

Thomas and Jane's daughter Florence Amelia Ward wrote an article called "Plantation Life in Fiji" sometime after she married George McKAY in 1901. Her address was Colin St, Perth, Western Australia. It is transcribed below:

"Plantation Life in Fiji" by F.A.McK.

Plantation life in Fiji is rather different to plantation life in other countries; Ceylon or India for instance; & yet in many respects it is very similar. A planter's life in the South Pacific is free and easy, healthy & interesting. A picturesque spot with a good commanding view is always chosen in which to erect the homestead; often built bungalow fashion (the modern buildings of now-a-days are more like our cottages) in an enclosure of an acre or more ground. The fence around the homestead is generally one of "Moli" (lime or lemon trees). These trees are planted very closely together & are clipped

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every year to keep them short & bushy. They are not allowed to grow more than four feet in height. This fence which is exceedingly pretty, being of a bright rich green, is also a very secure safeguard for the garden and the nearer surroundings of the homestead; as cattle, pigs, etc cannot force their way through on account of the thorns. In front of this "vali" (house) is a beautiful & most luxuriously grown garden full of sweet smelling flowers, crocuses, vines & creepers of all descriptions intertwining amongst the shrubs & over rockeries. Then your eye rests on a smooth rich green carpet of couch grass which is used for either a tennis court or croquet lawn. These pastimes being much

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indulged in, in spite of the hot climate. A short distance away are the labour buildings or "Buries"; "Vali Mati" (hospital) (each plantation has by order of government a house set apart for the sick). Work on the plantation generally starts at 6 o'clock A.M., then the planter or overseer musters his men, calls the roll, has a horse brought up from the paddock and saddled, which he mounts & off they go to what-ever direction or directions the work of the day lay. There may be one gang of men planting or preparing land for one kind of product & another gang in another direction cultivating another kind, or perhaps erecting a shelter-shed for a crop of "sila" (maize) or "Uvi" (?) (yams) that is ready to

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be harvested. The planter starts one lot of men going with their days "caka caka" (labour or work) then he rides on to set the next lot to work & gives his instructions, & so on all around till he sees a good start made, riding around in the fresh morning air, his horse brushing the dew from the undergrowth which is very thick, & the dew generally very heavy, - wends his way home with his master lazily sitting in the saddle whistling & thinking about the inner man for it is getting breakfast time. A good substantial meal is put before him, & his family are all up by this time & gathered around the table with a black boy to wait on them. After breakfast there are usually a

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few little things to see about the house, a little gardening to be done, some banana or guava trees to be seen to, or a grenadilla vine to be trained etc. A good deal of fruit is indulged in during the morning, - when one is going through a nice patch of "vundi" (bananas) with yellow bunches hanging here & there it is a great temptation just to try one or two, or a nice ripe pineapple, soursop, mango, or any other of these luscious tropical fruits. Then after a walk round his homestead a lounge in a hammock on the spacious verandah or a little odd job is done, the planter jumps on his horse again & takes another tour around the plantation to see how the work is progressing. Sometimes he has a great deal of trouble with the men, who are very fond of malingering. There

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are different kinds of labour employed on plantations in Fiji, very few planters employ native labour; they generally work the land by Coolies or Polynisians, or, as they are called in Queensland, Kanakas. After he sees that all is going well & has had a good ride around (which is very pleasant, I can speak from experience as I have ridden around about a plantation myself many a time; being a planter's daughter) and seen that each man is doing his allotted work, he finds his way home to dinner. After "Kakana" (partaking of food) is over, the planter generally finds he has some business to do at the sea-port or township, which will take him the best part of the afternoon, getting home just in time to see the labour "Knock off" work. Therefore on a

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plantation the planter or overseer is in the saddle most of the day; but there are a great many days when the men have a "tavi" (set task), then the planter is not so much tied; the men know they have to do a certain thing & they put forth their energies to get through it, so the master goes off to enjoy himself, very often in the way of taking his wife, sister or daughter - as the case may be - to spend the afternoon with friends and have afternoon tea & a game of tennis or croquet, or join a riding party, or may be go shooting "songi" or "ruvi" (two different kinds of bush pigeons) which are most delicious eating, very like the English grouse in flavour. Saturday afternoon is often spent by young fellows in taking out the dogs for a pig hunt. This sport is a good deal

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indulged in, as there is plenty of fun & excitement to be got out of it, & sometimes it is very venturesome, I have known a wild boar with great white curling tusks, when bailed up by the dogs, make a desperate dart for liberty dashing between the legs of two young men upsetting them like ninepins; & while these sportsmen were picking themselves up and getting over their surprise, with feelings very much hurt at their undignified positions, the pig made good his escape. The dogs enjoy these hunts quite as much, if not more, than their masters. When the gun is taken down from its place, they dance about yelping, nearly mad with delight at the prospect of a good hunt, often they will go off by themselves & follow up the

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trail of a pig & bail him up for hours in the bush, but if no one comes to their assistance they will wend their way home towards evening very much the worse for their outing, besmeared with blood & probably with a nasty flesh wound, or perhaps some more serious damage such as a broken rib, indeed often our canine members meet with their end in fearless combat with these wild animals. The Kanakas set traps for the "vuaka" (pig) by digging a very deep hole then

covering it lightly over with twigs & leaves. The pig innocently enough walks over or endeavours to walk over what he thinks is solid ground; when to his surprise down he goes with a grunt, & there he stays till his trappers come and carry him to their "buri" (house) & enjoy him for supper.

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There are some plantations on which little else but sugar cane is grown. It is a beautiful sight to see acres & acres under cane planted at different times, thereby you may see on one plantation - with a large area under cultivation - sugar cane in all its stages; in one direction a field of young green leaves waving too & fro in the wind, apparently as level as a table, each cane having grown almost to the same height. A little further on a field of what looks like swords held very erect & pointing straight up to the sky, this is cane coming into blossom; in another direction you see the cane in full bloom; this is, I think, the prettiest stage to look upon, the blossom is very light & feathery, very like that of pampas grass only tinged with a

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delicate purple hue - cane is very seldom allowed to grow to this stage as it is redy for crushing before it flowers.

There are other plantations abounding with cocoanut trees. The nuts of which are made into copra & exported. Cattle are bred more extensively on cocoanut plantations than on any other as the animals can roam about among the trees & feed on the undergrowth without damaging the trees. And there are other planters who go in for a little of everything such as maize, yams, bananas, pine-apples etc & often breed cattle, pigs, etc.

The busiest time of a planters life is when the

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crops are ready for gathering & he is exporting fruit or otherwise disposing of his products. Home life on a plantation in Fiji is perhaps a little monotonous. Apart from the family interests there is little else to occupy oneself with when the days work is over. There being no evening amusements except what may be got up by a few energetic people, such as a local concert & perhaps a dance afterwards, or a card & supper party, music evenings, and such like. There are no streets for the gentler set to parade in, & show off the latest fashion, or gaily decorated shop windows on which to flatten ones nose. A large general store is more

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to the purpose; which, from the outside appearance is a great barn, but the interior presents a more pleasing aspect, & you can purchase almost every thing you want, from a needle to an anchor.

Children on Plantations generally have a good long walk or ride to school; & if there is no school at a get-at-able distance then lessons are heard at home. The mother has plenty to do in looking after her house-hold duties & her children, as there are no European maids employed on the plantations, except perhaps a governess sometimes. The domestics are all Kanakas or Coolies, & make very good

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servants when well trained; but it is very trying and tedious work training them. A planter's life in Fiji is on the whole one of ease and comfort, but I have not now space to expand on these advantages.

(Transcribed by Geoffrey Barber c1987, original held by Julitha Barber, great granddaughter of Florence McKay (nee Ward), Perth Western Australia)