

**Des Petersen**

## **TWO BOOKS ABOUT FIJI**

*FIJI, A Short History.* By Deryck Scarr. Published by George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1984. 202 pp.

*THE FIJIAN PEOPLE, Before and After Independence.* By Isireli Lasaqa. Published by ANU Press, Canberra, 1984. 231 pp.

Deryck Scarr's short history of Fiji is published with a foreword by Fiji's Minister for Education and Youth, Dr Ahmed Ali, himself an historian. One guesses that this book was intended at least in part for the educational market, and will perhaps establish itself as a set-text for history students in Fiji secondary schools and at the University of the South Pacific. To this apparent end it is, in the author's word, "concise" (p. x) and written in a very straightforward, direct manner.

The author admits in so many words that the book is really something of a 'primer': he was conscious in writing it of "keeping to the high road without much explanation of local byways" (p. x). For detailed accounts of particular events the reader will have to go elsewhere, more often than not to primary sources, for there is not yet any single comprehensive history of Fiji.

The standard text to date in this field has been R.A. Derrick's *A History of Fiji*, first published in 1946. Derrick's book deals with Fiji's history from the beginning, as it were, to Cession in 1874. Scarr's book covers the same period, but continues past Cession to recent times, including occurrences up to 1982. Interestingly, Derrick's book is some 250 pages long, giving an idea of just how concise Scarr's book is. To take but one example, Scarr disposes of Ma'afu's takeover of the *Yasayasa Moala* in one sentence (p. 23); Derrick deals with it at some length (pp. 129, 187, 204); and one can learn more about this event by referring to Marshall Sahlins' book *Moala* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1962), in which the author, an anthropologist, gives a local account of the episode (pp. 373-4).

All of this is not intended as criticism of Scarr's valuable work, but it nevertheless raises a point. There is in Scarr's book, and for that matter Derrick's, the ordering, god-like mind at work, sifting and gradually developing a story, one that provides an overview of the country's history, a general picture of that mental construct labelled 'Fiji'. But what is also needed is an account of Fiji's history through the local histories of the various provinces of Fiji. As part of the general history of Fiji written, as it were, 'from above', the Ma'afu takeover of the *Yasayasa Moala* retreats into virtual insignificance. However, like

so many other similar events, it can still exercise a subtle influence on Fijian life today, at the popular as well as the official level. Similar cases could be made for Lakeba, Bau, Cakaudrove in general, Ba and Vuda, and Nadroga/Navosa.

The value of Scarr's book is that it provides a cogently presented introduction to the history of Fiji. It is to be hoped that it will encourage readers to explore this fascinating subject, particularly the "local byways" that Scarr points us to.

With Lasaqa's book the focus sharpens. It is "about the Fijian people" (p. xi), and it confines itself to modern Fiji. It is a detailed account, often backed up by statistics, maps and photographs, of the modern Fijian predicament. The first obvious point is that it is written by a Fijian. Thus Lasaqa joins Rusiate Nayacakalou in being one of the few Fijians to present such a detailed account of Fijian life. There are varying degrees of sensitivity throughout the Pacific to expatriate accounts of island life, to the extent that some Samoans have recently expressed the view that they don't particularly wish to be written about by anyone (*USP Bulletin*, Vol. 18 No. 18, 24 May 1985, p. 2). Lasaqa's book will, at least for Fijians, redress some of the balance.

In writing about the Fijian people, Lasaqa discusses some of the various forces affecting their lives and the kinds of issues that are central to any consideration of modern Fijian life, such as the country's population growth (there are more Indians than Fijians in Fiji), economic development, the structure of government, family and clan structure, village life, land, the constitution and law, internal migration, housing, education and political development. In discussing each of these, the author carefully and clearly outlines the issues involved for Fijians, and writing deliberately as a Fijian presents his own analysis and commentary.

Probably the main theme that runs through the book is that the Fijians must be helped to achieve full participation in the affairs of their country. Lasaqa argues that it is ultimately in the best interests of everyone, and parenthetically of Indians in particular, to take a broader, more sympathetic standpoint to help Fijians achieve this participation. He points out that many of the present achievements in Fiji are the result of "the wise and realistic leadership by Fijians, and the accommodating outlook taken by them in general towards other communities" (p. xiii). He goes on to say, rather pointedly: "One would hope that this attitude will continue and be reciprocated by others, both in theory and in practice, in the interests of all". This theme is brought out particularly in the chapter on education, where Lasaqa argues that

*Fijians may be pardoned for saying that in view of the recent liberalisation in the Agricultural Landlord and*

*Tenants Act, where leases are issued for 30 years in the first instance, and such a measure is likely to benefit many Indian tenants, this criticism against the policy on the allocation of university scholarships shows ingratitude for Fijian generosity. Indeed it shows a certain degree of insensitivity to Fijian aspirations that could lead to a feeling of insecurity among Fijians: a fear of the day when an Indian dominated political party gains control of the reins of power in this country.*

This is an orthodox statement of the Fijian position. But, moreover, there are the problems faced by young Fijians which go beyond the issue of education.

Lasaqa's book is very much an adult book: he is less authoritative when he touches upon the perceptions and problems of young Fijians. Indeed, his portrayal of the ties between youth and their elders could be seen as somewhat romantic and to my mind the explanations given by the author raise more questions than they apparently answer (pp. 37-9, for example). Similarly, his statement that "The social network normally associated with village life will be transferred to the town, and will perform a useful role for the new migrant to settle in and find a job" (p. 79) begs a number of questions. Further, his statement that urban economic and housing pressure "often leads to undesirable unsocial behaviour" (p. 79) is something of an understatement if one looks at the crime figures. It also leads one to ask: Are economic and housing problems the *only* ones that lead to "undesirable unsocial behaviour"? Here Lasaqa is giving the 'official' line. Nevertheless, there is the argument that by being orthodox the book achieves its central aim; it also provides valuable insights into adult Fijians' perception of their situation.

An article by John Connell in *Islands Business* (April 1985), 'Now, where is Tahiti?' makes the point that first-year geography students at the University of Sydney, when tested, "had difficulty finding their way about the region" (p. 35). One hopes that both these books will be read widely in Australia, and not just in Fiji.