The Tartes had deep roots in England. Apparently the family had been part of the Huguenot's escape from France in the 16th and 17th centuries. They had first settled in southern England before spreading to London and Birmingham. It is recorded that John Tarte became Lord Mayor of London in 1614 and that Edward Tarte became Vicar of St Mary’s in 1782.

My great-grandfather, James Valentine Tarte, became apprenticed to an electrical engineer but had a very adventurous spirit, so when he heard of the rich gold finds in Victoria, Australia, he decided to try his luck. It seems that he was a rather wild character, as on the trip to Australia, he found himself in trouble with the ship’s Captain on a number of occasions and was put ‘in irons’.

In a diary that he compiled later in life he tells of his experiences in the gold mining town of Ballarat. When gold mining failed to yield the expected results, he set up a store to supply the miners with their needs. This was so successful that he moved into trading in gold claims and made himself a small fortune.

He then met up with Adam Lindsay Gordon, who was later to become one of Australia’s best known poets. At that time Gordon was into horse racing and James became a jockey. Steeplechasing was his specialty and also his downfall. On one occasion after a fall, his horse stamped on his face as it was getting up and destroyed one of his eyes. It took him a long time to recover, and during this recovery period he began to hear about land sales that had started in the Fiji Islands.

Despite the scary tales about fearsome Fijians and cannibalism, my great-grandfather decided to venture forth again. The first port of call was Suva and he claimed to have been on ‘the first steamer to anchor in the harbor.’ He recorded in his diary: ‘We went ashore to find a few native huts and soon a crowd of natives appeared. We started to land a horse. When it was up in the air on a hoist the Fijians couldn’t make out what it was. But when the horse was landed in the water, and stood up and shook itself, they took off and started to climb coconut trees.’

He tells how the next day they sailed on to Levuka which was then the capital. ‘A quaint little town with two hotels.’ The word in Levuka was that the best land in Fiji was on the island of Taveuni. So that is where he headed, acquiring 300 acres of choice land at a place that he called ‘Woodlands’. Cotton was the popular crop of the day. After constructing a Robinson Crusoe-type house, he and the labour he was able to recruit began hacking down the thick bush. ‘The
weather was really against us. For 16 days it never stopped raining—heavy rain. We had to sleep on the ground and I often got up during the night to wring out my clothes.’

He eventually got established, harvested his cotton crops, bought more land from settlers who found the going too tough, and decided to bring to Fiji the lady he intended to marry. Clarissa, the lady of his choice, who was from Melbourne, would have had little idea of the primitive conditions in Fiji. James met her at the Levuka Hotel and their wedding was recorded by the British Consul as the first white wedding in Fiji. Many years later, my mother would describe her as ‘very beautiful in a rather regal way—with the long tapering fingers of a pianist.’ She said Clarissa liked to sing to my sister and I when we were small, and she would often rub my head and comment: ‘It’s such an unusual head that he will have an interesting life.’ Indeed I have.

When they reached Taveuni, Clarissa was carried on a stretcher the three miles from the coast to her new home in Woodlands. Soon after her arrival, she experienced her first hurricane. According to James, ‘she almost died of fright.’ But it was the hurricane of 1874 that destroyed their fragile home and motivated James to buy land on the coast and build a house that no hurricane could destroy. The stone walls of this house were a metre thick and the house stands to this day, 150 years on.

It was in this house that their first child was born. James tells the story:

Cara was having her first birth pains. It was a moonlit night and I saw figures moving around the house in a rather threatening way. I got out my revolver and went out to challenge them. I saw that their leader was a man I had punished the previous day. He came and stood before me and told me I had shamed him before his people and he was going to kill me and burn my house down. I pointed my revolver at him and told him that my wife was about to give birth and that if he would try to do anything I would shoot him. There was a tense standoff for a while so I suggested that he and his men should go and sit under a tree till dawn while I attended to my wife, then I would come out and talk to them. My son was born shortly after that and when it was daylight I carried him outside and presented him to the Fijians. Here is your new Turaga (chief) I told them. For a while they just stared at the tiny child, then they turned and walked away.

He tells another story of how he was supervising the same gang of workers as they were clearing land. When he had to return to his home, he took out his glass eye, placed it on the fork of a tree and told the men that he was leaving, but his eye would watch them and make sure they kept working.
Sugarcane and coconuts were the next crops James planted. He built a sugar mill on the estate and by the turn of the century he had a flourishing enterprise of over 7,000 acres. There were 3,000 head of cattle, as well as horses, mules and donkeys. The estate was divided into many paddocks separated by 30 miles of six-foot-high stone walls, and there were tram lines over most of the estate.

He died while on a holiday in Australia in 1919, and his body was embalmed and brought back to Taveuni. As it was being lowered into the grave, a rope broke and the coffin fell. The Fijians in attendance muttered that this boded ill for the family. I think they were wrong.