

Claudia Knapman, *White Women in Fiji, 1835-1930: The Ruin of Empire?* Allen & Unwin, 1986. Pp. xiv, 226, map, photographs, orthography, notes, bibliography, and index. A\$15.95.

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Claudia Knapman's *White Women in Fiji* is one of those rare books worthy of unreserved praise. The author is a happy blend of historian and sociologist, and her analysis of the role of white women in Fiji breaks frontiers of understanding that highlight the complexity of the role of gender in that multiracial society. Her interest in this subject stemmed, she states, from personal experiences as an expatriate wife and mother. This book was one of three nominated in 1987 for the Nettie Palmer Prize for nonfiction.

Knapman sets out to argue against the long-held belief that women were responsible for rigid enforcement of racial discrimination and sees them as scapegoats for and an extension of the male of the species, subject to his decisions that reflected the imperial dream. She demolishes the gender explanation for the failure of colonialism; this she claims obscures the realities of the power relationships between the dominant and the dominated races.

Arguments, more or less accepted until recently by writers in the disciplines of history and sociology and in fiction, are examined. Rudyard Kipling and W. Somerset Maugham have provided images of women in colonial settings, which were reflected in academic studies such as James McAuley's work on New Guinea. McAuley maintained that the white woman drew "a circle of exclusion round her domain"--and in so doing "is perhaps the real ruin of empires" (quoted on p. 9). An analysis of Fijian society from 1835-1930 clearly shows that male perceptions and attitudes provided the stereotypes so difficult to bury.

A chronicle of the lives of a range of female groups--the missionary wives, the wives of government officials and businessmen, and those on the plantation scene, with its indentured labor system--indicate a wide variety of experiences. Some women faced overwhelming problems

both psychological and physical. The assumption that women can be stereotyped cannot be sustained. Knapman's rigorous research makes nonsense of the belief that this colonial society contained lots of Mrs. Lucy Hauksbees as portrayed by Kipling in *Plain Tales from the Hills*, sexually jealous and leading bored and useless lives. What is illuminating is what many women endured, an unenviable life of childbearing and childrearing and household duties accomplished under difficult circumstances. Often it was a question of survival, and this offers a new understanding of their roles in Fiji pre- and post-Cession. The missionary woman was the other stereotype, cast in the "heroic" role, a woman who carried the additional burden of evangelism and was meant to provide a model of Christian family life.

Perhaps only a combination of historian and sociologist could have penetrated the truth, successfully proving the argument that white women were at the root of racial tension is "conceptually, theoretically and methodologically" an untenable position to sustain (p. 9). In her first chapter Knapman spends some time dealing with those writers, like John Young, who provided the stereotypes and the myths about women in colonial situations. She points out that women writers, like Caroline Ralston and Rita Cruise O'Brien, were more guarded in their approach but reinforced the general propositions. The first effective challenge came from Amirah Inglis in *Not a White Woman Safe* and Susan Gardner's questioning of accepted propositions. In the tradition of feminist scholars the author makes the point that all the social aspects relating to women must be examined and that the question that must be addressed is "why are women (whether 'idle' or 'moralistic') regarded as irrelevant to the main historical themes and events, and at the same time seen as significant in the vital area of race relations?" (p. 16). In chapters 2 to 6 women's daily lives are analyzed in depth, to show the quality of life and to indicate the types of contact, which were varied, white women had with Fijians and Indians.

Selective and twisted evidence, Knapman argues, has led to the male assumptions about racial prejudice. There is no hard evidence to support the belief that there was more racial disharmony where white women were concerned. Facts are examined in terms of economic, political, and cultural reasons for antagonisms between the Europeans and the Fijians. There are examples of women's standing on their own feet, where possible or where necessary. In crises like epidemics the notion that women were the weaker vessels needing to be protected is shown to be nonsense. Women worked hard in many areas to assist husbands and fathers to establish good relations with the Fijians. The wife

of Trader Thompson was described by a contemporary as being more courageous and tactful than her husband. Women were especially compassionate with regard to childbirth and other health crises, unmindful of race in such situations. The heterogeneity of women's experiences is firmly established. In whatever situation there was a desire for the most part to establish positive relationships, but in the early nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was little perception that to achieve this the indigenous society and its culture at least needed to be understood. With the influx of Europeans in the 1860s and 1870s patterns of colonialism became more set by men, and while women accepted the patterns it did not follow that they were more exclusive than men. Women, again by virtue of the male's setting the pattern, were more circumscribed in their contacts with Fijians.

Dualistic theories about gender and race, so long a part of Western thought, are effectively discounted by Knapman. This, she rightly maintains, has to be done before the root problem can be tackled. Dualist theories, she points out, put the black races into the same category, if in a lower stratum of that category, as that of white women. The white man is superior and hence assumes the role of protector, reflecting racial superiority, as well as being superior to irrational, fallible woman. So if this concept is seen to be a failure, white women can be cast in the role of destroyer by being charged with greater racial intolerance.

The continual theme of this book is that racial theories of history explain behavior in terms of racial characteristics, not social conditions, and that these were not challenged (indeed still die hard) until the First World War. These theories leave no room for individuality, which Knapman's evidence shows was present in this multiracial society. Evidence there is of violence on both sides before and after the big influx of women. The marked decline in such amicable relations as there were, prior to Cession, developed from the struggle for land and labor and conditions of law and order, which brought, for instance, planters into conflict with the host society. Clumsy approaches and the development of fear exacerbated the situation. In the light of the evidence offered, the accepted stereotypes were not the norm for women when their numbers increased significantly.

Men then and later had double standards and this was expressed through the white man's control over European women, especially in the field of sexuality and childbearing. Higher standards of living and more rigid standards of behavior were not simply responses to women's exclusiveness, but due to better commerce and trade. The case is firmly

made by Knapman that the hardening of race relations is more related to the ambitions of the new settlers whose wives reflected these ambitions. She asks, if racial characteristics and gender explain race relations, women being women, why were not bad relations evident before the Fiji Rush? Most judgments on the mistress-servant relationship stem from mid-twentieth-century observations, when these relations are believed to be a problem. In the context of the times there is no evidence that the household servant was more harried than the fieldworker, though no doubt there were exceptions to the rule. There is evidence offered that many servants were happy in their domestic positions where only patience and understanding produce a good servant. Indentured Indians preferred to be in a household. The white woman, while certainly physically vulnerable, had to rely on the moral force of control, where men frequently fell back on various forms of physical force.

This book, with its well-chosen photographs, reaches into the heart of interrelationships concerning gender and race and convincingly breaks down the old stereotypes and myths, while painting a sympathetic picture of the difficult, and for the most part, industrious lives white women led. Knapman destroys without doubt the fallacy that women were more racially intolerant than their male counterparts. This study is a lively, scholarly, and exciting breakthrough destined to become a classic of its kind.

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