ADOLPHE DE PLEVITZ AND SIR ARTHUR HAMILTON GORDON: BRITISH JUSTICE, RACE, AND INDIAN LABOR IN MAURITIUS AND FIJI, 1871–1880

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This paper follows the relationship between the first substantive governor of Fiji, Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, and Adolphe de Plevitz, a Frenchman by birth, who held strong beliefs about the supremacy of British justice and equality. The setting is two tiny British colonies, Mauritius and Fiji, in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In Fiji Gordon encouraged the importation of indentured Indian workers to develop Queen Victoria's newest colony; yet in Mauritius, his previous posting, he had reluctantly initiated a Royal Commission into the inequitable treatment of Indians who remained on the island after their period of indenture had ended. The catalyst for the Royal Commission, which made Gordon immensely unpopular, was a pamphlet written by Adolphe de Plevitz alleging systemic maltreatment of the Indians. Forced to leave Mauritius and unaware of the governor's antipathy toward him, de Plevitz followed Gordon to Fiji. In the context of tropical labor, race, governance, and ambition, Gordon's character—obdurate, unforgiving, and autocratic—was bound to again clash with de Plevitz's—outspoken, impetuous, and defender of the underdog.

APART FROM EXCEPTIONAL CASES, such as those of William Bligh or Edward Eyre, histories of colonies often overlook the provenance—geographical, political, and psychological—of their protagonists. Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, as Fiji's first substantive governor, is noted for importing Indian indentured labor to work the sugar cane plantations, yet in his previous appointment as Governor of Mauritius (1871–1874) he had overseen a Royal Commission that found that Indian laborers on that island had been

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treated appallingly by planters, government, and the police; had any semblance of freedom denied them; and, through the rapaciousness of their masters, had been unable to return to their homeland.

The catalyst for this Royal Commission was a petition of over 9,400 signatures of Indian laborers and an inflammatory pamphlet in which the other subject of this paper, Adolphe de Plevitz, publicly and spectacularly criticized the Indian indentured labor system on Mauritius. By doing so de Plevitz had frustrated Gordon's ambition to make his mark on that minuscule Indian Ocean colony. Ever a man to maintain a grudge, Gordon was unlikely to provide a warm welcome for de Plevitz and his young son Richard when they sailed into the harbor of the capital of Fiji on the 300-ton bark, the *Bhering*, in early August 1876, some thirteen months after Gordon took up his post.

Soon after his arrival in Mauritius in February 1871, Gordon had written to his wife, "Send me out any immigration printed papers in my basket . . . or in the drawing room. The immigration system here is a bad one, I should like to mend it before I go."[1] A man of immense self-confidence, Gordon considered himself well qualified to do this, having instituted some minor labor reforms when Governor of Trinidad (1866–1870). He informed the Undersecretary of State for the Colonies that he would shame the Mauritian Legislative Council (half of whom were either planters or had planting connections) into passing reform laws by making unflattering comparisons with Trinidad and with British Guiana, where a Royal Commission had just recommended a far-reaching overhaul of the Indian labor indenture system.[2]

Unhappily, this precarious strategy was undermined by Adolphe de Plevitz. Born in Paris in 1837 of Dutch petty nobility, he had arrived in Mauritius as a twenty-one year old seeking adventure. He found work as a forest ranger in the Woods and Forests Department, but on marriage to a Creole woman, a descendant of the African slaves brought to work the sugar cane fields, he left government service to manage his father-in-law's small plantation in a remote part of the island. There he grew vegetables, coffee, tobacco, and exotic plants such as vanilla. He concerned himself with education for the local children, plans for import–export to Madagascar, and retaining the tree cover on the island, which he argued would preserve the island's rainfall. However he was most affected by the plight of the Indian laborers stranded on the island after their initial period of indenture had expired.

Shortly after slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1833, Mauritius became the first colony to import indentured labor from India, another great source of seemingly endless manpower. In 1860 the Mauritian

Legislative Council abolished the requirement that the planters pay the workers' return passages and unilaterally extended the contracts of indenture from three to five years. The workers, unable to save for the journey home because their employers charged them excessive rates for food and accommodation and fined them for trivial offenses at work (including two days' pay deducted for every day off sick), often ended their period of indenture owing their master money. The Old Immigrants, as they were called, could re-engage on estates or try to find work for themselves; however there was vast unemployment and overcrowding as more and more cheap indentured labor arrived from India.[3] By 1867 the numbers and mood of the Old Immigrants, now the majority of the island's population, were perceived as a threat to public order and safety. To force them to re-engage, thus controlling their movements and saving the planters the costs of new imports, the Legislative Council passed special laws (never notified to Whitehall as required) that compelled the Old Immigrants, to purchase a costly ticket bearing their photograph and identifying their status. If they wanted to work other than on plantations they had to buy a work license. In order to move between the nine districts of the island, each only a few miles across, they had to obtain a pass endorsed by the police.

de Plevitz's first encounter with the injustices of this system was when he sent seven of his father-in-law's Indian tenants to the police station to update their papers noting he was now manager of the estate. On arrival at the station the men were arrested and locked up. de Plevitz was in court the next morning to argue that they had been complying with the law, not contravening it. He was successful, the case was dismissed, and de Plevitz had found his vocation as advocate for the oppressed. Neglecting his agricultural duties, he wrote petitions to government and appeared in court where he demonstrated a facility to argue and cross-examine not only in English and French but in Hindi. To the consternation of his family, but the gratitude of the Indians, he declared, "When I saw oppression, and ill-treatment lawfully and unlawfully, I said to myself: I shall endeavour to change this one day."[4]

Unemployed Indians were imprisoned as vagrants; indeed in the years 1867 to 1870 nearly one-quarter of the Indian population was sentenced for this offense. Police corruption and brutality were rife. Nevertheless the government-appointed Protector of Immigrants had never exercised his powers to prosecute a planter or police officer. Gordon's first step was to extract from the protector some small promises for change. These were published in the protector's *Annual Report* tabled before the Legislative Council in April 1871. Though he had done nothing overt, rumors were circulating that the Governor was sympathetic to the Indians.

The moment the protector's report became public, de Plevitz drew up a petition for the Old Immigrants in English, French, and a number of Indian languages. It was addressed to Queen Victoria asking her to apply the same laws to those who had finished their period of indenture as to any other of her subjects on the island.[5] Over 9,400 signatures of Indian laborers were on the petition when it was presented to Governor Gordon on June 6, 1871. In his diary the event elicited only the laconic notation, "Received immigrants' petition."[6] Gordon had determined that reform would proceed at his pace, so, leaving Mauritius in an uproar, he engaged in what was to be characteristic behavior: he set sail for his outlying dependency, the Seychelles.

On August 3, impatient for action, de Plevitz published a pamphlet in which he described serious abuses, flagrant infractions of the law, and corrupt processes from recruitment in India to the passing of laws whose sole objective was to protect the past governors' and members of the Mauritian Legislative Council's sources of cheap labor.[7] He sent the pamphlet to Queen Victoria, humanitarian societies in England, and a number of influential people in India.

On return from the Seychelles, Gordon was obliged to publicly defend de Plevitz from a demand signed by 950 worthies that de Plevitz be expelled from the colony for this "wholesale libel upon the Colony at large."[8] Privately, however, Gordon observed that the "restlessness" on the part of Mr. de Plevitz that led him to write the pamphlet "seriously embarrassed" Gordon and rendered "that very difficult of accomplishment, which when I left for Seychelles would have been comparatively easy."[9] This disingenuous statement belied the fact that, given the later reaction by these men to the Royal Commission, it was highly unlikely that Gordon's shaming strategy would have any effect at all on the members of the Legislative Council.

The planters on the Legislative Council demanded the Governor call a Royal Commission to refute the pamphlet's libels against them. Gordon reluctantly agreed; matters were now out of his control. Commissioners Frere and Williamson arrived the following year, their express brief to inquire into the allegations in the pamphlet.[10] They heard evidence for more than fourteen months. Adolphe de Plevitz appeared before them on a daily basis representing the exploited and abused Indians for free. The local press, which reported daily from the Commission, attacked his character at every turn. The police had to be ordered to protect him from the mobs that gathered to hurl abuse and threaten his life.

The Governor too was fearful, but for his dignity. The Commissioners asked him to give evidence, suggesting it offered an ideal public forum in

which to draw comparisons with Trinidad and British Guiana. Gordon, however, was apprehensive about being cross-examined by de Plevitz and William Newton, the lawyer for the planters. Frere reassured him:

> I don't think there is the slightest chance of their doing anything disagreeable . . . The fact of their having been present will give that further value to your evidence which it always gains by the power of being cross-examined . . . But if you cannot overcome your dislike to the lawyer's and Plevitz's presence we will not press an examination.[11]

Placated, Gordon appeared. Foreshadowing his later policy in Fiji, but reassuring no one in Mauritius, he opined that the Indian immigration was of benefit both to workers and planters, provided a close watch could be kept on it.[12] Neither de Plevitz nor Newton cross-examined.

The Royal Commission was daily exposing institutionalized corruption and mistreatment, but the Indians and de Plevitz looked in vain for reform. The influential sectors of the local population, far from being shamed by Gordon's references to other sugar-producing colonies, argued in the press and before the Commission that Gordon was exceeding his executive powers and should be recalled to London.[13] Meanwhile de Plevitz was feted as a hero by the Mauritian Indian laborers,[14] and English humanitarian movements such as the Anti-Slavery Society[15] and the Aborigines' Protection Society.[16]

Shortly after the Royal Commission finished hearing evidence, the Governor again went off on leave, this time to Britain. He was away a year. He reluctantly returned in November 1873, but by June 1874 he had accepted a more congenial posting, Fiji. Three days later, leaving behind the social instability created by the Royal Commission, Gordon quit Mauritius, announcing only that he was visiting the Seychelles. He sailed directly from there to London, and later to Fiji. The new Governor of Mauritius, Sir Arthur Phayre, arrived in March 1875 armed with the Royal Commission's findings that de Plevitz's allegations in the pamphlet had been substantially proved.

This report further inflamed the planters' animosity toward de Plevitz, and without the protection of the Royal Commission and the police he was a marked man. Planters drew lots for the task of beating him. They inscribed the stick used in silver and presented it to its owner, whose fine was paid by public subscription. Squeezed by his many creditors after a hurricane destroyed all his crops, de Plevitz decided to leave the colony and seek a new life elsewhere. Subscription funds were taken up by the Aborigines'

Protection Society, local Indians, and those on the subcontinent. Unaware that Gordon held him responsible for his plans for measured reform in Mauritius going awry, de Plevitz determined to follow the Governor to Fiji.

Governor Gordon in Fiji

Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon was content in his new post. In Britain, Gordon numbered among his friends liberal thinkers such as Charles Kingsley, Samuel Wilberforce, and influential members of the antislavery movement. However, as the youngest son of Lord Aberdeen, a former Prime Minister of Great Britain, Gordon was a product of his background and upbringing. From his first days in Mauritius he had bombarded his friend W.E. Gladstone, the British Prime Minister, with requests for a transfer, since he found confrontation with the Legislative Council distasteful. Indeed when offered the governorship of South Australia he had refused, noting that, "being fond of work (and I fear of authority), I should never be content merely to act at the bidding of my 'responsible advisers'."[17] Therefore when offered Britain's newest colony he had accepted with alacrity. As he wrote to his wife, "the prospect of *founding* a colony has great charm for me."[18]

These contradictions in Gordon's character, which were to shape his policies for land, labor, and governance in Fiji, were described by his Private Secretary in Fiji, A.P. Maudslay:

> A short man, dark, not good looking, careless of his appearance, shortsighted ... Nowhere has he been popular, since he has a very bad manner with strangers, and he is perfectly aware of it and regrets it very much ... He is very determined, and puts aside all opposition when his mind is made up ... He professes to be a thorough liberal, but his aristocratic leanings come out insensibly.[19]

The capital of Gordon's newly established colony was Levuka on the tiny island of Ovalau. Its sharp volcanic peaks rise steeply behind the town; their upper slopes are heavily covered in vegetation. Beach Street, its main road, is virtually the only flat land in the town. From the 1850s Levuka had been settled by European traders and had become an important Pacific trading port, where its inaccessible terrain was a virtue in case of attack. However Levuka was principally chosen as the new capital because it faced Bau, the seat of Cakobau, a powerful chief who had gained supremacy over the

other Fijian chiefs, first by his own force, then with the aid of Europeans who upheld his dominance.

Situated as it was, Levuka was ideally placed as a seat of British government, both for the settlers and Cakobau; as a town, however, it was cramped and somewhat claustrophobic. While the houses on the slopes faced the sea, the pleasant breeze could turn almost without warning to a treacherous gale. The atmosphere was oppressive and lowering.

Gordon's character was not one to tolerate the geographical and social confines of a tiny outpost of Empire like Levuka. He soon tired of administration and set out for broader pastures. His ostensible aim was to subdue the natives after an outbreak of tribal fighting. He spent five months away on Viti Levu, the largest island of the Fiji group, where he camped out, went barefoot, and made the acquaintance of the Fijians whom he admired tremendously. He was especially taken by what he understood to be the essence of Fijian culture, its autocratic rule by regional chiefs, which reminded him of the ancient legal institutions of his ancestors' beloved country, Scotland.[20] Taking clans and chiefs in the eastern part of Viti Levu as a sure sign that Fijian society was evolving toward "civilisation," Gordon created governance structures of indirect rule, the most enduring example of which is the *Bose vaka Turaga*, the "Great Council of Chiefs,"[21] threatened but not abolished by the current regime. Gordon nominated high-ranking hereditary chiefs, both male and female, to advise the executive government on local matters and placed himself at its helm in the role of Paramount Chief representing Her Imperial Majesty Adi Victoria, Queen of Great Britain and its colonies.[22]

The Governor also admired the manly physique of the Fijians and their settled villages, neat gardens, and agricultural use of land—clear indications, according to the legal theorists of the day, of rights over the land.[23] In 1874 a number of chiefs had ceded sovereignty and dominion over the Fiji Islands to the British Crown. This was taken to mean that the Crown held the right to purchase, requisition, or otherwise dispose of the land. However, driven by a firm conviction that his destiny was to protect the Fijians against exploitation, Gordon set up a Lands Claims Commission to hear and settle European claims. Contrary to legal advice that land acquired before the cession was already lost to the Fijians, Gordon declared that all land decisions would be referred to him for executive approval.[24] Underpinning the powers of the Commission was to be a standardized system of Fijian land tenure that Gordon had extrapolated from his limited observations of customary law in the eastern part of Viti Levu.[25] Land was deemed both inalienable and held in common by *mataqali* (variously interpreted as a "tribe," "clan," or "family group"). Like the conclusions Gordon had reached in relation to the role of chiefs, the new law relating to land

ownership bore little resemblance to the reality of complex and diverse processes of customary law across the islands, even in eastern Viti Levu.

Gordon was in his element. Here, his ambitions and character could be given free rein. On exactly the other side of the world from Whitehall, and with virtually untrammeled power, he could initiate the policies that have shaped the political, economic, and ethnographical landscape of today's Fiji. Here there were no difficult members of the Legislative Council to contend with, no Royal Commission, and no Adolphe de Plevitz.

Adolphe de Plevitz Arrives

When, a fortnight after his arrival in August 1876, Adolphe de Plevitz had had no response to his advertisement in the *Fiji Times*—"Gentleman thoroughly conversant with the Cultivation and Manufacture of Sugar, Vanilla and Coffee, wishes an engagement"[26]—he wrote to Government House, Nasova, a mile along Beach Street, requesting an audience with the Governor. Gordon declined to meet him. The Colonial Secretary replied that he was directed by the Governor to inform de Plevitz that if he wished "to make any communication to H.E [His Excellency]. . . . to do so in writing."[27] Undeterred, de Plevitz immediately penned a full account of a scheme to set up an agricultural company to grow sugar and coffee using imported skilled labor from Mauritius. He wrote that 1,200 Creole and Indian Mauritian tradesmen had asked him before he left Mauritius "to pray Your Excellency to allow and assist them to emigrate to this colony."[28] He asked Gordon for "a Crown grant of land upon easy terms," citing promises of capital from Sydney for the company. The Colonial Secretary's reply was curt: a copy of the *Fiji Royal Gazette* with the regulations for land allotment and its prices heavily underscored. Yet even if he had had the money to purchase land, it was unlikely that de Plevitz would have been granted it. As Gordon later confided to Chief Justice Gorrie, he intended "to make the alienation of native land *as difficult as possible*. It is the only condition of any possible *progress* on the part of the natives."[29] As part of this strategy no further land had been granted to any European since Gordon's arrival.

With the *Gazette* came a note advising that it was "unnecessary for H.E. formally to 'allow' immigrants from Mauritius to come to Fiji as he has no power to prevent any person desirous of doing so from entering the Colony."[30] This last comment was no doubt privately expressed with a good deal of regret. As Gordon later wrote to F.W. Chesson, the secretary of the Aborigines' Protection Society in London, "I do not share your feelings for Mr de Plevitz—it is mainly owing to him that matters are in their present unsatisfactory state in Mauritius."[31]

de Plevitz may have had promises of labor from Mauritius, but he had no success for his next scheme—to raise local capital to build sugar mills in Fiji. In September 1876 a committee of twelve men met to consider his prospectus but unanimously rejected it on the grounds that promises of further capital from Sydney were "of too vague a character to be safely relied upon."[32] Shortly afterward, Griffiths, the editor of the *Fiji Times* and one of de Plevitz's supporters, advised him that news had arrived that in Mauritius de Plevitz had supported labor against capital. Griffiths concluded that de Plevitz's plan for agricultural enterprises would not succeed because "capital and philanthropist could not work together."[33]

Gordon Proposes Indian Indentured Labor

Before Gordon left London, members of the antislavery movements had called on him to abolish trafficking in Islander labor whereby local Fijians and Islanders were "blackbirded," captured or inveigled to work for plantation owners in the Pacific (including Australia) virtually as slave labor.[34] Gordon's solution, which fitted with his aspirations to protect the Fijians and allow their social evolution, was that the Fijian government would engage indentured laborers in India, allot them in Fiji under government supervision, and tax the planters one-third the cost of their importation. The government would thus hold the monopoly over Indian indentured labor, setting wages and conditions.[35] In the Governor's first official address to the colonists he put the question, "Is it in your opinion desirable that the Government should undertake the conduct and management of labour from India?" He argued that the labor was cheap and "practically boundless" and that Indians could be indentured for five years plus an additional five years before the planter would be obliged to pay their return passage. Compare this, he said, to "Polynesians" (as Islanders were then called) who had to be returned home after three years.[36] He ignored the Royal Commission, which found that such conditions led to the mistreatment of the Old Immigrants in Mauritius, and set aside his own observations, which were that the high rate of suicide in that colony was "due to nostalgia, or an intense desire to return to India, which they had no means of gratifying."[37] When Gordon's proposal became known to the humanitarian societies in England there was outrage.[38]

The same response, though for different reasons, was received from the Fiji Europeans. They soundly rejected His Excellency's proposal. They were not interested in paying for what could be got for virtually nothing—Islander and Fijian labor. In the *Fiji Times* of August 30, 1876, and elsewhere, the colonists stridently argued their case: Islanders could be "got"

for £3 payable in trade goods, whereas Gordon intended to set the wages of Indians at £6 per annum. Indians saved money rather than spent it and then returned home with the hard cash: therefore employing Islanders had the double advantage of not only being half the price but also of stimulating the flagging economy because the workers would buy, and be paid in, trade goods. By November the planters had presented an alternative scheme—all Fijian men between the ages of fifteen and fifty should be "apprenticed to the planters for 5 years and in consideration of being taught a valuable industry receive no pay during that time."[39]

Gordon appeared blind to the fact that men who could pen such lines were scarcely likely to treat Indians with any greater humanity. Those same forces that led to the exploitation of the Indians in Mauritius were also present in Fiji—greed, access to an unsophisticated workforce who would sign a contract enforcing pitiful wages and terrible conditions when they had no idea where they were going, and the ability of planters to do virtually what they liked far from the eye of the home government and the Anti-Slavery Society.

What motivated Gordon, who had observed ill treatment of Indians elsewhere, to propose their importation to Fiji? Gordon's paramount instruction was that the new colony should be economically self-sufficient, financed by local taxes and duties. This could only be possible by raising taxes on local enterprise, notably tropical agriculture, in particular sugar. Two other personal factors can be considered: his liberal friends had asked him to stop the trafficking in Islander labor, and Gordon wanted to maintain the Fijians in their apparently idyllic state of nature. This latter, however, he had already disrupted by changing the taxation system. On cession to Britain in 1874 each Fijian man had to pay £1 and each woman 4 shillings per annum tax; currency that could only be earned by working on plantations. Gordon believed that a communal tax not only would be more in keeping with Fijian traditional society, but would obviate any need for Fijians to be working on plantations. He decreed that tax would now be paid collectively by villages in the form of cash crops such as copra, cotton, tobacco, maize, and coffee to be grown in the villagers' communal gardens.[40] The policy in fact undermined traditional agriculture since it required more land and time than the previous taxation system and encouraged economic dependence on cash crops. The Fijians declared Gordon a hard master. Nor was it popular with the planters since it cut off a supply of labor, nor with the commodity traders because the Fijians now knew the market price of cash crops. Back in England Sir Charles Dilke, Member of Parliament, deemed it "a new kind of slavery."[41]

Meanwhile in Levuka de Plevitz unsuccessfully tried twice more to see the Governor. On December 28, 1876, humiliated, he wrote to Gordon asking to be considered for any available work. The Governor replied that if de Plevitz had "consulted him before leaving Mauritius he would have dissuaded him from coming to Fiji, that [his] name was now noted as an applicant, but that he was unable to hold out any sanguine hope of the possibility of speedily meeting [his] wishes."[42]

Though de Plevitz had friendly support from others who had arrived from Mauritius after him and obtained government work, they were powerless in the face of Gordon's obduracy. By February 1877 de Plevitz no longer had money for rent, so he set out for Vanua Levu, the second largest island of the Fiji group, with letters of introduction given to him by John Bates Thurston. There he formulated an idea for an industrial school to teach the Fijians trades. This philanthropic plan was supported by Captain Hill, an influential member of the Legislative Council, who wrote enthusiastically to Gordon:

> We white foreigners here owe something to the Fijian people. We absorb their lands, and we may make labourers of them, but we should do something more, we should teach them something.... Creole mechanics could be imported from Mauritius, such as carpenters, sawyers, boat- and ship-builders, engineers ... to [teach] the general principles of agriculture, and at least one trade thoroughly.[43]

Gordon rejected the scheme.

de Plevitz suggested to the recently arrived and now employed Charles Mitchell, who had assisted the Mauritius Royal Commission, that he could be employed in the Immigration Department, where his knowledge of Indian languages and familiarity with labor laws would be an asset.[44] He asked Mitchell to mention this to the Governor, but with no more success than others. Despite this rebuff, de Plevitz wrote at this time to the Secretary of the Aborigines' Protection Society in London that Sir Arthur Gordon was "a man of honor and integrity who possesses the firmness moreover to carry through the laws necessary to protect the weaker classes, caring for the howling of opponents just as little as he would regard the barking of a pack of curs."[45] Whether it amused or distressed Chesson to receive de Plevitz's praise of Gordon and Gordon's low opinion of de Plevitz[46] in the same mail from men who lived not a mile apart on the other side of the world is not recorded.

In September 1877, more than a year after their arrival, Richard de Plevitz, now aged fourteen, found employment in a tailors' shop in Levuka and was able to support his father. However, another four months passed before Gordon finally relented. William Seed, also from the Mauritius Royal Commission, had been made Inspector of Police on his arrival in Fiji. He was permitted to appoint de Plevitz to the police force at the beginning of 1878.[47] de Plevitz was to be sole European police officer to administer Vanua Levu, an island three times the size of Mauritius and half as big as Jamaica. He was given neither house nor horse. Nor was there a lockup, except for a *bure* (a thatched hut) through whose dilapidated walls the prisoners could pass at will. And as he later complained to Seed, he had no copies of the laws he was meant to administer.

A Policeman's Lot . . .

Islander Labor

On arrival on Vanua Levu, de Plevitz found a familiar situation: the ill treatment of plantation laborers. He immediately embarked on a tour of inspection. By March 1878, not three weeks after his arrival, he had penned a lengthy report to Seed noting that he had advised the proprietors to improve the workers' abysmal conditions. As the supervision of labor was not part of a policeman's duties it was not welcome news in Levuka that the sergeant was making recommendations that he did not have the power to implement. Despite orders to the contrary, de Plevitz continued to send reports for two years (copies to the Aborigines' Protection Society), and they continued to be ignored in Levuka, where it was no doubt thought that importing Indian laborers would resolve the issue of the exploitation of Fijian and Islander workers.

The Indians Arrive

On May 14, 1879 the *Leonidas* with 464 indentured laborers, mainly from the United Provinces of India, anchored off Levuka. While the ship was quarantined for ninety days with cases of smallpox, cholera, and dysentery, on shore the press was preparing its welcome. Two days after the *Leonidas* dropped anchor, the *Fiji Argus* gleefully published a report designed to reinforce the prejudices of the planters. Indian laborers, indentured on Réunion (Mauritius's neighboring island) and taken to New Caledonia, were now on offer to planters on Taveuni, the third largest of the Fijian islands. Their services, however, had been categorically refused by the Fijian planters on the grounds that:

> If they were not supplied with everything, they were able to cite section so-and-so of Ordinance No. so-and-so &c and point out requirements of same; but when they commenced to quote decisions of the court in several cases in Mauritius and elsewhere in regard to coolie labor, their employer thought that such intellectual laborers were out of place on a plantation, and so was not sorry to get rid of them. A little learning is a dangerous thing, and may serve to make the services of coolie labor anything but sought after.[48]

The editor's prediction was correct. Of the planters, only Captain Hill took 106 laborers from the *Leonidas*. The rest had to be found work in government service. Enlightened by the Royal Commission and de Plevitz's humanitarian campaign in Mauritius, an appreciation of the rule of law had reached the Pacific. de Plevitz's advocacy in Mauritius had again frustrated Gordon's plans for labor.

The Chippendall Case

In the meantime Fijian and Islander labor continued to be poorly treated, and de Plevitz continued his unwanted reports. In February 1880 Gordon had minuted querulously on a police report that de Plevitz was living at Savusavu on Vanua Levu, contrary to instructions. "Why my orders more than once given that he should come over here remain unattended to I know not."[49] "Over here" was Suva. Levuka and its surrounds had been found too constricted for a capital, and the center of government had moved to the eastern coast of Viti Levu. Gordon was to regret two months later that his order had still not been carried out.

There had been no European magistrate on Vanua Levu for some months when on April 27, 1880, Gordon received a report from de Plevitz, via Seed, that an accusation had been made that one Chippendall, a planter of Nabuni, had kicked an Islander worker and the worker had died. Gordon had previously had dealings with Chippendall, an ex-lieutenant of the Royal Navy, and not formed a good opinion of him. On that occasion he had heard that Chippendall was living with a fourteen-year-old Fijian girl whose husband had demanded her return. In his role as Paramount Chief Gordon had exercised his authority to order the girl back to her husband.

Gordon's nemesis as Governor was about to be precipitated, not by his unpopular policies, but by his personal prejudices. If there was truth in the allegation about the laborer's death, which Gordon was immediately disposed to believe, there were two paths of prosecution: either by the

Immigration Department because the laborer had come from another island group or through a police prosecution presented by the local police officer pursuant to the criminal law. Mistrusting de Plevitz's abilities (though Seed later asserted that de Plevitz would have been "quite equal to the duty required"[50]) and the inexperience of the local temporary magistrate Henry Anson, and fearful that the case might "break down,"[51] Gordon decided on a Crown prosecution by the Immigration Department, contrary to the advice of his Chief Justice, Sir John Gorrie.

On April 29, Anson, the Crown prosecutor Hobday, the government medical officer, the inspector of immigrants, and two special constables arrived on Vanua Levu to take evidence and exhume the body. In a report to his superior de Plevitz gave his opinion that, given the state of the body that had been buried some days previously by other laborers, "it would have been impossible for any medical man to find out" how the laborer died.[52] Nevertheless Hobday ordered de Plevitz to sign an information against Chippendall charging him with murder with malice prepense. Sergeant de Plevitz refused to do so unless he was allowed to read the medical report. Hobday replied it was sufficient that the sergeant had been told the results. With bad grace de Plevitz signed. He was then given a warrant for the arrest of Chippendall and ordered to keep him under house arrest until the committal hearing the next day. That evening Chippendall confided to de Plevitz that the accusation had probably been thought up by a malicious neighbor.

In court the next day the charge was reduced to manslaughter and Chippendall was committed for trial in Suva in July. de Plevitz sent off a report to Seed protesting about the order to sign the information when he had no knowledge of the facts on which it was based. He gave his good opinion of Chippendall and enclosed a map of the property that showed how far the deceased was able to walk after the alleged assault. He hoped that this "would help to render justice."[52] Seed supported the report and passed it on to the Colonial Secretary, whose response was to diagnose Seed "confused" and de Plevitz "irritated." Gordon directed that these opinions be conveyed to Seed "pretty stiffly conveying my entire approval of the course pursued ... de Plevitz to be informed."[53] Gordon had had enough of de Plevitz's reports and ordered his immediate transfer to Suva.

The European settlers were incensed that Chippendall had been ordered to stand trial. They took up a petition, the tenor of which was that no white man should ever be brought to trial for any action whatsoever against an Islander. Reminiscent of events in Mauritius where Gordon had also been accused by the planters of executive interference in judicial matters,[54] the petition demanded an immediate inquiry into Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon's

conduct in the process. Widely signed, it was then forwarded to London to Lord Kimberley, Undersecretary of State for the Colonies. Urged on by a pamphlet published by Chippendall's father, a clergyman, notice was given in the House of Commons of a motion for an inquiry into the case.

The trial opened in Suva in early July 1880, and after hearing the evidence Chief Justice Gorrie acquitted the accused. Kimberley decided against an inquiry but privately admonished Gordon.

Gordon loved his position as Governor of Fiji. However in 1880 the Colonial Office appointed him as Governor of New Zealand. Learning this news from the editor of the *Fiji Times*, who had received the news by cable, Gordon was furious. He sent off a protest to London, but too late, cabled back Kimberley, your post is gazetted, and William Des Voeux is the new Governor of Fiji.

The planters were hysterical with delight on hearing that Gordon was leaving, utterly convinced that it was their intervention that had occasioned the move. In farewelling the colony in November 1880, the main thrust of Gordon's parting speech was a justification of his prosecution of Chippendall.[55] Hisses filled the room. Gordon left the room, and the colony, privately declaring that he was "leaving half my heart behind me in the land over which for more than five years I had been the absolute despot."[56] He was to retain his connections with Fiji through his supervision of native policy in the Pacific as high commissioner for the Western Pacific, a territory from Tonga to New Guinea. Indeed it was on one of his trips back to Fiji that a serious crisis developed in New Zealand's native affairs that led to Gordon's hasty retreat from that colony.

As for de Plevitz, the superintendent of police, William Seed, was to minute on his file shortly before dismissing him from the police force for playing cards and drinking in the Suva Hotel off duty: "In any other capacity Sergeant de Plevitz might be found to answer very well as he is a shrewd sharp and clever man, but as a policeman he is not a success."[57] Nevertheless de Plevitz found a place for himself in the new capital. He acted as an interpreter of Hindi and other languages in the courts, he had a splendid garden from which he sold vegetables, he proposed a cigar-making industry, he imported comestibles, and he sold illicit wine and spirits. He was finally caught smuggling two men's suits from a German ship and sentenced to six months imprisonment in Korolevu jail outside Suva. On his committal his family, except for his youngest daughter who stayed to become a missionary nun, hastily left the colony for Sydney.

de Plevitz had almost served his time, much of it unsupervised as the gardener of the Suva Botanical Gardens, when he asked leave to attend the wedding of his daughter Mary in Sydney. The government accepted the

opportunity with alacrity, minuting on his file that de Plevitz can leave so long as he never comes back. He set sail, not for Sydney, but for New Caledonia. He died in 1893 in the New Hebrides.

Conclusion

Within the limited world of administration of Queen Victoria's colonies characters were bound to meet, clash, and come off second best. Adolphe de Plevitz, restless, impetuous, and defender of the underdog, held the view that migration offered workers the chance of a better life, but that the British Crown had a duty to provide them with the same legal rights and protections as any other of Her Majesty's subjects, regardless of color or provenance. This was an unlikely prospect in nineteenth century colonial life, where every one of Queen Victoria's governors was obliged to face the issue of cheap labor to develop their colony—retaining their position depended on it. Nevertheless it is surprising that Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, aware of its condemnation by the antislavery movements, and its abuse in Trinidad, British Guiana, and Mauritius, should see indentured labor from India as a solution for the burgeoning colony of Fiji. However, once acquainted with the Fijians and their way of life, Gordon had become obsessed with protecting them from further exploitation. His way of doing so was eccentric, to say the least, in colonial administration.

By the time Gordon's governorship of Fiji had ended, he had determined the course of Fiji's modern history. His insistence on Indian labor had partially met the antislavery movement's concerns about Islander and Fijian labor, but it overlooked the fact that the same human greed infected both. The laborers from India did not immigrate to Fiji, they came on contracts with the intention of returning home. When, as in Mauritius, the planters found ways around paying the agreed wage and declined to pay their return fares, the Indians had no choice but to stay in the Pacific. For them, and their descendants, the denial of access to those rights of equality that de Plevitz had advocated undermined their future security.

NOTES

1 Arthur Hamilton Gordon, *Mauritius: Records of Private and Public Life 1871–1874* (2 vols., Edinburgh 1894), vol. I, p. 41, letter to Lady Gordon, March 8, 1871.

2 Great Britain, *Report of the Commissioners appointed to enquire into the Treatment of Immigrants in British Guiana* (2 vols., London 1871).

3 For example, 44,397 Indian laborers arrived in 1859.

4 Mauritius, *Report of the Police Enquiry Commission* (Port Louis 1872), p. 138.

5 Adolphe de Plevitz, *The petition of the old immigrants of Mauritius presented on 6th June 1871, with observations* (Port Louis 1871).

6 Gordon, *Mauritius*, vol. I, p. 95.

7 Adolphe de Plevitz, *A Rare Book* (reprint, Port Louis 1959).

8 Gordon, *Mauritius*, vol. I, p. 305. His reply to the petitioners was reprinted in full in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* 17:8 (1871), pp. 231 et seq.

9 Gordon, *Mauritius*, vol. I, p. 280, also at p. 358. He similarly blamed Lord Kimberley, the Undersecretary of State for the Colonies, for not authorizing the reform program earlier, at pp. 395 and 465.

10 William Frere had previously sat on the Royal Commission in British Guiana.

11 Gordon, *Mauritius*, vol. II, pp. 12–13.

12 Great Britain, *Report of the Royal Commissioners appointed to enquire into the treatment of Immigrants in Mauritius* (London 1875), evidence of Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, November 11, 1872.

13 Great Britain, *Report of the Royal Commissioners*, evidence of Sir Virgile Naz, December 17, 1872. In his diary (Gordon, *Mauritius*, vol. I, p. 73) Gordon designated Naz as "a half-breed Indian and negro."

14 And by their descendants, for example, Sookdeo Bissoondoyal, *Fresh light on Adolf von Plevitz* [sic] (Port Louis 1963); Anon, *Remember de Plevitz* (Port Louis 1958).

15 For example, "Mr Adolphe de Plevitz, the hero of Mauritius," *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, 19:8 (1875), pp. 196–9; pp. 203–5.

16 *Colonial Intelligencer and Aborigines' Friend* (May 1874), pp. 123–5.

17 Gordon, *Mauritius*, vol. II, p. 68.

18 Gordon, *Mauritius*, letter to Lady Gordon of June 18, 1874, emphasis in the original, vol. II, p. 632.

19 Alfred P. Maudslay, *Life in the Pacific Fifty Years Ago* (London 1930), pp. 82–3.

20 Arthur Hamilton Gordon *Paper on the System of Taxation in force in Fiji, read before the Colonial Institute* (London 1879), p. 197 quoted in Peter France, *The Charter of the Land: Custom and Colonization in Fiji* (Melbourne 1969).

21 It continued as a form of indirect rule until it was suspended by the current regime in April 2007. In 2008 it was reported that the Great Council of Chiefs was ready to reconvene, but at time of writing has not yet done so.

22 *Adi* is a title used by Fijian women of chiefly rank, the equivalent of the *Ratu* title used by male clan chiefs.

23 William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England 1765–9* (reprint, Abingdon 1982). Blackstone's theories were derived from the writings of Emer de Vattel, *Le droit des gens, ou Principes de la loi naturelle, appliqués à la conduite et aux affaires des Nations et des Souverains* (2 vols., London 1758). International law envisaged three situations: land that was apparently "deserted and uncultivated" by its nomadic inhabitants was declared terra nullius and open for possession by a foreign power. However, land that had been gained through conquest in war or that was ceded to the foreign power remained in the hands of the local people until that power exercised its rights of occupancy, which the British Crown did in Fiji through the Deed of Cession.

24 An appeal could be taken from a commission decision to a board that consisted of Gordon, his Chief Justice, and the Commissioner for Native Affairs. France, *The Charter of the Land*, pp. 114–5.

25 France, *The Charter of the Land*.

26 *Fiji Times*, August 12, 1876.

27 Notation by Colonial Secretary dated August 31, 1876 on letter from Adolphe de Plevitz to Governor Gordon (Suva, National Archives of Fiji) CSO Inward Correspondence 1233 of August 25, 1876.

28 Adolphe de Plevitz, letter to Governor Gordon (Suva, National Archives of Fiji), CSO Inward Correspondence, 1221 of August 31, 1876.

29 Arthur Hamilton Gordon, *Fiji: Records of Private and Public Life 1875–1880* (4 vols., Edinburgh 1897–1912), vol. III, p. 469 (emphasis in the original).

30 Alfred P. Maudslay, Acting Colonial Secretary, letter to Adolphe de Plevitz (Suva, National Archives of Fiji), CSO Outwards Correspondence 1014 of September 6, 1876.

31 Arthur Hamilton Gordon to F.W. Chesson, March 20, 1877 (Oxford, Rhodes House) *Anti-Slavery Papers. Letters to the Secretary of the Aborigines' Protection Society, F.W. Chesson*, MSS British Empire, S18. C135/88.

32 *Fiji Times*, September 13, 1876.

33 Adolphe de Plevitz to F.W. Chesson, April 16, 1877 (Oxford, Rhodes House), *Anti-Slavery Papers. Letters to the Secretary of the Aborigines' Protection Society, F.W. Chesson*. MSS British Empire S18. C145/51.

34 The *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, 19:7 (1875), pp. 165–7 reported that a deputation from the Aborigines' Protection Society had called on Gordon before he left for Fiji.

35 John D. Kelly and Martha Kaplan, *Represented Communities: Fiji and World Decolonization* (Chicago 2001), pp. 164–5.

36 *Fiji Times*, September 4, 1875.

37 Gordon, *Mauritius*, vol. I, p. 180.

38 For example, in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, 20:1 (1876), pp. 20–22; 20:3 (1876), pp. 63–4.

39 *Fiji Times*, November 29, 1876.

40 In 1878 this taxation system netted £20,888 for the colony revenue: *Blue Book of Fiji 1878* (London, Public Records Office) CO 459/3.

41 Stephen L. Gwynn, *The Life of the Rt. Hon. Sir Charles Dilke* (2 vols, New York 1917), vol. I, p. 536.

42 Adolphe de Plevitz, letter to F.W. Chesson, April 16, 1877, MSS British Empire S18. C145/51.

43 Gordon, *Fiji*, vol. II, p. 296.

44 Adolphe de Plevitz, letter to his friend, V. Modeliar Rajaruthnam, of Madras, March 1877 (letter copybook in author's possession).

45 Adolphe de Plevitz, letter to F.W. Chesson, April 16, 1877, MSS British Empire, S18. C145/51.

46 Cited above at footnote 31.

47 *Blue Book of Fiji 1878* (London, Public Records Office) CO 459/3.

48 *Fiji Argus*, May 16, 1879.

49 Arthur Hamilton Gordon, notation dated February 24, 1880 on *Report on Police Force for 1879* (Suva, National Archives of Fiji), CSO Inwards Correspondence 303 of February 19, 1880.

50 William Seed, letter to Acting Colonial Secretary (Suva, National Archives of Fiji), CSO Inwards 836 of May 12, 1880.

51 Gordon, *Fiji*, vol. IV, p. 281.

52 Adolphe de Plevitz, report to William Seed dated May 2, 1880 (Suva, National Archives of Fiji), CSO Inwards Correspondence 836 of May 12, 1880, attachment to Seed's letter to the Colonial Secretary.

53 Arthur Hamilton Gordon, notation to the Colonial Secretary dated May 26, 1880 (Suva, National Archives of Fiji), CSO Inwards Correspondence 836 of May 12, 1880.

54 In May 1871 Gordon had appointed the Subprocureur-General (Deputy Attorney General) to act for sixty-seven Indians who had lodged a complaint alleging they had been ill-treated by the owner of Mont Choisy estate.

55 Gordon, *Fiji*, vol. IV, p. 488.

56 Gordon, *Fiji*, vol. IV, p. 505.

57 William Seed, letter to the Colonial Secretary, J.B. Thurston (Suva, National Archives of Fiji) CSO Inwards Correspondence 534 of March 19, 1881.