



Commodore James Erskine RN,
later Admiral of the Fleet.



The artist, Nicholas Miklouho-Maclay,
here with his servant Ahmat

idealistic and full of disturbing contradictions” (ABC, Radio National). Indeed, one is irresistibly reminded of some of the earlier continental-educated scientists who established temporary homes in Sydney and captured the imagination of colonial society, men such as Strzelecki or Leichhardt.

In 1884 he married Margaret-Emma, the widowed daughter of the Premier of New South Wales, Sir John Robertson, very much against his wishes (to say that Robertson was not enthusiastic about the match would be an understatement: he is rumoured to have announced his intention of throwing her Russian fiancé off the Gap...). Miklouho-Maclay’s work took him back to Russia for an extended visit in 1886, where he began to cement his reputation, even corresponding with Leo Tolstoy, but his health was deteriorating, and he died from a brain tumour while visiting St. Petersburg in 1888, leaving many of his ambitions only partially realized.

Given his background, it is little surprise that Miklouho-Maclay was a staunch supporter of the rights of the people of New Guinea at a time when this was becoming a pressing issue – the German Empire had established a protectorate on the northern coast in 1884, and the British under Commodore Erskine would make their own claims for the south coast later the same year. Only with the outbreak of the First World War, when an Australian naval force occupied German New Guinea, did Australia take the penultimate step towards administering all of New Guinea as a Territory, a role they took on until independence in 1975.

NEW GUINEA

The present sketch is testament to Miklouho-Maclay’s abiding interest in the people of New Guinea because, as his inscription confirms, it is based on a visit he made to the Hood Lagoon in August 1881. It was a time of great unrest in New Guinea, as the sometimes fractious relations between colonial settlers – chiefly missionaries and traders – and the local tribes flared into occasional conflict. Without doubt the most significant unrest occurred at Kalo, a nearby village and the site of a London Missionary Society outpost which was raided in March 1881, resulting in the death of 12 men, women and children.

Miklouho-Maclay was in Sydney when news of the events at Kalo began to filter through, and fearing that a punitive raid was being meditated in retaliation, got permission to sail on HMS *Wolverene* (Commodore Wilson) as a sort of de facto intermediary. His role seems to have been rather equivocal, especially given his involvement as an advisor to a clumsy raid on Kalo that resulted in the deaths of four New Guinean men, but it was adjudged a great success by most of those who took part (Webster, *The Moon Man*, pp. 249–252). As his portrait of Koapena makes clear, Miklouho-Maclay must have met the chief while he was making his investigations into the Kalo massacre.

KOAPENA

That Miklouho-Maclay and his colleagues on board the *Wolverene* would have been introduced to Koapena comes as no surprise, because the chief was already a well-known figure by 1881. One of the most striking accounts of him was published in an earlier report by an Australian-appointed Police Magistrate called Henry M. Chester. Sent to investigate some reports of unrest in New Guinea, Chester singled out Koapena as having been responsible for directing a July 1878 attack against some rogue sailors from the *Annie*, a schooner that traded along the coast. Even so, as Chester’s account makes abundantly clear, there is no doubt that Koapena was an arresting and charismatic figure: Chester was clearly not immune to Koapena’s charms, retelling a rather magnificent story of travelling with him on a visit to one of the more remote villages, the whole time anxious about the possibility of another attack. Koapena “was chewing betel at the time,” wrote Chester, “but stopped, and looking fixedly at us for some moments, said, ‘What land will give you trouble? Am I not with you?’ and brought his chunam spoon down with tremendous energy on the gourd” (Chester, *Narrative*, pp. 22–24).



“Commodore addressing Chiefs on board H.M.S. ‘Nelson’, Hood Bay” [caption] from *Narrative of the Expedition of the Australian Squadron to the South-East Coast of New Guinea* by James Erskine, 1880, showing Koapena seated centre, grasping the ebony staff presented to him by Erskine.
(See a separate fully-illustrated catalogue [here](#))

SIR JAMES ERSKINE

Quite apart from its great importance in terms of the history of New Guinea, the portrait therefore also brings together two of the more intriguing figures of Victorian Sydney, the Russian scientist and artist Miklouho-Maclay, and the then serving Commodore of the Australia Station, Sir James Erskine RN (1838-1911). On paper the two men may seem an unusual pairing, but they both had a decisive influence on the creation of the British settlement of New Guinea and they shared a fervent belief in the need to protect the rights of indigenous peoples. Indeed, Erskine's speech at the ceremony to declare the protectorate in New Guinea "has been considered ever since as a declaration of rights for the indigenous people" (ADB). The two men were certainly known to each other, because Erskine is mentioned several times in the diaries of Miklouho-Maclay, since published as *Travels to New Guinea*.

A great many details regarding the history of the portrait can be made out because of a number of overlapping annotations in Miklouho-Maclay's own hand, which can be deciphered with a little care. The reference to August 1881 quite clearly relates to his visit to New Guinea, while there is also a reference to him presenting the portrait to Commodore Erskine on 23 January 1885. Given this date, the note reading "Carthona" would therefore relate to the grand Gothic-revival house built on Darling Point in 1841 for the explorer Sir Thomas Mitchell. In the 1880s it was owned by the solicitor Arthur Mansfield Allen, but he was offering it to be let fully furnished in June 1884, and Erskine is known to have been resident there soon after.

HMS NELSON

A further clue to the background of the portrait is vouchsafed in what is doubtless the most famous account of Erskine's expedition, the grand-folio photographic album published in Sydney in 1885, *Narrative of the Expedition of the Australian Squadron to the South-East Coast of New Guinea*. Testament to the importance of the Hood Lagoon in British and Australian ambitions, this extravagant work includes six depictions of the region (effectively a sixth of the finished work).

Most significant of all, the *Narrative of the Expedition* includes a remarkable photograph of the scene on board HMS *Nelson* as Erskine addressed some of the assembled elders ('Commodore addressing Chiefs on board HMS Nelson, Hood Bay'). Koapena is the figure sitting cross-legged in the middle of the shot and grasping the ebony staff presented to him by Erskine (see above) as "an emblem of authority in the form of an ebony stick with a florin let in at the top, the Queen's Head being uppermost, and encircled by a band of silver" (Lyne, *New Guinea*, pp. 13, 114-118).

Lindt offers a sympathetic and atmospheric account of Koapena aboard the ship in *Picturesque New Guinea*:

"Our guest Koapena, the chief of the Aroma District, although past the prime of life, is a fine stalwart man over six feet high, and decidedly the finest specimen of savage humanity we have seen in New Guinea. He stoops slightly with age, but his bearing is full of grace and dignity, and altogether he looks like a person to select rather for a friend than a foe. He is in full native dress, i.e., waist string, plaited armllets, and head-scratcher, or five-toothed comb. His luggage consists of a little netted shoulder-bag or knapsack, containing a lime gourd, a stick of betel pepper and a few areca nuts, the combination of which articles constitutes his favourite chew. The steward served him dinner in the saloon as soon as ours, which we now almost invariably take on the quarter-deck, was over. Amongst other things he was given some tinned asparagus, a vegetable which he certainly had never seen before. His appetite was wonderful, and he ate enough baked yams and pork to satisfy three ordinary people. The result of this late and heavy meal was that he could not sleep, notwithstanding the soft cushions provided for him in the aft part of the saloon, and I was witness to a midnight conversation equally quaint and ludicrous between this gigantic



Detail of tattoos to Koapena's upper arm and shoulder blade added by Miklouho-Maclay and used to date this work following the Kalo events of 1881

naked savage and Mr. Fort, the General's secretary, who often prefers to do his work in the cool of the night. The former plying his little chunan stick from his lime calabash to his mouth, and now and then taking a chip of betel, by way of variety, watched with curiosity the busy pen of the Secretary seated opposite, writing by the light of three candles, in addition to the saloon lamp. Scarcely a word was spoken, and certainly none were exchanged, the chief contenting himself with smiling and nodding in reply to the Secretary's whispers and dumb show. This nocturnal interview between an Oxford B.A. and a native prince is surely without precedent. I greatly regretted that the time and place afforded insuperable obstacles to my taking a picture of it. The warrior chief, in addition to his other embellishments, had more than thirty crosses tattooed on his breast and back, each of which indicates a life violently taken." (Lindt, p. 73)

Chris Ballard (ANU) writes "the Kalo events of 1881 were (inevitably) complex, but the more important context for this work is Maclay's reworking (and repurposing) of the image for Erskine. I strongly suspect he produced the image during January 1881, immediately prior to the inscription and presentation, as part of his perennial campaign to secure both patronage and support from influential figures. As I mentioned previously, in producing the Erskine painting, he elaborates on the original sketch, adding tattoos to Koapena's upper arm and shoulder blade (see detail, left); intriguingly, he uses a female pudendum tattoo as the source for the upper arm tattoo, something which would have been unthinkable within the Hood Bay community - artistic license or a private joke?"

PRESENTATION

Taken together, this provides a convincing account of how Miklouho-Maclay came to present the portrait to Erskine: the Commodore was newly returned from his important voyage, where he had made the personal acquaintance of one of the greatest chiefs, Koapena. Back in Sydney, Erskine received the news of his promotion to Rear Admiral and also the news that he was being succeeded by Commodore George Tryon. He immediately began the process of tidying up his affairs and making his farewells, hosting a "Goodbye at Home" event at Carthona on 24 January 1885 (see *The Australasian*, 31 January 1885). Miklouho-Maclay, who had petitioned the Commodore personally regarding New Guinea, and who would have agreed in broad outline with the steps Erskine had taken, must have decided to present him with a farewell gift which spoke to their mutual interest in New Guinea, and indeed to their shared history, and therefore gave him this portrait of their mutual acquaintance, the warrior-chief Koapena. It was a magnificent gift, and appears to have been treasured by Erskine, remaining in his family for several decades: its rediscovery is an event to be celebrated.

PROVENANCE:

The portrait was executed by Miklouho-Maclay before 1885 (and perhaps as early as 1881), before being personally presented to Commodore Erskine in January 1885 as a "Momento".

The sketch is a more fully-rendered and much larger version of another associated with the collection of the Russian Geographical Society in St Petersburg. Although quite a large number of Miklouho-Maclay's papers, diaries and correspondence are extant, it is known that many of his more private journals are lost, at least some destroyed by his wife after his death in 1888. We know of no manuscripts by him that have been sold and more importantly, of no examples of his ethnographic art.

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ADB; ODNB; Trove; Watsons Bay Association.



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