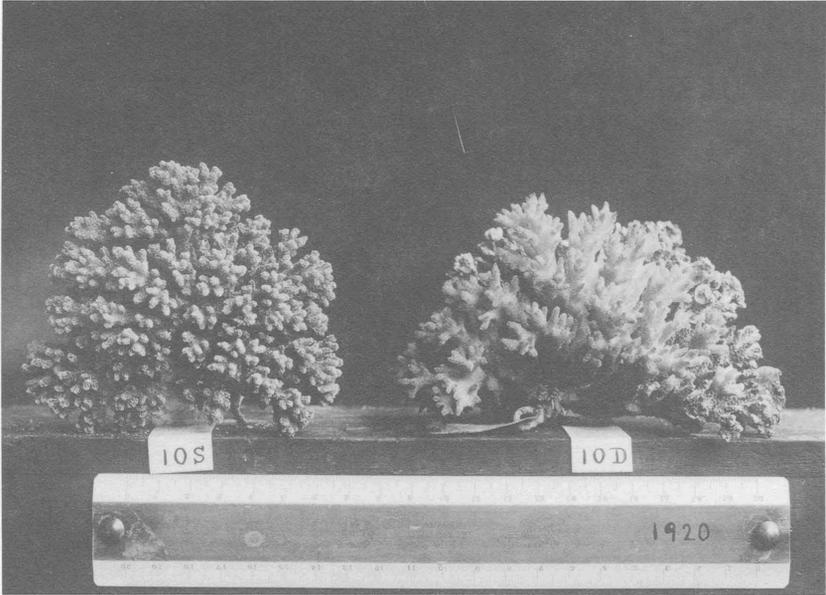
ous problem was the threat of tropical storms. In fact, Mayor kept the laboratory open only from late April until the first of August because of the higher incidence of hurricanes in August and September. Even so, a tropical storm was an ever-present threat, and, in 1907, one arose so suddenly that Mayor and his associates barely had time to board the yacht and flee before a raging wind that severely damaged the laboratory buildings and drove the yacht a hundred miles away from its port. Hurricanes ravaged

the laboratory again in 1910 and 1919, but, fortunately, no one was there in either case.¹⁵

By 1910, in fact, Mayor had already begun to consider a more desirable location for the Carnegie Institution's marine laboratory. Among the places he inspected during the next few years were Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and the Bahamas. The difficulties associated with the Tortugas location were not, however, the only reason why Mayor lost some of his interest in the region he had once considered as ideal for marine studies. He had come to realize the need for expanding research in the field of marine biology. In addition, although he was an extremely devoted husband and father, Mayor was a man of the sea, and he found great pleasure in traveling upon the vast oceans to faraway places, especially to the islands of the South Pacific. Furthermore, by 1910, he had become interested in another group of cnidarians, namely, the stony corals (Order Scleractinia). His interest had been whetted by the work of T. Wayland Vaughan, one of the most active and industrious of the researchers who worked at the Tortugas Laboratory and one of the world's leading authorities on the taxonomy of corals and on the nature of coral reefs. Increasingly intrigued by the nature of hermatypic, or reef building, corals and how depth, wave action, and other environmental factors influence their development, Mayor recognized a need for doing comparative studies between the reef corals of the Caribbean and those in the South Pacific. He easily persuaded the Carnegie Institution president, Robert S. Woodward, a physicist by training and an old friend of Mayor's father, to appropriate funds for expeditions to Oceania and Australasia, where coral reefs abound. Thus, in 1913, 1917, 1918, 1919, and 1920, Mayor led expeditions to the South Pacific, mainly, but not exclusively, for the purpose of studying coral reefs and their ecology. He made some of his studies by submerging in a diving hood, a risky venture in itself but all the more dangerous in the case of Mayor because he was suffering from tuberculosis by 1917.¹⁶

15. Alfred G. Mayer to Harriet Mayer, 11 April 1907 and 24 June 1911, Harriet Mayor Papers, SUL; Alfred G. Mayer to C. B. Davenport, 1 November 1910, Davenport Papers, APS; *Carnegie Institution of Washington Yearbook* (hereafter *CIW Yearbook*), 1907 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1908), 107; *CIW Yearbook*, 1910 (1911), 25-6, 117-20; *CIW Yearbook*, 1919 (1920), 185.

16. Alfred G. Mayer to Harriet Mayer, 26 January and 1 November 1913, 5 April 1915, and 16 June 1917, Harriet Mayor Papers, SUL; J. Stanley Gardiner to Alfred G. Mayer, 11 March 1914 and 6 July 1915, Alfred G. Mayor Papers, SUL; Alfred G. Mayer to Robert S.



Specimens of the scleractinian coral *Pocillipora damicornis*, collected by A. G. Mayor from the Aua Reef, near Pago Pago, Samoa, in 1920. Originally a single, living coral head, it had been sawed in equal halves in 1919. Each section was embedded in concrete and returned to the water, one (labeled S) in shallow water, and the other (labeled D) in deeper water. In 1920, Mayor removed the corals from the water and measured and photographed them as part of a study of coral growth.

Mayor had already indicated through notes in his scientific journals and in letters to Harriet that he was also interested in the peoples and the culture of the South Pacific islands, especially those occupied by Polyne-
sians. Although he never expressed to Woodward or to the Carnegie In-
stitution's trustees any intention to conduct studies of the South Pacific
Islanders, Mayor published in 1915 a series of articles on Tahiti and a se-
ries on Fiji. Both series appeared in the *Popular Science Monthly*, but the
final part of the latter was continued in a new, related magazine, the *Sci-
entific Monthly*. In addition, in 1915, he published an article on the peoples

Woodward, 22 August 1912, 18 January 1916, 9 and 27 December 1917, and 15 January 1918, and [Robert S. Woodward] to Harriet Mayor, 19 December 1917, and T. Wayland Vaughan to Alfred G. Mayer, 29 July 1913, CIW; *CIW Yearbook, 1909* (1910), 125-6; *CIW Yearbook, 1911* (1912), 121-6; *CIW Yearbook, 1912* (1913), 21, 119, 125-8; *CIW Yearbook, 1913* (1914), 21, 164-5; *CIW Yearbook, 1914* (1915), 181, 186-7; *CIW Yearbook, 1915* (1916), 183-6; *CIW Yearbook, 1916* (1917), 171; *CIW Yearbook, 1919* (1920), 185-8; *CIW Yearbook, 1920* (1921), 185-92.



“The High Chief of Anaa,” Anaa Island, Tuamotu Archipelago, French Polynesia, 1900.
Photograph by Alfred G. Mayor.

of Papua New Guinea, and, in 1916, one on "The Men of the Mid-Pacific," and another on "The Islands of the Mid-Pacific." All of the articles contain photographs of scenery and native inhabitants that Mayor took with his own camera. Then, in 1921, while trying to recover from a severe attack of tuberculosis, Mayor completed the book-length manuscript titled "Pacific Island Reveries." Perhaps he intended to revise and polish the manuscript before sending it to a publisher, but his condition had worsened so that, by early 1922, he could do almost no work at all. Treatment and rest in a sanatorium in Tucson, Arizona, did little to improve his health, but, despite the horrendous condition of his throat and lungs and great debilitation of his physical strength, Mayor went to Loggerhead Key and opened the laboratory in May 1922. On 24 June he made his way by sheer will power to the shore of the Key to wash his underclothes. After wading into the shallow water, he fainted and died, perhaps from drowning but more likely from the ravages of the disease. Fortunately, his widow preserved the manuscript of "Pacific Island Reveries" along with his other papers and their correspondence. She died in 1960, at the age of ninety-two, after living the final year of her life in the home of her sister Anna Hyatt (Mrs. Archer M.) Huntington, who, with Alpheus Hyatt Mayor, donated the papers to the Syracuse University Library a few years later.¹⁷

In the manuscript journal he kept during his first trip to the South Seas in 1896, Mayor recorded only a small number of observations about the peoples and culture he encountered, devoting most of the space to scientific matters, which included some superb descriptions of coral reefs and several of the marsupial mammals of Australia. It was, however, in that journal that he wrote the favorable comment about the symmetrical character and skin color of the Polynesians. More of his comments on the

17. Alfred G. Mayer, "A History of Tahiti," *Popular Science Monthly* 86 (1915): 105-27; *ibid.*, 403-52; *ibid.*, 452-66; Mayer, "A History of Fiji," *Popular Science Monthly* 86 (1915): 521-38; *ibid.*, 87 (1915): 31-49; *ibid.*, 292-306; Mayer, "A History of Fiji," *Scientific Monthly* 1 (1915): 18-35; Mayer, "Papua, Where the Stone-Age Lingers," *ibid.*, 105-23; Mayer, "The Men of the Mid-Pacific," *ibid.*, vol. 2 (1916): 5-26; Mayer, "The Islands of Mid-Pacific," *ibid.*, 125-48; Mayer, "Java, The Exploited Island," *ibid.*, 350-4; Alfred G. Mayer to Stuart Paton, 31 March 1922, and Mayer to J. Alexander Miller, 17 April 1922, Alfred G. Mayor Papers, SUL; Alfred G. Mayer to Harriet Mayor, 27 June and 4 October 1921, 11 and 16 June 1922, Harriet Mayor Papers, SUL; Alfred G. Mayor to C. B. Davenport, 19 December 1920 and 25 October 1921, Davenport Papers, APS; W. H. Longley to L. R. Cary, 20 September 1922, Tortugas Laboratory Papers, APS; Alfred G. Mayer to Joseph A. Cushman, 19 November 1920, Paleobiology Division Manuscript Collection, United States National Museum; John W. Mills to Walter M. Gilbert, 6 July 1923, CIW.

South Pacific Islanders during his second journey to the region are extant, including some in the manuscript journal he kept and others in letters to Harriet Hyatt. In 1897, the ship made its first stop at Honolulu, a city that impressed him as an especially beautiful place. Mayor was fascinated by the indigenous residents of Hawaii and the impact of American imperialists upon them. In a letter to Harriet, dated 28 October 1897, he wrote, “One cannot but admire the beauty of the natives,” but he viewed them as “mere withering remnants of a once proud race.” Obviously enchanted by their physical features, he wrote, as he often did, in delightful alliteration, of “their rich bronze skin and smiling yet pensive faces framed by luxuriant locks of rippling black hair.” The Hawaiian peoples, he added, “stand wonderfully erect, and the carriage of the women is truly queenly.” Yet, as with so many of his contemporaries, he believed “they have the minds of children.” Nevertheless, he did not condone their exploitation by Americans, and he declared that they had been “robbed” by their imperial masters. Even more “shameful,” as he viewed the plight of the Hawaiians, “our ‘superior’ race has transmitted to them the hideous diseases that are slowly but shurely [*sic*] stamping out their life.” In his judgment, the “last act in the disgraceful drama” would be annexation of their land “in order that a few sugar planters and politicians may gain more gold.” Before he left the subject in his lengthy missive to Harriet, he penned his mental image of the land. “All around us,” he said, “lies an ocean of brilliant blue flecked with purest white where the gentle trade wind ruffles it.” On the lovely island of Oahu, he wrote, “emerald shadows flit forever . . . a fit subject for the subtle brush of a Monet . . . [for] in the moonlight [the surrounding sea] gleams like molten silver under the deep soft purple of the sky.”¹⁸

Eleven days later, his ship anchored in the harbor of Suva, Fiji, and Mayor encountered a somewhat different type of peoples—a mixture of Polynesians and Melanesians whose ethnic identity is closer to the former than to the latter. On that occasion and upon the return of the expedition vessel to Fiji in late December 1897, where it remained until mid-January of 1898, Mayor had opportunities to observe the Fijians and their culture. Of Suva, the capital city, he wrote to Harriet, “The streets swarmed with natives—great superb looking men and women standing straight and looking the perfect picture of health.” He noted, however, that their skin color was “dark and muddy” and that their hair “stands straight out like a

18. Alfred G. Mayer to Harriet Hyatt, 28 October 1897, Harriet Mayor Papers, SUL. Actually, Mayer added to the letter through ca. 9 November 1897, before he mailed it.

mop.” In addition, he observed that the Fijians applied lime to their “naturally jet black” hair and thus caused it to have “a red appearance.” Obviously, though he generally depreciated peoples of darker skin, Mayor admired the Fijian natives. He was less charitable toward the immigrants from India who had settled in the island’s main city, calling them “sneaky looking dark brown Hindoos.”¹⁹

It was not until his third voyage with Agassiz to the South Pacific, however, that Mayor had an opportunity to increase his direct knowledge of the native peoples and cultures of a large number of the major islands and lands of Oceania and Australasia. That expedition, lasting from August 1899 to March 1900, took him to the Marquesas Islands, the Tuamotu Archipelago, the Society Islands (mainly in Tahiti), the Cook Islands, Niue, Tonga, Fiji, the Ellice Islands (now Tuvalu), the Gilbert Islands, the Marshall Islands, and the Caroline Islands. The voyage continued on to the Ladrone Islands (now Marianas) and Japan. His next visit did not occur until 1913, when he led a scientific expedition to Australia, stopping briefly on the way at Tahiti and spending several days in Papua New Guinea on the return voyage. During the following year he began the articles on Tahiti, Fiji, and other South Pacific Islands. From the praise he lavished upon Tahiti, it is certain that he admired that French-controlled island above all others.²⁰

In the series titled “A History of Tahiti,” Mayor wrote of a land in which “the beautiful is wedded to the grand.” Referring to “the sylvan setting of the waterfall where rainbows float on mists among the tree ferns,” he said that “the charmed memory of Tahiti lives only to die with the beholder.” Mayor was aware of the barbarous customs, as he called them, of the early inhabitants of the island, but he urged his readers not to be “over harsh in condemning the Tahitians.” Although he credited the introduction of Christianity into Tahiti with checking the practices of infanticide, human sacrifices, and tribal warring, Mayor asserted that “the adoption of Christianity [had] contributed to the increase of certain fatal diseases, notably tuberculosis.” Moreover, through efforts to impose the standards of Western civilization upon Tahitians, the conquerors of the is-

19. Alfred G. Mayor, “[Journal of Voyage to] The Fiji Islands, 7 November 1897 [to 5 February 1898],” Alfred G. Mayor Papers, SUL; Alfred G. Mayor to Harriet Hyatt, 28 October [9 November] 1897 and 1 January 1897 [1898].

20. Alfred G. Mayor, “Pacific Island Reveries,” Alfred G. Mayor Papers, SUL; Alfred G. Mayor to Harriet Hyatt, 4 March 1900, Harriet Mayor Papers, SUL; Alfred G. Mayor to C. B. Davenport, 18 December 1899, Davenport Papers, APS.

land and the teachers who followed had caused “the destruction of almost all that once was theirs in the hope that things of our own creation might arise.”²¹ Mayor would return to these matters five years later in his “Pacific Island Reveries.”

Similar themes appeared in Mayor’s series of articles on Fiji. In his description of the physical appearance of that land Mayor again painted a delightful word picture, though he did not find the main island of Fiji quite as attractive as that of Tahiti. Still he wrote of “the beauty of the mountain valleys . . . [that] time can not efface from the memory.” Those lovely valleys are enhanced, he said, by “the rich brown stems of tree ferns crowned by emerald sprays of nature’s lacework,” and deep in the forest greenery one could catch a glimpse of “a flash of color, where some cockatoo or parrot or brilliant butterfly appears, only to vanish in the leafy maze.” In the same place, one could note “through a break in the canopy a furtive beam of sunlight [that] penetrates to gild the greenness of the shade.” Of course, as he had indicated to Harriet in 1897, he did not find the Fijian as beautiful as the Tahitian and others of pure Polynesian descent. “The eye” of the Fijian, he said, “lacks the languid softness of the Polynesian’s and is small, swine-like and often bloodshot, imparting a cruel aspect to the visage.” Mayor’s views toward anyone possessing African physical characteristics differed, unfortunately, very little from the stereotypes of blacks held by many other contemporary Americans. Still, Mayor respected the Fijians and spoke of “the native grace and unconscious dignity of these superb people.” He believed, however, that they were deficient in stamina and were more prone to catch diseases, though, of course, as he had previously noted, the diseases that claimed the life of so many of the South Sea peoples were introduced by white Europeans and Americans.²²

Again Mayor criticized the Christian missionary for being “too often predisposed to regard all customs not his own as ‘heathen,’ or pernicious.” Indeed, Mayor tended to view all religions as too tradition bound. “It is,” he observed, “a common belief that the savage is more cruel than we [Americans],” but the “cruelties” of the savage, he added, are hardly worse “than the lynching or burning of negroes . . . events so common in America that even the sensational newspapers regard them as subjects of minor interest.” Furthermore, stated Mayor, “despite our mighty institutions of freedom . . . there remain savages among us.” To Mayor, it was

21. Alfred G. Mayer, “A History of Tahiti,” 108, 121, 403, 455.

22. Alfred G. Mayer, “A History of Fiji,” *Popular Science Monthly* 86 (1915): 525, 529–31.

necessary for any group to “conquer *itself*” before it could attain a state of civilization. He therefore rejected the notion that the great powers could ever succeed in civilizing any “primitive race,” for, “under our domination the savage dies, or becomes a parasite or peon.” In fact, Mayor maintained that the colonial powers had harmed the natives of the Pacific Islands by depreciating their art, which he viewed as “the highest expression of their intellectual life . . . a means of gratifying their instinct for the beautiful, and a record of their history and their conception of the universe.” In one of his rare moments of optimism over the future of the South Sea natives, Mayor expressed hope that in Fiji the course of exploitation might be ended and that, if left to themselves, the Fijians might “attain civilization.” Obviously, he was torn between a desire to leave them free to follow their own customs and a belief that they must become more like Americans and Europeans since they were otherwise doomed to extinction. “As one who has known and grown to love these honest, hospitable, simple people,” he said, “I can only hope that the day is not too far distant when a leader . . . will turn their faces toward the light of a brighter sky.”²³

In late July of 1913, Mayor led the first of the five scientific expeditions sponsored by the Carnegie Institution to the Pacific Islands and Australia. His main objective on the voyage of 1913 was to study the stony corals of the Great Barrier Reef. During the voyage to Australia, he stopped briefly in New Zealand. There he observed yet another group of Polynesians, the Maoris. On 21 August he arrived in Australia, where he and his small team of researchers devoted most of their time to the study of coral reefs and to some of the marine invertebrates associated with them, especially around Thursday Island. Although he had been in Australia for a short time during the spring of 1896, Mayor now had a greater opportunity to make additional observations about the Aborigines who had populated the continent many thousands of years before the first European explorer laid eyes upon the land. On the return trip, in November 1913, Mayor and his party sailed the short distance from Australia’s Cape York peninsula to Port Moresby, in Papua New Guinea. Two years later, in his articles “Papua, Where the Stone Age Lingers” and “The Men of the Mid-Pacific,” Mayor offered a number of comments on the Papua New Guinean natives, and, in the latter, a few on the aboriginal inhabitants of Australia.

To Mayor, Papua New Guinea lacked most of the attraction of the

23. Alfred G. Mayer, “A History of Fiji,” *Popular Science Monthly* 87 (1915): 32, 49, and Mayer, “A History of Fiji,” *Scientific Monthly* 1 (1915): 34.

smaller South Pacific islands, and he observed that Europeans had long avoided it because there “the heavy air . . . flows lifeless and fetid over the lowlands as if from a steaming furnace.” But Mayor admired the Papuans and called for Europeans to educate them “in the production and sale of manufactured articles.” In his judgment, Europeans should encourage the native peoples to return to the making of their traditional arts and crafts, which would aid them and develop “that self respect and confidence . . . which the too sudden modification of their social and religious systems is certain to destroy.” Most of the missionary schools, he averred, emphasized a traditional European curriculum and the importance of converting to Christianity, but he believed secular schools should be established for the purpose of teaching manual training to young Papuans. Mayor argued that the new schools “would in no manner interfere with the religious teaching received from missionaries.” In his opinion, it did not matter “whether Christianity be true or false . . . for the natives are destined to be dominated by Christian peoples.” Unlike the case he had made for developing more independence for the Fijians, Mayor obviously believed that the Papuan would fare better under his imperial master. The Papuan was, after all, basically “Negroid” in character. Once again, he resorted to characterization by color of skin and by bodily type. The skin of the Papuan, he wrote, “is dark chocolate.” He described the Papuan as having long arms, “poorly developed legs” and a “weakly made” body. Moreover, he characterized him as having “small eyes, bloodshot and sinister” and a “weak chin and thick protrusive lips [,] revealing descent from Africa.” Beauty was not, to Mayor, solely in the eye of the beholder.²⁴ Following prevailing perceptions of his day, Mayor obviously embraced the notion of “the white man’s burden,” even if he was skeptical about the ability of the Christian missionary to carry that burden properly.

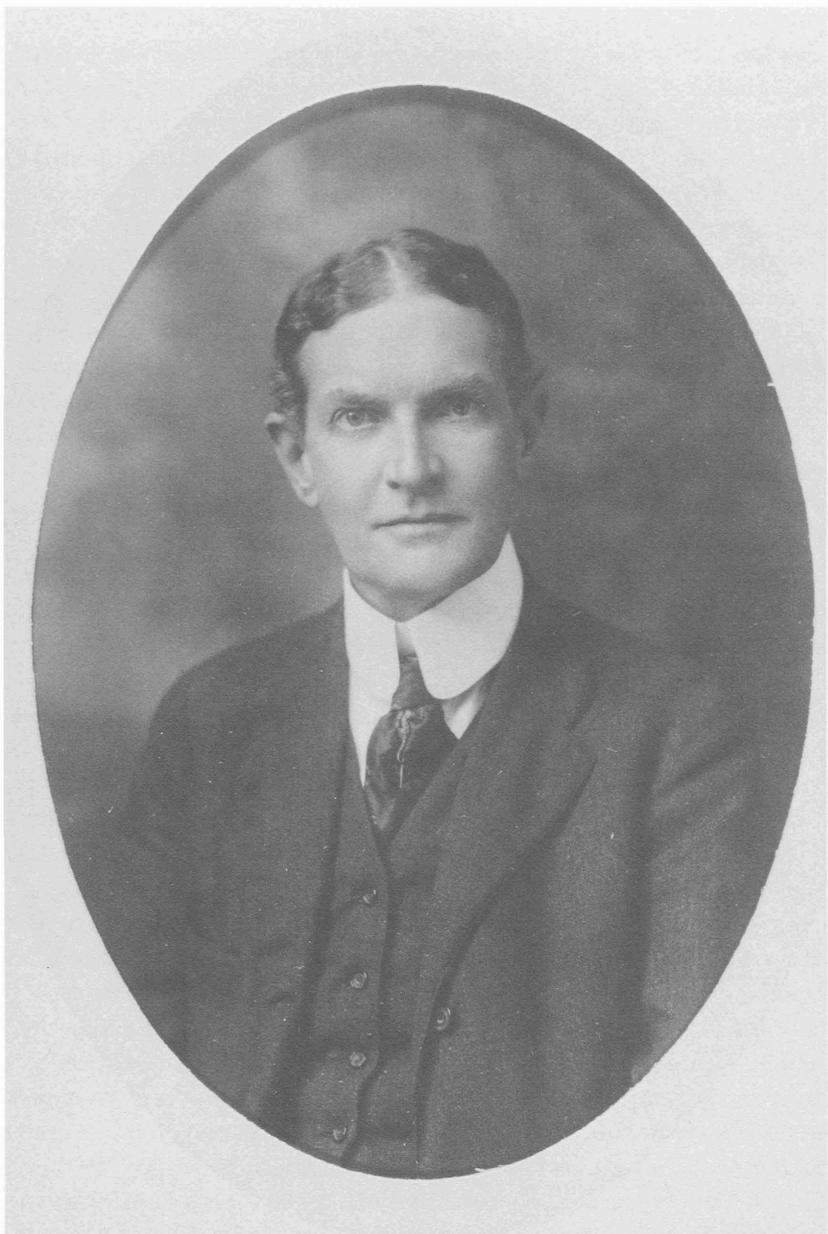
The same was the case for the Aboriginal Australian, as Mayor viewed the attributes of racial inheritance. Indeed, he referred to the Aborigines as “among the lowest of existing men,” who, in his words, represent a “striking contrast to the finer races of the Pacific.” The Aborigine, added Mayor, is incapable of rising “to the intellectual level of the natives of the Pacific Islands.” In fact, he even placed the Papuan above the Aborigine, whose “little eyes glitter suspiciously from deeply sunken orbits hidden under unkempt locks of matted hair.” After other negative characterizations of the Aborigine, Mayor declared that his features “form a demon-

24. Alfred G. Mayer, “Papua,” 107, 117–19; Mayer, “Men of the Mid-Pacific,” 12–3.

like picture as he skulks silent and snake like through the thickets where he seeks the kangaroo." Alas, as with many, perhaps most, of the scientists and other intellectuals of his day, Mayor was unable to recognize the flaws in his argument and to apply the same kind of standards toward the human animal that he used in his descriptions of the invertebrate creatures of the seas. Nor was he able to view varieties in human skin color and physique in the same way that he viewed the varieties of color and form in corals and other coelenterates. Thus, for example, in his "The Islands of the Mid-Pacific," also published in 1916, he found beauty in the different forms of corals. "Olive and yellow-greens, mauve and purple-browns . . . [characterize] the living corals," he wrote. The same kind of beauty he found in the diverse types of starfishes, anemones, and giant clams inhabiting the Pacific coral reefs he had studied.²⁵

On his scientific expeditions in 1917, 1918, and 1919, and 1920, Mayor concentrated upon the study of corals around the islands of Samoa. Before 1917, he had spent only a short time in that area—once in 1896 and again in 1898. During those voyages he spent time in Apia, located on the island of Upolu, now part of Western Samoa, but his research during the period from 1917 to 1920 was done exclusively in American Samoa, mainly around the islands of Tutuila and Rose. On the voyages of 1918 and 1920 he also visited Fiji again. Mayor wrote little about the Samoan natives, for, during the period from 1917 to 1921, he was mainly occupied by his scientific work, and by efforts to relocate the Tortugas Laboratory. As tuberculosis weakened his strength in 1921 and compelled him to decrease his activities, Mayor turned his attention to writing "Pacific Island Reveries." Although he said comparatively little about the Samoans in that manuscript, it is clear that he admired them as much as he admired the other groups of Polynesians. His main objective in writing the manuscript, however, was to inform his readers that the Polynesia "which still lingered in the autumn of its decline" when he first saw the South Pacific Islands had "now vanished forever into the night of things that were." He had seen the peoples of those islands, he said, "when much of their primitive charm and strangeness still lingered," but he believed that their occupation by Europeans and Americans, the adverse effect of diseases upon them, and the introduction of modern technology into their culture had brought their paradise to ruin. Noting the population of each major island at the time the imperial powers claimed it as a possession and at the

25. Alfred G. Mayer, "Men of the Mid-Pacific," 12–5; Mayer, "The Islands of the Mid-Pacific," 129–30.



Alfred G. Mayor, 1915. Photograph by Pach Bros., New York.

time he was writing the proposed book, Mayor lamented the awesome decline. Of the native inhabitants of the Marquesas Islands, for example, he noted “the moral and physical corrosion of their once proud race.” The problem with the peoples of Polynesia, however, was not, in Mayor’s judgment, due solely to the impact of the Western countries upon their culture. The decline was also a consequence of “the age-old communism of the race.” Elsewhere, he referred to the “archaic socialism” of Polynesian culture, contending that it “stultified individual ambition” and led to a decline in the peoples’ “mental power and moral stamina.” The lassitude of Polynesians, he added, “is in largest measure the outcome of this pernicious communism.” Obviously influenced by his own commitment to a system of capitalism and almost certainly sharing a quite-common concern over the recent triumph of the Bolsheviks in Russia, Mayor told his readers that “a crushing indictment of socialism glares out as an object lesson in the South Pacific, where races unrivaled in beauty or stature, and potentially intelligent, have withered . . . [and become] a doomed race.”²⁶

Yet, likely because he found the Polynesians so beautiful, Mayor contradictorily held out some hope for them, arguing that, despite their ability to obtain no more than a mental age of fourteen, they could be saved by enlightened governments and Christians. Consistency was not necessarily a virtue in Mayor’s notion of the intellectual capacity of the Polynesians, for he had previously argued that Melanesian, Papuan, and Aboriginal Australian adults were also childlike, but, of course, as Mayor saw it, they did not possess the physical beauty of the Tahitians, Samoans, Hawaiians, and other Polynesian groups. In part, according to Mayor, evolution by natural selection accounted for the lower state of the native peoples of Oceania and Australasia, as it did in Africa and in Asia. Still, there was hope, especially for the Polynesians, but everything depended upon a change of attitudes. It is time, he asserted, for “another type of missionary in the Pacific.” That type would not be a “religious zealot,” and he would not focus on teaching the Bible and the academic subjects. Instead, he would be a missionary for the manual training of Polynesian youth. Graduates of the traditional, “stupid schools learn little that can be of use to them,” he declared. Even in Fiji, where, in Mayor’s view, the British had governed wisely on the whole, the masters had failed to provide a meaningful education for the natives, and, contended Mayor, once again in a contradictory comment, “these docile . . . and amiable chil-

26. Alfred G. Mayer, “Pacific Island Reveries,” i, 2, 24–8, 37–49.

dren” should be encouraged to advance on their own.” While he repeated his belief that “an enlightened progressive race” could never succeed in civilizing “a degraded and savage one,” he called upon the colonial powers to help the native peoples of the Pacific Islands to flourish.²⁷

Early in his treatise and again near the end, Mayor revealed another reason for his concern over the future of the South Pacific Islanders, namely the potential of Japan to dominate them—and possibly the whole world. Said Mayor, “Truly in the Pacific we behold the sea of destiny, the ocean upon which must be fought out the vast question, who shall eventually dominate the world, Asia or Europe?” After visiting Japan during the voyage of 1899–1900, Mayor had become concerned that, although it had adopted “the modern sciences of Europe,” Japan had remained unchanged in its “national obsessions” and in its notion of being “the chosen people.” By 1921, he was warning that Japan might “plunge itself into fatal conflict with the Gentile races.” There is in Japan, he added, a “deficiency of originality . . . [and] imagination,” but the Japanese possess the “racial trait” of “a spider-like quickness” that could bode ill for the Pacific Islanders and for their masters.²⁸

Alfred G. Mayor was a superb scientist, and he possessed some remarkable insights into the nature of humans and their cultures. But, as with all scientists and other intellectuals, he was to some extent a product of his own culture and his own time. His contributions to science and his fascinating life are worthy of further study, as are his interesting and sympathetic, but often flawed, observations on the Polynesians and other natives of Oceania and Australasia. To examine his thoughts is to open yet another window to those perceptions in the past that allow us to see more clearly their links to our present.

27. *Ibid.*, 49, 95–6.

28. *Ibid.*, ii, 36, 220, 225.