The middle decades of the last century have been dubbed the ‘Little England era’ and the ‘Age of Separatism’. They were supposedly the years when British politicians and informed public opinion held colonies in low esteem. Britain’s reaction to the unsought offer of cession of the Fiji Islands to Queen Victoria in 1858 was, therefore, a foregone conclusion. Consideration was bound to be perfunctory and any interest manifested, illusory. After all, if the British colonies were destined for eventual independence, it was pointless to lavish money on them and even more foolhardy to contemplate adding to the list of burdens. Thus it has generally been assumed that the brief interest which was shown in the acquisition of Fiji in 1858 was deceptive. It has been argued that the appointment of a Commission of Enquiry was no more than a clever ruse to avoid an outright but impolitic refusal and that, in any case, the commissioner’s instructions were heavily weighted against acceptance of the offer. The result was only to be expected: a reassertion of ‘the fundamental official outlook on the Pacific’ without any real consideration being given to the merits of the case.

British policy, however, was rarely so consistent. The 1858 offer from Fiji was, in fact, warmly received by one Colonial Secretary, heartily endorsed by a second, and the commissioner was actually sent to Fiji at the specific request of the Prime Minister and the cabinet. The interest shown in the economic and strategic possibilities of the islands was by no means illusory. As in most cases throughout the nineteenth century, official decisions taken in the Colonial Office concerning the problem of expansion did not revolve round the discussion of general principles but were limited to the simple question of expediency. In 1861 the annexation of Fiji was not deemed expedient. This decision had little to do with preconceived separatist notions or ‘anti-imperial’ tendencies.

I

British contact with Fiji—a group of over four hundred small islands in the South Pacific, some twelve hundred miles north of New Zealand—had first been established by explorers, sandalwood traders and Methodist missionaries. It became more formal in September 1857, with the decision to appoint William Thomas Pritchard, the son

1 J. D. Legge, Britain in Fiji, 1858-1880, London, 1958, p. 34.

171
of a former consul at Tahiti and lately acting-consul in Samoa, as British consul to Fiji. The new consul had not been in residence two months, however, when one of the leading chiefs in the islands, Thakombau of Bau, attempted to make the link even stronger by offering on 12 October 1858 to cede Fiji to Queen Victoria.

The reasons behind this offer of cession are well known. Two conditions were attached to the proposal. First, the position to which Thakombau aspired as Tui Viti or 'King of all Fiji' was to be confirmed; secondly, the British government was to assume responsibility for his American debts of $45,000 in return for a grant of 200,000 acres of land. It must be noted, however, that Thakombau had never been recognised as Tui Viti; nor was the gift of 200,000 acres within his power. The American debts related to compensation for damage to American property involving claims dating back to 1844. The most serious incident had occurred in 1849 when the house of John Brown Williams, the American consular agent, had been plundered after a fire. In 1855, Commander Boutwell of the USS John Adams, fixed this compensation at $30,000. The Methodist missionaries, however, objecting to Boutwell's summary mode of procedure, enlisted the aid of Commander T. Bailey of the USS St. Mary's who was then paying a short visit to the islands. Commander Bailey, a senior naval officer, ordered Boutwell to adhere to his instructions and to give the Fijian chiefs a fair hearing. But this representation did not have the intended effect. Boutwell, whom the missionaries regarded as a 'Papist and a Southerner', informed the Methodists: 'the interference of Commander Bailey, through the representations of the Rev. Mr. Calvert, and other persons, has increased the difficulties of Tui Viti, made my task more difficult to finish, and has not, I believe, added any gratification to the claimants.' The compensation was now fixed at $45,000 and Thakombau was forced, under the threat of deportation, to admit his responsibility. Three years later, Commander Sinclair of the USS corvette Vandalia, finding that


4 Boutwell to Rev. J. Waterhouse, 19 October 1855, M.M.S., incoming letters, 1856 file. Rev. James Calvert immediately complained about Boutwell's actions to William L. Marcy, the American Secretary of State in the Pierce administration. Calvert to Marcy, 1 January 1856, copy in M.M.S., 1856 file. Commander Bailey apparently advised Calvert to publicise Boutwell's actions in American Methodist journals and to draw attention to the fact that Boutwell was a Catholic. Calvert to General Secretary, 3 January 1856, M.M.S., 1856 file.
no compensation had been paid, reassessed the American claims at $48,254 and on 8 October 1858 exacted from Thakombau a promise to settle his debts within a year. The chief's offer of cession to Britain occurred four days later.

Other troubles also plagued Thakombau. Tribal war had long raged in the Fiji Islands. Thakombau's somewhat shaky position of authority, attained by his victory at the battle of Kamba in 1855, now appeared to be threatened. Thakombau feared that his leading rival, Ma'afu, chief of the Lau Islands in eastern Fiji, was plotting war-like manoeuvres in collusion with King George Tubou of Tonga. Thus Thakombau approached the British consul not only to relieve himself of his embarrassing American debts, but also for aid in keeping the peace and maintaining his own position: 'King George is dead with crying because of the cession, he sees that his chance of getting Fiji is gone.'5 Consul Pritchard, who opposed Tongan designs, embarked for England in November 1858, to press the cession on the government.

The immediate reaction of the Derby government was polite but uninterested. The government was constantly being invited to intervene in the South Pacific. The position in Tonga, Samoa and Tahiti had recently been reviewed. Fiji itself had come under consideration as recently as 1855 after the offers of cession carried to England by Captain Denham of HMS Herald and Captain Fremantle. The British government had simply decided to adopt a course of minimum involvement by appointing a consul in Fiji. The Foreign Office, therefore, could hardly be expected to be enthusiastic when their consul appeared in London with yet another offer of cession. Malmesbury, the Foreign Secretary, preoccupied with Italian affairs, passed Pritchard on to the romantic novelist at the head of the Colonial Office. Bulwer-Lytton now studied the situation afresh.

The Colonial Office had been warned of the impending cession and some consideration had already been given to the subject. Lord Carnarvon, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary, had cautioned: 'it is painful to refuse, but there must be a limit somewhere to our protecting and governing duties especially when we gain nothing by the acquisition'. Bulwer-Lytton, however, had been more struck by the danger that 'a quarrel with an English Missionary in the S.S. Islands would suffice for a war in the English Channel'.6 He thought the offer should be 'cordially entertained' and the Permanent Under-Secretary, Herman Merivale, agreed that the strategic position of the islands in the Pacific made Fiji a 'most desirable possession'. Lord Carnarvon remained unconvinced. He sympathised with the 'unfortunate islanders who are terrified by the licence of French sailors & the annexation ideas of the U.S. Govt.' but pointed to the difficulties and expense involved in governing far-away indigenous populations. He wanted

5 Cited in Derrick, p. 140.
6 Minutes by Carnarvon and Bulwer-Lytton, 21 January 1859, on Denison to Bulwer-Lytton, 12 October 1858, Colonial Office manuscripts: New South Wales correspondence, C.O. 201/504, Public Record Office.
further information concerning internal conditions in Fiji and called for further consideration of international complications. He warned the government to beware of the lure of cotton cultivation, an enticement often held out when Britain was required to embark on some ‘desperate undertaking’.\(^7\)

Carnarvon was right in believing that cotton manufacturers were pressing for the annexation of Fiji. Their interest was represented by a deputation which waited on the Prime Minister, Lord Derby. The members included Thomas Bazley, M.P., a Manchester cotton spinner and merchant and Director of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce; John Cheetham, representing the recently formed Manchester Cotton Supply Association; and two members of the Aborigines Protection Society: Arthur Kinnaird, banker and philanthropist, and Lord Alfred Churchill, Chairman of the African Aid Committee. Lord Derby gave the deputation to understand that he was prepared to accept Fiji provided no international complications should ensue.\(^8\) But no decision was reached. Bulwer-Lytton then ordered the question to be shelved till the outcome of the 1859 Reform Bill settled the future of the government.

While the decision was being held over, a pamphlet entitled *What is Fiji, the Sovereignty of which is offered to Her Majesty?*, was produced by William Arthur, General Secretary to the Wesleyan Missionary Society. This was a useful piece of propaganda. Methodist missionaries knew the islands well. They played an important rôle in Fijian politics. Indeed, one Wesleyan missionary, James Calvert, who from 1861-6 was in charge of the Ovalau circuit, had largely been responsible for the 1855 offer of cession carried to England by Captain Denham.\(^9\) In order to spread the gospel, the missionaries had aimed at converting the chiefs to the Christian faith. As a result they were drawn into domestic feuds and soon found themselves taking sides in tribal disputes. When the situation became further complicated by the arrival of white settlers, British rule seemed to be the only means of restoring law and order. James Calvert corresponded privately with one M.P., Captain J. E. Erskine, author of *Journal of a Cruise among the Islands of the Western Pacific*, in order to impress on him the need for a British annexation, and the missionaries sought the aid of their London headquarters in influencing the government to intervene in Fiji.

In this pamphlet, the General Secretary advocated the course recommended by Denham and Erskine and endorsed, or so he claimed, by the Governor of New South Wales and the Senior Naval Officer at Sydney, that the offer of cession should be accepted. The islands were too significant strategically to be allowed to fall into

\(^7\) Minutes by Bulwer-Lytton, 28 February 1859, Merivale, 21 February 1859, and Carnarvon, 22 February 1859, on Foreign Office to Colonial Office, 18 February 1859, C.O. 201/510.

\(^8\) Minute by Gairdner, 25 April 1859, on F.O. to C.O., 21 April 1859, C.O. 201/510.

\(^9\) Calvert to General Secretary, 13 August 1855, M.M.S., 1855 file.
foreign hands. Some Americans had recently appeared to show a great deal of interest in the islands and had been exerting increasing pressure on the chiefs. Arthur asserted that if the United States should annex Fiji, American influence would dominate the South Pacific including the route from Australia to British Columbia. Not only would the route to Panama, so recently agreed upon for the British mail steamers, be in American hands, but Australasian coastal shipping would run the risk of being harassed should hostilities occur between the United States and Britain. Furthermore, it was feared that the American consular agent was intriguing with the French priests and Williams was, in fact, actually conducting correspondence with the Emperor of France.\(^{10}\)

The dangers of emanating from a French annexation would be equally great, especially in the light of the French annexation of Tahiti and New Caledonia. French occupation of Fiji would cut right across British lines of communication. Arthur was no doubt well aware of the implications of the recent visit of the French frigate _La Bayonnaise_ to Fiji: after a little punitive work for the American consular agent, a treaty had been signed by the chiefs guaranteeing complete freedom for the Roman Catholic religion.

If Britain were to take the initiative, however, any possibility of American or French dominance would be removed and the British colonies protected. The missionaries, Arthur concluded, would then be able to continue their work of civilising the islanders of the South Pacific and winning them to Christianity.

W. T. Pritchard, the consul, was not so concerned with retaining Fiji as a Methodist preserve. He was more worried by the possibility of foreign intervention. He believed there was a threat from yet another direction. German merchants were interested in Fiji. In 1860, Godeffroy’s, who had established their headquarters in Samoa in 1857, opened an agency in Fiji. He felt that the strife-torn islands, with their growing European population, must eventually fall under the protection of one of the four governments. But Pritchard’s attempts to prod the British government into action had little effect. In June 1859, however, the Derby government resigned after Disraeli’s fancy franchise reform bill was rejected. A new government was now formed by Lord Palmerston with the Peelite fifth Duke of Newcastle as Colonial Secretary.

II

What should Newcastle do about Fiji? The Colonial Secretary immediately reviewed the information accumulated by the Colonial Office in the preceding months. The Admiralty hydrographer, Captain John Washington, had reported that Britain did not possess a single island or rock in the seven thousand miles of ocean between Vancouver and Sydney. The harbours of the Fiji islands would pro-

\(^{10}\) Cf. Brookes, p. 233.
vide a good naval rendezvous and coaling station. Pritchard had asserted that the islands could produce coffee, sugar, valuable timber, nutmegs, indigo, turmeric, antimony and possibly coal. Above all they were suited to the cultivation of cotton. Moreover, the Manchester Cotton Supply Association had received samples of this commodity with delight: 'such a range of excellent Cotton is scarcely now received from any Cotton growing Country which supplies this requisite raw material to Great Britain'. Addresses from the legislative assemblies of New South Wales and Victoria also arrived urging acceptance of the offer of cession.

The missionary interest can again be seen at work. In New South Wales, the local Methodists, who since 1855 had supervised the Fiji mission, were politically influential and the resolution proposing the annexation of Fiji was introduced by Alexander M’Arthur, son-in-law of W. B. Boyce, the President of the Australian Methodist Conference who later became General Secretary of the Methodist Missionary Society in London. For the present, however, the missionaries attempted to influence individual Members of Parliament, while the Wesleyan Missionary Society and Aboriginal Protection Society bombarded the Colonial Office with advice on how to restore a peaceful society in Fiji. In the Australian colonies, friends of the missionaries joined hands with local commercial interests in advocating acceptance of the islands—Fiji was an important rendezvous for the Australian colonists who were eager to establish Sydney as a base for the local trade in coconut oil, tortoise shell and béche-de-mer. United with the powerful cotton interest in Britain and Pritchard’s attempts to show the danger of foreign intervention, considerable pressure was brought to bear upon the new Colonial Secretary to annex Fiji.

There were, on the other hand, certain problems which Newcastle could not ignore. Were the Fijians to become British subjects? More information was required about revenue and the American debt. Sir William Denison, the Governor of New South Wales, also warned that acceptance of Fiji would probably lead to a ‘war of the races’ more ferocious than that in New Zealand and ‘as the climate is less adapted to Europeans, the cost of an attempt to maintain the Supremacy of the white population will be comparatively great and the loss of life enormous’. Chichester Fortescue, Newcastle’s Parliamentary Under-Secretary, felt this was a ‘warning voice well worth listening to’ and the civil servants in the Colonial Office, with the

11 Admiralty to Colonial Office, 14 March 1859, C.O. 201/510.
13 Secretary, Manchester Cotton Supply Association, to Malmesbury, 1 March 1859, F.O. 58/98.
14 T. McCullagh, Sir William M’Arthur: a Biography, London, 1891, p. 147. In the early 1870s, it was M’Arthur’s brother, Alderman Sir William M’Arthur, who was to be the successful advocate in Parliament of the moment to annex Fiji.
Maori wars in mind, shuddered at the thought of annexing Fiji. Opinion in the Colonial Office had hardened before Newcastle became Secretary of State. Thomas Frederick Elliot, the Assistant Under-Secretary, had formed the conclusion that British intervention in the South Pacific would draw Britain into quarrels with major maritime powers on the behalf of ‘wild inhabitants’. Sir Frederic Rogers, the new Permanent Under-Secretary, noted in June 1860: ‘The present juncture certainly is not one in which it would be convenient to become responsible for the Government of more warlike savages than we already have on our hands.’

Only one voice in the Colonial Office definitely favoured annexation. Newcastle, who suspected that the American debt affair was ‘more of a Filibustering character than one of legitimate diplomatic compensation’, was still willing, ‘though alive to the dangers and probable difficulties of the step’, to accept the cession. The Duke had always shown great interest in proposals to cultivate cotton in West Africa, the West Indies and Ceylon. Cotton was probably the cause of his willingness to annex Fiji. But the project was overruled in cabinet. Gladstone later asserted that Newcastle was the only man in the cabinet to favour accepting the offer of cession. Newcastle confided to Shaftesbury: ‘I was willing to accept the Fijis—but such was not the view of the Cabinet, and I fear nothing can be done without further enquiry.’

In October 1859, Lord Alfred Churchill, one of the members of the original deputation to Lord Derby, and subsequently to Lord Palmerston, prodded the Colonial Office into action. He wished to know what had been decided about Fiji; whether a special commissioner would be sent to the islands. This was a new departure of which the permanent staff were unaware. Elliot noted: ‘Lord Alfred alludes to an impression that the Govt. meant to employ some competent person to visit the Islands and report upon the offer, but no step of that kind has fallen within my knowledge.’ Newcastle explained: ‘No engagement to send out any Person was given, but it has been mentioned by Lord Palmerston, I believe, as likely to be

15 Colonial Office minutes, including Fortescue, 20 June 1860, on Denison to Newcastle, confidential, 10 April 1860, Colonial Office manuscripts: Fiji correspondence, C.O. 83/1.
16 Minute by Elliot, 25 May 1859, on Admiralty to C.O., 23 May 1859, C.O. 201/510.
17 Minute by Rogers, 19 June 1860, on Denison to Newcastle, confidential, 10 April 1860, C.O. 83/1.
18 Newcastle to Palmerston, 16 July 1859, copy, Newcastle Papers, NeC C/4-5, Locked letter book, Manuscripts Department, Nottingham University Library.
19 Newcastle to Shaftesbury, 4 November 1859, copy, Newcastle Papers, NeC C/59.
20 Gladstone, 25 June 1872, Hansard, 3rd Series, cccxii. col. 216. This is the evidence usually cited for Newcastle’s position as the Duke refrained from commenting in the Colonial Office files. Further evidence cited in the Newcastle Papers confirms Gladstone’s recollections.
21 Newcastle to Shaftesbury, 4 November 1859, copy, Newcastle Papers, NeC C/59.
done, and I have been enquiring for a fit Agent. Nothing however is settled.\textsuperscript{22} Gladstone, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, opposed such an appointment and the Foreign Secretary, Lord John Russell, appeared totally indifferent to it. The remaining members of the cabinet, however, headed by Palmerston who had taken some interest in the proposed annexation, now urged that a commissioner should be sent to Fiji to enquire and report.\textsuperscript{23} Gladstone refused to be personally connected with the project. Newcastle was left to appoint and instruct the commissioner. His choice fell upon Lieutenant Colonel W. J. Smythe, R.A.\textsuperscript{24}

Newcastle's instructions to Smythe were detailed and specific. Aware of the amount of pressure being exerted on behalf of the Methodist missionaries, he was careful to warn that 'the hope of the conversion of a people to Christianity, however specious, must not be made a reason for increasing the British dominions'.\textsuperscript{25} The question to be decided was one of expediency. Would Fiji be a useful station for mail steamers running between Panama and Sydney? Would its possession add to national power and security in the Pacific Ocean? Would the islands be suited to the cultivation of cotton on a grand scale? The Duke even sent Smythe to Manchester with an introductory letter to Thomas Bazley, M.P., to learn more about the growth and cultivation of cotton. Newcastle's instructions were very forceful upon this point:

There is no question of the present day affecting the use to be made of our foreign possessions for encouraging and supporting the industry of our country, in which the Community in general feel so great

\textsuperscript{22} Minutes by Elliot, 26 October 1859, and Newcastle, 28 October 1859, on Churchill to Newcastle, 20 October 1859, C.O. 201/512.

\textsuperscript{23} Newcastle to Gladstone, 31 December 1859, copy, Newcastle Papers, NeC C/96-97. Arthur Kinnaird later recalled that of all the ministers he petitioned in 1859, Palmerston was the most informed about Fiji and recited to him the depths of the various harbours; speech during the discussion on F. W. Chesson's paper, 'The Past and Present of Fiji', \textit{Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute}, VI (1875), 112.

\textsuperscript{24} Lieutenant Colonel W. J. Smythe (1816-1887) enlisted as 2nd lieutenant in the Royal Artillery in 1833 and fought in the Kaffir wars, 1835-7. Sent to St. Helena, 1847, where he was placed in charge of an observatory at Longwood. The results of his magnetic and meteorological observations were published in Sir Edward Sabine's \textit{Observations} in 1850 and 1860. He spent the years 1854-7 superintending arms contracts in Belgium and Germany, except for a short break in 1856 when he served on a Royal Commission to France, Russia, Austria and Italy to report on military education. He was later promoted to Lieutenant General, 1877; Colonel Commandant, Royal Artillery, 1880; and when he retired in 1881 was gazetted honorary general.

It has been impossible to ascertain on whose recommendation Smythe was actually appointed. The Colonial Office files are silent and the Newcastle, Palmerston, Gladstone and Russell Papers shed no light on this. Newcastle contemplated using Smythe in a letter to the Treasury, 21 December 1859, and on the same day requested the Secretary of State for War to release the Lieutenant Colonel who was serving on an Ordnance Select Committee. Both these letters were founded on Newcastle's personal instructions, 19 December 1859, to Elliot. Smythe's instructions were drafted by Elliot and Fortescue and amended by Newcastle, 23 December 1859.

\textsuperscript{25} Newcastle to Smythe, 23 December 1859, draft, C.O. 201/510.
an interest as this. To add to the fields from whence that supply is now derived is one of the highest economical objects to which Her Majesty’s Government can apply themselves. Any indication of such a field is to be carefully followed up. To this branch of the subject therefore you will devote your especial and most solicitous attention.

Smythe was also to study the Fijian system of land tenure and enquire whether the Fijians would be prepared to sell land to individuals and the Crown. The advisability of scattered European settlements was also to be looked into. Little interest was shown in the problem of government in Fiji though the possibility of erasing ‘barbaric customs’, like polygamy and cannibalism, was to be considered.

Newcastle’s practical questions were plainly and impartially stated. They were surely not, as W. P. Morrell claims, ‘weighted heavily against the acceptance of the cession’.26 The Duke entrusted Smythe to bring ‘the requisite knowledge, discretion & resolution to report without regard to any preconceived wishes or opinions’.27 Newcastle’s approach to the problem indicates, if anything, a genuine interest in the economic and strategic possibilities of Fiji and a willingness to annex the islands if the report was favourable.

Smythe’s opinions were not influenced by Newcastle’s instructions alone. By the time the commissioner reached Fiji his views were already partly shaped. The journey took over six months. Smythe arrived in New South Wales in April 1860. Here, he met the Governor, Sir William Denison, who doubtlessly repeated his fear that any attempt to maintain European supremacy in Fiji would lead to racial conflict. In the very despatch informing Newcastle of Smythe’s arrival in Australia, Denison criticised Pritchard’s advertisements in the Sydney newspapers inducing settlers to emigrate to Fiji. The Governor reminded Newcastle of ‘the present state of affairs in New Zealand as indicative of the results which are likely to follow should inducements be held out to a white population to occupy the land which it is proposed to cede to Her Majesty’.28 The Colonial Office staff thought that this despatch pointed very significantly to the probable conclusion. Smythe may have had an opportunity to discuss the situation in New Zealand when he was forced to change vessels at Auckland, because of the dislocation to shipping caused by the Taranaki war.

Smythe also knew that the views of the ‘busy race of Pritchard’29 were not always to the liking of the British Government. Russell had ordered the consul to return to his post so that he could be present when the American claims fell due in November 1859. He was told to inform Thakombau that his offer was under consideration. Pritchard arrived on 1 November 1859, to find civil war raging between the warring chiefs of Fiji. Ma’afu had achieved further successes at the

27 Newcastle to Smythe, 23 December 1859, draft, C.O. 201/510.
28 Denison to Newcastle, confidential, 10 April 1860, C.O. 83/1.
29 ibid., minute by Elliot, 18 June 1860.
expense of his rival. Pritchard was asked to mediate and the consul restored order by the traditional means of international diplomacy in Fiji—a warship standing by—and on 14 December 1859, under the friendly surveillance of HMS Elk, Thakombau’s offer of cession was ratified by over twenty chiefs. Ma’afu relinquished his pretensions and the chiefs now admitted that the American debt was not Thakombau’s sole responsibility. They also agreed to cede part of the 200,000 acres themselves. On 31 December 1859, the chiefs made an even larger concession. A document was signed giving the British consul supreme authority to govern Fiji. As Pritchard later claimed: ‘I secured the controlling power of the group in my hands.’ The news of this transaction was received with astonishment in London. A consul had been appointed to avoid such direct intervention and commitments. The Foreign Secretary immediately demanded a complete explanation and, in July 1860, the Colonial Office joined the Foreign Office in rebuking the consul for his irresponsible acts.

Pritchard was, apparently, equally unpopular with the Wesleyan missionaries in Fiji. The consul took a different view from the missionaries of the tribal conflicts and deplored Tongan intervention in Fijian affairs. The actions of the Christian King of Tonga benefited the missionaries. He had also reinstated a powerful heathen chief named Ritova, whom the Methodists regarded as an enemy. Pritchard later suggested that Methodist apprehension had been aroused by Newcastle’s enquiry: ‘What will the Wesleyan missionaries do when they see a bishop accompanying a governor, for the Church always goes where the State goes?’ and that the missionaries influenced Smythe’s decision.

Smythe finally arrived at his destination in July 1860. He lodged with the Wesleyan mission schoolmaster. And though there is no evidence that Methodist enthusiasm for British rule ever waned, the commissioner does seem to have accepted the views of the missionaries on many matters, including their interpretation of Fijian affairs, and based at least some of his report on hearsay evidence. Ten months in Fiji were to confirm Smythe’s prejudice against Pritchard and his proposed annexation of the islands.

It is not surprising that when Smythe wrote his report on 1 May 1861, he advised against accepting the offer of cession. Thakombau,
he reported, had never been recognised as Tui Viti and therefore the offer was quite invalid. The islands would be an embarrassment in time of war. They were not on the Vancouver-Sydney route, a route via Auckland being shorter and safer. Cotton would never be a significant product. There would always be a labour problem, as the Fijians disliked regular work. No system existed whereby labourers could be hired; chiefs were normally paid for the work of a tribe and they dispensed the money at their pleasure. The suppression of inhuman practices such as cannibalism would require a battalion of soldiers and a warship. Smythe concluded by recommending a form of protective trusteeship: ‘Judging from the present state of the Sandwich Islands, and the former condition of Tahiti, it would seem that the resources of the Pacific Islands can best be developed and the welfare of their inhabitants secured, by a native government aided by the counsels of respectable Europeans.’

The Colonial Office received this report with delight. Even Newcastle was forced to admit that it was ‘quite conclusive against the acceptance of the Sovereignty’. The Colonial Office finally advised the Foreign Office on 7 September 1861 that the proposed cession of the Fiji Islands should be rejected.

III

That the offer of Fiji should have been thus dismissed would seem to vindicate the thesis that expansion was officially frowned upon in the eighteen-sixties. But why then did the offer receive so much careful consideration? The Commission of Enquiry was not an attempt to make an outright but impolitic refusal more palatable to the Fijian chiefs as Ethel Drus has suggested. It was founded, certainly in Newcastle’s case, on a genuine interest in the economic potentialities and strategic significance of the islands.

But if Newcastle was genuinely interested in Fiji, why was Smythe’s report so freely accepted? It contradicted expert opinion and was ultimately proved wrong in many respects by later events. The Admiralty hydrographer, for example, had already stated that an intermediate naval station between Vancouver and Sydney was desirable and that Fiji had the best harbours in that part of the Pacific. The Admiralty had also agreed that the group was not far removed from the most convenient line between Panama and Australia and it was certainly more of a halfway house than the alternative of Auckland suggested by Smythe.

The commissioner’s report was even more at odds with expert opinion on the matter of cotton. Berthold Seemann, an experienced botanist, who was sent to Fiji with Smythe on the recommendation of Sir William Hooker, Director of Kew Gardens, reported: ‘If I understand the nature and requirements of Cotton aright, the Fiji’s

35 Smythe to Newcastle, 1 May 1861, enclosure no. 5, C.O. 83/1.
36 ibid., minute, 26 August 1861.
37 Drus, pp. 88-89.
seem to be as if made for it.\textsuperscript{38} But Seemann, who travelled more widely and probed deeper than Smythe, had to admit that labour would probably have to be imported. Even so, the two later commissioners, Commodore J. Goodenough and E. L. Layard, who visited Fiji in 1873-4, thought Seemann’s predictions had been ‘amply fulfilled by experience’.\textsuperscript{39} Yet Seemann’s report, received fully two months before that of Smythe, was ignored.\textsuperscript{40}

All this casts considerable doubt on the suitability of Lieutenant Colonel Smythe as a commissioner and suggests that he was either unfit for the task or prejudiced. It would appear he was both. Newcastle’s choice was unfortunate. Smythe’s service in South Africa during the Kaffir wars had led him to distrust ‘natives’. The outbreak of the Maori wars reawakened the fear. This prejudice against accepting the islands was finally sealed by his personal dislike of Pritchard.

The commissioner was, in other respects, unsuited to his task. It has been asked why it was necessary for an officer of the Royal Artillery to check the expert advice of the Admiralty and the Manchester Cotton Supply Association.\textsuperscript{41} The answer lies in Newcastle’s admission that an impartial commissioner had to be appointed before any further move could be made. In all probability the Duke assumed the evidence of these two bodies to be correct and therefore did not expect it to be challenged—though these matters had, of course, to be included in the commissioner’s instructions. But even if Smythe was not required to have expert knowledge in these fields, the choice was still unfortunate. It is hard to see what particular qualifications an army officer could have to make him so well equipped to understand the tenure systems, tribal customs and economy of Fiji. But then the British tradition of enquiry and report has always rested on the services of the impartial amateur.

It would seem that Newcastle’s main difficulty lay in the fact that there existed no body of obviously qualified men capable of conducting such an enquiry. At first sight, Smythe’s appointment was not such a bad one. He had been to mixed societies like South Africa and the West Indies. He had had some scientific experience in charge of an observatory at St. Helena and his magnetic and meteorological observations had subsequently been published in England. He had also had some diplomatic experience in Belgium and Germany and had served on a Royal Commission to Russia, France, Austria and Italy. He spoke fluent French and German—the two languages required in communicating with the non-English speaking settlers in Fiji. Since he had established the Department of Artillery Studies in the Royal Artillery Institution at Woolwich (and was the first Director, 1850-2), Newcastle may have regarded him as an expert on strategy. It may also be pointed out that however prejudiced his views

\textsuperscript{38} Seemann to Newcastle, 17 June 1861, C.O. 83/1.\textsuperscript{39} Goodenough & Layard Report, Cmd. 1011 (1874), xlv, p. 323.\textsuperscript{40} Seemann’s report was received at the Colonial Office, 18 June 1861; Smythe’s arrived, 17 August 1861.\textsuperscript{41} Ward, p. 190.
and however unfit for the task he turned out to be, Smythe later changed his opinions,\(^4^2\) and a subsequent Colonial Secretary, the Earl of Kimberley, was not averse to considering him for an identical appointment in 1873.\(^4^3\)

Finally, why did Newcastle accept a report so diametrically opposed to his own inclinations without any further discussion? He must have been aware of the disagreement with the Admiralty hydrographer's advice and the difference of opinion between the reports of the commissioner and the botanist on the prospects of cotton. Yet still Newcastle accepted Smythe's opinion as conclusive.

The reason for this may now be suggested. Newcastle had the greatest difficulty in securing the appointment of a commissioner in the first place. Gladstone was decidedly opposed; Russell was indifferent. The unfavourable outcome of an enquiry, which Newcastle hoped would win over his colleagues to the need for British annexation, put the Duke in a hopeless position with the rest of the cabinet. Moreover, Smythe raised some valid objections. Thakombau's offer was of doubtful validity, though it had been ratified by the leading chiefs in December 1859. Even the more optimistic Seemann had not challenged Smythe's conclusions about the difficulties of a labour supply for the cultivation of cotton. Above all this hung the problem of race relations, with the unhappy recent example of New Zealand as a warning. As Newcastle instigated the commission, he could hardly ignore its conclusions.

Thus in the case of the Fiji question of 1858-61, the lack of emergency or proven necessity was the main reason for deciding not to expand the empire. That a genuine interest was at first shown in the proposed cession of the islands demonstrates that expansion was not unacceptable in the eighteen-sixties, under certain circumstances—during the very decade when 'anti-imperialism' was supposed to have reached its climax. British policy in the South Pacific followed the lines suggested by Gallagher and Robinson: informal control if possible, formal where necessary, direct rule being a last resort.\(^4^4\)

The brief interest in the Fiji Islands kindled in the years 1858-61 lay in the strategic and commercial advantages to be obtained, particularly the possibility of cultivating cotton. Other factors, however, eventually counter-balanced these advantages. The pressure brought to bear upon the British government by private commercial interests, both British and colonial, and by such bodies as the Wesleyan Missionary Society and Aborigines Protection Society was neutralised by Smythe's sceptical report, Colonial Office fears concerning race relations and Gladstone's determination to protect the British

\(^4^2\) Smythe to W. M'Arthur, 12 February 1873: 'I am now of the opinion that the best course, both for the interests of the natives and of England, would be to accept the offer of the sovereignty of the group made by the Chiefs.' McCullagh, p. 159.

\(^4^3\) Kimberley to Gladstone, 30 April 1873, Gladstone Papers, British Museum, Additional Manuscripts, 44225, p. 29.

Exchequer from further financial burdens. These were the real reasons behind the decision not to accept the offer of cession. The refusal was certainly no concession to separatist opinion or ‘anti-imperial’ tendencies. The basic question around which the decision revolved was one of expediency. The failure of the commissioner’s report to endorse the opinions of the Admiralty and the Manchester Cotton Supply Association and the cabinet’s concern about possible foreign complications rendered Newcastle’s desire to annex the islands hopeless. British intervention was usually only condoned in the eighteen-sixties in cases where the security of the colonies was threatened. In 1861 there seemed to be no such pressing urgency in the South Pacific.

University of Edinburgh

C. C. Eldridge