

AUSTRALIAN REACTIONS TO THE FRENCH PENAL COLONY IN NEW CALEDONIA

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The number of ex-pees now arriving from New Caledonia is becoming alarmingly large, and there is reason to fear that some of them are of the very worst class of criminals. I think the time has arrived when the Governor might with propriety invoke the aid of the Home Government, in the hope that an earnest representation should be made to the French Government. It is not fair or reasonable that this Colony, which years ago successfully freed itself from the importation of British criminals, should be against its will made the receptacle for the scum of France.

Colonial Secretary Michael Fitzpatrick, 1878¹

Responding to a letter from the Inspector General of Police regarding French ex-convicts residing in New South Wales, the Colonial Secretary of the day, Michael Fitzpatrick, evidently was alarmed. His ‘fear’ that some New Caledonian convicts were ‘the very worst class of criminals’ was compounded by his consciousness of his own colony’s recent shady past. This concern drove Fitzpatrick to lobby the British ‘Home Government’ to act in the interest of the Australian colonies. Fitzpatrick was not alone in his unease.

This article investigates popular and official reactions to the French penal colony that operated in New Caledonia between 1864 and 1897. The post-convict shame of Australia’s own history that shaped the dominant discourse will be examined. The Australian colonies’ assertions of security concerns will be evaluated as embryonic independent foreign policy—before Australia was federated. Finally, the interaction between the mentality of post-convict shame

¹ Colonial Secretary Michael Fitzpatrick, ‘No. 36’. *Influx of Convicts from New Caledonia, Legislative Assembly of New South Wales 1878–9* (4 December 1878), State Records 906b.

and the practical implementation of foreign policy shall be considered as an example of the possibilities of combining cultural and diplomatic histories.

Very little has been written on this era of Australian history, which is surprising, considering the extent to which it loomed large in the political consciousness, particularly in the 1880s. Clem Lack's 1955 article on 'The Problem of the French Escapees from New Caledonia' appears to be the only in-depth coverage of this question (Lack 1955). It recounts the influx of escaped and freed New Caledonian convicts to Queensland, protests by the colonial governments against the penal settlement and broader imperial tensions in the Pacific. Nevertheless, it does not analyse the broader significance of the colonies' responses. Robert Aldrich's *The French Presence in the South Pacific* considers the Australian political reaction against escapees and former convicts; however, this discussion is quite brief as his main focus is the activity of the French in the Pacific (Aldrich 1990). Similarly, Stuart Rosewarne (Rosewarne 1986) and Roger Thompson (Thompson 1980) both mention in passing Australian concerns with New Caledonia. Their relative lack of interest in this topic is surprising, considering that both works document Australian foreign relations with the Pacific during this time. Colin Forster highlights the extent to which the Australian penal model influenced French thinking about crime and punishment, culminating in the commencement of transportation to New Caledonia in 1864 (Forster 1991, Forster 1996). Some useful research on colonial New Caledonia has been published in both English and French, particularly during the past twenty years; it tends, however, to generally ignore Australia.²

Firstly, Australians' reactions against the French penal colony reveal anxieties about their own recent history. At the same time as England was moving away from the convict system, the French moved towards it. Transportation to Western Australia, the last destination for British criminals, ended in 1868.³ The year before France had announced that New Caledonia would henceforth be the only destination for French convicts (Forster 1991, 135). This decision had a long history, as the political instability of France in the first half of the nineteenth century meant that debates on crime and punishment were revisited many times (Forster 1991, 135–149). Interestingly,

² See for example Bullard 2000, Merle 1995, Toth 2006 and Barbançon 2003.

³ Transportation to eastern Australia ended when Tasmania abolished it in 1853.

French politicians both in favour of and opposed to transportation used Botany Bay as a case study to support their arguments (Forster 1996, 3, 7–54). Previous experiments at other locations had failed, most notably French Guiana in the early 1850s where the mortality rate among both convicts and guardians was so high that it was regarded as impossible to continue (Forster 1991, 148). New Caledonia became a French possession in 1853, and prisoners were shipped there progressively from 1863 (Toth 1999, 60). Two important developments were the exile of 3,900 Communards to New Caledonia after the ten-week bloody battle of the Paris Commune in 1871 and the 1885 Relegation Law which resulted in recurrent common-law criminals (*récidivistes*) being transported to the *bagne* (penal colony) (Stuer 1982, 131 and Toth 2006, 21, 36). Both decisions sought the ‘moral regeneration’ of France itself and of the convicted men and women: New Caledonia thus became ‘a human refuse heap for the *métropole*’ (Bullard 2000, 93–94).

It is therefore not surprising that the Australian colonies objected to having a penal colony only 1500 kilometres from Brisbane and on an island with a high level of sea traffic from trade.⁴ What is significant, however, is the extent to which moral concerns were framed through the lens of Australia’s recent convict past. Following the annexation of New Caledonia by the French as a penal colony, an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* lamented the possible ‘moral, social and political consequences’ (*SMH* 1853). The editor’s ‘regret’ at the French colonisation was ‘enhanced’ by reflecting on ‘all our struggles to get rid of the withering curse of convictism’ (*SMH* 1853). The extremely emotive language of ‘withering curse’ condemned both the French efforts and the Australian heritage, with both falling under the same moral judgement. Similarly, responding to the escape from New Caledonia of Henri Rochefort, leader of the Paris Commune, *The Argus* bemoaned that ‘the dregs of the French criminal classes are allowed to percolate through New Caledonia into Australia. It is not very pleasant to think of this, considering all that has been said and written about the transportation of our own criminal countrymen’ (*Argus* 1874). The labelling of political prisoner Henri Rochefort as a criminal prisoner reflects a broader conflation in Australia between *déportés* and

⁴ Stuart Rosewarne highlights that by the 1870s New Caledonia was a ‘growing market for Australian exports’. In 1882 shipping firm Messageries Maritimes established a regular route between New Caledonia and Sydney (Rosewarne 1986, 26, 57).

transportés.⁵ It also reveals the underlying anti-revolutionary sentiments shared by the Victorian newspaper's conservative readership, wherein political radicals were seen to be as destructive as criminals.

A later article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* condemned the French penal settlement in terms so strong it would seem the writer had forgotten the convict origins of his own colony. It claimed that the presence of convicts meant that 'the moral condition of society must be essentially weak' and that 'no successful colonisation will ever be accomplished through the imposition of convict labour' (*SMH* 1863). This seems to deny, or at the very least ignore, the reality of the Australian penal experience, forgotten due to moral shame. The article went on to encourage the French government to take the 'higher and broader view of the interests of humanity' and not continue with the penal settlement, as the presence of 'criminals' 'must always be a source of danger and disorder' (*SMH* 1863).

A particularly remarkable series of articles was published by *The Sydney Morning Herald* between May and July 1884. This series of thirty-two reports covered a diverse range of topics including *déportés* and *transportés* from the Paris Commune, female convicts, clemency and recidivists, as well as more general reports on the island—even an article on cafés and barmaids.⁶ Explicit comparisons between Australia and New Caledonia are nuanced. On one hand Australia was cast in a positive light by over-emphasising the role of free settlers and minimising the contributions of convicts, in contrast to its presentation of New Caledonia (*SMH* 1884e). On the other hand the writer condemned in a sweeping manner all penal colonies: 'France re-attempts an experiment which has been made time after time by ancient as well as modern nations, and always—without one exception to set against the experience—with absolute and indisputable failure' (*SMH* 1884b). The emphasis on 'always—without one exception' silently and implicitly censures Australia. French convicts were condemned on a moral basis, being described as 'positively dissipated and dangerous' (*SMH* 1884e). It was claimed that these criminals could not escape their inherent state: 'rebellion is in their blood, and war against society is as much a part of their nature as the instincts of the

⁵ *Déportés* were political prisoners while *transportés* were criminal prisoners (Griscelli 1980, 8).

⁶ See *SMH* 1884a to *SMH* 1884f.

animal' (*SMH* 1884e). The reference to 'rebellion' is a historical allusion to the Paris Commune, and continues the historical conflation of political to 'moral' dangers posed.

The moral judgement that convicts are bound to a life of criminality is inherent to the fervent criticism of *régénération* throughout this series of articles. This strategy was described as 'the ultra-humanitarian principle or [...] principle of weakness which permits the thrice murderer to still hold his life, renders possible the commission by him of still further outrages' (*SMH* 1884c). The motif of a 'thrice murderer' was matched by extreme examples, including the murder of a young girl by a convict who apparently said 'with the utmost nonchalance, "Oh, I felt that I must kill something"' (*SMH* 1884c). The writer mocked the system of punishment through the use of similarly ridiculous examples such as 'Adeline, whose accumulated sentences will expire in the year 2086' (*SMH* 1884c, 3). Racial imagery was used to describe the efforts of *la régénération*: 'the criminal has gone into prison a very black man and is supposed to come out a very white man' (*SMH* 1884c). A sardonic tone was used to appraise this strategy: 'the washing powder of *régénération* was to do miracles. It was to cleanse nature itself, so that the born murderer should become the after-day saint' (*SMH* 1884e). The reader was thereby positioned to reject the strategy of *régénération* through the incongruous parallel of the supposedly 'born murderer' and the 'after-day saint'.

These Australian reactions to the New Caledonian penal colony are part of a larger story of post-convict shame, which has been of interest to historians for over forty years. Before turning to Aboriginal history, in 1969, Henry Reynolds wrote a landmark article, 'That Hated Stain: The Aftermath of Transportation in Tasmania' (Reynolds 1969). In this, he analysed the influence of transportation on Tasmanian society. Although convictism had a negative impact on Tasmania during the years immediately following the suspension of transportation, this did not remain the case (Reynolds 1969, 20). Rather, 'Tasmanians were proud of their new innocence': society over-reacted in terms of political conservatism, a decentralised police force and widespread 'fear of moral corruption' (Reynolds 1969, 5–6, 8–9, 22–23). Alison Alexander added to this list by highlighting their 'ultra-English' tendencies: being 'English-mad' and supporting enthusiastically the Empire (Alexander 2010, 148). While agreeing with Reynolds that 'the strongest influence of the convicts' was 'the trauma' of coming to terms with the Colony's 'shameful origins', John Hirst

discerned a longer-term trajectory in the ‘boast’ of racial purity in the White Australia Policy and the significance of Gallipoli as a ‘test’ of nationhood (Hirst 2008, 4–6). By contrast, Babette Smith takes a far more condemnatory tone, arguing that the ‘birthstain was a self-inflicted wound’ which engendered ‘a legacy of national self-hatred’ (Smith 2008, 7).

Although most frequently expressed after the convict era, the ‘sublimation’ of Australia’s convict heritage has a long history (Hughes 2003, xi). Indeed, ‘even before the first convict ship sailed, Britain thought its convict colonies were terrible places: a convict colony *had* to be, just because it was a convict colony’ (Alexander 2010, 2). During the early colonial era, it was insulting ‘to call a convict a convict’, with the euphemism of ‘Government man’ preferred’ (Hughes 2003, xi). The rhetoric of a ‘convict stain’ or ‘hated stain’ was mobilised in the 1840s by Australian reformers agitating to end transportation (Hughes 2003, xi and Alexander 2010, 134). Kirsten McKenzie compared the movements to end slavery and transportation at the Cape Colony and New South Wales respectively, finding that ‘discourses of sexual scandal’ and ‘language of moral transgression’ were used in both contexts, to mobilise a sense of shame (McKenzie 2003, 1). Instead, the reformers sought ‘domestic morality’ and bourgeois ‘respectability’ (McKenzie 2003, 2–5).

One consequence of the post-convict shame was a conscious silencing of the history of convictism. Fearing judgement of ‘outsiders’, primarily those in the mother country, Tasmanians after transportation made a ‘desperate attempt to white-wash the past’ wherein ‘contradictions, falsifications, exaggerations, even outright lies did not matter’ (Alexander 2010, 135). Changing the name of the island from Van Diemen’s Land to Tasmania was an immediate strategy to dissociate the past from the present (Alexander 2010, 136). It was claimed that most convicts had either left the island or left ‘no trace’ (that is: descendants), with only a few ex-convicts identified ‘so that the mass could escape the stigma’ (Alexander 2010, 138–139). Convict records were ‘deliberately destroyed or censored’ in an effort to ‘erase the convict stain’ (Karskens 2001, 26 and Smith 2008, 36). By the 1920s, the ‘overwhelming majority’ of Australians with convict ancestors were unaware of their own family heritage (Alexander 2010, 156, 167).

There has been a counter-reaction against this phenomenon of post-convict shame. Grace Karskens identified a counter-discourse of a ‘powerful, even perverse fascination’, beginning shortly after the end of transportation

with tourists visiting Port Arthur from 1877 and in the popular 1874 novel by Marcus Clarke, *For the Term of His Natural Life* (Karskens 2001, 27). More recently, in the second half of the twentieth century, the ‘convict stigma began to fade’, as broader public history issues were raised (Alexander 2010, 3). The growth of interest in family history was entwined with changed attitudes towards convict ancestors as ‘no longer something to be hidden away, denied or be embarrassed about’ (Alexander 2010, 3–4, 249–251). With a broader rise of interest in heritage issues, convict buildings have become ‘almost sacred’ in the public consciousness (Karskens 2001, 27). Overall, there has been a shift of attitude from shame to interest or even pride (Alexander 2010, 260–261). The recovery of interest in the convict past demonstrates the success of its suppression as it became a novelty to discover a convict ancestor once shame was no longer a major factor.

It is interesting to note that the reflection of post-convict shame when considering New Caledonia may have been justified. After all, the case study of Australia was central to the early nineteenth-century debates in France considering the advantages of introducing transportation (Forster 1991, 136 and Forster 1996, 7–54). Furthermore, New Caledonia was consciously founded on the model of nearby Australia (Merle 1995, 22). Yet none of the studies of post-convict shame mentions the reaction of Australians against French transportation. This deserves to be rectified. Post-convict shame pervaded the public discourse of what was perceived as a very real risk to Australia’s newfound respectability, framed in moral discourse. Reflection on New Caledonian convicts was explicit, in contrast to the silence on Australia’s past. Moreover, I would suggest the over-reaction to security risks reflects subconsciously the degree of public anxiety about the convict past. The newspaper articles discussed in this paper are useful in expanding the understanding of the extent and depth of post-convict shame during this period.

Secondly, Australian responses to the New Caledonian penal settlement also reveal an early independent foreign policy—before Australia even became a nation. Australian colonial interests were asserted within the framework of Empire: London was petitioned to enact favourable policies and negotiate with the French on behalf of the individual colonies. Upon hearing of the annexation of New Caledonia by France, some newspapers ran articles expressing not only security concerns for Australia but also ‘deep regret’ at the failure of the British Government to colonise the island (*SMH* 1853, 4). *The*

Sydney Morning Herald editorialised that ‘the opportunity of colonising that fine group has been lost’ (*SMH* 1853, 4). *Empire* speculated that it was part of the ‘latest “Ideas of Napoleonism”’: either a ‘comprehensive plan of French colonisation or the discovery of a rival Eldorado at the Antipodes’ (*Empire* 1853, 2). Following a similar line of argument against Napoleonic expansion, the *South Australian Register* suggested that the possible security risk posed by a nearby French colony should be met by offensive rather than defensive strategy: ‘it would be very unwise to leave in the hands of an adversary the option of striking the first blow’ (*South Australian Register* 1853, 4).

The greatest concerns for security came with the arrival of the French convicts. By 1887, it was estimated that 247 escaped New Caledonian convicts had landed in Australia in the previous decade. The majority preferred Queensland due to its geographical proximity, but a large proportion also went to New South Wales (Lack 1955, 1047). A particularly dramatic incident was the landing in June 1893 of seven New Caledonian convicts at Bowen in North Queensland. As Lack recounted, ‘rumours of the “invasion” had caused the wildest alarm in Bowen and multiplied the convicts by hundreds’, although the seven emaciated convicts surrendered themselves to the volunteers of the town militia (Lack 1955, 1048–1049). The 1874 break-out of the leader of the Paris Commune, Henri Rochefort, was a reminder of the perceived dangers of transportation (*The Argus* 1874, 6). He escaped with a group of fellow prisoners to Newcastle, travelled to Sydney, before continuing on to the United States and London, eventually returning to Paris after the amnesty (Lack 1955, 1047). ‘Crowds gathered in Sydney to see these famous “communist revolutionaries”’ (Bullard 2000, 134). While waiting for £1,000 to be telegraphed from his friends in Paris, Rochefort spoke out fervently against conditions in the *bagne* (Dutton 2002, 18, 26). In both France and Australia attention was drawn to the ease of escape for prisoners (Bullard 2000, 134–135).

An indication of the extent to which the security threat was taken seriously is in the active steps taken to protect the colonies. Sydney Detective Roche was assigned the task to track and report French ‘escapees, *libérés* or suspects’ to the Inspector General of Police (State Records 905). In 1879, he listed 48 escapees living in New South Wales, while in 1885, he reported on 233 *libérés* and 21 *libérées* (most of the latter he accused of prostitution) residing

in the colony.⁷ Individual police officers also reported directly to the Inspector General of Police concerning problematic French convicts in their regions. For example, Concord Police Station wrote in April 1879 of a French escapee who stole two loaves of bread and one tin of sardines, and was sentenced to seven days in gaol, and who later stole one pair of boots and three ‘smoothing irons’, for which he received three months in gaol.⁸ Windsor Police Station reported that two Frenchmen, both ‘political offenders’ recently arrived in Sydney from New Caledonia, had a ‘quarrel’ in which one ‘stabbed the other with a knife’.⁹ These incidents were considered significant enough to be reported not only to the Inspector General of Police but also the Colonial Secretary. This over-reaction indicates the seriousness with which the escapees were treated. The French Consul also forwarded to the Governor the *feuille signalétique* of sixteen escaped criminals, describing their name, age, physical appearance, crime and punishment.¹⁰ This correspondence indicates that concern over the New Caledonian criminals motivated diplomatic interactions.

Fear of escapees drove politicians to take an interest in foreign policy. The New South Wales Colonial Secretary’s records concerning recidivists from New Caledonia contain correspondence with the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Governor, the Agent General in London, other Australian Colonial Secretaries and Premiers and the Consul of France.¹¹ This communication reveals the way in which the Australian colonies worked together to lobby Britain. As one of the articles in *The Sydney Morning Herald*’s 1884 series argued, ‘we have a right to some say in the government of the island so far as to ascertain that every possible and practicable means are taken to protect us from injury. The onus of restraint lies with France, not the onus of defence with us’ (*SMH* 1884d, 3).

Originally, the British government was quite reluctant to act on behalf of their Australian colonies. Writing for the Secretary of State for Colonies, Lord Kimberley minimised both the responsibility of Britain and the danger to

⁷ ‘Metropolitan Districts’, 1879 in State Records 906a and also State Records 905.

⁸ Snr Constable Broderick, ‘Escaped Convict from New Caledonia Convicted of Theft’, 22 April 1879, in State Records 906a.

⁹ Senior Sergeant Fitzpatrick, 22 June 1879, in State Records 906a.

¹⁰ The Consul of France Théodore Ballieu, ‘Feuilles Signalétiques’ 16 December 1879, in State Records 906a.

¹¹ State Records 906b. See also Parliament of Victoria 1884.

Australia: ‘Her Majesty’s Government do not see what steps they could with propriety take in the matter’ as ‘the distance of New Caledonia, even from Queensland, is so considerable [...] that no serious injury would be caused to the Australian Colonies’.¹² Yet only five months later their position changed following the campaigning of the colonies: ‘Her Majesty’s Minister in Paris’ was ‘instructed to express to the French Minister for Foreign Affairs the hope [...] that proper precautions will be taken to prevent the escape of the convicts to British Colonies’.¹³ The Australian lobbying had achieved a remarkable turn-around in imperial policy.

In the second half of the 1870s and throughout the 1880s, the Australian colonies frequently worked in unity to effectively petition Britain regarding the New Caledonian issue. Upon hearing that France was to pardon 600 ‘Communists’ (as the ‘Communards’ were known, presumably in a tactic to increase fear and moral disdain despite the previously warm reception of Rochefort), the New South Wales Colonial Secretary proposed that ‘the Australians should unite in a remonstrance’, believing that ‘France will respect’ their efforts.¹⁴ Following this, the British Ambassador in Paris ‘addressed to the Government of France [...] the objections entertained by the Australian Colonies’.¹⁵ It is remarkable that the Australian colonies succeeded in having their interests represented to a foreign power.

The Intercolonial Convention of 1883 was a turning point, where representatives from New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, Western Australia, and also Fiji and New Zealand, joined together to form a united policy with regards to New Guinea, the New Hebrides and other Pacific islands.¹⁶ The two final resolutions regarding New Caledonia were:

6: That the Convention protests in the strongest manner against the declared intention of the Government of France to transport large numbers of relapsed criminals to the French possessions in the Pacific, and urges Her Majesty’s Government to use every means

¹² Robert G. W. Herbert, 13 July 1871, in State Records 906b.

¹³ E. Hammond, 2 December 1871, in State Records 906b.

¹⁴ Colonial Secretary New South Wales, 16 August 1876, in State Records 906b.

¹⁵ Carnarvon, Secretary of State, 1 January 1877, in State Records 906b.

¹⁶ Intercolonial Convention 1883: Report of the Proceedings, in State Records 906b.

in its power to prevent the adoption of a course so disastrous to the interests of Australasia and the Pacific Islands,

7: That the Convention expresses a confident hope that no penal settlement for the reception of European criminals will long continue to exist in the Pacific, and invites Her Majesty's Government to make to the Government of France such serious representations on this subject as may be deemed expedient.¹⁷

The tone of this declaration is striking: the use of adjectives such as '*strongest* manner', '*disastrous*' and '*serious* representations', along with the choice of verbs 'urges' and 'invites', demonstrates the degree to which the Australian colonies were attempting to influence imperial policy. Their expectation that Britain would protest on behalf of the Australian colonies is quite explicit.

Subsequent intergovernmental communications focused on 'forming the united voice of Australasia' through representations to London.¹⁸ Quite remarkably, the Premier of Queensland suggested bypassing the traditional channels of communication via London and sending a telegram directly to the French, 'threatening to pass legislation' which presumably sought to restrict the influx of escapees and expirees into Australia. Yet, as the Colonial Secretary of New South Wales highlighted, 'we have no *locus standi* with the French Government' and the threats 'would be met with ridicule'.¹⁹ Individual colonies also attempted to legislate against New Caledonian criminals, as in the 1881 'Criminals Expulsion Bill' in Queensland and the 1886 'Foreign Criminals Act' in New South Wales: both of these were, however, unsuccessful.²⁰ Instead, the colonies continued to act within their imperial framework, as 'part and parcel of the British Empire', and instead chose to address 'the Home Government

¹⁷ Intercolonial Convention 1883: Report of the Proceedings, in State Records 906b.

¹⁸ Colonial Secretary of New South Wales Alex Stuart, 1 May 1884, in State Records 906b.

¹⁹ Colonial Secretary of New South Wales Alex Stuart, 10 May 1884, in State Records 906b.

²⁰ R. H. Meade, 10 August 1883, in State Records 906b; 'A Bill to prevent the Introduction of Foreign Criminals into New South Wales', 29 March 1887, in State Records 906b, and. Stuer 1982, 135.

in language of remonstrance' against the proposed French legislation.²¹ This strategic decision does not minimise the significance of the Australian colonies directly lobbying the Secretary of State to act in their favour in issues of foreign policy. Various city council and public meetings were held in Victoria between July and September 1883: these meetings passed messages of support for the Victorian Government's foreign policy efforts, which were later sent to the Agent-General in London.²² It is hard to imagine that a resolution of the Shire Council of Yea, or a Public Meeting at Horsham, would have significantly influenced imperial policy: nevertheless, it does reveal the impact of this issue on the public psyche.

Diplomacy was not the only element of Australian foreign policy to find its roots in the Pacific. Quite bizarrely, Australia's spy industry had its origins in New Caledonia. One of the first military spying missions overseas was to New Caledonia in 1902, five years after the end of the penal settlement (Hall 1978, 10–11, 128). Major Bridges conducted a three week expedition, consisting of 'taking photographs, borrowing maps and observing trenches' (Hall 1978, 128–129). The Commander of the Commonwealth Military Forces in Australia, General Hutton, subsequently drew up a plan for the invasion of New Caledonia on the basis of Bridge's reconnaissance (Hall 1978, 129). This extraordinary incident indicates the degree of anxiety New Caledonia engendered in Australia's leaders.

It is important to situate these events in their historical context. Clem Lack linked the colonies' agitations concerning the New Caledonian problem with their strategic quasi-imperial concerns for Fiji, New Guinea and the New Hebrides (Lack 1955, 1057). In 1858, the New South Wales Legislative Assembly resolved that Fiji 'should become a British possession': this was the 'first time an Australian legislature had tried to influence imperial foreign policy' (O'Lincoln 2008, 4). Colonial agitation continued until 1874, when the island group came under British sovereignty (O'Lincoln 2008, 4). More dramatically in 1883 the Queensland Premier Thomas McIlwraith raised the British flag on New Guinea, claiming it as crown land (Thompson 1980, 51). Although McIlwraith had cabled the Colonial Secretary, urging him to annex New

²¹ Colonial Secretary of New South Wales Alex Stuart, 10 May 1884, in State Records 906b.

²² Parliament of Victoria 1884, 45.

Guinea, he did not wait for a reply but rather intended to ‘present Britain with a *fait accompli*’ (Thompson 1980, 52). A month later, the British government disallowed this annexation (Thompson 1980, 66). When the following year the Colonial Secretary declared a protectorate in the south-eastern corner, having ceded the north-east to Germany, the colonies were required to pay a portion of the maintenance costs (O’Lincoln 2008, 6–7). From 1883 the colonies led by Victorian Premier James Service—his ‘imperialistic predilection’ for a ‘wholesale takeover of unappropriated Pacific Islands’ was well known—also agitated against the occupation of the New Hebrides by the French (Thompson 1980, 68–70). Cumulatively, this is extraordinary: Australian colonies actively attempted to colonise on behalf of the mother country. This concern was at the time disparagingly referred to as the Australasian or Pacific Monroe Doctrine (Tate 1961, Alomes and Provis 1998). Another facet of the Monroe Doctrine was the Australian advocacy against the French presence in the New Hebrides, including most notably that of Victoria’s representative at the 1887 Colonial Conference, future Prime Minister Alfred Deakin (Norris 1981). Colonial Secretary, the Earl of Derby, writing in private to the British Prime Minister after McIlwraith’s annexation, scoffed: ‘this is mere raving and one can scarcely suppose it to be seriously intended, though it is hard to fix the limits of colonial self-esteem’.²³ The reference to ‘colonial self-esteem’ is mocking in tone because of the convict stain. This reveals that Australian foreign policy efforts at the time were perceived as quite distinct from those of the Empire.

Traditional historiographical understandings of the development of Australian foreign policy do not take into consideration these early colonial diplomatic interactions, including those surrounding New Caledonia. Different time frames have been given for the development of Australian foreign policy. For example, Gordon Greenwood claimed that until 1914 Australians were introspective navel-gazers, with the ‘luxury of almost undisturbed concentration upon their own domestic affairs’.²⁴ T. B. Millar argued for a later turning point: ‘a combination of apathy, remoteness and a lingering sense of dependence on Britain gave Australia few distinctive policies in foreign affairs, and almost no independent voice, other than in trade, until World War II’.²⁵ An even later

²³ Derby to Gladstone, December 7 1883, quoted in Tate, 1961, 277–278.

²⁴ Greenwood 1955, 252, 252, quoted in Meaney 1975, 1.

²⁵ Millar 1978, 21, quoted in Bridge and Attard, 2000, 2.

periodisation can be found in Curran and Ward's recent *The Unknown Nation*, pointing towards 'John Gorton's designation of Britain as a "foreign country" in 1968 through to Gough Whitlam's campaign for a more "independent" Australian voice in the world' as the crucial turning points (Curran and Ward, 2010, 23, 127–162).

Yet an appreciation of Australia's reaction to the New Caledonian convict settlement, in the context of the other pre-Federation foreign policy manoeuvrings in the Pacific, challenges this conservative periodisation. An alternative school of thought has emerged, beginning with Neville Meaney's 1976 *The Search for Security in the Pacific*, in which he argued that 'the first formulations of an Australian defence and foreign policy are to be found in the colonial era' (Meaney 1976, 15, 1–2). While Marxist historian Tom O'Lincoln argued that Australian foreign policy represented a form of 'sub-imperialism more aggressive about imperialist conquest than the British themselves', both Roger Thompson and Stuart Rosewarne described it as direct 'imperialism' (O'Lincoln 2008, 1, Rosewarne 1986, Thompson 1980, McQueen 1970). Thompson refuted the 'assumption that only sovereign states have foreign policies' on the basis of the content of colonial and Commonwealth government Pacific islands policies as the first form of foreign policy (Thompson 1980, 2). It is interesting, however, that these studies generally focus on Australia's concern for British annexation of Pacific islands, while the tensions over New Caledonia are generally mentioned only in passing. Expanding the vision of colonial foreign policy to include New Caledonian negotiations would strengthen the validity of this argument by demonstrating that it was not only a matter of one-off incidents such as McIlwraith's annexation, but rather concerted and strategic foreign policy developed over an extended period of time.

Additionally, the consideration of colonial agitation regarding New Caledonia highlights the ongoing contextual significance of the British Empire. Early Australian foreign policy, particularly concerning New Caledonia, was explicitly conducted within the imperial framework. As previously discussed, the colonies petitioned the Colonial Office to persuade the Foreign Office to act on their behalf and in their best interest. After Federation, a strange tension was found: many aspects of external affairs remained submitted to the imperial centre, while the newly created Federal Government had particular powers over relations with Pacific islands under the new Constitution and

Britain also conceded Australia a '*de facto* vote over any British agreement to foreign annexation of Melanesian islands' (Thompson 1980, 2). Despite being 'aware that the interests of the mother country did not entirely match their own', there was still some surprise that 'local expansionist appetites were still not shared in London' where 'quarrels over tiny Pacific Islands appeared as an irritant jeopardizing other policy goals' (O'Lincoln 2008, 7). In this context, assertion of Australian strategic interest is even more significant as it was contrary to broader imperial interests. The Australian colonies' deliberate and strategic lobbying of the Colonial Office regarding their concerns at the New Caledonian penal settlement in the context of similar events indicate that there was certainly an early form of independent foreign policy. This was, however, conducted within the framework of the British Empire and was not the final point in the evolution of uniquely Australian international relations.

The significance and the extent of the Australian concern over the French deportation of criminals to New Caledonia in the late nineteenth century cannot be overstated: indeed, it forms part of the nation's Federation story. Recounting the move towards Federation in his insider's history, *The Federal Story*, Alfred Deakin listed the 1883 Convention as one of the early steps towards national unification (Deakin 1963, 18). Foreign policy thus became 'embedded in debates on the union of the colonies' and the possibility of Federation to better 'advance and administer Australia's Pacific interests' (Rosewarne 1986, 79). At the second session of the newly formed Federal Council, a resolution addressed directly to Queen Victoria was passed, 'protesting against the French deportation of habitual criminals to New Caledonia, and the system which allowed many of them to escape to Australia' (Garran 1933, 12). The need for a national defence and foreign policy was 'at least a major, if not the chief,' motivation for Federation (Meaney 1976, 10). This reality was readily perceived by the French, for whom 'Federation and Australian imperialism in the Pacific were inseparable' (Barko 2000, 19).

The third important element illuminated by a study of Australian reactions to the French penal colony in New Caledonia is the interaction between post-convict shame and independent foreign policy. These two important factors are not separate and cannot be considered in isolation; rather, there is an evident reaction of cause and effect between the two. In an early study on Federation, Frank Beasley linked post-convict shame with the development of an independent foreign policy driving towards Federation.

Discussing foreign concerns that contributed towards the move to Federation, he explained that ‘Australia returned to the *path of righteousness* in 1867 with the final abandonment of the transportation of convicts [...] and in her newly acquired *respectability* resented the existence of a foreign jail so close to her shores’ (Beasley 1935, 328).²⁶ The use of moralistic language (‘righteousness’ and ‘respectability’) indicates that the desire to erase the convict stain was to be achieved through suitable foreign policy.

Numerous newspaper articles already mentioned for their indications of post-convict shame also provided opinions on foreign policy. An article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* of 2 November 1853 which bemoaned ‘the withering curse of convictism’ also regretted Britain’s lost opportunity at colonising New Caledonia (*SMH* 1853, 4). *The Argus* of 10 April 1874, which compared French escapees who arrived in Australia to dregs percolating, went on to call upon the various Colonial Secretaries to protest to the Secretary of State. Their rationale was that ‘no nation can persistently continue a course of action offensive to the feelings and subversive to the comfort of a neighbouring nation without giving occasion for remonstrance’ (*SMH* 1884e, 6). Moreover, as part of the series in *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 1884, the article condemning the strategy of *régénération* proclaimed that Australia has a ‘right to some say in the government of the island so far as to ascertain that every possible and practicable means are taken to prevent us from injury’ (*SMH* 1884d, 3). Such a drastic claim, that Australia had the ‘right’ to interfere in the government of another country, only makes sense in the context of the convict stain which tainted their perspective on the seriousness of the security risk New Caledonia posed and of the emerging view of the south Pacific as Australia’s ‘backyard’.

Conversely, many documents regarding foreign policy decisions also reflect post-convict shame. Writing to Governor Sir Hercules Robinson to protest New South Wales’ reluctance to accept expired convicts, the Consul General of France made a tactical error in criticising the Australian miners who went to work in New Caledonia. He claimed that the French convicts were ‘much less objectionable’ than these men, many of whom were ‘addicted to drink and have more than once caused difficulties with the native tribes’.²⁷ The

²⁶ Frank Beasley, ‘Problems of Federation in Australia,’ *Foreign Affairs* 13 (1935) p. 328. Emphasis added.

²⁷ Consul General of France F. De Castelnau, 31 January 1878, in State Records 906b.

reply of the Governor reveals his moralistic mindset, claiming that the parallel between the two groups 'is not sustainable' because 'the diggers may possibly be drunkards, and may cause difficulty and expense to the Colony, but they are not criminals [...] they are free citizens'.²⁸

It is evident here that the status of criminal is held to represent the worst moral degradation. An even more striking example is New South Wales Colonial Secretary Alex Stuart's call for a protest by the Imperial Government against the Relegation Law enabling the transportation of recidivists. He wrote that 'in former days these Colonies made strenuous efforts, which after a long struggle were successful in freeing themselves from the contaminating influence of English criminals, and the prospect of the danger arising from being made the receptacle of escaped or semi-pardoned French criminals causes them to speak out as with one voice against the threatened danger'.²⁹ This suggests a compelling desire to escape the return to the convict stain. The repetition of 'danger' shows the extent of the perceived threat of the French criminals.

In forming foreign policy, colonial politicians overstated and overestimated the danger that the New Caledonian penal settlement posed to the country because of the moral shame of their own convict heritage. There is an evident link of causation between sentiments of post-convict shame and their translation into an early independent foreign policy which sought to exert influence in the Pacific.

In conclusion, this study of colonial official and unofficial reactions to the French penal colony in New Caledonia has illuminated an aspect of Australian history not previously explored in depth. It has shown that these reactions form a useful body of evidence to study post-convict shame, as they were explicit in contrast to the predominant silence about the past, and were vehemently moralistic, revealing the prevailing social concerns.

It has also provided a nuanced counter-balance to different historiographic traditions on when Australian foreign policy became independent. During the early pre-Federation period the colonial politicians formulated an independent foreign policy conducted within the framework of the British Empire. While still a colony, Australia developed imperialist

²⁸ Governor Hercules Robinson, 27 February 1878 in State Records 906b.

²⁹ Colonial Secretary Alex Stuart, 6 May 1884, in State Records 906b.

tendencies in the Pacific, independent of Britain and sometimes contrary to British policies. This experience suggests that there was a slow evolution in the development of autonomous external affairs, rather than one single turning point.

Finally, by demonstrating the inter-related nature of the attitude of post-convict shame and the development of foreign policy, the possibilities for combining cultural and diplomatic histories have been explored. It is unwise to consider one aspect of the Australian reactions to New Caledonia without the other: they must not be studied in isolation. This reveals the power for fusing different schools of technique and tradition within history and suggests the possibilities specifically for diplomatic history to follow in the vein of the 'new, new political history' of the past two decades which 'borrows heavily' from cultural history (Benecke 2005, 315). The study of colonial reactions to the French penal settlement in New Caledonia can therefore make a novel contribution to our understanding of Australian history.

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