

## **Fiji: Republican Rome in the Pacific?**

**By Gillian Dooley**

*Fiji: Paradise in Pieces* by Satendra Nandan. CRNLE in association with Pacific Indian Publications, 2000. ISBN 0725808535

Earlier this year, on one of those impulses formed of interest, duty and perhaps even a little shame at one's ignorance, I found myself reading Cicero's speeches (in English – alas, my Latin isn't what it was). I was taken with his courage in attacking those he regarded as the enemies of the Republic. In his first Philippic against Mark Antony, he speaks of 'an increasing number of ruffians, together with their equally degraded slaves' menacing the city; 'the consuls elect declared they did not dare come into the Senate at all. The liberators of our country, too, were excluded from the very city which they had rescued from servitude.'<sup>1</sup>

At the time I read this, Fiji's elected government was being held hostage by George Speight and his 'ruffians'. However, it was not until I read Satendra Nandan's book *Fiji: Paradise in Pieces*, months later, that it occurred to me that there might be a parallel, and the comparison occurred to me at first through a barely conscious impression of similarities in their rhetorical styles: perhaps not something which could be articulated without a thorough analysis of structure and semantics. Perhaps, indeed, what these two men have in common is principally the courage to speak up for the political system they believe in. The Roman Republic, as we know, was doomed, and Cicero's outspokenness led to his death at the hands of the Triumvirs: I'm happy to say Nandan is safe from the clutches of his political enemies, although it has been at the cost of his political demise, and exile in the suburban wilds of Canberra.

Satendra Nandan is the grandson of indentured Indian labourers brought to Fiji after the abolition of slavery – although, as the indenture system shows, the abolition was in name rather than in fact. It was the same system which took V.S. Naipaul's forebears to Trinidad, and Nandan is deeply conscious of the similarities in their histories. Naipaul's work is quoted often, *The Mimic Men* in particular and one can readily appreciate the parallels between the island society of Isabella so mordantly described in that novel, and the Fiji of the last 15 years or so.

Nandan's book was, I believe, conceived after George Speight's insolent action in May 2000. Most of it, however, was written beforehand, so Speight, such a prominent occupant of our television screens and newspapers this year, is rarely mentioned. One might imagine him reading the book – if he is a reading man – and feeling bitter disappointment at the bit-part assigned to him. The villain of the piece is Colonel Rabuka; but even he is not condemned outright: 'Rabuka is a paradox, and racialism warps even the best of minds,' Nandan writes (21).

In format, *Fiji: Paradise in Pieces* is indeed a series of pieces, dating from 1978 to the present. There are 13 sections, including an introductory author's note, speeches, book reviews, essays and, finally, a poignant story, 'Mangoes', about an old man, marooned in Fiji having been captured and brought from India as a young boy to work on the sugar estates – so reminiscent of characters such as the grandfather at the beginning of Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*. But Nandan's tale ends, as Naipaul's never would, with a quote from 'The Ancient Mariner.' His style is all his own, and is full of allusions to everything from nursery rhymes to Shakespeare and the holy scriptures of

Hinduism and Christianity. His imagery and wit is extraordinarily inventive and idiosyncratic: who would have thought of describing a feeling of exhaustion as ‘like a cockroach on last night’s leftovers’ (153), or of saying that ‘Churchill was never a hero to Indians – his initials had other connotations for them’ (73)?

Nandan does not shrink from criticising his enemies. The chief burden of this book, nevertheless, is not a one-sided polemic but a plea for humanity and reason to prevail once more in Fiji. He is not even pressing for complete equality between the two racial groups: the bulk of the land in Fiji is owned by indigenous Fijians, although they make up only a little more than half the population, but, Nandan believes, ‘that the land should remain in perpetuity with the Fijian people is desirable. A dispossessed people’s psychology is deeply demoralising and the price a nation pays for it is often tragically great’ (22).

In 1999, Nandan wrote that ‘goodwill is the most remarkable quality of this little country, where the sun rises first every day. Within Fiji, despite our colonial history, strategic separation of races, communal tactics, coups and cultural differences, this goodwill has been Fiji’s most enduring gift’ (23). It is devoutly to be hoped that this goodwill remains at grass roots level: how long, after all, can it survive assaults such as Rabuka’s and Speight’s? Books like *Fiji: Paradise in Pieces* and *The Wounded Sea*, Nandan’s wonderful novel about a childhood in Fiji written in the wake of the 1987 coups, will foster goodwill and work against the racist assumptions that we all, however unwittingly, might harbour. It is especially important for those of us who haven’t experienced life in Fiji to read books like these, so we can experience with our hearts as well as our heads the human consequences of racial discrimination, however seductive and convincing the sophistry of the Speights of the world appears. Let us hope,

too, that the fate of the Pacific nation of Fiji will not follow the pattern of the Roman republic, and that it will once more admit all its citizens to the type of full political enfranchisement we Australians assume is our natural right.

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<sup>i</sup> Cicero. *Selected Political Speeches*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972: 298-9.