

REFERENCES CITED

Brij V. Lal, Doug Munro, and Edward D. Beechert, eds., *Plantation Workers: Resistance and Accommodation*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993. Pp. vii, 343, tables, bibliography, index. US\$38 cloth.

Reviewed by Colin Newbury, Oxford University

This collection of essays fills a need for a comparative overview of labor conditions on Pacific plantations during the period of the establishment of Western commercial enterprise and government. The editors would not claim that coverage is in any way complete. Rather, the aim has been to highlight the features of penal indenture and some other forms of legal constraint on workers, common to investment in tropical agriculture in the long aftermath of slave emancipation.

Arguing against the use of sociological models, Edward D. Beechert covers the well-documented history of labor recruitment for Hawaiian plantations, noting the reasons for the scarcity of indigenous labor, the rejection of American blacks and Chinese by the Hawaiian monarchy, and the consequent reliance by sugar and merchant capital investment on Japanese indentured immigrants. In practice, demand usually exceeded supply in conditions of weak legal constraints, giving rise to a mixed system of free, indentured, and subcontracted workers. Resistance techniques hardly evolved beyond desertion before penal contracts came to an end in 1898; planters chose to keep the sugar subsidy, rather than face rises in direct labor costs that may have encouraged greater efficiency; and wage bargaining, strikes, and equality of Hawaiian labor before the law from 1900 counted for more in the general strategies of resistance than the usual tactics of an oppressed work force, as the sugar and fruit industries moved into the intense deployment of worker power in the face of mechanization in the 1920s.

Brij V Lal's essay (already published in the *Hawaiian Journal of History* h) demonstrates that the fewest acts of open resistance occurred in the worst conditions of indenture: Riots and strikes were in inverse proportion to the strictness of legal codes. Accommodation with the system to preserve health and a modest amount of savings was the optimal strategy among Indians on

Fijian plantations, given diversity of origins and lack of social cohesion, language difficulties, oppression by the *sirdar* (foreman), and frequent mobility between plantations. Little protection could be expected from Fiji's colonial government, at its worst so far as laborers were concerned under Thurston, and only mildly humane under Jackson and im Thurn. Despite this, life for some of the lower-caste recruits improved, a small percentage of complaints by laborers were upheld by the courts, and a large number chose to remain after indenture rather than face the miseries of Indian village life by repatriation.

Using the example of Queensland Melanesian labor, Clive Moore closely follows the model described by Lal, emphasizing strategies for survival rather than outright resistance or total accommodation. In so doing he deploys the concept of a counterculture among immigrant Melanesians in Queensland that is useful in explaining attitudes to abuse, insult, and punishment in alien, confrontational systems of justice, but of little help in accounting for the considerable social mobility among re-contracted workers or the strong political action mobilized after 1900 to avoid total repatriation. Some of the leadership underwent considerable cultural adaptation. On the whole, therefore, resistance was spasmodic, individual, and brutal, rather than collective and advantageous, prior to the formation of the Pacific Islanders' Association in 1901. From the statistical examples collected for the Mackay district, Moore argues for a typology of "open" resistance against the iniquities of penal indenture and a more "covert" type using Melanesian "social mechanisms." Details of the former category are easy to document from an analysis of the indenture system and court records. But it is difficult to see why recorded examples of absconding, murder, sabotage, and so forth should be classified as covert, although a good explanation is offered in terms of reactions to illness and death from disease rather than straightforward "payback." Even so, by 1883 about a quarter of the total Melanesian labor force was time-expired and re-contracted. This proportion rose to some 60 percent by the late 1880s, including independent ticket-holders, freed from indentures. In the end some twenty-five hundred were allowed to stay. Clearly, the pattern of survival strategies requires an account of differential wage levels over time, opportunities for improvement within the system, and job mobility to explain why so many who escaped death and jail may have turned the system to their advantage and wished to continue to work in Queensland.

Doug Munro and Stewart Firth's example of the twenty-five hundred Gilbertese who worked in German Samoa provides a clear analysis of the depravities of a badly administered indenture system and the support for worker resistance provided by British consular patronage from 1894. The

foundation of Samoan plantations in the context of mercantile investment and the vulnerability of Gilbertese to recruitment is thoughtfully explored from both the employers' and workers' viewpoints. Planters' law was bad law, and the reason is seen in the collusion between public authorities (including Samoans) and private interests, as exemplified by the Steinberger commission of 1875 and by German consular support, until British jurisdiction intervened from Fiji. The case also reveals how little labor could expect in a basically underdeveloped economy, compared with Queensland or even Hawaii.

Writing with a firm sense of the structural constraints on capital in the early plantation history of the Solomons, Judith A. Bennett explains why, despite low start-up costs, plantations faced a continuous labor shortage and a state of armed conflict with Melanesian societies. The usual abuses in an indenture system that paid relatively low wages (though not as low as New Guinea) and attracted only fractious young men were to some extent remedied by Colonial Office intervention, inspection, and the adoption of task work. The use of taxation as a stimulus to recruitment is thoughtfully analyzed and provides a basis for comparison with other Melanesian plantation systems not covered in these essays (New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea). Again, too, once indenture was abolished, mass resistance became possible, as in Hawaii, and labor protest passed into the phase of political protest in the shape of Maasinga rule.

The chapters on Central American labor are instructive for differences rather than parallels with the island Pacific and Queensland. In the absence of penal indentures, older forms of servitude arising from patronage and peonage provided the social and economic basis for recruitment for estates in Guatemala, Yucatecan (Mexico), and northern Peru. Constraint on workers' options had more in common with the Transvaal or the antebellum South in a transition from personal authority over indebted peasants to wage contract with the state acting as policeman and arbiter. David McCreery emphasizes the more subtle forms of resistance on the part of Guatemalan coffee workers, given to minor deceptions and flight to home districts or to Mexico and Honduras. The Yucatecan Maya investigated by Allen Wells and Gilbert M. Joseph similarly deployed the "weapons of the weak" until their situation was exacerbated by a financial panic, 1907-1908, and was seized on by radical politicians in the run-up to more widespread agricultural insurgency that prefaced the Mexican revolution. Sugar workers in northern Peru had more in common with Hawaiian workers after 1900: recruited by professionals, enjoying a rising daily cash wage, and open to forms of "social control" through improved housing and health. In this rela-

relationship Michael J. Gonzales considers coercion “unimportant” (p. 311), as debt peonage was undermined by the cash nexus.

So what can be concluded from the range of examples? Doug Munro, in an able introduction, summarizes the mechanisms of constraint and the limits of employer power in the face of the need to conserve an essential economic input. Penal indenture gave powerful weapons, if enforced by the state, and few remedies that could be equitably exploited by workers. If Lal’s model is followed, then the best strategy was to keep heads down and await repatriation or liberation into the normal wage-labor force. But if the Queensland, Mexican, and Hawaiian examples are heeded, then the paradox of resistance is that it grew in proportion to the legalization of contractual status under more liberal labor regimes and in the more general context of political conflict.

Moreover, two historiographical gaps in the examples need to be kept in mind. There were possibilities for social mobility even on Fijian plantations, and many more in Queensland. Work histories display a tendency for experience to improve the bargaining relationship with employers, even to the extent of cooperation (headmen, recruiters, brokers) and co-optation (independent contractors with their own labor). Secondly, the economic record for sugar, copra, coffee, or natural fibers was not uniform in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries--the period covered by some of these essays. The general survey would be improved by an exploration of plantation performance to differentiate between styles of worker management in relation to discontent. Some plantations could afford to be paternalistic; some could not. Plantation techniques were not identical, and some private companies fared better than others. A critical condition that might have been exemplified also by Papua and New Guinea was the fiscal relationship between state and enterprise, as Bennett has pointed out; given this close relationship, much of the indenture system outlived its time, as other economies moved (as in the American examples) into wage bargaining without passing through the penal indenture stage. A final consideration arising out of these points is the value of labor, which is not considered in the general conclusions. Labor was “cheap” only at unit cost, not in the aggregate; and its coercion was a feature of inefficient administration based on low-level investment. Once it became “dear” at unit cost (Queensland, Hawaii, northern Peru), very different labor regimes took over, based on specialization and alienation rather than standard task work and state/employer paternalism. But anyone contemplating a general or specific exploration of Pacific economic history will find these essays essential reading.