

Chapter 1

New white men without knowledge

'We are peculiarly situated here as regards natives', complained the Governor in 1907, considerably understating the differences he perceived between the powerful position of the Fijians and the more depressed situation of the aboriginal inhabitants of other British colonies.¹ The Governors who followed Gordon and Thurston viewed the system of Fijian administration bequeathed them with feelings ranging from kindly forbearance to cynical despair. Nearly all of them voiced hopes of reform, insisting that Fijians could not forever opt out of the twentieth century or the colonial version of 'the modern world'. Every address of a Governor to the Council of Chiefs employed quaintly translated clichés of the conventional wisdom the privileged classes of England had always directed to the lower orders at home, and much more confidently to the subject peoples overseas. Many of these Governors lacked personal credibility in their role as Supreme Chief. It could hardly be expected that in three or six years a Governor would achieve the kind of rapport with Fijians Thurston had built up over much of his life. Some of them made no attempt to learn Fijian - they were past the stage of their career where language tests could be considered reasonable. While most seemed to have enjoyed the impressive chiefly rituals that had become a gratifying tradition of the Fiji post, few were sensitive to the reciprocal commitments to which the same ceremonial solemnly bound them in Fijian eyes. With the death of Thurston in 1897, the partnership of the British and the Fijians entered a long period of strain, rather like a lukewarm marriage that had lasted long enough for each partner to value the convenience and fear the consequences of a rupture. With the best of intentions Thurston's successor in Fiji, Sir George T.M. O'Brien, began a process of almost continuous review of Fijian policy and ineffective piecemeal reform intended to bring Fijians gradually into line with more conventional British ideals of individualism and democracy. It is a theme that underscores the history of the British administration for the next fifty years.

O'Brien was a quiet bachelor who preferred the company of his spinster sister and Roman Catholic clerics to Suva's raucous society of planters, lawyers and merchants - nor did he have any inclination to maintain the intimate

relations Fijian leaders had previously enjoyed with their supreme chief. A painstaking and practical man, he had the views of the age on the importance of cleanliness, privacy, the one-family household, thrift and enterprise. If he brought to his review of the government's Fijian policy a sense of decency and much patience, he lacked the cross-cultural insight that had distinguished the career of his predecessor. O'Brien took for granted that Thurston's long political battle for the survival of a Fijian polity had been won: it was now urgent that something more be done to ensure the physical survival of the appalling number of children dying in their first year and later.

Between the census of 1891 and that of 1901, annual birth and death tallies monitored a decline in the Fijian population of 11,397 to a new low of 94,397 - despite a birth rate as high as thirty-seven per thousand. One-third of Fijian children failed to reach their first birthday; in the Yasawas and the Colo provinces the proportion was four out of ten. The Colonial Office and the colonial government in Suva were sensitive to these statistics for political as well as humane reasons. The decrease figures were ammunition for the vociferous section of the European community who resented their lack of elected representation in the Legislative Council and the economic self-sufficiency of the Fijians, and sought a solution in federation with New Zealand or even Australia where governments had dealt with 'the native problem' in ways far more conducive to economic progress. In Fiji the federationists tried to drum up support amongst the Fijians themselves, telling them that they were oppressed by the government, unjustly taxed, that obedience to hereditary chiefs was shameful in a British country, and that they should disregard the restrictions imposed on their liberty to leave their districts and find work.² They took every opportunity to vilify the Fijian Administration in the sympathetic columns of the Fiji Times and Australasian newspapers: 'coddling administration. . . has resulted in the unfortunate aborigines being relegated off the face of the earth at a most alarming rate. . . when overtaken by sickness he quietly succumbs as a happy release from his troubles'.³

The decrease in population had been a worry to the government for over twenty years. The measles epidemic of 1875 had carried off about one-fifth of the pre-Cession population of perhaps 140,000. Subsequent epidemics of whooping cough, dengue fever, dysentery and influenza took

several thousand more lives. After 1891 there was a decade free of epidemics yet deaths consistently exceeded births. Norma McArthur has correlated the continuing decline in the number of births in these years with the arrival at reproductive age of the seriously depleted cohorts born just before and just after the 1875 measles.⁴ No such explanation was evident to the anxious government officials of 1893 when they sent circulars to everyone of note or of long residence in the colony inviting them to submit opinions to a commission of inquiry into the decrease. Basil Thomson, who served on the Commission, later wrote amusingly that it appeared from the collected replies as if Fijians were suffering from 'a combination of every known physical, moral and social disease in its most acute form. Collectively they were cankered through and through with monogamy, in-breeding, unchivalry, communism and dirt; individually by insouciance, foreign disease, kava-drinking, and excessive smoking.'⁵ 'But the most potent cause of all', pronounced a planter from Serua, 'is Tobacco and self-abuse amongst men, women, girls and boys.'⁶ If the respondents agreed on one thing, it was that Fijian mothers were bad mothers - 'a race of blunted sensibilities', claimed one official: 'I have lived amongst natives during the past 23 years and have never seen any particular affection shown to a child by its mother.'⁷ A Wesleyan missionary contributed the story of a mother with a frail child living in his compound at Vuna Point, Taveuni. He asked her to come twice a day to his house for fresh cow's milk, yet 'although her child was dying of starvation, she found it irksome to apply for milk. Her maternal affection failed under the strain of walking 110 yards twice a day . . . she is but a type of most Fijian mothers of delicate children.'⁸ In their final report the Commissioners also blamed the Fijian men for treating their women 'as mere beasts of burden, and sexual conveniences.'⁹

Fijians, too, had discussed the decrease. 'In the old days,' mourned a village chief, 'when we were darkminded and in a savage state we lived. Nowadays when we are civilised and enlightened we die.'¹⁰ A remarkable array of remedies had been proposed of which a Kadavu Buli's was the most effective: the Buli of Sanima prosecuted several couples before the native magistrate of Kadavu on the grounds of abortion. There was no evidence other than that they were married and childless. The cases were discharged but all the wives subsequently gave birth to healthy children.¹¹ On the same island the Buli of Nakasaleka

simply ordered thirteen childless women to have children and nine of them did so within a year, the remaining four within two years.¹² The Roko Tui of Bua interrogated all the married women of his province and produced the following statistics: there were 12 per cent childless for natural reasons or because they knew how to prevent conception, 17 per cent who conceived but artificially aborted the offspring, 46 per cent who had children but neglected them until they died, and only 25 per cent who had healthy families. For this situation the Roko blamed the import of 'foreign ways', meaning Tongan, and the abandonment of good old Fijian customs such as the spacing of families by a long period of sexual abstinence after childbirth.¹³

Despite this evidence of real interest in their own welfare, Governor O'Brien seems to have adhered to the familiar stereotype of the natives sunk in apathy. It was well expressed in Basil Thomson's The Fijians: A Study of the Decay of Custom. Fijians, we learn, if not natives everywhere, are incapable of any routine or any moderation; system of any kind is incompatible with their nature; custom makes no provision for innovation.¹⁴ What a Fijian most wanted, agreed the Colonial Secretary in 1902, was 'to be left alone to eat, to sleep, and to follow his own devices . . . all forms of authority are irksome, even those to which they have been accustomed for many generations, though without them they would fall at once to the level of the animals'.¹⁵ Fijians were seen as emerging from the physical struggle of intertribal warfare to the 'moral struggle of modern competition'.¹⁶ It was a difficult, perhaps fatal 'time of transition' - the phrase that neatly sidestepped further analysis for the next fifty years. Neither O'Brien nor any of his successors until Sir Philip Mitchell (1942-44) doubted that the salvation of this squalid decaying society was for Fijians to become more like 'the sturdy yeomen' of England were romantically understood to be: hardworking, individually self-sufficient, thrifty farmers and artisans, loyal to their social superiors and devoted to their families in the privacy of picturesque, clean little cottages - with separate bedrooms. But where to start?

Reluctantly conceding that it was 'still the day of small things in Fiji', O'Brien felt that Fijian society would be immediately improved by better water supplies and medical facilities, by educating the people in sanitary matters and the care of young children, and by tightening

up provincial administration to enforce existing regulations - 'sheeves [sic] of regulations . . . hundreds of resolutions . . . all a dead letter'. What was new in this mundane package was simply O'Brien's determination to reform Fijians whether they wanted it or not. The eager re-assumption of the white man's burden implicit in this program of good and public works was underscored by O'Brien's lack of faith in the capacity of the Fijian elite to further the aims of progressive government: 'The chiefs would cheerfully agree to and verbally support any regulation or resolution whatever that the Government might desire - but always subject to the tacit reservation that they should continue to remain exactly as they were.'¹⁷ The massive inertia of Fijian life needed shock treatment beyond the powers of government to administer, but at least a start could be made.

The system of administering through the society's own leaders should be supplanted, O'Brien advised the Colonial Office, by some agency more trustworthy and capable, in short by bringing 'the perseverance, conscientiousness and method of competent English officials into continuous and personal bearing on the details of administration of native affairs'. O'Brien regretted that his predecessors' land policy had left the Crown without revenue from realizable assets and thus dependent for district administration on the goodwill of chiefs 'utterly indifferent to the welfare of the people'. To replace them overnight with European officers would have cost over £20,000, or slightly more than the whole native tax revenue. Not to mention the resentment of the people if they saw the abolition of a system to which 'in their queer conservative fashion' they had become attached.¹⁸

The government decided to allocate part of its increasing revenues to the elimination of some of the worst hazards to public health, especially poor water supplies. A scheme to supply the Rewa River delta with piped water cost £11,000 to complete. Numerous smaller projects were undertaken such as the construction of concrete tanks on the dry islands of Lau, and three provincial hospitals were built, with quarters for European medical officers. These unprecedented public works for the benefit of Fijians absorbed over £21,000 between 1897 and 1900.

A further £2000 was set aside from the beginning of 1899 for a new experiment in district administration: the appointment of four Provincial Inspectors to supervise the

work of the existing Fijian officials in eight provinces. O'Brien saw this as the first step in bringing 'the Fijian problem' under control. From a developmental point of view the chief weakness of the nineteenth century administration had been its want of executive follow-up at local level. This had been clearly perceived by men such as Walter Carew, the experienced Commissioner of Colo East, who had written in 1896:

Nothing but the very strongest measures such as a Regulation compelling the cleaning of every village daily, Sundays and all, when the people rise in the morning, with severe penalties on all whether villagers, Turaga ni koros, or Bulis rigorously enforced, regardless of rank or position, will ever bring them out of their condition of sloth into which their failing sense of self-respect and patriotism is fast sinking them.

Thurston himself had commented that 'no native would supervise as indicated in the Comrs minute, and yet his suggestions are necessary'.¹⁹ O'Brien now had the money and the men to resolve Thurston's dilemma - in a way Thurston would never have approved.

'The success of your appointments', the Provincial Inspectors were told, 'will be judged entirely by its practical results in the way of checking depopulation, ameliorating the condition of the natives and increasing the out-turn of native produce.'²⁰ They were to enforce long-standing regulations relating to the planting of fruit trees and crops, the freeing of women in advanced pregnancy and after childbirth from carrying heavy burdens or fishing, the care of the sick and of young children, and the general health and well-being of the people. This charter was vague in relation to their status vis-a-vis Fijian officials with whom they were expected to work. They had no direct magisterial powers. Each of them went his own way to get results and left detailed accounts in daily diaries eagerly read by O'Brien. The margins were peppered with his 'Bravo!' or 'very nice' or 'stupid of him'. He queries the need for a new stone fence for a village in Bua: 'Would not a wire fence be really cheaper?'; despatches a dozen bottles of Hepster's Extract of Codliver Oil and some preserved milk for an Inspector's wife to dispense; enquires anxiously whether the people are building latrines and whether 'their habits thereat'

are improving - they were.²¹

By the end of his first year as a Provincial Inspector (1899), Frank Spence had travelled 2896 miles up and down the provinces of Cakaudrove and Bua. He found it effective to take his wife with him: 'What escapes my notice is seen by her.' Laura Spence kept her own diary. 'It is dreadful to see how the poor little creatures are neglected', she wrote 'Some of the women are so densely stupid. It is a most trying and difficult work and requires a good temper . . .' In one month, August 1900, this energetic lady visited 43 towns, inspected 299 houses, burnt 665 dirty mats, and treated 60 cases of ringworm. Her husband meanwhile was having trees felled, ditches filled in, drains dug, wells cleaned and, in some cases, villages moved bodily to healthier sites.²²

Spence's counterpart in charge of Ba and Nadroga, Sydney Smith, left the best account from which to surmise the reactions of Fijians to this unprecedented interference in their domestic affairs. Smith saw himself at war with the old system: 'I feel I am pulling in one direction trying to wipe out things Fijian and substitute common sense while there is a Roko perpetuating "the Fijian".' When he arrived at a village he dispensed with what he called 'the Fijian capers' - and went straight on to inspect the drinking water, bathing places and houses: 'I won't be bothered with their wretched presentations, and never do accept them . . . The Roko (rotten institution) should be made to leave these things alone, and work; work hard. He is handsomely paid. Either that or get out of the road. Not hinder me.'²³ Similarly in Tailevu, Islay McOwan had very foreseeable problems with the Roko, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, senior son of Cakobau, the great Vunivalu of Bau. Ratu Epeli asked O'Brien, unbelievably: 'Did you really appoint him [McOwan] to rule the province entirely by himself. . . he does so, and in any way he pleases, nor is there any consultation between us. I should know when he comes and when he goes; we should discuss things beforehand so that I can have my say - just as it was published in Na Mata [the Fijian language government gazette]'. O'Brien counselled McOwan to 'humour him a bit, and keep him au courant and not to let him feel that he is being counted out'.²⁴ It was a first hint of the practice that later developed of allowing the Rokos the trappings and not the substance of power.

The Rokos had an opportunity to voice their anger at the Council of Chiefs of 1902 where their ill-feeling was explained by Ratu Jope Naucabalavu in a sentence: 'The cause of our trouble is that new white men without knowledge have taken charge of our affairs.'²⁵ They argued that if villages could be moved and Bulis dismissed without reference to themselves, then their whole way of life was threatened - and by men whose specific goals, however progressive, made no allowances for the feelings of the communities involved. As a result of these protests and of reports of unrest in the provinces, the Inspectors were withdrawn in 1903 and replaced by three Assistant Native Commissioners based in Suva and Labasa. Inspections became much less frequent, but the powers of the Commissioners clearly overrode those of the chiefs. The policy of 'closer domestic interference' introduced by O'Brien was to be pursued with varying intensity for the next forty years.

The inspectorate was not O'Brien's only instrument for improving the villages. He asked the Roman Catholic and Wesleyan missions in Fiji to mount a hygiene mission and provide the detailed instruction that no Provincial Inspector or his wife could be expected to manage single-handed. Bishop Julian Vidal released eight European and fourteen Fijian nuns to work in the vicinity of the Catholic mission stations. The Wesleyans were not much taken with the scheme, although the wives of their missionaries had done similar work before. With reason they feared that the Catholics would use the hygiene mission to infiltrate Wesleyan villages. They successfully demanded that the Governor restrict the Sisters to Catholic villages, drawing an angry reaction from some of their own adherents: 'Do you really believe that we should all die rather than a Catholic attend to us when we are sick?'²⁶ For the work of the Sisters was well received by the people. An enthusiastic supporter wrote in Na Mata: 'the Sisters are the enemies of dirt, they are the enemies of all foetid atmospheres, they are kindly, they are loving, they are anxious to assist us and their example is one we might very well follow.'²⁷

The Sisters sallied up into the hills of Namosi and other remote areas not covered by the Provincial Inspectors to root out the accumulated filth of years. Before bonfires of old mats, grass, clothing, and trees that had been growing too close to houses, they upbraided the startled populace for their unclean ways and showed the mothers how to care for their infants. After a few months

of the campaign in Serua, the European magistrate reported that hardly a house had not been turned out and thoroughly cleansed. Raised sleeping-shelves (vata) were provided for every occupant - although there was doubt that they were much used. (The vata survive to this day as the rock-hard wooden platforms of honour on which the European guest in a Fijian home is firmly condemned to sleep however much he inclines towards the comfort of a soft matted floor.) The Sisters began to grow discouraged as they realized that as soon as they were out of sight the people reverted to the habits of centuries. Fijian officials were not always cooperative. With malicious humour the Roko of Serua made his point on an inspection of the Sisters' own mission station while they were away in the hills. He had all the mats inside the church pulled out, pronounced filthy, and burnt on the spot. The hygiene mission seems to have petered out about 1903 when the Sisters resolved to confine their activities to the more congenial task of educating children.²⁸ It was not until the child welfare movement began in 1927 (see below) that a way was found to change the alleged attitudes and practices of Fijian mothers.

After nine months' annotating the diaries of the Provincial Inspectors and the Sisters' reports, O'Brien sadly concluded that reforms of a deeper social nature were needed if the standard of Fijian life was to improve. He was depressed by 'the almost total extinction of all incentive to individual exertion', and chose as his first target the practice of kerekere: the relatives and friends of a man could, it seemed, 'request' his personal property in the sure knowledge that he would be too ashamed (madua) to refuse. Sydney Smith had told O'Brien, who relayed the story to the Legislative Council, that in Nadroga a man would buy a new lamp with the proceeds from his bananas - and break the glass on the way home in the hope that it would then be less attractive as an object of kerekere. 'Are there any people on the face of the earth so inherently and incurably industrious that they will exert themselves more than they need, if they are not allowed personally to enjoy the fruits of their labour?'²⁹

O'Brien naively hoped to abolish kerekere by the untiring moral persuasion of the missionaries and his own officials.³⁰ The Rokos and Commissioners were asked to bring kerekere up for discussion in the district and provincial councils, so long as resolutions on the subject were 'spontaneous and not "deferential"'.³¹ Resolutions duly came forward - in Cakaudrove every tikina claimed to have

abolished it in 1898, and when other provinces followed suit, the Governor really believed that he had achieved a lasting reform. He told the Legislative Council that where efforts had been made to educate the people on the evils of kerekere, they were tending not to hide their utensils, lamps, plates and fine mats.³² And indeed these articles are not usually objects of kerekere today, if they ever were, though the general practice certainly did not succumb to rhetoric. It had a function not perceived by O'Brien and his men. Kerekere was not merely begging, although it was (and is) described as such by Europeans. Granting a favour conferred status on the giver and the right to make a return request in his own moment of need or whimsy. 'It is as clear as daylight', explained a Fijian in a letter to Na Mata, 'that one cannot kerekere indiscriminately. If you come and ask for my lantern because you are short, by and by I will be short of clothes and I will ask you for some. It will be in return for my lamp.' Kerekere was a common man's lala, he added, referring to chiefly rights to conscript goods, and it could only be done without if the chiefs eased their demands on the people and all transactions in Fijian society were put on a cash basis.³³ The problem with kerekere, replied a dissenting correspondent, was that 'The lazy man goes to kerekere the hardworking man, but the latter has no need to ask anything of the former ... Fiji-style they are both reduced to the same state.'³⁴ The practice remained in force - an effective levelling or distributive mechanism that has always inhibited the accumulation of private capital and still binds individuals closely to their kindred.

The organization of communal labour was O'Brien's second target for reform. There was no question of its abolition. As the chiefs had said immediately after Cession, no man could build a house by himself to the generous Fijian proportions requiring raised foundations, heavy timber posts and crossbeams, and a thatched roof. Nor could an individual drag timber for a canoe. Men had always worked in groups under the direction of their chief for the needs of each other and of the community.³⁵ The Native Regulations took communal labour a stage further by requiring it for roads, provincial office building, hospitals, tax gardens or any other project approved by the provincial councils. The self-reliance of this system appealed greatly to a penny-pinching government, but it led to many allegations and some instances of chiefly oppression - just how much O'Brien wanted to know. It appalled him, for instance, to find that the European Tax

Inspector could not provide 'even the faintest approximation to an estimate' of the work involved in tax operations.³⁶ It had always been left to the chiefs to call out as much labour as was needed for a particular operation, and at any time they saw fit.

Part of the solution, decided the Governor, was for the provincial councils to draw up a more specific annual program of work and allocate definite times not only for tax work but also housebuilding, planting, road clearing and especially the labour requirements of officials and chiefs. At least a month was to be set aside for 'individual betterment' - generally December. (Ironically, this seems to be the origin of the contemporary Christmas-New Year 'happy time'.) The first programs drawn up for 1900 did not reassure the Governor that Fijians saw things as he did: 'Lala to be left to the chiefs to exact when the people are free' or 'whenever a chief may really require it', coconuts 'to be planted at all times'.³⁷

In time the program of work became formally more specific, but when enforced, tied the people so much to particular activities that it came to be regarded itself as one of the major obstacles to the individual betterment O'Brien had hoped to encourage.

The native taxation scheme was the one area of past Fijian policy which O'Brien still endorsed for its 'necessitating a certain though very limited amount of exertion'. Its abolition, he feared, would make Fijians 'even idler and more indolent than they are at present'.³⁸ At the turn of the century the scheme was still working fairly well. The average annual cash refund to the producers between 1892 and 1902 was over £12,000, or 60 per cent of the total assessment; the cost of collection was only 6 per cent. Sugar cane was grown for tax in the Rewa delta area, on the Navua River (Serua), and in Ba, Ra and Macuata. Although the average village tax field was only about 2 acres, requiring around thirty days' work a year, Fijians produced 15,447 tons of cane in 1900 worth £7432 at the five mills.³⁹ In the copra provinces (Cakaudrove, Bua, Kadavu, Lau, Lomaiviti, Yasawas) the work varied greatly with the fluctuations in price. With copra around £9 a ton in 1902 a man needed to contribute about 3 hundredweight or 900 nuts towards the assessment, three days' work at the most if the nuts were easily accessible in a clean plantation. Where tobacco was the allocated crop, each man might tend 200-300 plants.⁴⁰ Though cotton and rice had been

tried, as well as coffee, the only other significant crops now were yaqona (kava) and maize. Fifteen tons of yaqona were sold in 1901 at 9 1/2d per pound, and 28,000 bushels of maize at 2s 1d per bushel. The only villagers exempt from payment in kind were 270 men who lived close to Suva and Levuka and who were accustomed to selling their produce at the markets for cash, providing a useful service to the townspeople.

It was left to the chiefs to make the actual division of labour - the point that most worried O'Brien. European magistrates sometimes acted as tax inspectors to coordinate the work between villages and especially to supervise the heavier aspects of cane harvesting in the sugar areas. Cane always gave the most problems. Fijians found its cultivation alien to their subsistence techniques and resented the distances they often had to travel to reach the cane fields - over 20 miles in some areas. They shirked the work whenever possible: 'Growing cane is a nightmare to the natives and to the Inspectors', wrote McOwan from Navua, 'until absenteeism can be quashed'.⁴¹ Another magistrate had to hold special monthly provincial courts to deal with offenders. It needed a tough brand of personal leadership to make the scheme work. The Colonial Secretary, W. L. Allardyce, recalled how he once had the whole of Serua province out cutting cane, several hundred people, and kept the Deuba mill supplied unaided. Ten days' work was enough to meet the provincial assessment, but only because he slept with them in the rough shelters on the field, roused them at daylight, and worked with them till dusk.⁴² After the death of Thurston, who expected this kind of leadership of his subordinates and gave it himself, there were few men of Allardyce's calibre really prepared to make the scheme work. Their fellow countrymen had always been loud in its condemnation and now the Fijians themselves, unaware of the consequences, were tempted by what seemed the easier alternative of paying taxes in cash.

From Macuata came the most detailed account of how the system was breaking down under less able men - or if the opinion of magistrate Nathaniel Chalmers is preferred, it was 'entirely owing from first to last to the utter carelessness and indifference of the Bulis and the people'.⁴³ CSR Company officers prepared the Labasa tax field and provided £60 worth of first-class cane tops for planting. Chalmers himself, an old sugar hand and a notoriously bad manager of men, laid them out on the field and showed the Buli and his men how to cut the tops, lay

them in sets, and space them in the rows. The weather was exceptionally dry, so he instructed them to tread down about 6 inches of soil over each set. With the planting under way he left the Buli in charge and returned to his office. The next day he heard that all 48 acres had been completed. Gratified, he rode out to inspect. The men had already gone home. To his disgust he found that the cane tops had been thrown anywhere into the furrows, uncut, and with a foot or two exposed to the scorching sun. He galloped to the house of the Buli and demanded that the entire field be replanted immediately. This time he supervised the work for a few hours, but the moment he was on his way back to Labasa to hold a court the cane was 'shoved in anyhow' with the result that not 1 set in 500 vegetated. And CSR had no more tops to spare. The field was planted a third time with tops from other districts and finally yielded a miserable 8 tons per acre: 'I respectfully submit that it is utterly hopeless and a most heart-breaking business to cultivate cane under the present system.' Would it not be more efficient, Chalmers suggested, to have one large plantation for several districts combined and work it systematically with teams of good workers drawn in rotation from each tikina? O'Brien gladly approved, hoping that the more regular work would also teach 'habits of continuous industry'.⁴⁴

The experiment, like most experiments in Fiji, began well. The conscripts lived in the field in temporary huts and grew their own food crops on the side. Then a drought in 1900 destroyed the crop and discouragement tailed into indifference. Although 1901 was a better year and the crop was expected to realize £1200 (2400 tons from 191 acres), the Provincial Council of Macuata unanimously requested permission to abandon cane growing for the more leisurely routine of copra cutting. The reaction of the Receiver General expressed the newly ambivalent attitude of the government towards the taxation scheme. How far should the wishes of the people be allowed to undermine 'their own good'? 'Macuata is a very backward province and unless the Govt. made it a duty for them to do something more than work up their nuts they are not likely to show any enterprise. I therefore think for their own good they should fish beche de mer or grow a crop of maize so as to get money to increase their comfort.'⁴⁵ But what if the people felt they were comfortable enough? It was not a question the progressive administrator could ask.

Macuata was allowed to relinquish cane, and other provinces were anxious to follow. The Roko of Serua, who had never interested himself in tax work except to exaggerate the grievances of his people, complained that workers had little to eat, the cane fields were too far from the villages, and women and children were left alone for days on end.⁴⁶ That cane had done well in Serua was no consideration. The neighbouring chiefs of Namosi, on a similar theme, showed awareness of the new pieties when they suggested that if they abandoned cane they would have 'so much more time for individual betterment'.⁴⁷ No one in Suva believed them - though they had their way in the end. The only 'terrible waste of labour', Allardyce had often argued, was the time they would spend in their villages, 'sitting, sleeping, malingering, loitering, gossiping, smoking and laughing'.⁴⁸

The copra areas had their own sets of problems. For months before the assessment date a tabu on gathering nuts deprived the people, especially newly weaned infants, of a valuable food and oil. Copra productivity was low. The villagers could not be persuaded that it was worthwhile to thin out their plantations (cut down good trees?), tend the young saplings or plant for the future. Fijian plantations could be identified by their dense tangle of undergrowth, as if the palms were growing wild and their fruit a gratuitous windfall. To meet a small quota was often difficult, ana yams were substituted at 50s and 60s a ton or logs at about 1s each. Another solution was for one district to proceed en masse to another and kerekere for all their wants. The Matuku islanders sailed one year to Nakasaleka in Kadavu and requested food. After several days of lavish hospitality they sailed away with 10,400 taro (£50), fourteen large kava roots (£2 16s) and one bullock (£5). Some time later the Kadavu people made a return visit to Matuku where they presented twenty-seven tabua (whales' teeth). On the way their cutter nearly came to grief on a reef and later cost £27 to repair. They were reimbursed with 1000 coconuts, enough for only £11 worth of copra:⁴⁹ a typically Fijian transaction in which the social context was far more important than the economic disparity revealed in these irrelevant calculations of a hostile official.

Wherever possible Fijians were trying to subvert, so to speak, the economic goals of the colony by subsuming them into more congenial and traditional ways of meeting their needs. Whereas in the nineteenth century the

government valued the stability this state of affairs gave to the colony and recognized the satisfactions of Fijian social life as good in themselves, in the twentieth century the proponents of more material progress were to become impatient with a society that showed such disrespect for individual profit. These people had to be educated out of their 'malaise' and learn the values of honest work for private advantage: the common good would look after itself.

In his final effort to foster individualism in Fijian society, O'Brien instructed the magistrates and Bulis in 1900 to apportion the cash refund according to the contribution of each individual. Where it was enforced, the order had unexpected consequences, at least in the case of copra. Whereas previously a district had met its quota by pooling the resources of its landowners - those who had no land in production cut their neighbours' copra - now the owners began to demand payment in pigs or mats or cash to compensate for the diminution of their share in the refund. Some districts went a step further and began to sub-assess individuals from the start for a fixed quantity of copra. For the first time taxes became a problem for the landless. The Roko Tui of Lau, the province most affected, pleaded for individuals to be allowed to pay in cash.⁵⁰ The absurd situation had arisen in his and other provinces where individuals were selling produce to storekeepers to raise cash to buy the particular produce required for taxation in kind. The Council of Chiefs in 1902 asked therefore that it be left to the provinces to decide in what form they should pay their taxes.

O'Brien rightly feared that to grant exceptions would bring down the scheme altogether. In 1900 when the tobacco crop failed in Colo West he had allowed the people to go to the coast and work for a few weeks, but 'strictly as an exceptional case and not to form a precedent'.⁵¹ But under his successors frequent exceptions were made. By 1906 Namosi, Serua and the interior Colo provinces had abandoned their tax fields. Almost alone of the provinces Ba - or rather its energetic Roko, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi - resisted the trend to cash payments. Ratu Joni allowed the people to have individual gardens and kept a strict tally of each man's contribution. In 1908 the people despatched produce that realized £2500 in excess of the assessment of £647 19s. Some individuals received a refund of up to £10.⁵²

Ratu Joni had been trained by Thurston, and like his old friend and chief he must have feared the social consequences of the taxation scheme's imminent destruction. By 1912 there were so few districts paying in kind that it was decided to make cash payments obligatory from the following year. 'I look upon the change as final', wrote the Native Commissioner, adding no regrets.⁵³ The mood of government had changed. They knew well that Fijians would mortgage their coconut groves to the nearest trader who would himself have the nuts collected and the copra cut, with the net result that the owners would receive less than half the value of their produce. They also knew that the loss of the central marketing organization provided by the old scheme would relegate Fijians to the edges of an ever more alien-dominated colonial economy. They hardly bargained perhaps for the enormous amount of petty prosecution in the courts that would be necessary to hound villagers into exercising their new-found individuality and so extract cash taxes that were scarcely more than would have been given back to them under the Gordon system by way of refund. The changes were seen as the inevitable price of an ill-defined concept of general progress through the 'time of transition' to a more western way of life.

Sir George O'Brien had loosened the skewers, his successors began to pull them out. Would the whole Gordon-Thurston legacy disintegrate with the native taxation scheme, would Fijian society collapse within and the colony become a proper British dominion run in the European interest? The next assault was led by an able and well-meaning Governor who enjoyed a reputation in the Colonial Office as one 'whose whole interest wherever he has been has rested in and through the natives . . .'⁵⁴

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