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THE POLYNESIA COMPANY LIMITED OF MELBOURNE
AND FIJI, 1808-1883: A SOCIAL HISTORY

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INTRODUCTION

Late in August 1870, the s.s. Allhambra, chartered by the Polynesia Company Limited of Melbourne and Fiji, to convey 170 Australians to the Islands, floated peacefully in the Pacific, and her passengers rested, as if between trances in a catalepsy. They were riddled with ambiguity, shot through with unreality and myth, for they thought they were destined to colonize Fiji for Britain. Excited shouts and cheers which had followed the Allhambra as she pulled away through Hobson's Bay, were not just parrot-cries of delayed adolescence, but the issue of a deception, and a prelude to seizure.

The ship's departure, like the departures of her prototypes, the Mayflower, the Buffale and the Tory, and other frailer vessels which had become the embodiment^{of the}/colonialist dream, was the product of converging sets of circumstances. First, there were circumstances in Fiji, the burning of a white man's house, a demand for reimbursement, an offer of cession, the efforts of a Fijian chief to extend his influence and remove the threat of Tongan imperial expansion. Secondly, there was the Imperial tradition, in its local Victorian form, as much a part of the passengers' baggage as the brass bedsteads, pianos and portmanteaux that filled the Allhambra's hold, and much more likely to remain intact. For the British Empire gave vivid and concrete embodiment to the popular Australian belief in the omniscience of Britain, but this could be traced back to a deeper belief, which was the secular man's understanding of himself as self-sufficient. Usually, only those who have successfully deceived themselves

in such a way are vulnerable to the deception of others. Thirdly there were the circumstances of the individuals themselves, the changes of fortune following the excitement of the gold rushes, shattered hopes, and the conditioned reflex of renewed optimism in response to repeated personal failure.

This thesis aims to be a slice of social history, an attempt to trace how men lived and felt about, what they would have called a part of their lives, and what "the historian" calls, a particular "historical situation". What has evolved is not a study of the Polynesia Company in the context of nineteenth century imperialism, as originally intended, but one of the Polynesia Company in the wider, and more elusive context of deception, for imperialism, is just one of the things that begins in minds and mouths.