Introduction

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This book is by a European Fijian. Europeans have always been a tiny minority in Fiji: 2.1% of the population in 1881, 2% in 1936, 1.4% in 1966, and fewer since independence in 1970. Yet Europeans were central players in Fiji from the time they came in the 19th century, and they dominated the country during the colonial period, from 1874 until 1970. Europeans had advantages of technological know-how, political organisation, and military might that guaranteed their supremacy in societies that were encountering the rest of the world for the first time. Fiji was one of those societies and, in a process mirrored across the Pacific Islands, it became a British colony. Before that, European settlers had come to Fiji, especially in the 1860s, when the American Civil War disrupted cotton cultivation. As the price of cotton soared, hundreds of Europeans from the Australasian colonies headed for Fiji to make their fortunes as planters. One of them was James Valentine Tarte, the great-grandfather of the author of this book, and the founder of a family who have lived in Fiji ever since and who call Fiji home.

The modern history of Fiji is well known, but its basic outlines bear repeating. In order to give their colony an economic foundation, the British encouraged investment by the Colonial Sugar Refining Company of Sydney (CSR), which arrived in 1880 and became Fiji’s leading plantation company, with estates concentrated in western Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. For labour to work on the plantations, the British turned to their vast possessions in India, bringing more than 60,000 Indians to Fiji between 1879 and 1916, and ushering in a fateful change in the demography of the colony. A mere 14% of the population in 1901, the Indians were a majority by 1946, fuelling fears among the indigenous Fijians that, unless they continued to enjoy the protection of the British, they would lose control of their own country. The British, initially concerned that the Fijians might die out, protected and preserved Fijian society by a separate system of administration that kept many Fijians living traditional lives in villages rather than becoming part of a modern workforce. The Indians, meanwhile, rose in colonial society, establishing small businesses, entering the professions, and bringing their skills to the civil service. As historian Brij V. Lal has pointed out, the circumstances of Fiji’s divided colonial society led to the assertion of different and competing principles by different groups. While the Fijians called for the paramountcy of Fijian interests and the Indians called for parity, the
Europeans, who were at the apex of business and government, enjoyed and defended a position of privilege. The sympathies of the Europeans, meanwhile, lay principally with the Fijians.

This, then, was the society into which Daryl Tarte was born in 1934. His family were by then substantial plantation owners on the island of Taveuni, producing copra from the ‘dead straight’ rows of coconut trees on their estates. They were neighbours to an extraordinary collection of planters whose idiosyncrasies and foibles he describes, and to a small group of other Europeans who worked for the government. In the manner of the time, Europeans stuck together, ostracising any among them who married Fijians, and taking their superiority for granted. Colonial society was founded upon hierarchy, something that suited Fijian preconceptions and favoured the British. As Tarte writes, 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.’

The country of Tarte’s childhood and youth, however, was not the country of his adult years. By 1968 he was living in Suva as Secretary of the Fiji Sugar Board, and for the next three decades he was intimately involved in the sugar industry, which was not only a major source of exports but the foundation on which a whole social system of Indian settlement was built. Much of the country’s politics, too, revolved around sugar and the competing claims of landowners, growers and mills. Tarte focuses on the people of the sugar industry, their achievements, peculiarities and personalities, from Swami Rudrananda, ‘the saffron-robed Hindu monk, who for 50 years had been the vocal champion of cane farmers’, to Lord Denning, who sided with those farmers against CSR in his arbitration of 1969.

The British were under no illusions about the chequered political prospects of an independent Fiji, given the depth of the divide between the Fijian and Indian communities. They were constantly reminded of what might happen by appeals from the people of Fiji. On the Indian side, in 1965 the political leader A. D. Patel called for ‘complete independence in the not too distant future,’ saying that ‘without political freedom no country can be economically, socially or spiritually free.’ On the Fijian side, the Great Council of Chiefs reminded the British: ‘We find ourselves to be a minority people in our own land. The form of government which is being demanded by certain elements in Fiji and overseas, in the name of ‘democracy’, would result in our being placed under the political control of immigrant races. It was not for this that we ceded our land to your

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intoshious forebear.' The Indian leaders wanted independence; the Fijian leaders
wanted to preserve constitutional links between Fiji and the United Kingdom,
or at the very least their own paramountcy in an independent Fiji. The Indians
welcomed democracy; the Fijians feared it. In the end, the British departed on
terms they hoped might secure the dominance of the Fijians, in particular of the
country’s first prime minister, Ratu Kamisese Mara. For Tarte, ‘Independence
Day on the 10th October 1970 was one of the most moving’ of his life.

Mara came to bestride the politics of Fiji like a colossus. Except for a break
in 1987, he was prime minister of Fiji from 1970 to 1992, and president from
1993 to 2000. Tarte is an admirer of Mara, and of the three other chiefs who led
Fiji into independence: Ratu Edward Cakobau, Ratu George Cakobau and Ratu
Penia Ganilau. Their passing in the decades that followed (Mara was the last to
die, in 2004) coincided with Fiji’s descent into unprecedented instability, as one
coup followed another, the Fiji Military Forces became the dominant political
force, and tens of thousands of Fiji’s best people departed its shores to seek a
more secure life elsewhere.

Tarte’s account of more recent, more troubled times in Fiji is a reminder that
people’s long-held fears for the country were, to an extent, borne out. Fiji’s
coups have been terrible events. Tarte describes his dismay and anger seeing
the flames rising above Suva during the riots that accompanied the 2000 coup,
gineered by George Speight and ‘a dangerous bunch of heavily armed
ignorant thugs.’ He finds himself disquieted by the coup six years later, and he
rightly identifies ‘the migration of talented people from Fiji’ as the most serious
consequence of its coups.

Yet his account of life in Fiji since the 1980s also reveals that the very worst fears
held for Fiji—of widespread communal violence and the wholesale destruction
of society—have not been realised. Fiji’s coups have been Fijian in character:
forceful, sometimes chaotic, but in the end restrained. By comparison with
coups in other parts of the world, they have been models of moderation. As Fiji
has alternated between coups and elections, Fiji’s governments have been often
ineffective or repressive, but never disastrous. Looking ahead and seeking an
ethos that will bind the people of his country together, Tarte calls for the values
of *vakaturaga* to be the ones that guide all the people of Fiji of whatever race or
belief, the values of respect, humility, kindness, tolerance and understanding.

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2 ibid., pp. 241, 352.