

A 'Perceptive Observer' in the Pacific: Life and Work of Otto Finsch

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Friedrich Hermann Otto Finsch (1839–1917) is best known today for his involvement in the German colonial annexation of northeast New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago. A self-taught ornithologist, ethnologist and museum curator, he was recognised in his own lifetime as a "perceptive observer" and "collector *par excellence*", but struggled to gain traction for his interpretations of Pacific peoples and societies amongst his formally trained peers (Luschan 1897: 76; Schmeltz 1894: 268). The town of Finschhafen in Papua New Guinea's Morobe Province still bears his name, as do a number of bird species.

Finsch was born in 1839 in the spa town of Bad Warmbrunn. Then part of the Prussian province of Silesia, it is now Cieplice Śląskie-Zdrój, a district in the town of Jelenia Góra in south-western Poland. He was the third and youngest son of Moritz Finsch (1800–1883), a glass painter and trader from the region of Thuringia in Germany, and Mathilde Finsch, née Leder (1810–1891), whose Bad Warmbrunn family had a long history in the linen trade. From an early age, Finsch began sketching the local landscape, flora and fauna, as well as visitors to the town's public baths, foreshadowing what were to be lasting interests in natural history (especially ornithology) and ethnology. He also learned to stuff bird skins and sold them as curiosities to local businesses and tourists. He had little formal education, attending only the local elementary school, but received informal encouragement and support in his early years from the school's head teacher, the local priest, and the physician responsible for visitors to the baths.

In 1857 Finsch broke off a commercial apprenticeship to his father and travelled via Vienna to Pest (now Budapest, Hungary), where he studied briefly at the Royal Hungarian University (now the Eötvös Loránd University), supporting himself through the preparation of natural history specimens. In 1858 he travelled onward to Rustschuk (now Russe, Bulgaria), at that time part of the Ottoman Empire. Here he remained for the best part of two years, offering private tuition in German and undertaking lengthy expeditions to study the bird life of the region.

Finsch returned to Germany in 1859. After seeking employment unsuccessfully in Berlin and Düsseldorf, he relocated to the Netherlands, and from 1861 pursued his interest in ornithology as assistant to German ornithologist Hermann Schlegel (1804–1884), then director of the Imperial Museum of Natural History (now Naturalis) in Leiden. In 1864, at the instigation of another prominent German ornithologist, Gustav Hartlaub (1814–1900), he returned to Germany to become curator of the ethnological and natural history collections of the Museum Society in Bremen. He held this role for a total of fifteen years, overseeing the transfer of the collections to the ownership of the City of Bremen and their rebranding as the Municipal Natural History and Ethnography Collections (now the Übersee-Museum Bremen),

and rising to the position of director in 1876.



Anon., c. 1870, Portrait of Otto Finsch, 2, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-150666367

While in Bremen, Finsch published extensively on ornithological topics, including the two-volume *Die Papageien, monographisch bearbeitet* (The Parrots: A Monograph, 1867–68), for which he was awarded an honorary doctorate in 1868 by the Friedrich Wilhelms University in Bonn. Another notable publication was *Neu-Guinea und seine Bewohner* (New Guinea and its Inhabitants, 1865), the first German-language monograph on New Guinea, including geographical, geological, zoological and botanical information, together with descriptions of New Guinea's indigenous inhabitants. As the publication of this work preceded Finsch's first visit to New Guinea by over a decade, he was dependent entirely on others' accounts for his information, and drew especially on publications from French and Dutch expeditions over the period 1822–58. He also undertook several expeditions of his own while employed in Bremen, visiting North America in 1872, Lapland in 1873, and Western Siberia in 1876.

In 1878 Finsch resigned from his position as director to take up a travel grant from the Humboldt Foundation for Natural History Research and Travel, administered by the Royal Academy of Sciences in Berlin. The Humboldt Foundation, established shortly after Alexander von Humboldt's death in 1859, had already funded two expeditions to South America and three to various parts of Africa, but Finsch was the first traveller to receive financial support for a voyage to the Pacific. His initial proposal was for a year's travel to Micronesia, "to obtain for [Berlin's] scientific institutions and museums as much [material] as possible from the anthropologically and ethnographically interesting populations of Micronesia, which are swiftly nearing extinction, and at the same time to investigate the flora, fauna and geological formation of these islands" (Royal Academy of Sciences in Berlin 1878). However, the Academy was sufficiently pleased with his progress to approve two

requests for additional funding. Finsch's voyage eventually extended from mid-1879 to late 1882 and took him to Hawai'i, the Marshall, Gilbert, and Caroline Islands, Nauru, New Ireland, New Britain, New Zealand, Australia, south-east New Guinea, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka.

During his three years in the Pacific, South and Southeast Asia, Finsch pursued the ethos of "salvage anthropology" expressed in his initial proposal to the Humboldt Foundation, assembling extensive collections, not only of stuffed birds and animals, preserved plants, and fossils, but also of cultural artefacts and human remains, while consistently emphasising their rapid disappearance and the urgent need "to save what it was still possible to save, before the ever-increasing influence of trade and mission had utterly destroyed the last vestiges of the former natural life of these islanders" (Finsch 1882b: 553-554). The majority of these collections were incorporated into the holdings of Berlin's Royal Museums, although Finsch was permitted to keep so-called "duplicate" specimens. He also published widely on his travels in popular and specialist outlets, including a series of columns in the twice-daily regional newspaper *Hamburger Nachrichten* and regular reports to leading German pathologist Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902), co-founder and president of the Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory (BSAEP). Amongst these reports, excerpts of which appeared in the BSAEP's *Proceedings* and its annual scientific journal *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, were a brief account of Finsch's excavations of "ancient Hawaiian burial grounds" near Waimanalo, Oahu; a longer article on the inhabitants of Pohnpei in the eastern Caroline Islands, "based on [his] own observations and inquiries"; and a 78-page "descriptive catalogue" of the moulages (facial plaster casts) of "ethnic types" he had produced during his travels (Finsch 1879, 1880, 1884).

In some respects Finsch's experiences in the Pacific changed his pre-voyage views considerably. His early respect for missionary endeavour in the region was replaced by scepticism and disapproval, seemingly influenced in large part by the actions of Wesleyan Methodist missionary George Brown (1835-1917), who shortly before Finsch's arrival in New Britain had led an armed raid against villages whose inhabitants he blamed for the killing of four mission teachers. Notwithstanding his often paternalistic language, Finsch was genuinely concerned about violent conflict in the Pacific between islanders and Westerners, and acknowledged that there was blame on both sides, given the examples he had seen, "amongst the representatives of civilization, [of] truly dubious men, with a morality below that of the natives" (Finsch 1902a: 420). As he gradually abandoned his expectations of benefit from the presence of missionaries, he looked instead to commerce and imperial intervention to reduce social violence, hoping that a "greater expansion of trade" would lead eventually to "a great power assum[ing] responsibility" for the region and "undertak[ing] more towards the energetic protection of whites and natives" (Finsch 1881).

Finsch's field experiences also substantially complicated his ideas about human physical and cultural difference. He became less confident, not only in the validity of "racial" diagnostics - skin colour, facial angle, cephalic index - favoured by physical anthropologists, but even in the existence of clear and constant distinctions between "races". He concluded a letter to Virchow from Torres Strait by declaring: "From all that I have seen so far of human races [...] I come more and more to the conviction that they cannot be distinguished by characteristics on a natural historical basis, but merge into one another to such an extent that the

difference between Europeans and Papuans ultimately becomes completely unimportant” (Finsch 1882a: 166). Similarly, his initial assumption that the lifeways of “savage” peoples would display a series of characteristics consistent with their perceived developmental stage was tested to breaking point by the Tolai of East New Britain, who convinced him over the course of seven months that nakedness and cannibalism, seemingly unequivocal markers of savagery from a European perspective, could co-exist with equally unequivocal markers of civilisation, including “regulated cultivation of the soil”, “a great love of music”, and the use of “a medium of exchange corresponding to [European] money” (Finsch 1883: 445).

Shortly after his return to Germany, Finsch became involved with the Consortium for the Preparation and Establishment of a South Sea Island Company (later the New Guinea Company), a small group of influential men interested in creating German colonies in Oceania. Adolph von Hansemann (1827–1903), the group’s head, engaged Finsch to lead an expedition to “the unknown or little-known coasts of New Britain, as well as the north coast of New Guinea to the 141st meridian, in order to locate harbours, establish friendly communication with the natives, and acquire land to the greatest possible extent” (Finsch 1888: 7). Posing as a group of scientists to dispel potential Australian suspicions about their intentions, Finsch and his fellow expedition members made six separate voyages between September 1884 and July 1885 in the misleadingly named steamer *Samoa*, resulting in the declaration of northeast New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago as German protectorates.

Contemporary newspaper reports speculated that Finsch “would probably be appointed administrator of the annexed territory” (Anon 1884a, 1884b, 1884c). If Finsch had indeed hoped for such an appointment, it did not eventuate. He was offered, but refused, a contract as station director, objecting to the menial nature of the responsibilities involved, the contract’s prescriptive language, and the prospect of the New Guinea Company vetting all his publications and confiscating for its commercial benefit any items of ethnographic interest he collected. However, finding a more congenial position proved exceedingly difficult, and Finsch spent the best part of a decade following his return to Germany without formal employment. During this period he exhibited his collections and sold parts of them to what are now the American Museum of Natural History in New York, USA; the Field Museum in Chicago, USA; the Luigi Pigorini National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography in Rome, Italy; the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in St Petersburg, Russia; and the Weltmuseum in Vienna, Austria. He also published a lengthy account of his travels in 1884–85, *Samoafahrten* (Journeys in the *Samoa*, 1888); a descriptive catalogue of around 1000 artefacts purchased by what was then the Royal and Imperial Museum of Natural History in Vienna, Austria; and an exceptionally detailed overview of his various expeditions, exhibitions, publications, and other activities over the period 1859–99 (Finsch 1888, 1893, 1899a). He was assisted by his second wife, Elisabeth Finsch, née Hoffman (1860–1925), whom he had married in 1886; the daughter of a painter, she was herself a talented artist, and illustrated many of his catalogues. Little is known about his first wife, Josephine Wychodil, apart from the approximate dates of their marriage (ca. 1873) and divorce (during Finsch’s 1879–82 Pacific voyage).

In 1897 Finsch “abandoned ethnology, with a heavy heart”, and returned to ornithological work at the Imperial Museum of Natural History in Leiden (Finsch 1899b). He was deeply unhappy there; in a letter to Virchow, he described the museum as “a large warehouse

without any noticeable scientific life” and lamented that he, Elisabeth and their daughter Esther were forced to live “as though in exile” (Finsch 1899b). He also felt strongly that his efforts in realising Germany’s colonial ambitions had not received sufficient recognition, a point he stressed in articles with titles such as “Wie ich Kaiser-Wilhelmsland erwarb” (How I acquired Kaiser Wilhelm’s Land, 1902b) and *Kaiser-Wilhelmsland. Eine friedliche Kolonialerwerbung* (Kaiser Wilhelm’s Land: A peaceful colonial acquisition, 1905). In 1904, his own repeated pleas and interventions on his behalf by friends and well-wishers succeeded in obtaining him an honorarium of 1,000 Reichsmarks a year from the Imperial Central Treasury in Berlin. He returned to Germany the same year to take up a more congenial position as curator of the ethnological collection at the Municipal Museum in Braunschweig, where he remained until his death in 1917. His last major publication, *Südseearbeiten* (Pacific Products, 1914), was devoted to the material culture of the Pacific.

Finsch’s legacy as an anthropologist and ethnologist is difficult to assess. As already mentioned, his beliefs about human difference were profoundly challenged by his experiences in the field, and he continued to derive authority and expertise from these experiences long after he had returned to Germany. However, his attempts to change prevailing opinions fell largely on deaf ears. Metropolitan scientists and university-trained professionals, notably Virchow and his successor Felix von Luschan (1854–1924), were making their own reflections on the issue of cultural differences and hierarchies, so they praised his abilities as an observer and collector, but dismissed his attempts to interpret these observations and collections by referring to his lack of formal training. It is also possible that leading German ethnologists were uncomfortable with Finsch’s vocal and practical support of German colonialism because, in H. Glenn Penny’s words, it threatened to “expose the disparity between [their] cosmopolitan visions, their purported liberal humanism, and the realities of collecting in a colonialist world” (Penny 2002: 127–128). In any case, Finsch’s involvement with the New Guinea Company’s colonial ventures had helped open up an ethnographic frontier which proved such a fertile field for further research that his own observations and collections were soon dwarfed by a flood of new material.

More recently, Finsch has received some recognition as a pioneering ornithologist and traveller-naturalist, in particular through a special exhibition and accompanying catalogue at the Ethnological Museum (now the Weltmuseum) in Vienna in 2012. Efforts have also been made to mine his detailed publications for information on traditional practices and material culture in the Pacific. Following the signing of a memorandum of understanding on repatriation between the Charité Medical University in Berlin and the Australian Government in 2008, his acquisition of human remains became the subject of renewed attention, with the result that in 2013–14 the Charité returned ancestral remains collected by Finsch in Cape York and Torres Strait to their Traditional Owners.

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