

The Fiji Cotton Boom in the Eighteen-sixties

THE STORY of the establishment of cotton plantations in the Fiji Islands, expansion within a decade almost to the status of a monoculture, followed by a disastrous fall in prices in a distant market, ruin and disillusion, illustrates in microcosm an oft-repeated phase of nineteenth century capitalistic colonization. Here was an attempt to push the frontiers of European commercial exploitation into a remote, isolated group of islands in the Pacific Ocean. Cotton was not the only tropical crop tried but in its early stages was more successful than a variety of other attempts to establish a commercial plantation economy. While irregularity of rainfall, though adequate in total, greatly increased the risks of cotton growing, the failure of cotton was due less to any intrinsic deficiency in the physical environment of the region — Fiji Sea Island cotton was still winning gold medals in 1878 — than to a complex of human failings in the planters who settled in Fiji, and of economic factors beyond their control.

By the eighteen-sixties, Europeans had penetrated into most of the major island groups of the South Pacific. The French were already in New Caledonia and Tahiti, the Germans were in Samoa. The Fiji group was still no-man's land, one of the last havens for traders, beachcombers, adventurers and Wesleyan missionaries. In Australia the second generation of British settlers was finding it difficult to obtain good cheap land and was looking for a new frontier. Young British colonials in New Zealand, harassed by the Anglo-Maori wars in the North Island, were looking hopefully north. A number of Americans, Yankee traders, and Californians, lured by Australian gold fields, had found their way into the South Pacific. The promise of cheap land, cheap labour and large profits from tropical products drew many to the Fiji group where they would be unshackled by civilized institutions of government, law and taxation. High cotton prices in Europe produced by disruption of American supplies during the Civil War encouraged almost exclusive production of this crop in Fiji by 1869 (see p. 167).

Cotton is not indigenous to the Fiji Islands and seems to have been introduced in the mid-eighteen-thirties. By 1860 it was growing wild in several islands, although the native Fijians made little use of it.

Berthold Seemann noted six varieties which he identified as: two kinds of kidney cotton, *Gossypium Peruvianum* Cav. and a new species with mossy seeds; *Gossypium Barbadosense* Linn.; *Gossypium aboreum* Linn.; an inferior shorter staple variety of this latter; and Nankin cotton, *Gossypium religiosum* Linn.¹ He was impressed by the prolific growth of this wild cotton and the large number of pods produced by unpruned and uncared-for plants.

W. T. Pritchard, who had been appointed British Consul in 1858, returned to England at the end of that year to report on a Fijian proposal to cede the islands to Britain. He took with him some samples of wild cotton. These drew the following resolution from the Cotton Supply Association in Manchester: 'That if the representations made by Her Britannic Majesty's Consul, Mr. Pritchard, as to the possible quantity and quality which can be procured in the Fiji Islands be correct, the attention of Her Majesty's Government ought to be directed to securing for this country the means of obtaining those supplies.'² British cotton manufacturers were already concerned at the risk of depending too heavily on one source of raw material, namely the United States, and eager to follow up any other possible source of supply. In 1859 Colonel W. J. Smythe was despatched by the British government to report on conditions in the Fiji group, including the prospects for commercial cotton production. In his report, Smythe, who came down against British acceptance of cession at that time, was not optimistic about the problems of obtaining land or regular labour for cotton production. 'On the whole, I am of the opinion that, whether by natives or by white planters with native labourers, the supply of cotton from Fiji can never be otherwise than insignificant.'³

But Dr. Berthold Seemann, a botanist from Kew Gardens, who accompanied Smythe and produced a separate report, was far more enthusiastic. 'If I understand the nature and requirements of cotton aright, the Fijis seem to be as if made for it.'⁴ Seemann had brought with him seed of New Orleans and Sea Island varieties which he distributed among a number of European settlers in Fiji. The Sea Island seed failed to germinate but on 18 October 1860, when he revisited a plot of New Orleans plants sown on 9 June on Somosomo estate, Taveuni, he found 'my plants were from four to seven feet high, full of ripe pods and flowers',⁵ Other settlers had similar success with his seed, and many set about putting in fields of cotton.

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¹ *Correspondence Relative to the Fiji Islands*, London, 1862, p. 46.

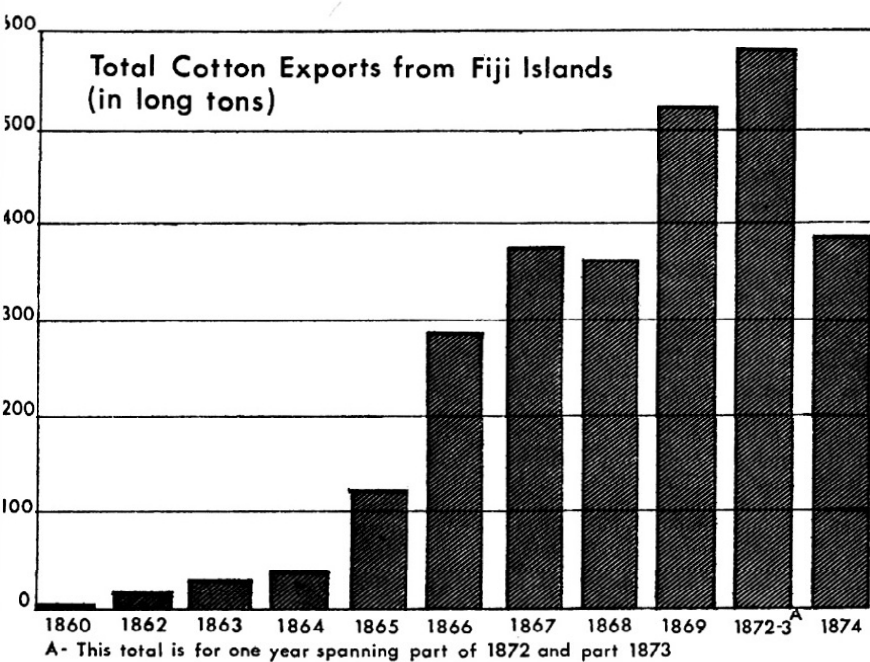
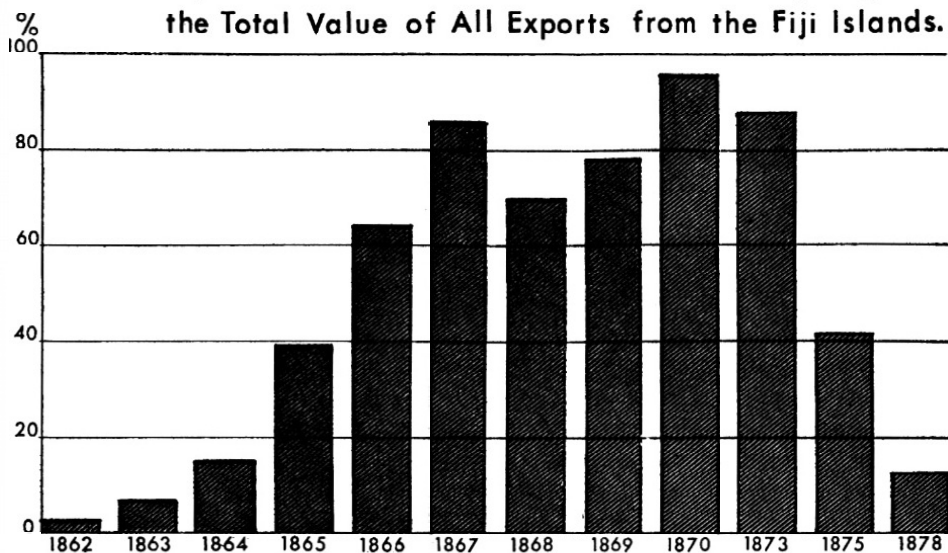
² Quoted in Introduction by W. J. Smythe to S. M. Smythe, *Ten Months in the Fiji Islands*, London, 1864, p. ii.

³ *ibid.*, p. 207.

⁴ Berthold Seemann, 'Remarks on a Government Mission to the Fiji Islands', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, XXXII (1862), 54.

⁵ Berthold Seemann, *Viti, An Account of a Government Mission to the Vitian or Fijian Islands, 1860-61*, Cambridge, 1862, p. 54.

Exports of Clean and Seed Cotton as a Percentage of the Total Value of All Exports from the Fiji Islands.



Meanwhile, Pritchard, back in Fiji, encouraged the Fijian chiefs to have cotton planted in their village gardens. The Wesleyan missionaries assisted in this project and cotton bushes rapidly became a characteristic feature distinguishing the Christianized villages of Fiji. In 1860 Pritchard had no difficulty in collecting the 1,000 lbs. of cleaned cotton which he had pledged to his friends in Manchester the previous year. He had taken two gins back to Fiji in 1859 for this purpose. Sea Island cotton was reintroduced in 1861 and was this time successful. Some samples from his plantation on the Rewa were exhibited by J. B. Smytherman at the London Exhibition in 1862.⁶ By 1863 there were cotton plantations established on Taveuni, the lower Rewa and southeast coast of Viti Levu, and Kadavu.⁷ In 1864, 2,400 acres cultivated by Europeans were planted in cotton, mainly kidney varieties. By 1869, 95% of the some 5,000 acres planted in cotton by European planters was Sea Island.

The main cotton-growing areas at the end of the eighteen-sixties were still Taveuni, particularly the Vuna Point area, lower Rewa, and south coast of Viti Levu, particularly around Navua. More recently established cotton plantations were located in the lowlands of the Nadi and Ba districts of Viti Levu, and the Bua coast and Savusavu Bay on Vanua Levu and on several small islands to windward east of Viti Levu.

Rising prices encouraged further expansion of Fiji cotton. Prices for Sea Island cotton in London in 1864 varied between 21 pence and 42 pence per pound. The normal range had been 18-24 pence per pound. By 1869, prices ranged between 30 pence and 52 pence per pound, while especially high quality lots realised up to 84 pence per pound. Prices for other varieties were somewhat lower. The Sea Island cotton was sold in London, mainly to French and Italian manufacturers who used it to mix with silk for high quality textiles. At first, Sea Island yields per acre were lower than the hardier kidney varieties, but the abnormally high prices and greater experience in cotton cultivation explain the concentration on Sea Island at the end of the decade. Many planters in 1867-8 tore up their fields of kidney varieties to plant Sea Island which explains the drop in production for 1868 (see p. 167).

Seemann's report, continuing news of success of Fiji planters, and promotional articles in the Australian and New Zealand press based on the assumption that the group would become British territory, stimulated a great deal of interest in British colonial circles. In the early eighteen-sixties, Pritchard recorded that 'every week parties of ten or twenty were arriving from the Australian colonies in search of sheep lands or from New Zealand in search of any place where

⁶ Henry Britton, *Fiji in 1870, being the letters of 'The Argus' Special Correspondent with a Complete Map and Gazetteer of the Fijian Archipelago*, Melbourne, 1870, p. 8.

⁷ Swanston Journals, ms., Fiji Museum, Suva.

they could escape the ravages of the Maori War'.⁸ In 1864 there were about 300 Europeans in the group. By 1867 there were 411 British, thirty-eight Americans and forty-three other Europeans, mainly Germans, a total of 492, not including a half-caste population of 339. The following year the number of Europeans reached a total of 862 — 583 men, ninety-three women and 186 children, not including 386 half-castes. The majority of the newcomers were 'British settlers and their families from New Zealand'.⁹

Up to this time there were relatively few European women in the group: many of the planters and traders took native wives. From about 1868 on, more prospective planters brought their wives and families. The character of the European planter began to change from a casual, often lawless, beachcomber-adventurer who worked closely with the Fijian population and usually took a Fijian wife, to a more respectable family man, attempting to establish a sort of white planter aristocracy, based on that of the West Indies or Mauritius. The *British Consular Report* for 1869 commented: 'The class of people settling in Fiji has much improved of late years. They are chiefly British, and, as a body, bear a good reputation. Many arrive with capital of from £2,000 to £3,000 and it may be said all possess some means. Among the planters are some who have held commissions in the army or navy Others again have held public offices in the Colonies [i.e. Australia and New Zealand] such as those of mayor, alderman, magistrate and director of railways. There are also squatters, farmers, professional men and tradespeople' Indeed, some of these immigrants were very fine people, but scarcely one of them knew anything about tropical agriculture. It was this lack of practical knowledge and experience which was to prove one of the major factors in the failure of many of the planters. In 1860 Seemann had already noted that many of the white planters on Ovalau 'belong to that class of immigrants who arrive almost penniless and are disappointed on not becoming transformed into capitalists on landing'.¹⁰

Some of the later immigrants had a little more capital at their disposal, but what induced them to invest all they had in a remote island group in a type of agriculture about which they knew very little? The answer lies in some of the enthusiastic but exaggerated reports which appeared in the Australian and New Zealand press and, in various promotional publications. A typical pamphlet was that published in 1869 under the pseudonym 'Ceres'¹¹ whose avowed object was 'to bring under public notice the eligibility of the Fiji Group of Islands as a new field for the industry and enterprise of the colonists of the present day'. It consisted largely of a compilation of 'extracts from colonial press, official documents and from works

⁸ W. T. Pritchard, *Polynesian Reminiscences or Life in the South Pacific Islands*, London, 1866, p. 253.

⁹ *British Consular Reports*, 1867 and 1868, reproduced in J. H. de Ricci, *Fiji, Our New Province in the South Seas*, London, 1875.

¹⁰ Seemann, *Viti*, pp. 67-68.

¹¹ 'Ceres', *The Fiji Islands as a Field for Emigration*, Melbourne, 1869.

and letters of the best and latest authorities we have at our command'. For obvious reasons only accounts of successful planting enterprises were included, such as the firm which realised £8,000 for the cotton crop after five years of operations, but the amount of investment in the enterprise was omitted. An editorial in *The Herald*, Melbourne, 28 September 1868, was quoted: 'To the small capitalists, the men prepared to encounter danger and privation, Fiji presents a brilliant future. Hundreds of young men in Europe and in this community are now eagerly looking for some such opening as Victoria and the neighbouring colonies presented twenty years ago.' Estimates of capital expenditure on five hundred acres of land plus the cost of fifty Fijian labourers, their food, wages, a horse, tools, dwelling houses, boat, cotton gin, were quoted as £580 total outlay in the first year. The man of smaller means might not be able to buy as much land and would have fewer labourers, and no horse or gin, but would sell his cotton in seed in Levuka. 'But a man with £400 or £500 ought with proper management to double his capital the first year, provided he arrives in time for planting, and as years roll on his position ought to become that of affluence.'

In his manual of cotton culture, W. C. Pechey¹² even more optimistically itemized the expenditure of setting up a cotton plantation for a prospective planter 'content to begin in a small way' as follows: passage from Sydney to Levuka £12; expenses in Levuka £10; land £50; 8 Tanna men @ £7 each £56; dwelling £4; cotton and yam house @ £2 each £4; yams for men £8; first-year pay for men £16; 'trade', stocks of cloth, etc. £6; planter's food and keep £50; 'incidentals' £34; a total of £250. The planter could expect returns within two years. Eight Tanna men (from the island of Tanna in the New Hebrides Group) could clear up to twenty acres in the first year. Allowing for a cotton crop planted on fifteen acres which would come into bearing after six months, a crop of 560 lbs. per acre in seed, 190 lbs. after ginning, could be expected, a total of 2,850 lbs. Even when sold at 1/- per lb. in Levuka, this came to £142-10-0. It was argued that even a smaller return than this was satisfactory, for in the following year, by deducting cost of land and labour, expenses would be reduced, while a larger acreage would be cleared and the cotton yield correspondingly greater, and the planter would then be in a position to obtain his own boat and cotton gin.

In the 'Ceres' pamphlet, and similar publications, the difficulty of obtaining land from Fijian owners was played down: the enticing prospect was offered of generous terms from the Polynesia Company, a Melbourne speculation which claimed to have purchased 200,000 acres from King Cakobau in Fiji. The labour problem was passed over: labourers could be 'easily imported from the adjacent islands to the Fiji Group under three years' contracts'. Alternatively, there

¹² W. C. Pechey, *Fijian Cotton Culture and Planters' Guide to the Islands*, London, 1870, pp. 89-91.

was the Fijian: 'with proper treatment and when removed from his tribe, he can be made a docile and valuable servant The Fijian man has naturally a respect for the white man' It is no wonder that the frustrated British colonials in Australia or New Zealand, with more optimistic enthusiasm than business sense, believed the letter-writer in Levuka, who concluded: 'I am convinced Fiji will pay; with cheap land, cheap labour and cheap living, if you cannot make money, where else can you?'¹³

And thus many men removed themselves and their families to make their fortunes as planters in Fiji. Few reckoned on the difficulties of obtaining land. There were frequent delays in obtaining a title to a block once it had been selected. A title from one Fijian chief did not necessarily satisfy all Fijian claimants, for Fijian land was not owned by individuals. Moreover, there was frequently more than one European claimant to the same block of land, each boasting what he took to be a valid title. Disputes were sorted out by the British and American Consuls where possible, but there was no effective central government, and no courts where an unsuccessful claimant could seek redress.¹⁴

Once a block of land was secured, the next problem was a dwelling. The usual style was a Fijian thatched *bure* built for a fee by local villagers. Those who could afford it built a wooden frame house and imported window sashes and galvanised iron for the roof. A more serious problem was the urgency of clearing enough land of dense tropical forest to put in a cotton crop in time to reap sufficient harvest in the first year to offset capital costs. In the early eighteen-sixties good quality cotton seed was always in short supply and many planters had to make do with inferior hybrids. Clearing and planting required assistance in the form of cheap labour, whether Fijian or imported. In the early years, local Fijians provided labour, but their 'present habit of working only for short periods, seldom exceeding a week at a time',¹⁵ was too unreliable. The Fijians saw no need to work long hours, day after day, at the tedious tasks of clearing forest, planting, weeding and picking cotton. From the planter's point of view they were lazy and careless, and too much time was taken up in the process of hiring them, and setting, supervising and checking tasks.

The increasing demand for labour led planters to look elsewhere and in 1864 importation of labourers from the New Hebrides, Solomons, Line Islands and Tokelaus began. By December 1869, 1,649 labourers had been imported.¹⁶ At first the costs were relatively low. Contracts were made for three years at £2.10.0 to £3 per annum for

¹³ 'Ceres', p. 47.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the land problem see J. D. Legge, *Britain in Fiji 1858-1880*, London, 1958, pp. 48-55.

¹⁵ Frederick J. Moss, *A Planter's Experience in Fiji, being a concise account of the country, its present condition and its prospects as a field for emigration*, Auckland, 1870, p. 34.

¹⁶ *Labour Trade in the Western Pacific*, Melbourne, 1882, p. 25.

wages plus the cost of passage at approximately £3. By 1870 costs of transport were up to £12, plus wages of £4 per annum for contracts of two years. 'But worse than all, the demand for labour is so great that planters, except on rare occasions, can only obtain them by chartering vessels, which frequently come back nearly empty, entailing great loss and greater disappointment.'¹⁷ Shortage of labour in Fiji and in Queensland promoted a good deal of 'black birding', kidnapping and other abuses, although the Fiji planter himself, unless he travelled on his own or a chartered vessel, was rarely directly involved, and obtained his labourers from and paid their passages to an agent in Levuka. Despite higher costs, imported labour was usually preferred to local Fijian labour as being more amenable to the discipline of plantation tasks.

The planter almost invariably found that estimated costs of setting up a plantation were too low. Forbes remarked that at least £400 was required to cover the purchase of 100 acres, twenty imported and twenty Fijian labourers, and a Fijian-built thatch house.¹⁸ After that the planter had to provide tools for his labourers — 'American' axes, long knives and a few spades. He also had to provide them with a dwelling and food. Sometimes there were sufficient coconuts, breadfruit, yams and bananas growing wild locally, but more frequently the planter had to buy from elsewhere. When food could not be purchased, the labourers had to be allowed to leave work and forage for themselves. Even Forbes's estimate of costs of establishment was too low. Henry Britton, a Melbourne journalist, and presumably a disinterested party, commented:

A man may settle down with £300 and count on making a living; but, beginning on this scale, unless he had extraordinary good luck, he would never be out of debt to the storekeepers, who of course expect to be paid for the liberal accommodation they afford. There are planters now in Fiji who started 10 years ago, but having suffered severely in hurricanes and floods, are still in debt. It is useless to expect to establish anything like a paying plantation with less than £700 or £800 unless there are special circumstances in the settler's favour, and those who look for a competency in seven or eight years should have at least £1,500.¹⁹

Forbes had also described a successful cotton plantation begun by some Sydney merchants comprising 200 acres on which some £7,000 had been spent, but which 'in the end had turned out a losing concern to the proprietors'.²⁰

When about ten acres of land were cleared, after trees were felled, cut up and burned, and the ground hoed, the first lot of cotton was sown. A hole was made with a stick or knife, and half a dozen seeds dropped in, and the spot marked in case germination did not occur. Until the concentration on Sea Island at the end of the decade, kidney

¹⁷ Moss, p. 31.

¹⁸ L. Forbes, *Two Years in Fiji, with a visit to Rotumah and remarks on the Polynesian Labour Traffic*, London, 1875, p. 103.

¹⁹ Britton, p. 20.

²⁰ Forbes, p. 86.

and Egyptian varieties were most frequently planted. The best season for planting was September to January. July and August were generally dry, the time to uproot and burn off weeds and prepare for planting. 'In dry months the sun is likely to strike through the soil and injure the roots of the young plants, thus producing the disease known as "sore shin". This retards the growth or causes the death of the tree. If heavy rain falls soon after planting, the seed is very liable to rot in the ground . . .'²¹ Hurricanes which tore out the plants by the roots and sudden floods were always a hazard particularly from December to April. Another hazard was 'the treacherous worm' which ate its way into the central stalk of the leaf and, unless the leaf was picked off, worked its way down the stem. There was no apparent remedy for the considerable ravages of this grub.²²

All cotton varieties grown in Fiji were treated as perennials. Sea Island cotton was usually planted in rows 6ft. x 6ft. although some planters followed the 'American practice' of 5ft. rows with plants thirty inches apart. Three pickings were obtained per annum, in January-February, May-June and September-October, although weather conditions could sometimes advance or retard picking by a month. The average yield per cotton bush was 1 lb. of clean fibre or something over 1,000 lbs. per acre. Kidney and Egyptian varieties grew into larger trees and were planted in rows 12ft. x 12ft. The main picking was in July but a second lighter crop was picked in December. The average yield was 350 lbs. cleaned cotton per acre.²³

The cotton harvest created more problems for the planter. While he may have had enough labour for planting and cultivating the crop, the demands of picking required larger numbers at precisely the right time. Even with enough labourers, rain at the time of picking would saturate and discolour the pods, reducing the quality of the cotton. After picking, the cotton bolls were dried in the sun, carried to the cotton house, weighed and packed ready for ginning. Larger plantations had their own gins. In 1864 there were still only two cotton gins, although by 1867 there were about thirty, and five steam engines. Saw gins were preferred for short staple cotton and knife gins for the longer staples. Most small plantations had to rely on more affluent neighbours to gin their cotton, bale it and send it to Levuka where it was sold. It was 'generally purchased by some merchant in Levuka, deep in whose books the planter is tolerably certain to be by this time'.²⁴ From Levuka it was shipped to Sydney, pressed to a quarter of its bulk and rebaled for its passage by clipper to London where it was sold to manufacturers in various parts of Britain and Europe. A constant cause of complaint was the high cost of freight charges to Sydney, £9 per ton, which almost equalled the cost from Sydney to London. Estimated expenses for ginning, pack-

²¹ de Ricci, pp. 196-7.

²² *ibid.*, p. 199; Forbes, pp. 106, 113-4.

²³ de Ricci, p. 197.

²⁴ Forbes, p. 107.

ing, freight and brokerage on Fiji cotton sent to England via Sydney came to 4½d. per lb.²⁵ Lack of direct communication by sea with England precluded any reduction in this aspect of production costs.

All the details of cotton culture had to be learned, usually by trial and error, and often at heavy cost. Britton quotes the example of a Mr. McClintock who, in 1861, had established a plantation on the Rewa with Sea Island cotton, and had a yield 'so small in comparison with the coarser staples grown by his neighbours that the crop was considered unprofitable and he unfortunately abandoned it when another six months would have made the experiment a success'.²⁶ Other experiments were made with different varieties of cotton. Robert Swanston recorded notes of efforts to produce a hybrid Sea Island and kidney variety and also kept a detailed account of his experiments in pruning at different stages in growth of cotton trees.²⁷ However, even after ten years of cotton growing, the best advice Pechey could give the prospective planter arriving in Levuka was to keep his eyes and ears open and 'learn to talk "cotton", as one learns to talk "wool" in Australia long before you know anything about it. This will facilitate conversation with those whose intellectual ideas cannot rise above cotton, and by means of it you may pick up a good deal of plantation knowledge, which will be useful to you in looking about or in purchasing land.'²⁸

Despite the ignorance of cotton growing, lack of capital, the physical difficulties of the land and climate, and personal hardships, 'many settlers with scarcely any means beyond a few stores obtained on credit, pushed out into unsettled districts where they were entirely dependent on Fijians for labour'. Others, Britton goes on to relate, 'pushed out to windward, and having become the owners of small islands are leading a sort of Robinson Crusoe life, with the Man Friday multiplied a hundred fold, and in spite of many hardships difficulties are gradually hewing fine estates out of the tropical wilderness'.²⁹

Even when prices were highest, it seems that commercial cotton growing in Fiji, without adequate capital and knowledge of tropical agriculture, was a risky proposition. Richard Philp's candid remarks on Fiji cotton planters are particularly valuable since these were preserved in a personal diary and not published.³⁰ 'It is a doubtful question whether cotton planting is suited for Fiji. As a matter of fact, cotton planters there have not made money. Two only I know, Messrs. Ryder of Mango and Peckham of Taveuni, have made money. Some have not lost money — but the great majority I am assured

²⁵ de Ricci, pp. 151, 156.

²⁶ Britton, p. 8.

²⁷ Swanston Journals.

²⁸ Pechey, p. 21.

²⁹ Britton, p. 9.

³⁰ Richard Philp, 'My Diary Notes of a Voyage to Fiji and two months' residence there', ms., Fiji Museum, Suva.

have suffered seriously in their attempts to cultivate the plant.' He goes on to explain some of the reasons for failure:

One is that most of the men who started growing cotton did so with no knowledge whatever of the business and with little capital — quite insufficient capital as it afterwards turned out: because before they could get any return for their outlay, their funds were gone and they were compelled to mortgage their crops and their plantations to the storekeepers in Levuka who lent money at a ruinous rate of interest: and that is a continual drag on fully two thirds of the plantations in the islands. Again, most of these men seemed to think that if they put cotton into the ground it would grow and they might sleep in the meantime, while really nothing requires more careful attention. These men, instead of being in their plantations, were often half the year staying in Levuka spending money and drinking gin, the plantation being left to the tender mercies of an overseer. That is the way with the great majority of the planters. And it is no wonder that they did not succeed. It is scarcely fair then to blame the country for their failure for even with all their neglect and heavy debt, a very good year such as this last one has been, will retrieve the fortunes of many of them.

In August 1870, at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, all the French textile factories closed. The London prices fell from 52 pence per lb. for Sea Island cotton to 16 pence per lb. and stayed there.³¹ American cotton was also coming back on to the European market. Planters in Fiji, already heavily mortgaged, were faced with lower prices but no reduction in costs of production or freight charges, and still exposed to the hazards of disease, unseasonal rain, floods and hurricanes. Many planters who had sunk all their resources in their plantation struggled on 'utterly ruined and overwhelmed with debt, with health shattered by privation and lack of what we deem the necessaries of life'. They were left 'stranded — literally without the means to get away, helpless, and well nigh hopeless — living just like the natives, on yams and wild pig, knowing no greater luxury than a bowl of yangona'.³² Productions was maintained for a year or two (see p. 167), but on most plantations, cotton fields were gradually abandoned. On Taveuni, which had hitherto yielded one-third of the Fiji cotton crop, 'scores of plantations were abandoned, the face of the country was transformed; and where formerly the eye could range over miles on miles of successive cultivation in the most perfect order, a solitary yam patch, or meagre acreage of corn has of late years alone relieved the dense scrub and undergrowth which has . . . almost obliterated the signs of former improvement'.³³

Many planters tried other crops; a few planted coconuts and waited hopefully for the trees to grow large enough to bear fruit. In the Rewa and Navua districts, 'since cotton went wrong', the area cultivated was reduced; some planters were running cattle; many tended

³¹ R. A. Derrick, *A History of Fiji*, Suva, 1950, p. 197.

³² C. F. Gordon-Cumming, *At Home in Fiji*, London, 1881, I, 97. *Vangona*, or *kava*, is a drink made from the root of *Piper methysticum*.

³³ *Fiji Times*, 18 October 1879.

patches of corn; others were experimenting with tea, coffee, cinchona. Sugar cane had been grown successfully, but prospects for expansion were limited to what could be processed in a few small local mills and cane fields were often left uncut for want of processing facilities.³⁴ Other experiments included raising Angora goats and silkworms. But the planters were still beset by the old problems — distance from European market, unreliable transport, insufficient capital, and labour shortage. Even when most of these problems were solved, most projects were doomed by ignorance of tropical agriculture. Horne, curator of the Botanical Garden in Mauritius, commented on the need to provide practical information for planters in Fiji, preferably by means of a botanical garden. 'Most of the settlers know next to nothing about the husbandry of the sugar cane, coffee, tea, cinchona, cacao and other products of the tropics. The consequence is that large sums are spent on worthless experiments or in working out useless theories, and not unfrequently on fanciful and absurd notions.'³⁵

While some were forced to experiment with other crops, those who could raise the fare left the colony altogether. Others drifted off into various occupations. A random selection of obituary notices appearing in the *Fiji Times* during April 1879 gives some indication of the fate of those who stayed. On 2 April the death was reported in Levuka of H. A. Burch, a native of Prussia, who had been in Fiji twelve years, most of this time a planter on the Rewa. 'His experiences however were not prosperous, and he eventually lost all. For the last few years he has led an unsettled life wandering from place to place and but lately come to Levuka.' He died of dysentery at the age of seventy leaving no known relatives in Fiji. In the same issue the accidental death was reported of Mr. Brooks, who, with his brother, had come from Melbourne ten years previously and purchased a plantation. When cotton failed the brother returned to Australia. 'After a long uphill fight against adverse circumstances', the deceased was about to embark on coffee growing. On 23 April the severe illness (dysentery) was reported of 'an old Fiji settler' named Hamilton, who once owned a plantation on Vanua Levu. 'Whence, through the cotton failure and other calamitous circumstances, he was forced to abandon planting pursuits and remove to Levuka, ultimately leaving for Tonga in the endeavour to retrieve his fortunes by the aid of photography.' He left his wife and family behind in Levuka 'in very straitened circumstances'.

By the end of the eighteen-seventies, cotton was still being grown in Fiji although between half and three-quarters of the cotton exported was grown by Fijians for taxes under Governor Sir Arthur Gordon's tax garden scheme. Most of this was kidney cotton, grown in small plots in village gardens. A few planters survived and made

³⁴ 'A Trip to Navua and Rewa' *Fiji Times*, 27 September, 1 October 1879.

³⁵ J. Horne, *A Year in Fiji or An Enquiry into the Botanical, Agricultural and Economical Resources of the Colony*, London, 1881, pp. 138-9.

profits. The Ryder brothers on Mago Island had established the Mago Island Company, which had a capital of £100,000 in 1882, and had won gold medals for Sea Island cotton at Paris in 1876 and Philadelphia in 1878. In 1879 they had 700 acres planted in Sea Island cotton and produced 350 bales of cleaned cotton at 400 lbs. per bale. There were six cotton gins on the estate powered by a steam engine. The estate had been purchased in 1863 and although they had started in cotton in 1864, they had later branched out into other activities; in 1879 seven hundred acres were planted in coffee, 150 acres of which were coming into bearing, and areas were planted in corn, breadfruit, bananas and other food crops for the three hundred labourers employed. Until the colonial government took control of the immigration of labour, the company had its own labour-recruiting vessels. Other activities included the production of 120 tons of copra per annum, the cultivation of limes, and the raising of sheep and cattle and Angora goats. The Ryder brothers were, 'in their way, little princes. They have successfully turned a doubtful venture into a great success.'³⁶

The Ryder brothers and a few others like them were notable exceptions. Most planters were long since disillusioned about earlier aspirations to a white planter aristocracy. Cession of the Fiji group to British rule in 1874 had not brought any real alleviation of the planters' problems. The Governor's protective native policy restricted Fijian labour on plantations and soon aroused planters' animosity towards colonial government. Cotton was still being advocated as a plantation crop,³⁷ along with a variety of others. Some planters in Taveuni and the Lau Group held on by diversifying their activities; others successfully concentrated on copra production. In Vitu Levu and Vanua Levu, more and more were pinning their hopes on sugar. In 1879 a representative of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company arrived in Fiji to report on prospects for investment in sugar in the colony.³⁸ Sugar was to be the salvation of Fiji; sugar grown under the aegis of a large company which could afford to construct a large mill and employ large numbers of much more expensive indentured Indian labourers. The depression of the eighteen-eighties and the fall in sugar prices, successfully weathered by Colonial Sugar Refinery and few other companies, provided the death blow to the small planter class who had so hopefully risen to prominence during the cotton boom of the eighteen-sixties.

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³⁶ H. Stonehewer Cooper. *The Islands of the Pacific, their People and their Products*. London, 1888, pp. 203-6.

³⁷ *Fiji Times*, 25 June, 30 July 1879; *Fiji Planting and Commercial Directory for 1879*, Levuka, 1879, p. 13.

³⁸ *Fiji Times*, 1 March 1879.