

Book Review

Suva Stories: History of the Capital of Fiji

Suva Stories: History of the Capital of Fiji. Edited by Nicholas Halter. Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2022. 477 pages. Available to download for free at press.anu.edu.au.

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It is not possible to review a book like *Suva Stories: History of the Capital of Fiji* (2022, ANU Press) without having one's own memories crowding in and competing with the written words on the page. As I read the chapters, it becomes clear that the city where I grew up while working as a young journalist covering the personalities, the protests, and the everyday rhythm of cultural life shaped not only those who lived and worked there but formed the foundation of Fiji as a nation. This edited collection attempts to offer more than the official colonial accounts of Suva by including the voices and perspectives of indigenous and diverse immigrant communities who lived and contributed to its development. It also captures the various acts of resistance, protests, and coups d'état that brought international media attention to Suva and will be the focus of this review.

The book is edited by Nicholas Halter, an academic at the University of the South Pacific, who has also developed a Fijian history website and mobile app with his students. The contributions come from prominent scholars, writers, and artists of Fiji. The book is divided into three parts: Part 1, "Foundations," covers the early inhabitants and the growing colonial influence; Part 2, "Creations," provides fascinating accounts of Suva institutions such as the Prison, St. Giles Hospital, Methodist schools, the significance of University of the South Pacific, and post-war race relations; Part 3, "Reflections," pulls at the heart strings as the pages reveal personal recollections of those who lived in Suva. The front matter includes a glossary of mainly Fijian and some Hindi words. It is followed by a comprehensive chronology giving a first glimpse at historical, cultural, economic, and political milestones. Cartography enthusiasts will find the maps of special interest, tracing Suva's expansion from early settlement to the city and surrounds of today. The collection has a rich selection of archival photos of Suva streets, people, and events.

As Halter reminds us in his introduction, during its 140 years of existence as Fiji's capital, "Suva has been the site of organised protest and resistance in the Pacific," (18). In the 1970s and '80s, Suva became the centre of Pacific anti-nuclear protests, much of that activism originating in the Laucala campus of the University of the South Pacific (USP). Jacqueline Leckie observes, "During its early decades, USP was a hotbed of radicalism. Students and staff were pivotal in the Pacific antinuclear, anticolonialism, environmental and women's rights movements" (308). As a journalist, I remember not only covering these events but being buoyed by the energy of those who were at the forefront, especially outspoken women leaders such as Amelia Rokotuivuna,

Suliana Siwatabau, and Clare Slatter.

Suva has also been the site of four coups in 20 years. The first military coup on 14 May 1987 led to fearsome scenes of wild rioting and violence in Suva's main commercial streets. As Larry Thomas recalls, "the protest marches and the riots removed the safety of the city. We looked at each other differently; it just wasn't the same anymore and people didn't feel safe" (381). In 2000, the biggest protest march saw 10,000 iTaukei in the ethno-nationalist-led putsch take over the street and important landmarks such as the Parliament House. Vijay Naidu tells a very personal tale of harassment of the author and his friends by the military and police during the first two coups, which saw him hiding in the shadows of Suva streets to seek refuge at the homes of friends. Naidu reflects in his conclusion: "The city residents have picked themselves up and rebuilt their lives after each disastrous coup. And in doing so have ensured that Suva regained its vibrant resilience as the central hub of social, economic and political dynamics of Fiji" (423).

The early days of the colony were marked by various workers' strikes by indigenous Fijian, Melanesian, and Indian indentured labourers to protest the harsh conditions under which they lived and worked. Roko Tui Suva (chief) Ratu Aporosa Tuivuya became known to authorities as a rebel for defying colonial order and representing indigenous interests against exploitation, such as spearheading the first Suva dockworkers' strike in 1890. As Suva became a white enclave, indigenous Fijians contested the colonial edict to keep them outside of the township boundary. Villagers found ways to resist a colonial rule that prohibited them from staying for more than fifty days in town by spending 49 days then leaving for their village for one night and returning the next day. In December 1959, riots in the streets of Suva saw a rare alliance between Fijian and Indian workers against European power.

Acts of resistance don't occur only in the form of large, organised protest marches. It also happens today in small acts of frustration or anger against intimidation by employers or those who have control over the lives of others. Late historian Brij Lal recounts the story of female factory workers who have found their own ways of meting out justice for the sexual advances of factory managers. In one case, the manager was held down on the ground as women workers urinated on him, and in another case, women photographed the transgressions and shared them with his wife.

Suva has developed from a sleepy coastal colonial town to the bustling cosmopolitan capital with its attendant traffic jams and housing shortages. This collection of stories is successful in capturing both the big-picture moments in the history of Suva alongside the everyday lives of residents from the mainstream to the edges of society. My education in Fiji schooled me on the gold rush days of Australia and John Macarthur's merino sheep in New South Wales but taught me almost nothing of the history and people covered in this book. As such, this collection should become an important addition to any history and social science class in Fiji schools.

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