THE MAJESTY OF COLOUR: A LIFE OF SIR JOHN BATES THURSTON Volume I; I, the very bayonet
No price stated ($10.95)

The time has long passed when a review of the present work may be justified as an assessment to assist prospective readers of a new book. Its success has so far been such as to preclude publication of a promised culminating volume, but there are some points that even at this stage may profitably be made within the context of Fijian historical studies as seen from Suva, and also with reference to the study of Pacific history at the University of the South Pacific.

The author has been a member of the Department of Pacific History (now the Department of Pacific and Southeast Asian History) in the Research School of Pacific Studies of the Australian National University since his days as a post-graduate student. He has had the added good fortune to have been a particular protege of the late Jim Davidson, foundation Professor of Pacific History at the latter university, and it might have been expected that the present volume would reflect the ideology of that department as it has developed over the last quarter-century or so. There are two sources for this: the inaugural lecture of Professor Davidson, most conveniently to be located, in a somewhat revised version, in the first issue (1966) of the department's 'Journal of Pacific History'; Harry Maude's presidential address to the History Section of the 42nd Congress of A.N.Z.A.A.S. (Port Moresby, 1970, published in J.P.H. VI (1971) pp. 3-24.

Davidson saw Pacific history as emanating from Imperial history. He believed, however, that a shift of emphasis to the islands and their indigenous societies was necessary to correct distortions of evidence of primarily European provenance derived from concepts and assumptions of the writers. He insisted that analysis of situations and developments was as necessary from the point of view of the islanders as from that of the European, and saw the main methodological challenge of the infant discipline to be to devise methods of
coping with multi-cultural societies. Maude, speaking after the Department had been in existence for twenty-one years, laid great stress on the need for Pacific historians to maintain the closest relations with other disciplines in the social sciences in order to overcome the climate of intellectual and cultural self-depreciation forced upon the Pacific peoples themselves as part of the trauma of the colonial experience. He emphasised the importance of unwritten records, including oral tradition, and the great opportunity of the Pacific universities to make a contribution to the methodology of the discipline as a whole.

Despite the advantages of the author's academic experience, and the claims he makes to have produced something new and revealing of the insufficiencies of other scholars, the result is curiously disappointing. There is no question that the work is a monument of scholarship, and that Scarr, within the bounds he sets for himself, is competent in the highest degree. It is safe to assume, for example, that every written word relevant to the subject of the biography has been tracked down and assessed. The lack of a clear picture of Thurston's domestic life, or even of his private character, should thus be attributed to lack of evidence, although it is an unfortunate lacuna in a biography conceived on so extensive a scale.

Scarr writes in his preface that he has attempted a portrait of Fiji. He somewhat condescendingly admits that this is 'worthwhile in itself', but makes it clear that for his purposes the portrait of Fiji is subsidiary to the portrait of the man. This results in one of the severest limitations of the book within the context of Fijian historical studies as practised in the country itself. Social structure, the system of land tenure, and the nature of political processes within the traditional culture receive a treatment so cursory as to be effectively meaningless. This may be justified on the grounds that they are subjects dealt with elsewhere in the literature, but they are controversial, and more important, crucial to an understanding of Fijian reactions in the late 1860s and early 70s - the period on which the book focusses. Fijians move in the background if they move at all; the environment within which the drama unfolds is that of mid-Victorian England in its South Seas transmogrification. The major chiefs are mentioned by name, but even they move within the complexities of the book as little more than cardboard figures.
Even as a portrait of European Fiji, however, the work is marred by too crude an analysis. Scarr sees everything in black and white. All Europeans are 'rampant' racists (the noun 'rampants' is coined (p. 248), presumably in the interests of greater linguistic flexibility), and at times the writing has an almost tractarian tone. Scarr claims, quite correctly, to be the first to have published the results of an examination of the records of the Cakobau Government, but he allows his interpretation to be swayed by the excesses of the newspapers of the time, notably the Fiji Times. He approves of Thurston's standing firm in the face of settler notions of the 'necessary, almost Darwinian and certainly divine pre-eminence of the Anglo-Saxon race', which Commodore J.G. Goodenough, judging the government on a brief prepared by the Fiji Times, is said to have accepted without demur. Apart from being grossly unfair to Goodenough, this is to attribute to the whole of the European community opinions held by only a small part of it. Prosperous merchants and planters, and even those who had hopes of no more than a reasonable living, well understood the importance of satisfactory relations with the Fijians. After the collapse of the cotton boom, such men were few in number, but they were by no means non-existent. A good illustration of the point is provided by a letter with about fifty signatures, supporting the government in the face of the opposition of September 1873 - the subject of chapter 10, entitled 'Treason - High Treason - against the Majesty of Colour', the quotation which provides the general title for the whole work (see J. Morey and others to Cakobau, 10 September 1873, Cakobau Government Records, F1/1, 73/109, Archives of Fiji, Suva). The difference between these men and 'rampant Anglo-Saxons' was pointed out by themselves when they all had a considerable stake and interest in the kingdom. The Levuka beach community may have fanned the polemics of the Fiji Times, but one of the few things Thurston and Goodenough had in common was their dislike of the proprietor, so it is unlikely that this did their cause any good. Would-be planters of little substance, pressing Fijians for land and adopting an arrogantly racist posture in the fact of their insecurity, may have been at one with the denizens of Levuka beach, but even if such men were a majority of Europeans in Fiji it should be remembered that they constituted only a very small percentage of the total population.

The collapse of the Cakobau Government and the tortuous negotiations leading to the cession of Fiji to
Britain are the most important events dealt with in the volume. I still believe that my paper, 'The negotiations leading to the cession of Fiji, 1874', The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History 2:3 (May 1974) pp. 278-93 (based on chapters in the Ph.D. thesis so roundly condemned) will provide a useful gloss to anyone attempting to thread the intricacies of chapters 11 and 12 of this book. Scarr wages a campaign of invective against Goodenough almost comparable to that of the egregious editor of the Fiji Times, without the excuse of the laxer literary conventions of the age. The commodore may have been less intellectually gifted than Thurston, but the one was as racist as the other - in the manner of nineteenth century Englishmen. Thurston's brand was of a particularly patronising variety (as was that of Sir Arthur Gordon) which caused him to believe that he understood the Fijians better than they did themselves, and certainly that he knew what was best for them.

A major difficulty with the book as a whole is that Scarr adopts a quite extraordinarily orotund and convoluted method of addressing his readers. This not only becomes tiresome after a while, but actually obscures meaning. References are made backwards and forwards in the text, sometimes not (and the idiosyncratic method of numbering the footnotes adds to the difficulties), so that a quite unreasonable amount of effort is required to follow the line of argument. Two examples will suffice:

With his appointment as clerk to the British Consul for Fiji and Tonga at about £100 a year, Thurston found at last a stage wider than a ship's deck. It was a stage the more attractive to him from the paraphernalia of state which, however tattered and incongruous in such a place, adhered to those who performed upon it. (p. 54)

Writing of Gordon's relationship with Thurston:

And the relationship which resulted was to be, for years, the most important of Thurston's professional life - complicated though it seems to have been by Gordon's astonished, resisted perception that, in some at least of the attitudes he liked to suppose he had introduced to government in Fiji, Thurston had forestalled him. (p.343)
It is astonishing, after this, that Scarr could have described Thurston's writing style as long-winded and self-conscious (p.64). Furthermore, Scarr has the habit of introducing material in an indirect fashion, so that unless the reader already knows a great deal about the circumstances surrounding Thurston's life, references will be obscure. An example of this obliquity is contained in the title and decoration of the book. Scarr explains that the phrase 'na kena vai' was freely interpreted by the Cakobau family, referring to Thurston, as 'the pilot-fish'. Whether this was when they were speaking in English is not explained, for the Fijian word for 'pilot-fish' is 'bakewa'. A literal translation would be 'his (stingray-pointed) spear' (used figuratively of Thurston), which would account for the drawing of the stingray on the title-page. The word 'vai' was used for 'bayonet' when European weaponry came into use in Fiji, but the reader, even if he knows all this, is still left wondering about the origin and implications of the nickname.

This reviewer is forced to the conclusion that the book rests on premises almost totally opposite from those Davidson and Maude have stated Pacific history should be based upon. The Fijian reality remains in the background (as the author said it would); the relationship with other disciplines - considered by Maude to be crucial to the development of Pacific history - has, to say the least, not been promoted.

It is the kind of book which the Australian National University (amusingly described as the 'Australian academic Vatican' at a recent Sydney conference) may be able to afford. For the University of the South Pacific, it is an example of what not to do. The need to write with the people of the region firmly in the centre of the stage is acknowledged to be exigent. Unwritten records and oral tradition are a major concern. The historian, the anthropologist, and the cultural geographer find themselves continually at one another's doors, and at those of other scientists and social scientists, as they endeavour to solve the problem of devising methods of coping with multicultural societies.

There is no question that a vast amount of extremely capable research has gone to produce the present volume. The result, however, is likely to go on sitting on library shelves rather than to become one of the working tools of either teachers or students in the field.