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# The Political Career of David Wilkinson, 1864-1910.

(His influence on the development of Colonial Policy in Fiji.)

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INTRODUCTION

> "When the history of Fiji comes to be written, there will be many figures to stand out with strange lights and shades of questionable success and magnificent failures, among the pioneers. Of this historically picturesque group, one of the most prominent members will be Mr. David Wilkinson."
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> (Extract from obituary FIJI TIMES 12-1-1910)

Prophecy was not the gift of David Wilkinson's obituarist. At the time of his death, Wilkinson's work in native affairs was seen by his contemporaries as erroneous and futile. The protectionist policies he implemented and his enduring belief that the Fijian race would survive appeared to be mistakes. The Fijian population was then, still in decline. Protection which had failed to halt the decline was believed to be an impediment to the general prosperity of the colony.

Ironically, it was contemporary recognition and not rejection of Wilkinson's policy that resulted in his historical obscurity. Seeking maximum utilisation of Wilkinson's knowledge and abilities he was not assigned to any single government department but was instead a floating advisor, available to all departments. The destruction of Wilkinson's papers and diaries also contributed to his obscurity. Even so it is difficult to comprehend the neglect by historians of a man whose career spans almost fifty years of Fijian colonial history, and whose influence presumably affected native policy. The existing, though fragmentary, evidence of contemporary colonists

and the early governors, indicates the significance of Wilkinson in the formulation of policy in Fiji.

In Fijian history Wilkinson is known as; secretary to Tui Bua, trader and planter with an interest in consular affairs, chief interpreter, native commissioner, native lands commissioner and a member of the legislative council. Wilkinson was not unique in this, both J.B. Thurston and R.S. Swanston held the position of secretary to a native chief and later official positions under the colonial government. Nor was the role limited to Fiji. It was a role created by a particular phase of the culture-contact process which occured throughout the Pacific. The positions held by Pritchard in Tahiti, Baker in Tonga and Stienburger in Samoa can be considered parallels.

Wilkinson's first visit to Fiji lasted five months and occured in 1861. He was then thirty years old and arrived in the capacity of agent for the Fijian Company, a speculative venture formed by a group of Adelaide businessmen. In 1864 he resigned from his post as company manager and removed his family from Kioa to Bua, where he became secretary, advisor and business partner of the Tui Bua.

As secretary to the chief, Wilkinson played an important part in the development of Bua, assisting the chief to adapt and cope with the encroachments of growing numbers of Europeans. Wilkinson was

instrumental in the establishment of the Bua government with its western-style laws, applicable to both native and settler. He held the position of secretary for ten years, up to the cession of Fiji to Britain. Although he held no official position in connection with the British Consulate, he was closely associated with the work of Consul Jones (1864 - 1866) in the various attempts to establish a confederation of native chiefs and in the task of peace-keeping.

It was during this decade of close association with Tui Bua that Wilkinson learnt to speak fluent Fijian and acquired that "apparently intuitive understanding of the native mind" which was later to prove invaluable to the first colonial governors.

There are aspects of Wilkinson's career which set him apart from his contemporaries. Wilkinson's position as interpreter-advisor to a native chief was not unique, but, his transference of this role, intact, to the 'white chief', Sir Arthur Gordon, the first Colonial Governor was. Connotations of a 'power behind the throne' relationship evoked by the nature of this position. While this can be partially negated by the confident strength of Sir Arthur Gordon's character, the idea cannot be entirely dismissed. Of necessity, all the Governor's communications with the Fijians were channelled through his interpreter. Thus, Wilkinson had the scope; in his awareness of intended policy and opportunity as the Governor's constant companion to

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influence policy. He could focus attention on neglected areas, emphasize aspects he considered important, or persuade against the implementation of certain policies. The planters and colonists who disliked Gordon's concept of Colonial Rule blamed Wilkinson, amongst others, as the originator of his perverse policies.

Wilkinson's successful transference of his advisory role was not due to his strength of character but to Gordon's deference to his experience. Gordon whilst believing that he had a close relationship with the Fijian people, could not but concede that Wilkinson's understanding and knowledge of the race exceeded his own, when his experience of them was channelled through Wilkinson. Both men were paternalistic, favouring protectionist policies. On the major issues, land alienation, the preservation of chiefly responsibility, native custom and labour, both men were in agreement.

The nature of their paternalism differed in origin Gordon's attitude was that of a Victorian gentleman of humanist persuasion - benificent but heavy with condecension. His protectionist policies were politically expedient. Wilkinson's very individual ideas on native matters were the product of his long and close working relationship with the Fijian chiefs and people. From his ability to speak fluent Fijian and from working with the Fijians, Wilkinson developed an unrivalled awareness of their customs and problems. Often, that which was taken as commonplace

and obvious by the Europeans was totally alien to the Fijian. Lack of comprehension, not ineptitude, was the root of the native error. Wilkinson had no doubts as to the Fijian capacity to perform any duty on a par with their European counterparts once the task had been sufficiently explained to them.

Many of Gordon's protectionist policies were pursued in the face of the antagonism from the bulk of the resident European community. Wilkinson's sympathy with Gordon's policy was a major factor in the establishment of indirect rule in Fiji. Although many government officials had a genuine concern for the consequences of the policies they implemented, their sojourn in Fiji was only a temporary phase in their official positions in other parts of the Empire. Wilkinson's concern was of a more personal nature. As Fiji was his home, all official policies had a direct bearing on Wilkinson's future prosperity, as well as that of the colony.

The majority of planters, those who arrived with the cotton boom, were eager to gain a quick return and large profit on their capital. They were not disposed to view favourably the long term aims of government policies when these conflicted in the short term with their aspiration. Wilkinson was a planter but he did not share the prejudices and demands made by this group at the expense of the Fijians. Having recognised that his interests could best be served by

adapting to the existing traditional system, Wilkinson became an untiring and enthusiastic champion of native rights, especially over the land and labous issues. His business partnership with the Tui Bua shielded him from the effects of the protectionist policies which produced problems for his fellow planters. His involvement with these policies won him many enemies among the colonists.

It was not only disgruntled settlers who criticised Wilkinson for his part in the establishment of the 'misguided' native policy. Arriving in 1904 as the Governor, Sir Everard Im Thurn attempted to revise Gordon's protectionism and return to direct rule. During this attempt, Im Thurn strongly criticised Wilkinson's official conduct with regard to native affairs and the land question. He also threw doubts on Wilkinson's character and competency in his position as Chief Interpreter. The criticism might have been less severe had the policies Sir Everard was trying to change and which Wilkinson had spent his life and career implementing been less firmly entrenched.

In retrospect, Wilkinson's role needs to be reassessed. In the sixty-eight years since his death many changes have taken place in Fijian society. In the 1920's Wilkinson's belief in the survival of the race was justified by a rapid rise in the population. The Fijians who had retained control over large areas of land were in a position to exert a strong influence

on the economy and hence in politics. The experience they acquired in administration and government, during the period of indirect rule, facilitated their taking a politically dominant position after independence.

It has been argued that Fijian recovery has been not due to the assumed paternalism of the colonial rulers of the mid nineteenth century but in spite of them. The real debt is due to those administrators who, like Wilkinson, retained their faith in the future of the Fijian people and in the importance of preserving their culture, in spite of the 'scientific opinion' of the day, which, regarded such an exercise as futile. Wilkinson's beliefs and the policies he helped establish were retained despite efforts to dislodge them. From a twentieth century prospective they appear to have been not only valid but fruitful.