

SUGAR AND EDUCATION IN FIJI

David Routledge

Brown or White: A history of the Fiji Sugar Industry, 1873-1973

By Michael Moynagh

The Australian National University

Pacific Research Monograph No. 5

Series Editor, E.K. Fisk

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Education in Fiji: Policy Problems and Progress in Primary and Secondary Education, 1939-1973

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Pacific history still suffers something of the bane of two centuries' European domination of its writing. Historians in Australia and New Zealand still agonize over the nature and future directions of what H.E. Maude called, "the particular branch of history which is concerned with the island peoples, whether indigenous or immigrants . . . a recognized specialization within the general matrix of historical studies".¹ For Maude, Pacific history, although a specialization, is not in any way special in the sense of being different *qua* history. The

past of the inhabitants of the Pacific islands is similar in kind to that of all peoples. It may be studied using the techniques for collecting evidence and the tools of analysis of the contemporary discipline, with the islands clearly at centre stage and the islanders as the main protagonists from whose point of view historical analysis is oriented. From this it follows that Pacific history is by definition both island-oriented and islander-oriented. Substantial contributions to the economic history of Australia, or to the theory of education in the third world may incidentally illumine aspects of the history of the islands, or even provide resources on which it may, in part, be written. They will not, *per se*, be contributions to Pacific history, as Pacific island students at the University of the South Pacific very quickly make clear.

The monographs under review are based on PhD theses more or less revised for publication. Michael Moynagh's history of the Fiji sugar industry is written almost entirely from the point of view of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (C.S.R.) and its officers: the people of Fiji appear as little more than figures on balance sheets. Based on exhaustive research in the C.S.R. records, it is an important study of Australasian economic activity in the Pacific islands. Moynagh begins by noting the dominant role of the sugar industry in the Fijian economy, although he does not address himself to the non-integrated nature of the latter. He argues that the size of the Indian population, and its competition with Fijians for political and economic advantage, stemmed from the introduction of Indian indentured labour - all obvious enough. After a brief survey of the origins of sugar as a commercial crop following the collapse of the cotton boom in the 1860s, Moynagh notes that the circumstances of the Crown colony dictated an "historical alliance between private capital, government, and the Fijian chiefs" (p. 3). Even if the first was soon perceived by the government to be more of a "bear" than a benefit (p. 39). There is something of a Marxist tinge to the analysis, though this is not rigorously pursued.

For example, in the first chapter there is a lengthy exegesis of George Beckford's Caribbean-inspired model dealing with the effect on developing countries of international trade, but this is not mentioned again. The complex relationship between capital, government, and the Fijian chiefs, which was "dialectical" enough, is not explored completely let alone that involving the Indian labourer and the Fijian commoner. Instead, the argument is consistently from the point of view of the company's policy-makers. E.W. Knox, manager for forty years from 1880, had not wanted to expand from the company's New South Wales home base into either Queensland or Fiji, but, recognizing that sugar from the latter would sooner or later compete with Australian, "decided to take a share in the development of the industry and in the profits" (p. 29). Knox's single-minded devotion to profit, together with his grasp of the technicalities of sugar production, permitted the company always to emerge ahead of the sometimes fluctuating economic conditions with which it had to contend, repatriating earnings that were "pretty large", even if they were not "superprofits" (p. 256) - whatever that might mean. Chapters on the Eve Commission, even now affecting Fiji's sugar industry, and on the Denning Report and the favourable circumstances under which the C.S.R. was able to extricate itself from Fiji, conclude what is essentially as Australian-centric study.

If Moynagh's examination of the sugar industry reveals little of the realities of life for the ordinary people of the islands, Whitehead's account of education policy reveals less. Based almost completely on public printed papers "readily available in New Zealand libraries", the study is too obviously an unrevised PhD thesis. Chapter headings such as "The Stephens Report", "The Ten Year Plan", "The Lewis-Jones Report . . .", the "Fifth Development Plan", and "The Education Commission and the Sixth Development Plan" suggest reliance on a very restricted range of sources, and make for heavy reading. Even the opportunity for lightening the tone provided by a number of interviews was not used to any great extent. The argument is to be read

within the context of the emergence after 1945 of "education planning . . . as a challenging subject for scholarly analysis . . . because of the world-wide preoccupation with the promotion of economic and social improvement" (p. xi). Since the author assumes the desirability for Fiji of basing social and economic progress on the "European or Western model" (p. xiii), it is hardly surprising that conditions at village level in Fiji are touched upon only obliquely. Whitehead accepts the colonial government's jejune stereotype of the culturally homogeneous, amiable, and traditionally loyal Fijian volunteering for the armed forces in large numbers during the years 1939-45, in contrast to the serious-minded, industrious and highly self-centred Indian refusing to do so (pp. 72-73). He noted that little or no attempt was made by Indians and Fijians to integrate their communities either by intermarriage or by economic and social cooperation (p. 148). He does not understand that racial lines would not have been so sharply drawn, if the government had not been dedicated to keeping the communities institutionally and physically separate, or if both communities had been preoccupied less with each other than with the hard-line dominance of Europeans in every position of economic and political powers at national level. Whitehead acknowledges that the "far-flung nature" of the Fijian population creates problems. However, he describes as "parochialism" the refusal of the people to adopt such "rationalizing processes" as the combining together of upper primary classes from several village schools (p. 108). He thus fails to appreciate the extent to which the people feared the levelling of cultural distinctions and the imposition on all Fijians of a Bauan norm, that might result from such action. This was a process which had begun with the missionary use of the Bauan language as its Fijian standard, and continued with the early colonial regime's defining of a standard pattern of land tenure. Whitehead's "parochialism" was for the villagers a legitimate expression of individuality necessary to preserve identity.

His main conclusion - that voluntary schools must be abolished in the interests of efficiency - does not take account of their role in this respect. Recognizing that the financial implications of their abolition are at present not supportable, he advocates the quite impractical solution of creating a dual system whereby voluntary schools would be permitted to continue without government assistance (p. 195). He observes that outspoken New Zealand criticism during the colonial period was a reflection of the strong state school system in New Zealand itself, without apparently examining whether his own opinions might derive from the same source (pp. 204-205), rather than from an understanding of the multi-cultural complexity of the Fijian situation. The study does not go beyond 1975, except in a brief two-page postscript which might profitably have been made more extensive for publication. One crucial development has been the Fiji government's commitment to mounting its own seventh form in place of the pre-degree programme at the University of the South Pacific. Cost has intervened, and development has been slower than hoped, but the university has so far found the standards of seventh form graduates to be good, no doubt because of its own close involvement in development particularly of the science programme.

Looking at the monographs in a wider context, it is in respect of their emphasis on the policies and actions of Europeans and their servants that they are weakest as Pacific history. The books are proof of Stern's contention that history, whether art or science, must preserve its immediacy of life.² In the Pacific islands life centres upon Pacific islanders. The problem of reorientation is not easy but must be tackled. First, obviously, the full range of available sources must be sought out and utilized to the full. Moynagh's study, already long, would have become much longer as a result, but as it stands it hardly justifies the second part of its title, " . . . a history of the C.S.R. in Fiji". The deficiencies of Whitehead's study are made clear if it is compared with the chapter on education, en-

titled "Dharma, disputes and education", in K.L. Gillion's, *The Fiji Indians: Challenge to European Dominance, 1920-1946* (Canberra, 1977), which is based on a much wider range of sources. Secondly, sources must be fully utilized. Ethnohistorical and Cliometric techniques have shown that data beyond which is superficially obvious can be extracted from the existing record. Lastly, and most hopeful for redressing the heavily European-biased record of the colonial period, is the collection and use of oral evidence in a systematic fashion. In this respect, there is a long road ahead if the anxieties and doubts of Pacific historians are to be removed, and their specialized branch of historical studies is to emerge as neither more nor less than the study of the past of the inhabitants of the Pacific islands.

David Routledge

Footnotes:

- 1 Maude, H.E. "Pacific History - Past, present and future", Journal of Pacific History, 6 (1971) 3. See also Howe, K.R., "The fate of the "savage" in Pacific historiography", New Zealand Journal of History, 1:2 (1977) 137, and "Pacific History in the 1980s: new directions or monograph myopia?", Pacific Studies, 3:1 (Fall, 1979) 81; Young, J.M.R. in "The National Times", 9 September 1979.
- 2 The varieties of History. From Voltaire to the Present. (Edited, selected, introduced by Fritz Stern, Cleveland, Ohio, 1956). Introduction, p. 24.