

Planter versus Protector

FRANK CORNWALL'S EMPLOYMENT OF GILBERTESE PLANTATION WORKERS IN SAMOA, 1877-1881

THE DISRUPTION of cotton supplies that accompanied the American Civil War resulted in the emergence of plantation economies in various parts of the Pacific during the 1860s. Since planters were usually unable to procure reliable supplies of labour from local sources, they looked further afield and imported workers from other parts of the Pacific, as well as from Asia, on contracts of indenture. Before World War I, approximately 500,000 labourers were so engaged, and at least another 300,000 afterwards.¹ Almost 61,000 Indians (1879-1916) and 27,000 Pacific Islanders (1865-1911) went to Fiji; 62,000 Islanders made the voyage to Queensland (1863-1904); and a further 146,000 labourers, predominantly Asians, worked on sugar plantations in Hawaii before 1900.² Smaller areas of employment included Samoa, which received approximately 12,500 Pacific Islanders and another 3800 Chinese in the 50 years before the First World War.³

Small though it was in relative terms, the labour trade to Samoa was almost completely the preserve of a single firm, the *Deutsche Handels- und Plantagen-Gesellschaft der Südsee Inseln zu Hamburg* (DHPG). Seen in this light, the Samoan segment of the trade constitutes a substantial single interest, involving an average intake of 250 new labourers each year, and a plantation system of

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1 Colin Newbury, 'The Melanesian Labour Reserve: Some Reflections on Pacific Labour Markets in the Nineteenth Century', *Pacific Studies* (PS), 4, 1 (1980), pp.6-7; Ralph Shlomowitz, 'Epidemiology and the Pacific Labor Trade', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 19, 4 (1989), p.588.

2 Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: the Origins of the Fiji Indians*, Canberra, 1983, p.1; Jeff Siegel, 'Origins of the Pacific Islands Labourers in Fiji', *Journal of Pacific History* (JPH), 20, 1 (1985), p.46; Charles A. Price with Elizabeth Baker, 'Origins of Pacific Island Labourers in Queensland, 1863-1904: a Research Note', JPH, 11, 2 (1976), pp.110-11; Edward D. Beechert, *Working in Hawaii: a Labour History*, Honolulu, 1985, p.86.

3 S.G. Firth, 'German Recruitment and Employment of Labourers in the Western Pacific before the First World War', DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 1973, p.309.

5000 acres under cultivation in 1880, rising to some 8000 acres a decade later.⁴ So thoroughly did the DHPG dominate the commerce of Samoa that one is inclined to forget that there were other planters and traders there during the nineteenth century. Two middle-sized British plantations were owned by Frank Cornwall in the late 1870s and early 1880s. They were never free from controversy and failed in sordid circumstances. In particular, their operation exposed the deficiencies of British legislation bearing on the labour trade, and highlighted the need for contract labourers to be placed under a 'protector'. This article will survey the conditions on Cornwall's plantations that resulted in the intervention of the British consul on the labourers' behalf, and will discuss the role of the protector in the Pacific generally.

Frank Cornwall came to Samoa as a printer to the London Missionary Society. He turned his back on his original calling, married a high-ranking Samoan woman, and became a planter instead. To this end he was deeply implicated in land speculation, and eventually claimed title to a massive 300,000 acres. In 1876 he began developing plantations at Magia (about 15 miles west of Apia, the main port of Western Samoa) and at Lata (on the isolated southwest coast of Savai'i) by borrowing heavily from the English firm Wm. & A. McArthur & Co. Cornwall agreed to ship his produce through McArthurs in return for their financial backing.⁵

Cornwall's next move was to charter two vessels, the brigantine *Olesega* (March 1877) and the schooner *Flirt* (December 1877), to recruit labour from the Gilbert Islands to the northwest of Samoa. Their captains had no difficulty in obtaining workers — 202 in all — because the southern islands of the archipelago were in the grip of a prolonged drought that forced starving Gilbertese on to the labour market.⁶ Many of the Gilbertese were in a 'most wretched' condition, but irregularities had also occurred on board the *Flirt*. These were ignored by Cornwall, who, in his capacity as acting British consul, cleared the vessel on its arrival at Apia. Soon afterwards Cornwall shipped over half the Gilbertese to Lata in the 15-ton cutter *Bertha* and left them with an overseer. Despite their famished condition, the remaining Gilbertese followed a few weeks later, again in the grossly overcrowded *Bertha*.

Lata was not the place to send debilitated labourers, especially when no preparation had been made for their arrival. The first party had to erect a makeshift dwelling the day of their arrival and then build their own accommodation in their free time. Their working day itself — clearing and planting the

4 John A. Moses, 'The Coolie Labour Question and German Colonial Policy in Samoa, 1900–1914', in John A. Moses and Paul M. Kennedy, eds, *Germany in the Pacific and Far East, 1870–1914*, Brisbane, 1977, p.257.

5 R.P. Gilson, *Samoa, 1830–1900: the Politics of a Multi-Cultural Community*, Melbourne, 1970, pp.341, 413–14; Deryck Scarr, *Fragments of Empire: a History of the Western Pacific High Commission, 1877–1914*, Canberra, 1967, p.79.

6 Swanston to Gorrie, 23 January 1879, Records of the Western Pacific High Commission (WPHC), Series 4, Inwards Correspondence-General, no.8 of 1879, Public Records Office (PRO), Kew. The relationship between drought and labour recruiting in the Gilbert Islands is discussed in Barrie Macdonald, *Cinderellas of the Empire: towards a History of Kiribati and Tuvalu*, Canberra, 1982, p.58.

rocky and poorly drained terrain — was hard. Their rations were unsuitable and insufficient, and the water supply was inadequate. To these tribulations was added the further burden of a driving and callous overseer in Harry J. Moors, who frequently resorted to corporal punishment and made no attempt to cultivate yams, taro, and bananas at Lata. The Gilbertese expressed their distaste for their conditions and their overseer by absconding, an act of desperation given the hazards. One sickly runaway collapsed in a taro patch and was found dying by Samoans four days later. Another runaway was equally unfortunate. Her child died in the bush, and she was returned to the plantations lashed to a pole like a pig and beaten severely in public by Moors. Even if absconders were in reasonable health, the chances of successful escape were small because neighbouring Samoans would return them to Lata for a \$5 reward.⁷

These happenings at isolated Lata might have continued unchecked but for one of Cornwall's many detractors who reported them in February 1878 to the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific in Fiji. It was even alleged that one woman received 40 lashes, and that the 'brutal overseer' afterwards inflicted excruciating pain by painting her private parts with coal tar.⁸ But there was little that British officialdom could do, given the limitations of their own jurisdiction. Both the amended Pacific Islanders' Protection Act of 1875 and the Order-in-Council of 1877 (which created the Western Pacific High Commission as the arm of British extra-territorial jurisdiction in the region) dealt inadequately with the labour trade. They were directed at recruiting, and left untouched the questions of conveyance, employment, and repatriation, so that the High Commission could not proceed against Cornwall for the overcrowding of the *Bertha* or for labour conditions at Lata. The High Commissioner, Sir Arthur Gordon, used these abuses to demonstrate the need to tighten the legislation bearing on the labour trade, pointing out that no provision had been made for the employment of labourers by British nationals in places such as Samoa and the New Hebrides, where no local labour regulations existed.⁹

Legal disabilities did not altogether prevent the intervention of the High Commission. The unsettled state of affairs in Samoa generally caused Gordon to despatch his private secretary, Alfred Maudsley, as acting British consul. Maudsley himself conducted an enquiry at Lata in April 1878 which demonstrated the essential accuracy of the allegations against Cornwall. Describing the labourers' condition as 'appalling', Maudsley found that they were underfed and over-tasked and that several cases of outright brutality had occurred. In none of these cases was he satisfied with the explanations offered by Harry Moors. Important to the whole enquiry was the ability of the labourers to put their case to Maudsley without Moors, who could speak the Gilbertese language, having

7 Some of the relevant correspondence has been published in *Treatment of Imported Labourers in Plantation of Mr. Cornwall, 1878*. Foreign Office Confidential Print, 4022; 'Native Labourers in the Navigator Islands (Papers Relative to Alleged Cruelties)', *New Zealand, Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives*, A-6, 1879; *New Zealand Herald*, 24 July 1979.

8 Hunt to Gordon, 2 March 1878, encl. in Gordon to Colonial Office, 2 March 1878, CO/83/16/5790, PRO. See also Hunt to Gorrie, 14 February 1879, WPHC 4, 19/1879.

9 Gordon to CO, 2 March 1878, CO 83/16/5790. See generally O.W. Parnaby, *Britain and the Labor Trade in the Southwest Pacific*, Durham, NC, 1964.

to be the interpreter. Many of the labourers had previously worked in Fiji, as had Maudsley, so the two parties conversed in Fijian. Maudsley's conclusions were that Lata was the last place to send famished labourers, because no accommodation or gardens were ready for their arrival. Nor could he understand why the weaker labourers had been rested for only three weeks at Cornwall's other plantation at Magia, where there was ample food, before being shipped to impoverished Lata. It was little wonder, but still totally unacceptable, that so many of the labourers had died.¹⁰ The active displeasure of Her Majesty's Government, however, could only extend as far as refusing to issue Cornwall with further licences to recruit labour unless Moors was dismissed. This duly happened, and Cornwall promised in future 'to correct any conduct on the part of those under him that may be prejudicial to the rights of his labourers'.¹¹

Six months later, however, fresh complaints were laid against Cornwall when several of his Gilbertese labourers from Magia plantation presented themselves at the British consulate saying that they were badly fed and housed. The new consul, William Swanston, sent his police constable to investigate: he confirmed the labourers' complaints, adding that what passed as a hospital was a disgrace. On the credit side, the labourers did not claim to have been physically abused. Cornwall was again told to remedy the situation, and the only deficiency uncovered by a spot-check the following month was a lack of sleeping mats.¹² The matter was settled for the meantime, but only because Magia's proximity to Apia allowed ready monitoring and because Cornwall himself could be brow-beaten into compliance. But Swanston was aware that the legal situation with regard to labourers on British plantations had still to be finally determined, and that what the Gilbertese really needed was an outside protector. As he explained to the acting High Commissioner:

In reference to your remarks that the High Commissioner's Court can, on complaints of the labourers on a plantation deal with the question at issue I submit who is to plead the labourers case; who is to lodge the complaint[?]

There is no interpreter here. The labourers cannot lodge a complaint in English and although from fortuitous circumstances, I can listen to what they say [he too spoke Fijian] I cannot act as counsel, interpreter and judge.

Again in reference to the enforcing of a bond against an employer, who is to act on behalf of these people for they certainly cannot act for themselves[?]¹³

10 Maudsley to Cornwall, 9 May 1878, Records of the British Consul, Samoa (BCS), Series 5, vol. 2, Wellington, National Archives of New Zealand; Maudsley to Gordon, 14 May 1878, BCS, 5/23; Alfred P. Maudsley, *Life in the Pacific Fifty Years Ago*, London, 1938, pp. 214–15. Moors later became the leading American merchant in Samoa, but has since become best known for his association with Robert Louis Stevenson. Moors gives passing reference to Lata in his reminiscences, originally serialized in the *Samoa Times* between 1924 and 1926, but does not mention his involvement in the running of the plantation. See Harry J. Moors, *Some Recollections of Early Samoa*, Apia, 1986, p.24.

11 Swanston to Gordon, 20 June 1878, BCS 5/23; Swanston to Gorrie, 26 July 1879, copy, encl. in Gorrie to CO, 18 August 1879, CO 225/3/16844.

12 Swanston to Gorrie, 16 January 1879, BCS 3/2; Swanston to Ryan, 16 January 1879, BCS 3/2; Diary of William Swanston, 16-17 January 1879, Suva, Fiji Museum; Ryan to Swanston, 18 January, 17 February 1879, BCS 3/2; Gorrie to Swanston, 4 April 1879, and enclosures, CO 225/2/10776.

Swanston's words were borne out only two years later. In 1881 Cornwall was under siege, with his creditors, McArthur & Co., suing him not so much for the recovery of their money but as a means of taking over his plantations.¹⁴ In desperation Cornwall informed the new British consul, Hicks Graves, that he was unable to provide for his labourers and that he proposed to 'send them up to Apia and throw them on my hands. I cautioned him against doing anything so foolish'.¹⁵ Four days later, overwhelmed by the magnitude of his problems, Cornwall left suddenly for Fiji. Conditions at Magia had reverted to their former chaotic state, though it was more a case of mismanagement than mistreatment. The labourers were nominally under a Samoan overseer, but he took his orders from Mrs Cornwall, a redoubtable Samoan lady who was in charge of the provisions. When the labourers complained about their inadequate rations, Mrs Cornwall unwisely told them to go to the British consul if they wanted to eat. Soon afterwards two of them arrived at the consulate with a letter of complaint, and again the consul was implicated in Cornwall's affairs. Graves assumed the active role of protector of the Gilbertese labourers by setting up a High Commissioner's court and proceeding against Cornwall, on their behalf, for back-wages and repatriation costs. The court duly found against Cornwall, who was neither present nor represented, and awarded the plaintiffs the sum of £900, to be realized from the sale of Magia's cotton crop.¹⁶ The Gilbertese labourers from Magia were duly repatriated, and Cornwall's estates were made over to his creditor. Cornwall made repeated attempts to regain his estates in an orgy of litigation and counter-litigation until his death in 1895.¹⁷

The Cornwall affair was one of the many squalid episodes that punctuated the history of nineteenth-century Samoa. Nothing very positive emerged out of it. The following year Cornwall's in-laws, who disputed McArthur & Co.'s right to Magia, inflicted damage on the property, and were fined £100 by the new High Commissioner, G.W. Des Voeux, backed by H.M.S. *Diamond*.¹⁸ That was only the beginning of McArthurs' problems. The firm expanded into plantations at the wrong time, for commodity prices were on the wane and labour difficult to get. Even the DHPG, for all its apparent stability and dominance, was severely tested during the 1880s. A crucial factor in the eventual demise of McArthur & Co. was their inability to recruit labour for their ill-gotten plantations. Licensed to enlist 250 labourers for McArthurs, the recruiting vessel *Myrtle* returned to Apia after four months in the Gilberts with just eight recruits on board.¹⁹ McArthurs' second

13 Swanston to Gorrie, 4 June 1879, WPHC 4, 53/1879.

14 Scarr, p.79.

15 Graves to Thurston, 25 November 1881, WPHC 4, 64/1882.

16 *ibid.*, and encl., WPHC 4, 64/1882.

17 For a detailed account see Scarr, pp.80–81.

18 Dale to Des Voeux, 7 November 1882, Co 225/13/1358; G.W. Des Voeux, *My Colonial Service*, London, 1903, II, pp.96–97.

19 The German consul in Samoa claimed that the *Myrtle*'s lack of success demonstrated that German recruiters enjoyed the trust of the Gilbertese, who would have signed on for Samoa had the vessel flown the German flag. In an oblique criticism of the DHPG's reputation as an employer, the British consul more accurately reported that the captain of the *Myrtle* 'could have easily filled up for Fiji or Queensland but could not persuade them [the Gilbertese] to listen to service in Samoa'. Stuebel to Bismarck, 27 January 1886, Potsdam, Deutsches Zentralarchiv, Records of the

difficulty was the reverse of Cornwall's: rather than owing money the firm extended too much credit, accepting land as security. It struggled on until the final blow in 1894, when a Land Commission, appointed to investigate European land claims in Samoa, invalidated most of those put forward by McArthur & Co. It is a commentary on the dubious nature of the land deals made by Cornwall and by McArthurs that British nationals claimed by far the greatest area of land, yet had the lowest percentages of these claims confirmed.²⁰

Nor did the revelation of abuses in the Cornwall affair result, as it should have, in the better conduct of the British labour trade. Following the Lata fiasco, Sir Arthur Gordon requested the authority to draw up regulations that would put the British labour trade on a sounder footing. When this authority was granted in the 1879 amending Order-in-Council, Gordon declined to act,²¹ and for the next 12 years his successors showed a similar lack of political will to clean up the trade. Frequent, but desultory, despatches and memoranda were exchanged, especially on the vexed questions of the recruiting for foreign planters by British ships, the issuing of recruiting licences, and the treatment of labourers once they were on plantations.²² Matters dragged on unsatisfactorily until a more resolute High Commissioner took remedial action in the 1890s.

The Cornwall affair demonstrated the vulnerability of labour migrants, and the multitude of disabilities with which they had to contend. The migrants were isolated from the support systems of their home islands, largely ignorant of channels of redress, subject to the penal causes in their contracts of indenture, forbidden to form trade unions, often uncomprehending of the languages spoken around them and, more often than not, disadvantaged by colonial regulations that favoured their employer. The Cornwall affair also demonstrated the importance of contract labourers having a 'protector', someone who would act on their behalf, articulate their grievances, ensure that their rights in law were upheld, publicize injustices, represent their case in courts if need be, and serve their interests generally. In the case of Cornwall's Gilbertese labourers, the role of *de facto* protector was assumed by officials attached to the British consulate, many of whom could converse with the Gilbertese in the Fijian language. To a considerable extent they compensated for the unsatisfactory nature of British law relating to the labour trade, most notably when Graves issued a writ of dubious legality to cover the wages and repatriation of the labourers.

The consular protector became a common enough figure in the subsequent history of labour in Samoa, but lacked the freedom of action that earlier British consuls exercised against Cornwall. In 1892 Britain declared a protectorate over the Gilbert Islands, and further recruiting from the group for Samoa was subject to the labourers being placed under the protective oversight of the British consul,

Reichskolonialamt, vol. 2316, f.62 (thanks to Dr Stewart Firth of Macquarie University for this reference); Churchward to High Commissioner, 7 October 1885, WPHC 189/1885.

²⁰ Gilson, pp.406–11; Paul M. Kennedy, *The Samoan Tangle: a Study in Anglo-German-American Relations, 1878–1900*, Dublin, 1974, p.101 & n.

²¹ His reasons are complicated and not altogether clear. See Scarr, pp.177–80.

²² e.g., despatches in CO 225/2/9179; CO 225/3/16844; WPHC 4, 17/1879; WPHC 4, 127/1883, WPHC 4, 79/1885, WPHC 4, 127/1885. See also Scarr, pp.191–2.

who alone would have the authority to exercise discipline. But the British consul's power to intervene on the labourers' behalf was wilfully obstructed by the DHPG, with the connivance of an obliging German consul. It was the Gilbertese themselves who evened the scores, by using their new status as a weapon against their employer. No longer subject to German jurisdiction, they displayed such intransigence that the DHPG paid them off early, glad to be rid of them.²³ The continued supply of Chinese labourers was also subject to inter-government negotiations when, in 1909, the Chinese authorities insisted that Chinese labourers in Samoa be placed under the protection of its consul; he, too, found his effectiveness impaired, but not nullified, by the unco-operative attitude of the colonial authority, whether it was a German colony, British military administration, or New Zealand administration.²⁴

Protectors of contract labourers are becoming increasingly recognized in Pacific historiography. They come in many guises, and a tentative typology is offered. There are colonial officials who lack a solid mandate in law, but who become protectors by force of circumstance, either responding to an appeal or acting on their own initiative. The British consuls who came to the aid of Frank Cornwall's labourers are clear-cut examples. More common are government officials specifically charged with the protective oversight of contract labourers. They are of two types, executive and bureaucratic. Examples of the first are the British consuls in Samoa after 1894, who supervised the DHPG's Gilbertese labourers, and the Chinese consuls in Samoa, whose primary responsibility was to protect the interests of their nationals under contracts of indenture. The bureaucrats include officials from government departments (Inspectors of Immigrants in Fiji and Inspectors of Pacific Islanders in Queensland, for example), empowered to enforce the labour regulations on the employers and also required to look after the welfare of the labourers.

Missionaries comprise a further category of protectors, but their effectiveness was limited for a variety of reasons. Planters were generally unwilling to have missionaries on their estates and many missionaries, in turn, were reluctant to be associated with labourers, lest it imply approval of the labour trade or leave them in some way obligated to employers. One of the few missionary organizations to involve itself explicitly with plantation workers was the Queensland Kanaka Mission, founded by Florence Young in 1886. But the QKM focused more on evangelization and education than on labour relations, and was more concerned with the labourers' habits of drinking, gambling, and swearing than with their conditions of employment. It could hardly have been otherwise, given that Miss Young needed the goodwill of the planters if she were to operate at all. In fact

23 Doug Munro and Stewart Firth, 'From Company Rule to Consular Control: Gilbert Island Labourers on German Plantations in Samoa, 1867-96', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 16, 1 (1987), pp.34-38.

24 Stewart Firth, 'Governors versus Settlers: the Dispute over Chinese Labour in German Samoa', *New Zealand Journal of History* (NZJH), 11, 2 (1977), pp.171-5; P.S. O'Connor, 'The Problem of Indentured Labour in Samoa under the Military Administration', *Political Science*, 20, 2 (1968), pp.18-26; Nancy Y.W. Tom, *The Chinese in Western Samoa, 1875-1985*, Apia, 1985, pp.73-84.

she was of the plantocracy; her brothers owned the Fairymead Plantation near Bundaberg.²⁵ Missionary protectors of a more resolute kind are nevertheless to be found. Examples are J.W. Burton, Richard Piper, and C. F. Andrews, whose condemnatory writings on Indian indentured labourers in Fiji were designed to create public outrage and bring an end to the indenture system. They were far from receiving the approbation of their colleagues; the Methodist Mission in Fiji was quick to disassociate itself from such views.²⁶

To any such typology must be added the conditions and circumstances that enhanced or impeded the effectiveness of a protector. The existence of protective legislation was clearly helpful. At one extreme was the German labour trade to Samoa, which began in 1866 and continued unregulated until 1883. Even then the ordinances were directed solely at recruiting, leaving untouched the more important issue of employment. For his part the German consul in Samoa had no set of labour regulations to enforce until 1898, and in any case he saw himself as responsible to the DHPG rather than to the indentured labour force.²⁷ On the other hand the Queensland labour trade was, by 1900, 'governed by 7 Acts of Parliament, 18 schedules, 54 regulations and 38 instructions'.²⁸

Legislation by itself, however, is meaningless unless upheld, and so another consideration is the attitude and energy of the officials whose job it was to enforce the regulations. The two British consuls involved with the DHPG's Gilbertese labourers in the mid-1890s had the same set of regulations to enforce, but one was far more assiduous than the other. A similar Janus-like quality had been revealed by Governor de la Richerie of Tahiti three decades earlier. He took decisive action against Peruvian slavers in 1863, but shielded the largest plantation enterprise within his jurisdiction, although its recruitment of Pacific Islands labour was often no less of a kidnapping operation and its conditions of employment also left much to be desired.²⁹

A contrasting example is that of the Reverend Hiram Bingham jun., who had served as a missionary in the Gilbert Islands and who spoke the language fluently. Thus qualified, he was appointed to the Hawaiian Board of Immigration in 1880 as Inspector and Protector of South Sea Islanders. He was given unimpeded access to plantations where Gilbertese labourers were employed: he 'had full power to inspect the condition of the islanders; to enforce all contracts made and to explain these; to hear complaints from both sides; to settle

25 David Hilliard, 'The South Sea Evangelical Mission in the Solomon Islands: the Foundation Years', *JPH*, 4 (1970), pp.41-44.

26 K.L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: a History to the End of Indenture in 1920*, Melbourne, 1962, ch. 9; Andrew Thornley, 'The Methodist Mission and Fiji's Indians, 1879-1920', *NZJH*, 8, 2 (1974), pp.149-52.

27 Firth, 'German Recruitment and Employment', pp.53-60, 83-84.

28 Peter Corris, *Passage, Port and Plantation: a History of Solomon Islands Labour Migration, 1870-1914*, Melbourne, 1973, p.43.

29 H.E. Maude, *Slavers in Paradise: the Peruvian Labour Trade in Polynesia 1862-1864*, Canberra, 1981, ch.13; Eric Ramsden, 'William Stewart and the Introduction of Chinese Labour in Tahiti', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 55, 3 (1946), pp.194-5; C.W. Newbury, 'The Administration of French Oceania, 1842-1906', PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1956, pp.161ff.

differences, by law if necessary; and, in his own words, "to cheer the Gilbertese". He fulfilled his duties 'with thoroughness and, at times, tenacity'; the Gilbertese in turn showed him an affection that he had never experienced in all his years as a missionary to their islands. Despite official backing, however, Bingham made little headway against a few determinedly defiant planters.³⁰

As Bingham's experiences demonstrate, the efforts of even the most assiduous protectors could be overridden by prevailing realities. The most highly placed protector of plantation labourers was the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific. One of his *raison d'être* was to ensure the good conduct of the British labour trade. But his dual role as High Commissioner and Governor of Fiji involved a conflict of interests, because the economic development of his colony entailed the continued supply of plantation labourers, and this took precedence over their conditions of employment.³¹ Problems of a different kind occurred in the Solomon Islands, where a plantation economy developed only after the late 1890s; the few government officials had obvious initial difficulties since plantations were isolated and dispersed and their means of transport limited.³² The Chinese consuls in Samoa had a measure of success when the ability to secure further transports of scarce coolie labour hinged on improved conditions. The Chinese revolution of 1911, however, created an over-supply of emigrant labourers, and the bargaining position of their consul in Samoa (and also their government in China) was correspondingly weakened.³³

Conditions in Fiji likewise eroded the effectiveness of protectors. The presence of a dominant plantation company; a succession of governors who hesitated to oppose the company even if had they had wanted to; a less than impartial colonial judiciary; and a general tenor of contempt towards Indian plantation workers in white society, not least among the Inspectors of Labour, weighted the nexus of power heavily on the employers' side. Had the Fiji sugar industry been structured around a large number of small plantations, the regulations could have been enforced by denying errant planters further supplies of labour. The authorities exercised this option in the Assam tea gardens of northeast India, for example, where plantations with a death rate of over 70 per 1000 per year were refused new recruits.³⁴ But in Fiji, 'such action, if taken against the larger sugar companies would have ruined the colony'.³⁵ The few Inspectors of Labour who tried to enforce the regulations faced a hopeless and uphill battle

30 Sandra Rennie, 'Contract Labor under a Protector: the Gilbertese Laborers and Hiram Bingham, Jr., in Hawaii, 1873-1903', PS, 11, 1 (1987), pp.81-106; J.A. Bennett, 'Immigration, "Blackbirding", Recruiting: the Hawaiian Experience, 1877-1887', JPH, 11, 1 (1976), p.18.

31 The dependence of the sugar industry on a plentiful supply of underpaid indentured labourers is stressed in Bruce Knapman, *Fiji's Economic History, 1874-1939: Studies of Capitalist Colonial Development*, Canberra, 1987, pp.12-13, 52, 60.

32 Judith A. Bennett, *Wealth of the Solomons: a History of a Pacific Archipelago, 1800-1970*, Honolulu, 1987, pp.153-60.

33 Firth, 'Governors versus Settlers', pp.175-6.

34 Brij V. Lal, 'Murmurs of Discontent: Non-resistance on Fiji Plantations', *Hawaiian Journal of History*, 20 (1986), pp.188-214; Gillion, pp.79-95.

35 Ralph Shlomowitz, personal communication, 3 April 1989.

that eventually led them to resign.³⁶ A happier state of affairs was sometimes possible in Queensland, at least from the mid-1880s, in localities such as Mackay, where a sprinkling of dedicated Inspectors of Pacific Islanders were free of conflicting functions and assisted by more solicitous labour policies on the part of the largest employer. But the quality of Inspectors, the attitudes of employers, wider community reaction, and therefore the conditions of plantation labour varied enormously throughout Queensland, despite the extent of protective legislation.³⁷

This paper claims only to be a starting point for further discussion on the role of a multi-faceted figure, the protector. At the same time the increased recognition of the protector's role, evident in recent historical works, need not obscure the fact that indentured labourers in the Pacific, as elsewhere, found ways to fight back against employers' demands and discipline. Such strategies of resistance include strikes, riots, assaults on overseers, malingering, desertion, and sabotage.³⁸ Another category of resistance is the identification and mobilization of avenues of redress. Recourse to courts of law is one aspect; invoking the aid of a protector is another. Frank Cornwall's labourers at Magia did this exactly when they took their grievances to the British consul. They knew what they were doing. So, too, did Pacific Island leaders in the more recent age of decolonization, when they sought constitutional advisers such as Professors J.W. Davidson and Yash Ghai to press their case. The different circumstances gave rise to a new breed of protector, but a protector just the same.

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36 Gillion, p.94.

37 Clive Moore, *Kanaka: a History of Melanesian Mackay*, Boroko & Port Moresby, 1985, pp.133-7; Corris, ch.5; Kay Saunders, 'Melanesian Women in Queensland, 1863-1907: some Methodological Problems involving the Relationship between Racism and Sexism', PS, 4, 1 (1980), pp.36-37.

38 Kay Saunders, "'Troublesome Servants': the Strategies of Resistance employed by Melanesian Labourers on Plantations in Colonial Queensland", JPH, 14, 3 (1979), pp.168-83; Ronald Takaki, *Pau Hana: Plantation Life and Labor in Hawaii*, Honolulu, 1983, ch.5; Clive Moore, 'On the Melanesian Frontier. Melanesian Society at Mackay, Queensland, in the Nineteenth Century: Resistance, Survival and Accommodation', in Henry Reynolds, ed., *Race Relations in North Queensland*, 2nd ed. [tentative title], Brisbane, forthcoming; Edward D. Beechert, Brij V. Lal and Doug Munro, eds, *Resistance and Accommodation on Plantations*, forthcoming.