1. People Along the Road

When I was born in 1934, Fiji was a firmly controlled outpost of the British Empire, having been ceded to the Crown by the Chiefs of Fiji in 1874. The Governor sat at the top of the hierarchical pile. These were colonial civil servants who had served their time throughout the Empire and worked their way up the rigidly stratified structure. Despite his absolute power within Fiji, the Governor had to refer all matters to London for final decision. He ruled the islands through the Legislative and Executive Councils, the former being made up of official heads of government departments and a minority of elected members representing the three major races. It was a rather farcical arrangement, as the majority was able to pass whatever legislation they chose. The Executive Council, consisting of the Governor, a few heads of departments, and appointed European members, functioned as a cabinet.

The society was divided by race. Europeans were the small, privileged minority who had little interaction with people of other races and enjoyed privileges denied to others. For example, Europeans could drink alcohol without restriction whereas Fijian and Indian people had to obtain permits. Europeans jealously protected their elite position. Fijians grew increasingly concerned as Indians sought greater political power, and Indians looked upon Fijians as a group crippled by their customary obligations.

Here was a classic example of the British policy of divide and rule. Living as I was on the rather remote island of Taveuni, I was quite unaware of the complex issues of race and government.

For the first six years of my life I had only a vague concept of what existed outside Taveuni. My world was a lush and peaceful island 30 miles long and eight miles wide. Dad said it had the second highest mountain and was the Garden Isle of Fiji, and my sister, Jeanine, and I believed him. But as a small boy I had no concept of the meaning of Fiji except that the island was an integral part of, in fact was the most important part of the colony, whatever that meant.

My mother spoke constantly of a place called Australia, for that was where she came from, and I had to believe that it was also a beautiful place, for she spoke of it with such nostalgia and affection. That’s where her mother and father and the rest of her family lived. From her description, I imagined it to be a place covered with gum trees, just as our plantation was covered with coconut trees. It was also apparently the home of real koala bears and millions of sheep. Strangely enough, Dad seemed to detest Australia. Although he had gone to one of its best public schools, Geelong Grammar, where he had been the cricket captain and apparently successful, his father had later made him stay on and
work as a jackaroo on a sheep station. He hated it so much that he ran away and scrounged enough money for passage back to Fiji. He refused to read any Australian magazines that Mother received from time to time and complained bitterly when she tuned into the Radio Australia news on our wireless at nine o’clock every evening.

I was about five when I began to hear a lot about a man called Hitler. I assumed that he was an absolute monster, as news about his activity caused Mother to weep with worry about Australia being drawn into another world war. I had no conception of a war except that it apparently resulted in a great deal of death and destruction.

Dad looked upon the impending war from a somewhat different perspective. He said it would mean a greater demand for coconut oil for use in making glycerine. I understood this had something to do with the manufacture of ammunition. As our livelihood depended on the making of copra, from which coconut oil was produced, his view seemed to make sense. After all, I did not see how a war could come to Taveuni. What is more, Mother always complained about our poverty, which I couldn’t understand as it seemed that we lived so much better than others on Taveuni. If we made more money because of the war, that sounded OK with me.

My world was filled with a curious collection of people about whom my parents had clear perceptions. Most of them lived on their plantations on the fertile western coast. These plantations were linked by a government road, which was administered by a Road Board on which Dad served as a member. It sounded important, but strangely enough, despite his membership on the board, Dad never ceased to complain about the dreadful state of the road. It seemed quite all right to me, as it was a lot better than our rough plantation roads. It was in fact a one-vehicle-wide track that meandered along the coast and, where this was too precipitous, up into the hills and mountains. It forded countless creeks, which periodically flooded, making passage across—what we were told were Irish crossings—quite impossible. But this flooding of the creeks only made our journey up the coast more exciting.

Dad always said the secret to maintaining the road in good order was to keep the drains open. The Road Board employed four Punjabis at the south end to do this work. These were bearded, turbaned, ageless men, always terribly polite and hard working. They lived in a small house near our plantation and departed for work at dawn each day and often walked four to six miles before starting their daily task of chipping away at the gravel road with their hoes. They filled in potholes and opened the drains until dusk when they wearily returned to their humble abode. They made wonderful potato curries and rotis, and sometimes, as a treat, Dad would pay them to make a curry for us.
It appeared to me that the Europeans had a pre-eminent position on the island. The Punjabis were quaint and different. The Fijians were looked upon as nothing but 'lazy buggers' who would never aspire to anything. The Indians were mere 'coolies' with no status, and the half-castes were looked upon as a rather pathetic group, only slightly better than the 'lazy buggers.' We of course never mixed socially with anyone but the Europeans.

At the extreme south end of the road was Vatu Wiri, where my great Uncle Rood and his wife Aunty Edie and my three cousins Adrian, Spencer, and Talei lived. I was terrified of Uncle Rood who boasted that he was born Rude, christened Rude, and had been Rude ever since. While his face had a roughness about it, he had deceptively kindly eyes. He was always drinking whisky and gin and yelling at people or abusing his labour. Dad told us awesome stories about how he used to whip the labour. Although they were our closest relatives, Dad and Mother didn’t seem to enjoy going to visit them and they seldom came to our house. They lived in a spooky old place with dark interior rooms filled with old paintings and furniture. It was the house built by my great grandfather in the 19th century and I always sensed his ghostly presence.

Aunty Edie was a wispy old lady with long grey hair that was plaited and tied at the top of her head. She was thin and put on lots of airs and graces. Dad and Mother said that this was to cover up for Uncle Rood’s brashness and the fact that she was only a clerk’s daughter. She always laughed at Uncle Rood’s excesses and loved to tell risqué stories. We were told that Uncle Rood was a great gambler and spent vast sums of money on poker and horse racing. He always seemed to be winning and bought all Aunty Edie’s jewellery from his gains and sent her and Talei on a world tour. I didn’t see much of the two boys, Adrian and Spencer. They went away to boarding school in New Zealand when the war broke out in 1940 and Europeans were advised by the government to send their wives and children to New Zealand. Dad and Mother resisted this advice.

Next to our house was a Morris Hedstrom store. Morris Hedstrom was the largest trading company in Fiji and one could buy absolutely anything from a cotton reel to a sack of flour at their branch. It was managed by a kindly old gentleman named Ernie Walker. We were told that he had been a Sergeant in the Black Watch and I understood this to be some kind of select group of soldiers with close links to the King of England. I remember when I was small and ran around with no shirt he would grab me and tweak my navel and say, 'I'll cut it off and sew on a button.' I was never quite sure whether he meant it. Ernie Walker lived on his own, but we were told he had a son who later won a scholarship and went away to be educated. (In fact, in later years he was to become Fiji’s most senior civil servant, Minister of Finance, and Fiji’s Ambassador to Japan.) We got on well together, but for some strange reason my parents seldom entertained
him. I got the impression that he was regarded as a storekeeper, while we were planters, and his Black Watch connections didn’t really alter the proper social order of things.

One night, very late, our telephone started ringing and Dad and Mother began talking in hushed tones. Dad went out in his car and I went back to sleep. I was told next day that poor Ernie Walker had gone up to the old Ura house, which was a spooky place that had fallen into complete disrepair, put a rifle into his mouth and blown his brains out. It seemed like a stupid thing to do, and I was never told why. However, I did hear people talking about money problems and drink and women. I felt sad about Mr Walker.

The next house north from ours belonged to my Uncle Herbert. He was another mystery man. I knew he was my father’s full brother, but he was strange and we saw little of him. I later found out that he had disgraced himself and the family by falling in love with the daughter of one of our Indian copra cutters. Apparently that was about as low as you could go. Dad banished him from the plantation and later bought out his inheritance. He left the island and even changed his name. But he married the Indian woman and had a son and some lovely daughters who I met when I was much older.

While we were told that the Tarte plantations were the largest and best kept on Taveuni, there was also the Couborough Estates. These were three properties, totalling more than 20,000 acres, which had been carved out of the virgin bush by a Scotsman named A. A. Couborough. His son, who had inherited them, had gone back to England and later died, and the plantations were managed by his trustees. Old Couborough was reputed to have accumulated a vast fortune, which, as a true Scotsman, he never spent. According to Fijian ‘talk,’ he buried it in a cave near the old home on the Ura Estate. In fact, when Dad was much older, he spent a small fortune trying to find the loot. Dad was an inveterate and quite successful prospector, who discovered and sold a gold mine, a cooper mine, and a manganese mine. For about six months he used a gang of ten Fijians to dig up all the rocky ground around the Couborough house, but he never found a thing.

One of the Coubborough Estates was Salia Levu, a property of 12,000 acres directly across the island from our plantation. It was managed by a jovial man named George Crabbe. His wife, Myrtle, was a scarlet-faced person who seemed to spend most of her days drinking gin and her nights drinking whisky. This was the only estate on the eastern side of the island and my parents used to say it was the wettest place on earth. It was apparently drenched in 250 inches of rain annually, and was known to have had 360 inches in one year: one inch for every day of the year. The only way to get to Salia Levu was by horseback along a track that wound through our plantation, then through thick bush and along
the steaming hot plantation roads of Salia Levu. For us kids, it was always an exciting ride, and we would be rewarded when we got to Salia Levu with a feast of fresh prawns and crayfish from the abundant reefs. Being on the eastern side of the island, Salia Levu always felt the full force of the south-east trade winds and huge seas crashed onto the rugged coastline. It was a wild and exciting place.

Back on the western side, the next property to ours was a small one with a palatial home owned by the redoubtable Godfrey Garrick. I seldom saw him, and had a mental image of a giant-sized Father Christmas. My parents always spoke of him with great respect, for he was a lawyer and spent most of his time looking after his legal practice in Suva. Nabono was simply his country estate home. The name was derived from a Fijian term ‘Na Bogi Ono’ which meant six nights. We were told that the great Lauan chief Ma’afu, who came to conquer Taveuni, stayed there with his fleet for six nights before going up the coast to wage war on the Tui Cakau, the paramount chief of Taveuni.

Next to Nabono was Ura, another of the Couborough Estates. Managers seem to come and go, but I best remembered Willie Peterson. Although Willie was a half-caste, (the term used in those days for mixed-race people), he was for some reason considered to be a cut above the others. He giggled a lot, but was always most polite and respectful. He always addressed Europeans as Mr or Mrs, and they always called him Willie. His wife Mary was a dark-skinned half-caste, but everybody loved Mary. She was so gentle and affectionate with children, and had about six of her own.

From Ura, there was a long drive up through the heavily-wooded hills. Dad drove this section of the road with great care, blowing his horn constantly as he crawled around the tight corners. I remember one day as we were driving up the coast, as the trip to the centre was called, in his blue Chev (he would never own anything but a Chevrolet), we had an accident. As we went around a bend we collided with another car. Both of us were doing only about 15 miles per hour and I don't think the accident was anyone’s fault. But the poor Indian taxi driver, whose name was Ram Autar, never had a chance. Dad exploded in rage and almost throttled the speechless and terrified Ram Autar who readily confessed that he was speeding and didn’t blow his horn and that his brakes had failed. Dad made him pay for the cost of damage to his car, and I think it broke the poor fellow, for I never saw him driving his car on the road again.

After the bushland we came to the Douglas Plantations. There were many Douglasses and countless stories about them. The patriarch of the clan was Charlie, a dumpy man with a huge belly and short thin legs. He never stopped talking and, Dad said, told the most outrageous lies. His sons Reggie and Eddie were my father’s age and the same shape as their father. A visit to the Douglas
house was chaotic, as all the men and women tried to talk at the same time and tell different versions of the same story or incident. Their voices became louder and louder as they each sought to dominate. We kids used to sit wide-eyed and speechless, looking from one to the other as the stories unfolded.

One of Charlie’s brothers, whose name was Toysy, (which seemed a strange name), was a real playboy and had apparently sired a number of illegitimate children by Fijian women. When he was drowned in the sea off our house after his boat capsized, my parents said it was just retribution for his multitude of sins.

There was also a sister who suffered from some mental disorder. We all thought she was rather pathetic and felt sorry for her. One day we were astounded to hear our parents say that she had eloped with a Fijian and was living in a cave. Later she was quietly removed to New Zealand and we never saw her again.

Adjacent to the Douglasses lived the Harness family, who, I think, my parents regarded as the only other normal family on the island. Mick and Ella were happy and friendly people. A relative owned the plantation that Mick managed and we all expected that when that relative died, Mick and Ella would inherit the place they had lived all their lives. When the old girl did pass on and left it to someone else, we were all mortified as the Harness family departed from Taveuni forever.

Mick was a tall, rugged individual who seemed to work hard. He loved his whisky and drank prodigiously at parties. When he was full he would sing and dance with great merriment. He drove an old Ford lorry and when it was time to go home, he would bundle the family onto the truck and somehow steer it along the perilously narrow roads. Ella never growled at him and I don’t think they ever came to grief. His son Bobby was my best friend, and his pretty, curly-haired sister Evelyn was regarded as my girlfriend and possible future spouse.

Next to the Harness family was the third Couborough Estate, Soqulu. It was managed by Wal Warden. Mr Warden was a veteran of the First World War and apparently had a piece of shrapnel embedded in his back to prove it. He and his wife Dorothy were everybody’s friends. They even treated their labour as friends, and not many people approved of this attitude. He had the easiest of jobs, Dad said, because he was paid a salary and didn’t have to worry about anything. Indeed, that seemed to be the case, as he never appeared to do any real work.

One of the delicacies of Taveuni was the wood pigeon, which thrived in the mountains above the coconut tree line. They fluttered about in the trees and when they rested, about 40 feet up, you could shoot them with .22 rifles. Mr Warden always seemed to be out shooting and he often boasted of bringing in
50 at a time, many of which he gave away to friends. Mother and Dad sometimes went out shooting with them, until one day when Mother was reloading her rifle and accidentally shot Mrs Warden in the foot. That was the last time she ever held a rifle.

Wal Warden’s other passions were his vegetable garden and raising poultry and eggs. He made a weekly visit to Waiyevo to see the District Officer and present a gift of pigeons, vegetables, homemade butter, or eggs. As the District Officer was always a temporary resident, he had to buy all these essentials, so the gifts from Wal Warden were much appreciated. When, some years later, he was awarded an MBE (Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) by the King, the locals said it was for giving Meat, Butter, and Eggs to the District Officer.

Wal Warden was also an inveterate snoop and gossip. The main form of communication on the island was the telephone. A single, eight-gauge, wire telephone line ran from Waiyevo to the south, and another one to the north, and the exchange to link the two was at Waiyevo. The number for each of the plantation houses was a Morse code letter. Ours was one long ring and three short rings. Of course, no conversation was private as anyone could pick up their receiver and listen to what other people were saying whenever they heard a ring. This was apparently how Wal Warden picked up all his gossip. The line was a fragile connection, as it was strung from coconut tree to coconut tree, and whenever we had a hurricane and trees were blown down, the telephone went out of action. It was also used to communicate government messages to the planters. On such occasions, the code—three longs, three shorts, and three longs—was rung by the exchange and everyone was expected to pick up their receiver. This was called a ‘press ring’ and when everybody indicated to the exchange operator that they were ready and listening, the message was given out.

Wal Warden was a great sporting enthusiast and was particularly knowledgeable about cricket and tennis. When the cricket test matches between Australia and England were on, he remained glued to the radio and as soon as there was anything to report he would ring people on the telephone. However, he said that he never participated in games because the shrapnel was so close to his spine that if it moved he could become paralysed. I don’t think my parents really believed this story and felt that he only spoke about it to give himself a kind of heroic glamour.

Next to the Wardens lived Jack Taylor. Jack was a wiry man with piercing black eyes and bushy eyebrows. He wore long khaki trousers and was never seen without his dirty felt hat. He was gruff and unfriendly and had a swarm of half-caste sons. His wife was a Fijian lady who, we were told, had once nursed
him when he became seriously ill, and he married her in appreciation of the care she gave him. He was largely ostracised by the Europeans on the island for marrying a Fijian and consequently did not mix socially. I don't think this situation worried him as he was an independent minded fellow and didn't care a damn about Taveuni society.

The next stop along the road was the Roman Catholic mission at Wairiki. There were a number of Catholic Fathers, who we often saw, and a number of nuns who we seldom saw. My parents joked about a tunnel that reputedly ran between the Fathers’ residences on one side of the compound and the nuns’ quarters on the other. They made snide remarks about illicit meetings and indecent goings on, but to us, the nuns who we did see all looked too sterile to do any of the things that my parents hinted at. The nuns taught at a large school while the Fathers saved souls.

One of the Fathers, I remember was a bearded Frenchman, Father Cockereau. He was known to us, however, as Father Cockroach and we believed that this was his real name. He was greatly admired by Dad for his engineering skills. He diverted a stream through the mission compound, constructed a pelton wheel from odd bits and pieces, and generated enough electricity from the water to light up all the houses. He even installed lights on poles within the compound.

This was something quite new for Taveuni, and one night as Mick Harness was driving his family home from a party soon after they had been installed, Bob woke up at the precise moment they passed the Wairiki Mission and seeing the lights on the poles exclaimed, 'Look Mum, stars on sticks.' It was a phrase that we remembered for a long time.

There was another such phrase that we used constantly. Whenever we were driving home at night from a party up north, Jeanine and I would go to sleep in the back seat and sometimes wake up and ask, 'Where are we?' Invariably, Dad or Mother would reply, 'Just passing a coconut tree.' Considering the hundreds and thousands of trees on the island it wasn't much indication of our position, but we laughed about it.

Close by the mission was another small Morris Hedstrom store, run by a curious little man known simply as George. I never found out if he had another name, but to distinguish him from other Georges he was called George Wairiki, as he lived at Wairiki. He was effusively obliging and always laughing. Our parents only called in to buy goods that they could not get elsewhere, and when they did he always gave us sweets.

The hour long drive along the 15-mile south-end road terminated at Waiyevo, the government station and hub of the island. Located on high land overlooking the beautiful Somosomo Straits were the hospital, the doctor’s residence, the
wireless operator, the District Officer, who was also the District Commissioner, the jail, the courthouse, the post office, the road foreman's house, the Public Works Department Depot, the rest house, and the tennis club.

The resident doctor was always an Englishman, Scotsman, or Irishman on a two to three year term with the colonial service. Doctor McCawley was a doctor I remember well, for I think he once saved my life. He was a rotund Irishman who had a son by the name of Martin. Martin was a veritable Irish terrier with a violent temper. It seems that whenever he and I met at the tennis club we ended up fighting. One day when he completely lost his temper he took to me with a cane knife. I'm sure that I would have lost my head if his equally angry father had not intervened in the nick of time.

Another doctor I remember well was Doctor Verrier. His name was actually Isaacs, but he was so afraid that Hitler would win the war and persecute the Jews in Fiji that he changed it to Verrier. He was a fat bachelor who spoke with a frightfully English accent and was, my parents said, 'a little odd.' I didn't know until much later what that insinuation meant. He was artistic and one of his creations was redirecting a small stream across the sloping lawns of his garden. At certain intervals he made little concrete waterfalls with a space behind them where he placed candles. At night he would sit on his verandah and gaze wondrously at what he termed his private fairyland.

On one occasion after a cattle muster on our plantation, I was galloping home on my pony at dusk and didn't see a temporary barbed wire fence that the stockman had strung across the road. I ran into it at a full gallop. The poor horse got dreadfully tangled in the barbed wire and had to be destroyed. I came out of it, luckily, with only a badly lacerated leg, and was rushed up to the hospital to be attended by Dr Verrier. I have a vivid memory of Dr Verrier clad in a green gown with a lamp on his forehead, peering down at me lying on his operating table. As he administered the chloroform he chortled, 'Don't worry old chap, I won't cut off your leg.'

The doctor presided over a small hospital of about 20 beds for people other than Europeans. He was assisted by a native medical practitioner who had some years of training in Suva but wasn't fully qualified. He also had three or four Fijian and Indian nurses.

Separate from this building was the cottage hospital, which was exclusively for Europeans. Here a qualified European nurse gave specialised attention to the white patients.

The other key person at the government station was the District Commissioner. This post was later downgraded to District Officer. The District Officer or Commissioner was the head of the government establishment on the island and
also filled the role of Magistrate. He was always an Englishman with the Colonial service and many of the District Commissioners and District Officers who came to Taveuni had served in Africa or the Caribbean before coming to Fiji. They came in all shapes and sizes, with varying attitudes toward the locals. Some had appallingly high opinions of themselves and never managed to forget that they were the sons of English aristocracy. They came and went and many made no impact upon the island or the people. But others, like Phillip Snow, who was a District Officer when I was a boy, made a life-long commitment to Fiji. Phillip Snow’s great contribution was to popularise cricket, and he later took Fiji teams out into the world. He was captain of the Fiji team for some time and wrote a book about cricket in Fiji. 40 years after serving on Taveuni, while living in retirement in England, he was still involved in arranging tours of Fiji teams to England.

Then there were eccentrics like Christopher Legge. My parents told us that while serving in Africa he had contracted blackwater fever, which sounded quite horrible. Apparently his temperature, which had gone up to 115°, was cited by the British Medical Association as the highest ever recorded temperature for a man who had survived the fever. My parents said this accounted for his strange behaviour.

While serving on the bench as the Magistrate, he would often suddenly get up and walk out of the Court without so much as an excuse me to the Prosecuting Officer or defending lawyer who may have been addressing him. After a while he might return, but on some occasions the Court Clerk would have to go and search for him. They would sometimes find him walking around admiring his garden, or swimming in his pool, or perhaps sitting down reading a book. He had simply forgotten that he was hearing a case.

He was indeed an odd chap, but the people accepted him as the King’s representative and gave him appropriate respect. There were times, however, when I found him hard to understand. Once, my parents were having dinner at his home when he suddenly left the table. He came back a little later to announce that the toilet was blocked. He then looked quizzically at Dad and asked, ‘Do you think Daryl may have stuffed the cat down the toilet?’ I was aghast at such an idea and somewhat disappointed that Dad didn’t rebuke him. But I think Dad and Mother were so busy trying to stifle their amusement that they couldn’t do anything else.

Another colourful character who lived at Waiyevo was Walter Zink. Walter, who operated the Wireless Station, was a black-skinned half-caste with a rough face. His duty was to man the Morse code set and receive and despatch telegrams for Taveuni people. If people wanted to order goods urgently from Suva or send a message to a friend or a business associate in Suva or Australia,
they would telephone the exchange and say, ‘I want to speak to the Wireless Operator, please.’ When Walter came on the line, he was told, ‘I want to send a cable to Suva to John Smith. J for Jack, O for Oliver, H for Henry, N for Nancy,’ and so on. Of course, everyone on the island could listen in to the message being read, so if it was private and very confidential, such as a message to the bank manager, one had to drive to Waiyevo and hand it to Walter personally.

Walter Zink was also the bandleader. He had a group of five men who played steel guitar, ukulele, mandolin, and bass drum, and they appeared at every party held on the island. His repertoire was confined to the popular songs of the day, like ‘Blue Birds Over the White Cliffs of Dover,’ or ‘You Are My Sunshine,’ or ‘Look for the Silver Lining.’

The main attraction at Waiyevo was the tennis club, a one-room wooden building with high shutters all around that was only opened by members on Saturdays and Sundays. It faced onto two lawn tennis courts, which was the reason why all the Europeans gathered there, clad in white and carrying big picnic baskets. They played singles, doubles, or mixed doubles all day and ate their lunches. The ball boys were provided by the Headmaster of the Bucalevu Provincial School, which was a school for sons of Fijian Chiefs and other respected Fijian families that was just north of Waiyevo. One of these ball boys would later become Governor-General of Fiji, but in those days he was regarded as just another Fijian boy. Whenever Europeans passed along the government road in their cars these boys from the Bucalevu School would stop and salute.

After tennis we usually went to the doctor’s or the District Officer’s place for drinks. Quite often, after being at the club all day and after having a ‘few’ with the doctor or District Officer, my parents would call at the Warden’s or the Harness’ on their way home. They would drink whisky and have boiled eggs and toast, and play card games or have singsongs around the piano before heading home. A downpour of rain was often a signal that it was time to go, as the dozens of creeks along the way could flood and leave us stranded on the road, taking us all night to get home. It was really quite a treacherous journey, but it didn’t seem to stop my father from drinking quite a lot. He always got us home safely. If we did arrive at a creek that was flooded, Dad would stop on the bank and wade out into the torrent to test its strength and depth. Only if the water was below his knees would he come back to the car and decide to venture forth. If it was too high, we would all sit in the car and sometimes go to sleep until the torrent subsided.

The road north from Waiyevo was not one that we travelled very often. It was regarded by Dad, out of jealousy I think, as being a terrible ordeal. In fact it was much flatter than our south end road as it snaked its way for 18 miles around steep headlands rather than winding up into the hills. Just north from Waiyevo
was the chiefly village of Somosomo. This was where the paramount chief of Cakaudrove, the Tui Cakau, lived. Whenever the Governor visited Taveuni, he came ashore at Somosomo and was carried on a litter by Fijian bearers. He was always dressed in his white uniform with an abundance of gold braid and plumed hat and was received with great pomp and ceremony by the Fijians.

This was also where the bazaars were held to raise funds for the war effort. We were constantly being asked to raise funds to assist Britain and many of the ladies knitted jerseys and socks, which were sent off to England. Dad also made charcoal out of coconut shell. This was cooked in 44-gallon drums and was apparently used for gas masks. Considerable sums of money were raised at these bazaars. Silver coins had gone out of circulation and had been replaced by notes. There were even penny notes and we children had a great time seeing how many penny notes we could accumulate. They were about three inches long and one inch wide.

At that time the Tui Cakau was treated with some respect by the European population but, despite his high station in Fijian society, was still regarded as an inferior mortal. He had the reputation of being a lazy drunkard and was despised by the planters because his extensive plantation was neglected and overgrown with weeds and bush.

Next to the Tui Cakau lived Duncan Hedstrom, his wife Rose, and their three daughters. Duncan was apparently the black sheep of the Hedstrom family, which owned the trading, shipping, and industrial empire of Morris Hedstrom. His over-indulgence in whisky had reduced him to a frail, shaky man with a bad temper. His wife and daughters were lovely people and good friends of my mother and Jeanine.

Duncan hated any form of authority and was constantly rebelling against new laws introduced by the local authority. The head of this body was the Medical Officer and it was Dr Verrier who decided it was time for planters to replace wooden shutters with glass windows. When Duncan refused to co-operate, Dr Verrier went to see him and said that unless he complied he would close down his labour quarters. Duncan became so irate that he lashed out and hit Dr Verrier on the nose, causing it to bleed profusely. Verrier calmly dabbed his nose with a silk handkerchief and pompously exclaimed, ‘Dear, dear, Mr Hedstrom, you must be a very sick man.’ Whereupon Duncan hit him a second time. Dr Verrier sniffed blood into his nostrils, turned his back, and walked away.

Duncan Hedstrom’s neighbour was Percy McConnell, an unsociable, mean, bad-tempered Scotsman. He lived on a hill surrounded by a forest of mango trees and one could only reach the house by climbing about 200 steps. He seldom visited anybody and very rarely entertained.
Mua was the next estate north. This was a rocky plantation with low coconut yields. To overcome this problem, the owner, Mr Bull—I always thought this was a funny name—imported a new variety of coconuts called Malay Dwarfs. They were short trees that were planted 90 to the acre, compared to 55 to the acre for the Fiji Tall trees. These trees came into bearing in five years, compared to eight years for the Fiji Talls, and the yields increased significantly. Much to everyone’s annoyance, Mr Bull refused to sell any of his seed nuts to other planters.

Also living on Mua were the two strange Moresby brothers. The elder brother was a recluse and we never saw him. One day he went out bush walking and simply disappeared. Search parties were sent out and they scoured the mountains for days. It was generally thought that the older Moresby must have fallen into one of the many rocky caves and either been killed or slowly died of starvation. Logan Moresby, the younger brother, was, however, well known. He was a blacksmith by trade and could fashion anything from horseshoes to precision-made scissors and emasculators. He had his forge and piles of coal in a filthy, cluttered shed, surrounded by odd pieces of discarded metal from which he made his wares. He always wore heavy black or grey flannel clothes that were covered with coal dust or grease. He had piercing black eyes and bushy eyebrows and a huge walrus moustache that he sucked on continuously. Logan was a gruff, uncommunicative man, quite intolerant of his helpers or clients as he went about his daily work fashioning metal on his anvil.

Although he had two Fijian assistants, I could never understand why they stayed with him, for he abused them dreadfully and referred to all Fijians as ‘Bloody Black Bastards.’

Just north of Mua was Naselesele, the northern most tip of Taveuni. From this point on, the road started to curve around towards the east. Naselesele was the home of the Petersons and the Ensors. They were always kind to us kids, but they were people of lower status. Their white ancestors had acquired large tracks of land, but when their descendants married Fijian ladies, they bred prolifically and the holdings were cut up into smaller uneconomical holdings. The families lived modestly and had a closer kinship with the Fijians than the Europeans.

North of Naselesele was Nagasau, the home of the McKenzies. Just as my Aunty Edie was known as the Queen of the South, so Mrs McKenzie was called the Queen of the North. That is not to say that Aunty Edie accepted that Mrs McKenzie was of equal status. We all laughed at her manner of speaking, which was coarse compared to Aunty Edie. Aunty Edie often told the story of how Mrs McKenzie was entertaining ladies for afternoon tea and saying, ‘Yous that want milk can milk youselves.’ Mrs McKenzie had a son, Max, who spoke just as roughly. In fact, he never stopped talking. Then there was a daughter
named Viti, who we were told nearly married my father. Apparently Dad was so smitten with Viti that for some months, every Friday afternoon after he had completed his work, he would ride his horse the 35 miles from Vuna to Nagasau, where he would spend the weekend courting Viti. We never did find out why the romance was broken off, but I suspect that it was at the instigation of my snobbish grandmother. Max was a jovial chap who had one thing in common with Uncle Rood, he was an inveterate gambler on the Australian horse races. There was also a half brother, which was something I couldn’t understand, named Bill McKay. He had a lovely wife named Helen and lived on the last estate on the north road. He was a kindly gentleman, but for some reason I could never understand, Dad did not like, nor trust him.