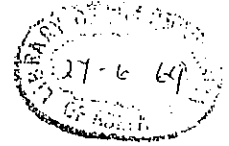


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FRONTIER SOCIETY IN FIJI

1858 - 1873

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By

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This thesis is the result of my own work, carried out while I have been a member of the Department of History at the University of Adelaide. It contains no material which has been presented for another degree in any other university, and to the best of my knowledge it contains no material previously published or written by another person except in cases which I have acknowledged.

CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
SUMMARY	ii - v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi - vii
INTRODUCTION	viii- xi
ABBREVIATIONS	xii
CHAPTER 1	The Invading Culture
	1 - 33
CHAPTER 2	The Beach
	34 - 78a
CHAPTER 3	The Settlement of Lau, Taveuni, and Vanua Levu, 1860-1870
	.79 - 120
CHAPTER 4	Adventurous Spirits: the Settlement of Southern Viti Levu
	121 - 183
CHAPTER 5	The Great Fiji Rush
	184 - 237
CHAPTER 6	The Beach City
	238 - 278
CHAPTER 7	Economics and Acculturation
	279 - 345
CHAPTER 8	Politics and Social Change
	346 - 443
EPILOGUE	444 - 448
APPENDIX 1	Map: Fiji in 1870
	449
APPENDIX 2	A Sample of Settlers
	450 - 455
APPENDIX 3	Passenger Arrivals and Departures at Levuka, 1870 - 1874
	456
NOTES ON SOURCES	457 - 461
BIBLIOGRAPHY	462 - 475

SUMMARY

Frontier society in Fiji in the period 1858 to 1873 was composed chiefly of planters, or of people dependent ultimately on the profits of growing cotton. They came mainly from the slightly older frontier societies of the Australian colonies and New Zealand, motivated by depressed conditions following the end of alluvial mining in Victoria, and economic stagnation in New Zealand, and attracted by the high price of cotton and the favourable publicity given to Fiji in the Colonial press.

Planters, however, were relatively late arrivals among the European invaders of the area and they came to a society which was already the product of a long period of inter-cultural reaction. Firearms were widespread, Christianity was widely accepted, and political power had been concentrated in the hands of a few powerful chiefs. Small communities of Europeans had established themselves within the group, enjoying the protection of the most powerful chiefs, in return for which they attracted European trade by the services they were able to provide to visiting ships, and later, to land purchasers. They had intermarried with the local people and had become part of the society in which they had been an important modifying influence.

Unlike their predecessors, however, the planters who came to Fiji, and in particular the numerous arrivals of the period

1868-1871, regarded themselves in a special light as the pioneers of a superior civilisation, and they expected to colonise Fiji with the same success as had been achieved in Australia and New Zealand. But in Fiji, the key to success proved to be adaptability and a readiness to ignore theoretical notions of supremacy in favour of a pragmatic accommodation with local conditions. Those who made this discovery were far outnumbered, however, by the more impecunious settlers, often from the gold fields, who took up land in the less secure areas of Viti Levu, and whose ignorance and anxiety, coinciding with local political instability, made for a rapid deterioration in race relations, and ultimate ruin.

The popular resolve, to make Fiji another 'white man's country', was strengthened by the short-lived cotton boom of 1868-1871, by the more frequent communication with the Colonies which this brought about, greater investment, and the inducement which prosperity gave to the migration of women. For a time, the adaptability of the men, and their tendency to modify their distinctive cultural characteristics, was checked. Levuka, the commercial centre, changed its appearance and character, providing a sample of Colonial urban life in the centre of the group. In the remote areas, planters' clubs, hotels, and group activities such as church services,

musical evenings and punitive expeditions, fulfilled a similar psychological function.

But the deterioration in race-relations, caused by the new confidence on the part of the European community, contributed to the undermining of the economic foundation on which the confidence was built. When goodwill was sacrificed, land was difficult to occupy, labour proved recalcitrant, and the superior numbers and armed strength of the Fijians placed settlers at a disadvantage. The use of imported labourers proved at best a temporary solution. Their loyalty depended on continued prosperity and in the meantime their presence increased Fijian resentment, which in the long run made matters worse. Successful planters were not those who tried to bend the country and the people to their will, but those who, like their beachcombing and trading predecessors, accepted things as they found them, respected the people's customs and the authority of the chiefs and were prepared to live, for practical purposes, as their subjects. The fall in the price of cotton after 1871 made life difficult for those who clung to their historic role as the pioneers of Colonial civilisation, and especially for their wives, and they reacted to this situation either by leaving Fiji or by becoming even more aggressive than before. This was the

social and economic process which explains the politics of the period. The communal homogeneity, achieved briefly in 1870, vanished with the fall in the price of cotton, to be replaced by wide variations in prosperity according to the degree of success in accommodation with local conditions. The political division in the community in the period before cession was basically between those who clung to their historic myths in the face of the evidence, and those who came to terms with reality.