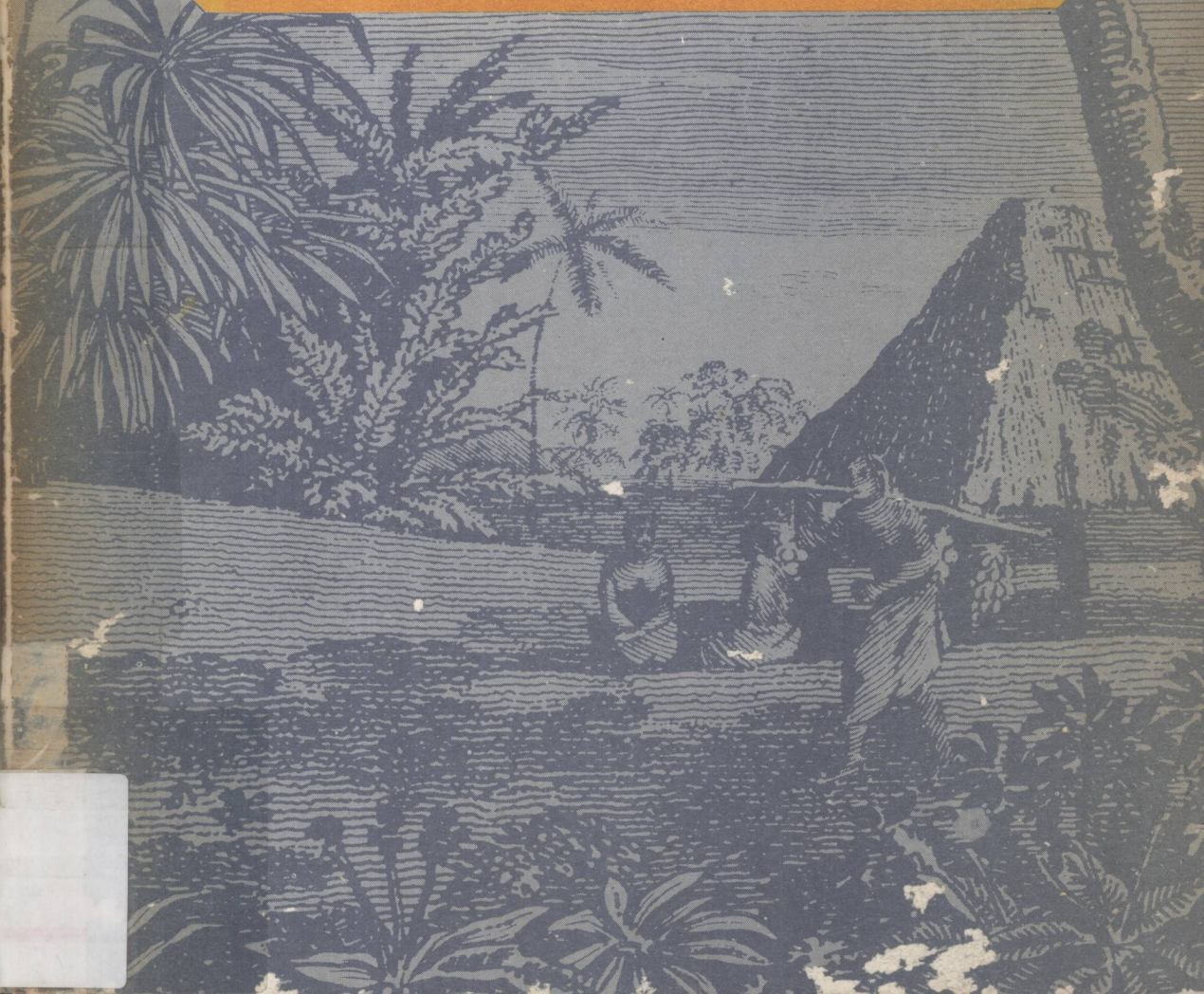


The Australian National University
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Viceroy of the Pacific
The Majesty of Colour
A Life of
Sir John Bates Thurston
Deryck Scarr



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Introduction

To embark on a biography in two rather large volumes at a time when financial gloom was settling over the publishing world may be accounted a challenge to providence; and the payment exacted in the present instance is that this book, sequel to *I, the Very Bayonet*, was ready for the press five years ago. The author can only beg the indulgence of such readers of the forerunner as remain alive and still interested.

Protégé and, in turn, patron of great chiefs in the South Seas, masterful servant of a remote Colonial Office, mordant observer of human follies, J.B. Thurston has his followers in the Pacific, at any rate. Among Fijians he was *Na Kena Vai*: Bayonet, according to the most ready translation, by extension; Pilot-Fish, as Ratu Sir Edward Cakobau used very freely to gloss it; but perhaps best of all, as I am grateful to Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara for suggesting, simply and literally stingray (the tail of which was indeed used as bayonet or spear-tip) - the image being, that the ray, Thurston, keeps station below schools of fish, the Fijians.

So did Thurston with Fijians. 'I shall not find another Minister here', as a blundering British envoy, Commodore Goodenough, was told by the man who gave Thurston the title, Ratu Apenisa Seru Cakobau. *I, the Very Bayonet* was translated into Fijian by Mr Urupeni Senibulu of the Fiji Broadcasting Commission and read over the air in weekly instalments, a penance for listeners who were not ready for church on Sunday evening.

And years before, on 24 February 1944 when, as Secretary for Fijian Affairs, Ratu J.L.V. Sukuna - soon to be Ratu Sir Lala - was resurrecting the semi-autonomous Fijian Administration from two generations of decay he, the leading Fijian statesman of his day, had a pretty clear picture of the role played by *Na Kena Vai*. As Ratu Sukuna - born 1888 - explained to Legislative Council, the early years of colonial rule in Fiji were a time

when the Governor was trying to create an atmosphere of trust through government by the chiefs that had ceded their country to the Crown, when Native Affairs were the main, and in the early years at any rate, the sole concern of Government.... The aim...was to allow the Fijians to govern themselves as far as possible with a minimum of interference.... The period ended with the death of Sir John Thurston.

Ratu Sukuna kept *Na Kena Vai*'s valedictory photograph hanging over his desk.

And how accurate was his perception of the man, his father's patron, emerges from the following pages. Overlapping a little with the last chapter of the previous volume, they take up Thurston's life in 1875. The Kingdom of Fiji is a thing of the past; the course to be taken by colonial rule in the new Crown Colony is open to doubt; his own future is in the balance. And with Fiji about to become the centre of British influence in the wider region through the Western Pacific High Commission, an additional sphere of activity and observation is opening up. Samoan resistance to Germany will excite his active sympathy, New Zealand's ambition to rule in the Pacific Islands incite his combined anger and amusement - in particular, because white New Zealand argued their right to govern there from their impeccable, impartial record in dealing with the Maori....

The force of fun or folly could no further go, as he would have put it; a comment which applied to so much of the later nineteenth century Pacific world, seen here through the eyes of a uniquely well-placed and well-informed participant.

A note on orthography

The well-established, highly economical
Fijian orthography is used:

b is pronounced as *mb* in *number*

c is pronounced as *th* in *that*

d is pronounced as *nd* in *end*

g is pronounced as *ng* in *singer*

q is pronounced as *ng* in *finger*

Glossary

<i>Adi</i>	honorific for woman of rank
<i>bati</i>	borderers, primarily owing military rather than menial service
<i>bete</i>	priest
<i>Bosevakaturaga</i>	Council of Chiefs
<i>Buli</i>	chiefly title in Bua; adopted as title for heads of districts under colonial government
<i>draunikau</i>	sorcerey
<i>kaisi</i>	person of no consequence
<i>ka vakavanua</i>	custom
<i>lala</i>	service obligation to chiefs
<i>lotu</i>	Christianity
<i>lovo</i>	pit-oven
<i>magiti</i>	feast
<i>M</i> <i>marama</i>	woman of rank
<i>masi</i>	bark-cloth
<i>Matanitu</i>	Colonial Government
<i>mataqali</i>	clan
<i>qase</i>	elder
<i>Qase Levu</i>	Chairman of Methodist Mission
<i>Ratu</i>	honorific for man of rank
<i>Roko Tui</i>	sacred chiefs of Rewa and Tailevu, traditionally; under colonial rule, title of governors of provinces
<i>tabua</i>	whale's tooth, symbolic object of veneration
<i>Taukei</i>	owners - Fijians
<i>Turaga</i>	man of rank
<i>Vale Levu</i>	as used here, Government House
<i>vai</i>	stingray; from use made of its tail, spearpoint, bayonet
<i>vakamisioneri</i>	Methodist missionary collection
<i>vakatuvoro</i>	pre-Christian
<i>vasu</i>	sister's son
<i>waqa ni Viti</i>	double canoe, <i>drua</i>

Abbreviations

BCS	Records of the British Consul to Samoa
BM	British Museum
CO	Colonial Office
COCP	Colonial Office Confidential Print
FCSO	Records of the Colonial Secretary's Office, Fiji
FM	Fiji Museum
FO	Foreign Office
HL	Hocken Library, Dunedin
ML	Mitchell Library, Sydney
MMS	Records of the Methodist Missionary Society, London
MOM	Records of the Methodist Overseas Mission, Mitchell Library
NAF	National Archives of Fiji
NLA	National Library of Australia
PMB	Pacific Manuscripts Bureau
PRO	Public Record Office
RH	Rhodes House, Oxford
RNAS	Royal Navy: Australian Station: Records of the Commander-in-Chief
TL	Turnbull Library, Wellington
WPHC	Western Pacific High Commission Records

...a period of indirect rule when the Governor was trying to create an atmosphere of trust through government by the Chiefs that had ceded their country to the Crown, when Native Affairs were the main, and in the early years at any rate, the sole concern of Government. The Native Regulation Board was fortunate in having the assistance of European officials long resident in the country, men who spoke the language fluently, who were well versed in custom and observed the same, and who were on intimate terms with the Chiefs. The aim of the Board was to allow the Fijians to govern themselves as far as possible with a minimum of interference. With Rokos and Bulis accustomed to rule and a people ready to obey, the administration ran smoothly and there was happiness and contentment in spite of the decrease in the population due, in all probability, to the introduction of infectious diseases both before and after Cession... The period ended with the death of Sir John Thurston.

Ratu (Sir) J.L.V. Sukuna,
Legislative Council speech,
24 February 1944

Summary

This volume, covering the years 1875-1897, takes up where *I, the Very Bayonet* (Canberra, 1973) left the life of Sir John Thurston - the merchant seaman, botanical collector, acting-consul, planter, who became champion of Fijian rights in the independent Kingdom of Fiji, was Colonial Secretary after Cession in 1875, and died as Governor of Fiji and High Commissioner for the Western Pacific, the most influential individual wherever British rule touched the South Seas. He was a witty as well as, quite often, an angry man; accordingly this volume quotes from his large, varied private correspondence to reveal his relations with Fijian chiefs, his jaundiced view of German activity in Samoa and New Zealand's attempted intrusion into the Pacific Islands. The result is an intimate, insider's view of the South Seas during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

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Chapter 1

'An opportunity to vindicate myself'

Summer Isles of Eden lying in dark-purple spheres of sea: Tennyson's line from 'Locksley Hall' is in the cultural sub-conscious of his countrymen. It was worth a pun to J.B. Thurston when he, *Na Kena Vai* - 'Spear Head', 'Bayonet' - to Fijians, had become Sir John, Governor of Fiji and High Commissioner and Consul-General for the Western Pacific. This line rang true to his surroundings on so many South Sea island beaches; but other phrases rang hollow as he looked around in September 1875. *Never comes the trader*, sang sanguine Tennyson, *never floats an European flag*. Traders and planters had long been in Fiji. And now the British flag flew, replacing the dove-with-olive branch motif of the independent Kingdom of Fiji.

King Cakobau's realm had gone down on 10 October 1874, to European rejoicing and Fijian despair. And Thurston, Cakobau's former Chief Secretary and the Fijians' champion in the fight to retain independence, was now even further from the security men begin to look for at his age. He was thirty-nine, but felt and looked older, sallow from years in the tropics. His manner was still boyish, though - too much so for his fellow European settlers. They expected from all mature men of their colour a proper deference to such well-established truths as the essential inferiority of black human beings to white. But if acceptance of these beliefs was essential to maturity, Thurston never matured. Psychologists have it that an individual's life can be divided into age-compartments, each with its own characteristic virtue. The young man's attribute is supposed to be fidelity, a capacity to adopt and maintain a stand. If this be so, Thurston remained young until he died in 1897 at sixty-one. He had taken a stand on the basic issue of relations between black and white in Fiji where 2,000 Europeans expected to rule 140,000 Fijians in the European interest. They could not do it without fighting, Thurston thought, and he did not give

much for their chances unless they were helped by imperial troops, as the *Pakeha* in New Zealand had been helped against the Maori. That had been a crime, he reckoned; and he had too many Fijian friends to want it repeated.

A short, slight, active and obsessive man, he lived so intensely that he could be prostrated by retching spasms when the pressure was removed. He paced his house at night, or sat feverishly writing, because he could not sleep; and his elderly wife perhaps presented no short-cut to relaxation. He concealed his thin skin imperfectly behind a flood of words. He laughed a great deal; when he was laughing at white men's folly in relations with black, Europeans did not find him funny. His humour was often bitter now, but that was not native to him. Fifteen years later, when Fijians were at last secure, his sense of the comic, his delight in droll re-creation of often tense situations, charmed an outsider to Fiji, the painter John Lafarge, as he walked with the Governor in the early morning on the banks of the Rewa River.¹

He had little reason to relax in September 1875. He could have kept Ratu Cakobau's independent Kingdom going, if the Commissioners from Britain, Commodore Goodenough and Consul Layard, had not commanded warships. Whites would have reconciled themselves to the government's insistence that Fijians were sovereign peoples, not just raw plantation labour - or they would have left the country; and the Fijian chiefs had at least promised they would work together. Force had altered the situation, and he looked on the change apprehensively. Favourable though he had been to British annexation if Fijians wanted it, he had sought conditions to protect them from his countrymen. He had failed, as far as formal assurances went.

Britain ruled unfettered. And her sons, expatriated to produce for her looms and sell her calicoes, her church-going daughters building families overseas, had certain natural expectations of her. Her policy must be to advance their interests, which were assumed to be Fijian interests too.

Romanticism had brought many of these settlers; that, and the high price of cotton in the late '60s, coupled with

¹ John Lafarge, *Reminiscences of the South Seas* (London, 1914), 408.

the low price Fijians seemed prepared to take for their land in Manchester and Brummagem wares. What kept planters there was indebtedness. In the case of the merchants who financed them, it was the hope that, with British rule, rising land values would make it worthwhile to sell their debtors up. For many men there was a sense of time invested, as well as a feeling that six to ten years in tropical heat were not a good preparation for trying afresh somewhere else. And still romanticism kept a hold. As one planter-merchant put it, in some cases

pride would not allow them to return to their friends, and dissipate entirely the halo of romance that surrounded a full-blown 'planter'; others again had become victims of the 'South Sea' or 'Pacific' fever, that peculiar fascination which Island life has for many men, and which has so strong an influence that a man of good education, and capabilities and one who could hold a good position in Society, a man who could make a living anywhere, will voluntarily resign all his opportunities and bury himself in a living tomb...²

Often these impoverished victims lived in despair, alienated from the surrounding black people. Even when white men adopted Fijian speech-patterns, took Fijian wives and acquired a genuine taste for *yaqona*, they were likely to go on insisting upon their separateness and superiority. Merchants like William Hennings, with his high born Fijian lady, charged Fijians double what they charged Europeans in their stores. There was nothing odd in any of this, Thurston thought; all white communities similarly situated felt the same.³ What was unusual was that he should feel differently.

As so much European poverty seemed attributable to Fijians' self-sufficiency, it followed to the settlers that the 'natives' must be dragged into the modern world. This might be done by a poll-tax which would teach them the dignity of labour by forcing them to work or produce for their

² Journal of J.L. Young, 11 October 1875, PMB; also on this theme, see my 'Creditors and the House of Hennings: an elegy from the social and economic history of Fiji', *Journal of Pacific History*, VII, 1972.

³ Memorandum, c. December 1876, 76/1698.

tax-money. It would also benefit the planter, bone and sinew of the country, by providing a reservoir of cheap labour, and the merchant, by putting copra into his trade-stores at whatever price he felt able to pay. Fijians too would benefit. Commoners would be instructed in the rights of the individual and cease to be more or less willing slaves to their chiefs - though they would then have to accustom themselves to being slaves to new white masters. Like the Maori, Fijians must be accorded the full personal liberty of British subjects. Then they must draw water for the white purchasers of the land which they must be free, and freely encouraged, to sell. Only in this way could savages be introduced to the go-ahead Anglo-Saxon's age of individualism, the market and progress.

'We are all dying' - said Thurston - 'of "progress"'.⁴ One reason for his divergence from fellow Europeans was that they inclined towards colonial radicalism, while his experience of the hierarchy of the sea had helped make him an arch-conservative. He hated cant. And he found it exemplified in the settler slogans which set up British social values and institutions as the model to which, if they wished salvation, all peoples must conform. Racial amalgamation of Maori with *Pakeha* was the watchword in New Zealand, as he knew from sometime Fiji planters like the New Zealand politician, F.J. Moss. Thurston's own scanning of newspapers told him that amalgamation meant subordination of black to white values. It meant proscription of Maori culture, no hope for Maori autonomy, the right of the *Pakeha* to acquire Maori land - and the grudgingly accorded right of the Maori to acquire *Pakeha* skills if he could. All this was cant. His own way of life was European, but Thurston could see no great intrinsic superiority in his own culture - though he educated his adopted son, twelve-year-old Ratu Josefa Lalabalavu overseas. Ratu Lala would rule his father Tui Cakau's chiefdom in time, and his foster-father thought he should be instructed in the ways of a new, European-influenced age.

If it were European-dominated, there would be no meaningful role for Ratu Lala. All depended on the new Governor. If he were conventional, it was likely to mean a punctilious show of respect for Fijian rights - insofar as they could be accommodated to settler interests. There would be recognition of the vast European land claims, and alienation of

⁴Thurston to Thiselton-Dyer, 7 February 1894, Kew Letters.

more land while the *itaukei*, the owners, were pushed on to reserves; creation of the largest possible Fijian labour force; extension of direct white control and whittling away of all but a pretence of Fijian autonomy. The conventional view was promptly put to settlers by the new Governor. 'My sympathy for the coloured races is strong', Sir Arthur Gordon announced in June 1875, 'but my sympathy for my own race is stronger.'⁵

Then there would be nothing for Thurston himself. From his mortgaged plantation of young coconuts on the northern tip of Taveuni, safe under Tui Cakau's protection, he would only be able to look with mordant humour on fired homesteads. Yet he could argue public utility as well as personal advantage for staying in office. His standing with Fijians had led Ratu Cakobau to tell Commodore Goodenough that he, the Tui Viti, could trust no other Minister. In September 1875, even so, the result of empty moral strictures passed upon Thurston's character by Goodenough appeared in the announcement of new appointments. Thurston was demoted to Auditor-General.

His enemies rejoiced, particularly the missionaries, who were delighted to see that opponent of Wesleyan Methodism in its exported form put where he could do no more harm. The Reverend Frederick Langham, Chairman of the Fiji District of the Wesleyan Methodist Mission, exulted: 'Here I sing the Doxology!'⁶ No longer could the man who felt that those with God much on the tongue should have their mouths washed out with soap, threaten the temporal authority sought by God's Elect. Nor could he prevent power in Fiji passing to God's chosen people. Hiding its relief at Thurston's demotion under an assumption of surprise that this Messiah turned Judas should be given any office at all, the *Fiji Times*, the settlers' voice, announced that he was doubtless to be used as a walking encyclopedia of Fiji's past but in no way allowed into the Governor's intimate society or, by implication, his counsels.⁷

Although Thurston could usually simulate amusement at

⁵ *Fiji 1875-1880: Records of Private and of Public Life* (Edinburgh, 1897-1912), I, 184.

⁶ Langham to Chapman, 22 September 1875, MOM 103.

⁷ *Fiji Times*, 4 September 1875.