



Phebe and Richard Parkinson.

THE PARKINSON LEGACY LIVES ON

BY MAX UECHTRITZ *

They came on a whaling boat from Samoa with a piano, a parrot and a baby.

Even for the adventurous place and time - the Bismarck Archipelago in 1882 - the arrival of Richard and Phebe Parkinson must have been a fascinating sight.

The tall, bearded, distinguished-looking Dane and his exotically beautiful half-American, half-Samoan teenage wife clearly were no ordinary additions to the small, ragtag settlers' group in the new colonial frontier. And the Parkinsons would go on to play an extraordinary role in one of the most colourful and formative eras of Papua New Guinea's modern history.

Their legacy endures to this day in both the soil and soul of the land they came to love.

Theirs is also a poignant love story - one with an unexpected spiritual reunion nearly a century after they were separated by Richard's death.

Richard - botanist, scientist, ethnologist and author - established the country's first coconut plantations for his fabled sister-in-law Queen Emma. He also introduced cocoa and coffee among many other plant and animal species.

His classic 1907 book *Thirty Years in the South Seas* is regarded as the most important anthropological record of the region and his scientific writings and natural history collections reside in some of the world's great museums.

Richard helped establish both Kokopo (Herbertshohe) and Rabaul which between them served variously as capitals of German New Guinea, Australian-mandated New

Phebe was a superb linguist. She spoke English, Samoan, French (learned from the nuns who educated her) and German fluently. But, unlike her husband and sister, it was her mastering of the Tolai language, regional dialects and pidgin, which made her an indispensable business and cultural conduit.

Guinea, and New Britain Rabaul recently celebrated the 100 years anniversary of its foundation under the Germans and the Parkinsons' contribution was highlighted.

Little wonder *Queen Emma* author R W Robson described Richard as "beyond question, New Guinea's most distinguished pioneer" and that he was tagged "the father of our commercial agriculture" by former PNG Prime Minister Sir Rabbie Namaliu.

[Incidental to all this and unknown to most, Richard was of Danish royal blood. He was the illegitimate son of Christian August II, Duke of Augustenberg, second in line to the Danish throne.

The Duke had a love affair with a lady-in-waiting to his wife, the Duchess. The woman became pregnant and five weeks before giving birth was "married off" to the Duke's horse trainer, an Englishman called Parkinson, who then was promptly dispatched back to England and never seen again.

The Duke had young Richard educated in Augustenberg Castle, alongside his half brothers and sisters - with the consent of the Duchess. He built a fine house nearby for the boy and his mother. This house is now restored and heritage protected.

Photographs of Richard and his half brother, Duke Frederick VIII, show a remarkable resemblance. Frederick's daughter Viktoria married Kaiser Wilhelm II, so Richard was the half uncle of the last German Empress and Queen of Prussia.

But Phebe undoubtedly was the woman behind the success of both her husband and her famous sister immortalised in books and a feature film starring American actress Barbara Carrera.

Phebe - like her sister Emma - was born in Apia, Samoa. Their father was American Consul Jonas Coe and mother Johana Le'utu, a princess of the royal Malietoa family of Samoa.

Emma with her then de facto husband Thomas Farrell began trading on the Duke of York Islands in 1879 but it wasn't until the arrival of the Parkinsons three years later that the commercial empire that gave her riches and 'royalty' began to take shape on New Britain.

Richard surveyed and planted Ralum plantation - with its famous bungalow Gunantambu - as Queen Emma's headquarters, then many other coconut and mixed plantations for her. Phebe, crucially, recruited the labour to work them.

Later, when Richard went to work for the German New Guinea Company, Phebe also took over managing Emma's burgeoning



Wife Phebe translates for husband Richard (standing). Phebe was a superb linguist.

plantations as well as the Parkinsons' own at Kuradui.

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If not for Phebe's translations for her husband, *Thirty Years in the South Seas* and his other works could never have been written.

Because of her empathy and innate understanding of them and her willingness to learn their languages and customs, Phebe

was accorded a special affection and status among the local people.

They called her "Miti" or Mother and turned to her to settle disputes and medicate their sick. She periodically saved children from the notorious 'blackbirders' plaguing the coast and placed them with missions.

She would "buy" with shell money other orphans captured in local wars and destined for a lifetime of abuse and slavery and send them off to the sisters. She even took in and raised some orphans at Kuradui where she and Richard were bringing up 12 of their own children.

British author Lillian Overell in her 1921 book A

When Queen Emma sold her empire in 1911 and moved to a luxury Sydney harbourside mansion, she implored Phebe to join her. But Phebe could not bear to leave “her people” and New Britain despite later losing Kuradui in the tough economic climes brought on by World War I.



Queen Emma and Phebe Parkinson (sitting).

Woman s Impression of German New Guinea wrote quaintly about Phebe: “The (Raluana) people came running out of the villages as they heard the carriage. Everywhere Miti was recognised and glad cries of “Miti, Miti” resounded.

“Mothers held up their children that they might see her, withered old women got as near to her as they could, and the luluais shook hands gravely. Miti knew everybody, inquired after their families and circumstances, sympathised with their griefs and smiled benevolently on them all.”

Richard died in 1909. Before his death from a lingering illness, he had laid out the Parkinson family cemetery or mat mat on a headland at Kuradui. He and Phebe made a pact that eventually she would be laid to rest there beside him.

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Though close, the sisters could not have been more different. One saw New Guinea as an opportunity, the other as home.

One died fabulously wealthy in Europe’s playground in Monte Carlo and her ashes lie in a prestigious plot in Vaucluse, Sydney, within two metres of the resting place of Australia’s commercial ‘royalty’, the Packers.

The other lived out her senior years in poverty in the villages of the people she loved and starved to death in a Japanese



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Kuradui House...the Parkinsons' home.

POW camp in 1944. For sixty years, Phebe Parkinson lay lost in a jungle grave on New Ireland, where locals said her spirit wailed to be reunited with her beloved husband at Kuradui.

This happened in January 2004 after her grandson Alf Uechtritz was finally led to the grave by an old man who'd cared for the site

for six decades after helping bury Phebe.

To soothe her spirit, the old fellow Das Das had planted a Tanget bush, native to nearby New Britain, at the head of the grave. Alf arranged to return Phebe's remains to Kuradui, amid an extraordinary outpouring of emotion by the local Raluana people, who turned on a religious festival of feasting and dancing for

Miti's homecoming.

Present were 44 descendants - in four generations - of Richard and Phebe Parkinson. The whole story was captured in documentaries for Australian and Danish television, the Danes intrigued by Richard's royal connection.

Alfred Max Parkinson Uechtritz passed away in 2008 and the local folk are awaiting his

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Phebe Parkinson was popular amongst the locals. She knew everybody and enquired about their families and their circumstances.



Young Phebe Parkinson.

ashes to be brought from Australia. His wife Mary Lou also wants to eventually rest there.

Alf was the son of the Parkinsons' daughter Dollie and was partly raised by Phebe on Sum Sum plantation on the south coast.

Phebe also had a very special bond with another grandson Rudi Diercke with whom she lived out her last decade and who was with her in the Japanese prison camp.

In January last year, Rudi's ashes were placed at Kuradui mat mat by his eldest son Chris Diercke along with those of his brother Michael.

Chris tragically passed away soon afterwards.

The mat mat is lovingly cared for by the traditional landowner Mleke and is a sacred ground to the Raluana people and to the Uechtritz and Diercke descendants.

As Sir Rabbie, himself from Raluana, said in his speech at the 2004 ceremony to welcome Phebe's remains and spirit back: "Now, this cemetery can be a special place and live on for generations of the peoples

of East New Britain and, indeed, for the whole of PNG."

Alongside the cemetery sits a school for the disadvantaged. The Phebe Parkinson Study Centre was set up by Darusila Namaliu, wife of the former Prime Minister Sir Rabbie. Its motto - "Providing a bridge for school leavers to pass" - marks the spirit of its namesake.

Mrs Namaliu, the organiser of Phebe's reburial ceremonies, now has plans to expand the centre and further honour the bond with the Parkinsons by building a replica of their distinctive Kuradui plantation home.

She hopes to win support for the project from New Britain authorities.

The National Museum of PNG has been showing an enlightened approach to celebrating joint indigenous-colonial history and Mrs Namaliu and the Parkinson descendants are hopeful the museum will soon the greenlight to a major exhibition featuring their life and works.

• Max Uechtritz is a great grandson of Phebe and Richard Parkinson.

