

MAN THE SEEKER : ROBERT FITZGERALD  
AND JEMESA ASESELA

A General Introduction To One Of  
FitzGerald's Fijian Sources.

It would not be possible in this brief introduction to examine in any depth the influence of Fiji on the poetry of R.D. FitzGerald. Rather than encourage a superficial, sweeping impression of this influence I will confine my remarks for the most part to introducing a Fijian text that is important to an appreciation of FitzGerald's recently published 'Invocation of Josefa Asasela'. Although there are a number of established Fijian sources for many of FitzGerald's poems that I could have turned to, I have decided on the Fijian text of the story of Jemesa Asesela because of its inaccessibility to the general reader, and also because of the intrinsic worth of FitzGerald's version of it in his invocation. An analysis of the 'mechanics' of the influence of this and other Fijian sources is not attempted, as the aim of this article is only to introduce the story of Jemesa Asesela as one of FitzGerald's least-known sources.

For some years now Robert FitzGerald's critics have noted the influence of Fiji on his work, culminating last year in the publication of A. Grove Day's study of FitzGerald's life and work in the Twayne's World Authors Series, the only readily available book-length study of the poet. (See also Day's article, 'R.D. FitzGerald and Fiji', in *Meanjin* XXIV, 3/1965, which is adapted in the TWAS study.) A large part of Day's argument is an affirmation of a substantial Fijian influence on FitzGerald: "The influence of five years in Fiji, it seems clear, has had a strong effect upon FitzGerald's choice of subjects and upon his prosody. It has even affected his personality." (Day, p.81) Without subscribing to Day's tendency to give rather ecstatic and over-simplified impressions of this influence, which are often at odds with the evidence he cites, it is still reasonable to suggest that Fiji has played an important part in the poet's development, though it still remains to be seen in what ways the influence works. It is far from a romantic exile in a tropical Eden, endless nights of Oceanic chanting and Melanesian clapping of hands, and subsequent emotion recollected in Sydney, as Day would have us believe. (Day, p.81)

FitzGerald's Fijian experiences went far deeper than that. For the most part Fiji meant plain hard work in the most enervating of climates, traversing acre upon acre of dense jungle, swamps, and precipitous mountains in five districts of three provinces. It meant repeated attacks of boils because of poor diet, physical exhaustion, and labour problems. When not in the field in Seaqaqa, Namosi, or any of the other remote areas he helped survey, he was

engaged in the drafting office in Suva in preparing maps of the surveyed areas. FitzGerald observed many aspects of Fijian life and the landscape and cultures of many parts of Fiji while in the field, and during the periods of respite in Suva. We can assume that the succession of new experiences such as these in a foreign country etched themselves on the poet's sensibility as indeed the large number of Fiji-inspired poems suggests. In fact he has never really 'forgotten' Fiji. Now in his seventies, some forty years after his Fijian stay, he can still hold a conversation in the main dialect, Bauan, and still has copies of the papers he once read and studied in Fiji; such as *Na Mata*, a government publication from which he learned much of his Fijian. He sometimes goes back to these papers to help in recreating poetically some event or memory from the past.

One quite recent example of the poet's reliance on Fijian sources is his 'Invocation of Josefa Asasela' (*Meanjin* XXVII, no.2, 1968). Of this poem Day quotes FitzGerald as saying "I carried the idea around in my head for years, made several attempts to write it; then suddenly it came good" (Day, p.141). It is interesting to note in passing that FitzGerald makes several similar remarks concerning 'Essay on Memory' (Day, p.78), 'This between us' (Day, p.136), and 'Relic at Strength Fled' (Day, p.136). These remarks, though disarmingly casual, do indicate that a marked Fijian influence is to be found, and warrants examination.

If this tracing of influences and gleaning from revealed sources seems rather pedantic or academic one need only refer to a popular work of reference, *The Landscape of Australian Poetry* (F.W. Cheshire, Melb., 1967) to see why proper 'contextualization' is necessary. Brian Elliott asserts in this book that the storm that begins FitzGerald's 'Essay on Memory' "IS a storm in Australia, and we may take it as such." (p.298 - Elliott's emphasis). This comes four years after the poet himself had revealed that we cannot take it as such. In his note on this poem in the Australian Poets series (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1963), FitzGerald reveals that his 'Essay on Memory' comprises "Ideas conceived under canvas in unceasing heavy rain in the mountains of Veivatuloa (Namosi Province, Fiji) 1935, and carried about for some time..." (p.57).

The available evidence suggests that it is possible to arrange the various Fijian influences in different groups or categories, a procedure which might help to systematize this complex issue. At one level, for example, is the poem with direct or obvious reference to a traceable event, place, or text in Fiji. A poem such as 'Relic at Strength Fled', based on an acknowledged experience in Seaqaqa, would fall into this category (strength-fled is FitzGerald's literal translation of the Fijian place name Seaqaqa). Others are 'This between us', 'Heemskerck Shoals', 'Side Street', and 'Long Since'. Poems that recreate Fijian stories or aspects of Fijian culture such as 'Embarkation', 'Incident', and 'Invocation of Josefa Asasela' also belong here.

In a way this category provides limited, non-interpretive information about influence. It involves tracking down sources and enumerating them, and that fills in but a small part of the picture. The poet's choice of a partic-

ular story or text, for example, can often be a matter of expediency, without a more elevated significance. But there is also a sense in which a poet writes 'differently' because of the knowledge he has of some obscure event. The poet's choice of the story of Jemesa Asesela, and use of a Fijian exemplar, result in a unique poem because that story will have helped to direct the poet's thinking in a particular way. The examination of such influences leads the reader to the poems with an increased awareness of the poet's interests and preoccupations as they are rendered in a specific cultural context. It then becomes possible to observe how much the poet internalizes the influence and relates it to his own vision, and what the effect of this is.

The second level, the more complex and intriguing of the two, is that of the vague, subjective effect of the 'local colour' of the country. Something of this occurs in the 'Essay on Memory' in the images of the rain. It occurs more substantially in 'Between Two Tides', which depends on a recreation of an era of Tongan history based on the poet's understanding of the Fijian personality (see FitzGerald's note at the end of the poem). This sort of elusive influence may very well be behind the poet's continued interest in Fiji. It certainly provides him with an area of knowledge he can use confidently. It has helped, for example, in the formation of his conception of beauty, as indicated in stanza six of 'The Hidden Bole'. This kind of interplay of environment and mind, though often largely inaccessible in its detail to the critic, is of importance to a full understanding of the poetry. It is influence in the complete sense of that word.

It is beyond the limited scope of this brief introduction to pursue these issues, except to provide the reader with an idea of the complexity behind the term 'the Fijian influence'. Such is the nature of the problem that nothing short of a full-length study would do justice to the poet, despite the contrary view that it is all "quite evident" (Day, p.80). A volume of prose by FitzGerald, now in press, might throw light on the problem, as it includes one or two reminiscences about Fiji. Future publication of diaries and letters would also be of great benefit to scholarship. Given the scope of the problem it is also necessary to point out that the Fijian influence is by no means the only one. T. Sturm, for example, adduces evidence to support the claim for substantial influence by A.N. Whitehead (*Southerly*, no.4, 1969). FitzGerald himself on a number of occasions has alluded to other influential writers and thinkers. (see Day, pp. 145-6) And, of course, it might be added that the whole issue of Fijian influence is just one facet of not just the range of possible influences, but the range of cultural resonances that the poetry sounds, including, for example, the poet's Irish background. But if the Fijian context is kept in mind the present critical preoccupation with FitzGerald's personal vision might give way to a wider appreciation of his cultural interest and facilitate a more socially-oriented interpretation of his vision.

FitzGerald's 'Invocation of Josefa Asasela' is a long, almost confessional poem in which the poet openly expresses his attachment to the Fijian lad who wandered the

Arctic. He follows Asasela's movements and decides that the wanderer did not die a lonely failure, but was instead a hero who had lived true to his vision of man the seeker, the adventurer. It is this heroic aspect that FitzGerald senses in the original story, and gives full vent to in his invocation. His commitment is clear:

Much I have had in mind,  
lately, a lonely man,  
not of my race or kind,  
dying far from his own;  
who, in a fickle shift  
of Arctic wind, was lost  
on pack-ice driven adrift -  
reft from his frozen coast;  
  
and have considered much,  
bewildered - and with distress  
for all caught in the clutch  
of the claws of loneliness -  
whether this man who sought,  
strangely, to live apart,  
lived with a mastering thought  
or was distraught in his heart.

The sympathetic tenor, the sense of urgency, and the underlying ethic of the man of action with his "mastering thought" develop, and in the course of the poem reveal the poet's professed values. In FitzGerald's thinking Asesela responds to the "primal appeals" and represents the ideal heroic figure that recurs in other characters elsewhere in FitzGerald's poetry - Tasman, Finau, and Parr, for example.

The text of the original story of Jemesa Asesela follows; it is one of three extant versions FitzGerald is familiar with, (Day, p.169), and which he refers to in the poem as "what an eye might catch/in a corner patch of the news". The Fijian version is offered here along with a 'working' translation, in the hope that it will be of help in appreciating the effect of one aspect of Fiji on FitzGerald's poetry. The translation was prepared with the assistance of Mr J. Waqairatu of Suva.

Note: It should be pointed out that there is some confusion as to the spelling of the proper name used in the invocation. The original name is JEMESA ASESELA. FitzGerald used the name JOSEFA ASASELA in error, though with the justification of poetic licence. Day's use of JOSEPH ASASELA is a typographical error.

#### A YALI NEI JEMESA ASESELA

(*Na Mata, Okotopa, 1932; 502.*)

E rogo mai ni dua nai taukei e viti na yacana ko Jemesa Asesela e tiko mai Canada, North America, ka sa raute e 20 na yabaki na kena dede. E dau nona cakacaka na tudai manu-manu ka dau vakayagataki na kulidra e na gauna ni batabata mei vau ni domo, qa ni liga kei na veika tale eso, ia, sa bau rawa ka sara ko Asesela e na nona cakacaka oqo ka rauti koya talega na draki ni vanua ko ya. E na vica na vula sa oti yani e a lako kina ko koya ki na veibaravi vaka Akatika (Arctic Coast) kei na veivanuanu eso ka koto e na yasana ki na ceva mai na toba ko Koroneiseni (Coronation Gulf) me

baci la'ki tudai manumanu kina, ia, ka sa dede yani na nona lako oqo ka sega ni lesu tale ki na koro se dua tale na kenau tukutuku e bau rogo tale yani ki ni vanua ka lako mai kina. Era sa vakaraici koya oti na Royal Canadian Mounted Police ka ra vakabauta ni sa ciri yani ki na loma ni wasawasa vaka Akatika.

E na vula ko Maji sa dromu e na yabaki ga oqo, 1932, era a tukuna kina na Esikimo (Eskimos) vua e dua na bete ni Katolika mai kea na yacana ko Farther (sic) Grin ni sa yali ko Asesela, io ko Father Grin e a qai vakaraitaka vei ira na Royal Mounted Police na ka era tukuna vua na Eskimo. Ia ni sa yaco yani vei ira na Royal Canadian Mounted Police na kenau tukutuku e rau qai mani lesi kina e lewe rua me rau vakamuraia na vanua e a lakova ko Asesela: ko Constable Tredgold kei Special Constable Smith, ia, na nodrau lako oqo e rau sega ni kunea tale na yagoi Asesela; e rau kunea ga na nona yaya ni dai eso kei na nona daire (Diary) e na vanua ka tiko kina.

Na nodrau vaqarara na lewe rua oqo e rau vodo e na mataqali qiqi ka dau yarataka na koli e na dela ni wai cevata. Ni rau sa lesu mai ka rau mai tukuna na veika kece e rau sa raica ka tukuna talega na nodrau nanuma ni sa na kauti Asesela yani ki na loma ni wasawasa vaka Akatika na wai cevata. E tukuna ko Asesela ni sa vinaka cake vua na draki ni vanua ko ya ka ca na draki ni nona vanua dina. Ko *Fiji Times*.

#### THE DISAPPEARANCE OF JEMESA ASESELA

(*Na Mata*, October, 1932; 502)

It is known that a native of Fiji, Jemesa Asesela, lived in Canada, North America, for twenty years. He occupied himself in trapping animals, whose skin could be used for scarves, gloves, hats, etc during winter. He earned money by selling some skins, and seemed to find the weather quite bearable. A few months ago he went to the Arctic Coast and also to some nearby islands lying to the south of the Coronation Gulf in order to trap animals, but he never returned to his home, and no one seemed to know anything at all of his whereabouts. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police carried out a full search for him, and believe that he drifted off into the Arctic Ocean.

In March of 1932 (the same year of these events) the Eskimos informed a Catholic priest, Father Grin, that Asesela was missing, so the Father reported the matter to the Royal Mounted Police. When the Royal Canadian Mounted Police heard about the missing Fijian it sent over two mounted policemen to track down the places Asesela visited. The two were Constable Tredgold and Special Constable Smith. On this search they failed to find Asesela's body, but found only his trap and diary in the place he occupied.

After their search, the two, who had travelled on sled, said that they thought Asesela had been taken away into the Arctic Ocean. Asesela had once said he preferred the Canadian climate to that of his homeland, Fiji. From the *Fiji Times*.