Convicts and Communards: French-Australian Relations in the South Pacific, 1800–1900

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Introduction

French-Australian relations in the South Pacific in the nineteenth century were defined largely by Australian concerns at the establishment by the French Government of a penal colony in New Caledonia, about 3,000 km from Australia's east coast. Concerns about escaped convicts, domestic and political (exiled supporters of the 1871 Paris Commune), dominated the attitudes of Australia towards France from the early 1870s to the late 1890s, and were often one of the issues of the day. This paper explores these events and the impact they had on French-Australian relations, observing and commenting upon the ways in which Australia reacted to the Paris Commune, transportation and possible escapes of convicts from New Caledonia to Australia.

This paper also comments on Australian writer Marcus Clarke's prophecy that the French penal colony would repeat the mistakes of Macquarie Harbour and Norfolk Island. Marcus Clarke, the author of *His Natural Life*—later published as *For the Term of His Natural Life*—and the journalist Julian Thomas (aka 'The Vagabond') had cameo roles in this saga.

The great debate

French concerns about crime and recidivism led, in 1819, to the establishment of a Parliamentary committee to consider the issue of convict transportation. The committee was heavily influenced by the

Australian example, and many books and pamphlets were written on this issue (Foster 1996, 7–41, Foster 1997).

The first and foremost publication was by Ernest de Blosseville, an enthusiast for the Australian model. He was followed by Jules de la Pilorgerie, a strong opponent of Blosseville's view. Alexis de Tocqueville, famous for his work on American democracy, also wrote on the subject, and reports of French travellers were widely read and discussed (Foster 1996, 71–127).

In 1854 the French Government legislated to allow common-law criminals to be deported. Prior to that only political prisoners could be transported. Convicts would no longer be sent to a metropolitan *bagne* in the shipyards, but to Guyana. However, diseases such as malaria and dysentery took a heavy toll, and these deportations were suspended in 1867. New Caledonia then became the sole penal colony (Toth 2005, 117–118).

New Caledonia was annexed in September 1853 by Rear-Admiral Febvrier-Despointes who, hearing that the British were heading for the Isle of Pines, annexed that as well. Annexation of the nearby Loyalty Islands, Lifou, Maré and Ouvéa, occurred between 1864 and 1866 (Aldrich 1990, 26–31). According to Robert Aldrich, the Australian colonies were not pleased with these actions, but chose not to react (1990, 24). The editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* felt less constrained, however, and within days of the hoisting of the tricolour, he stated that:

> No sooner, therefore, have we got rid of British convictism, than we are threatened with French convictism. An unlimited collection of Parisian brigands within a short and easy voyage from our northern coasts will tend as little to the security and happiness of the colonists as a similar collection of English outcasts in Van Diemen's Land. This at least, ought not to be permitted (Foster 1996, 168).

Notwithstanding these concerns work soon began on the construction of buildings and other facilities on the penal establishment at I'île Nou in Noumea harbour. The convicts were put to work erecting buildings, such as the penitentiary, hospital, barracks, workshops, storehouses, offices and houses.[1]

[1] *Sydney Morning Herald,* hereafter *SMH,* 12 May, 1884.

The penal settlement

According to Toth (2005, 119–120), in the early years there was a high degree of satisfaction and confidence in efforts to bring about the moral salvation of the prisoners at I'île Nou. Governor Charles Guillain stated that the prisoners were zealous in their work, had great respect for their guards and that punishments were not numerous. In 1873 it was stated that discipline in the camps left nothing to be desired and that there had been few attempts at escape.

In 1878 Julian Thomas, aka John Stanley James (writing as 'The Vagabond'), was chosen by Hugh George, the General Manager for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, to report on the Melanesian insurrection in New Caledonia (McDonald 2016, xiii). His despatches soon became a regular feature of the *Herald* and were reprinted in his classic, *Convicts and Cannibals: Notes of Personal Experiences In The Western Pacific* (1886). He remarked that the convicts were the chief feature of New Caledonia, and were employed in every capacity, from the Government offices to the kitchens of the officials. They were also employed in large public works, such as road construction and building. There were about 8,000 convicts, and the shortest term of sentence was seven years. After that each man had to do his *doublage*—seven years more as a *libéré* under surveillance. Then they were free and allowed to leave for Australia or elsewhere. The majority of the convicts were on I'île Nou; the others were at the *pénitenciers agricoles* (prison farms) and the mines at Balade or otherwise assigned to the settlers. At the *pénitenciers,* plots of land (*mise en concession*) were given to men of good conduct, and wives sometimes allotted to them (Thomas 1886, 117–118). The process of partner selection was, however, a little like horse trading.[2]

In 1889, several officers of HMS Opal visited I'île Nou, They described the punishments and indulgences of the convicts and remarked that the convict band (numbering about forty men), was comparatively well off, as its members did nothing but practise and play two afternoons and evenings a week. They also stated that very few of the marriages were successful, the majority of couples quarrelling and fighting, and finally separating.[3]

[2] *McIvor Times and Rodney Advertiser*, 4 July 1884.

[3] *Maitland Mercury*, 15 January 1889.

The Paris Commune and New Caledonia

Australian concerns about escapees lay dormant until the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871 and the start of the Versailles trials; a reporter for the *Evening News* wrote that '20,000 Communists, the swampings of Paris, and probably the choicest specimens of cosmopolitan ruffianism' could be deported to New Caledonia. Readers were reminded of the proximity of the French colony to Australia, and the meagre force available for guarding the penal population. He argued that the likelihood of the greater part of the convict population finding its way to the larger Australian towns was 'as certain as that water will run to the sea'.[4] According to Aldrich, public opinion in Australia had reacted strongly to the establishment of the Paris Commune and many Australians feared the infiltration of revolutionary ideas (Aldrich 1990, 224–225). The well-entrenched xenophobia of many Australian colonists, hitherto directed at the Chinese gold seekers, was soon to have another focus: French prisoners escaping to Australia.

The Colonial governments were quick to seek clarification of these reports from the British Foreign Office, and an active correspondence soon began, with the governments seeking to impress upon the British Ambassador to France, Lord Lyons, the need for the French to take all precautions to prevent the prisoners' escape to neighbouring English colonies. Jules Favre, the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, stated that as far as he was concerned he would be glad if the transportation idea was abandoned altogether.[5] But that was not to be.

The Paris Commune

In July 1870 the Emperor Louis Napoleon Bonaparte declared war on Prussia and, after a series of humiliating reverses, was forced to capitulate to the advancing Prussian army (Horne 2002, 35–60). The ensuing siege of Paris, which was still holding out, caused considerable hardship to many Parisians, particularly the poor, and many people were reduced to eating horse-meat, rats, dogs and cats ('gutter rabbits') (Baldick 1964, 186–188).

[4] *Evening News* (Sydney) 3 August 1871.

[5] Great Britain, Foreign Office and Australian Joint Copying Project with the National Library of Australia, Library of New South Wales & Library of Great Britain. Public Record Office (hereafter AJCP), Reels 3610, F.O. 27/1852, 1853, 1866, 1872 and 1908.

Paris was also about to endure its bitterest winter in living memory and morale suffered further when the Germans began shelling some of the forts (Baldick 1964, 177–202, Horne 2002, 185–223).

The four-month siege ended in January 1871. The terms of the armistice were ruinous—the cession of most of Alsace and one third of Lorraine, a huge indemnity and a triumphal entry into Paris by the Prussians. Worse still for Parisians, some of the Thiers government's actions, such as the move of the Assembly to Versailles, seem designed to antagonise them (Tombs 1981, 31–34, Baldick 1964, 221–235, Horne 2002, 247–264).

Thiers's ham-fisted attempt to confiscate the National Guard's cannon at the foot of Montmartre was a disaster, and resulted in the desertion of many regular troops to the rebel soldiers (the National Guard). A crowd gathered and two unpopular generals were executed. The rebels were now in charge of Paris, with the Government taking up office at Versailles and evacuating the remaining troops (Horne 2002, 265–276).

The Paris Commune was formed by the rebels in March 1871. It made a good start in organising the city's public services and many progressive measures were introduced. But it was riddled by factions and the defence of Paris against the government troops failed badly. A confused communications system, insubordination, drunkenness and meaningless acts of defiance, such as the demolition of the Vendôme Column, contributed to the military reverses (Schulkind 1971, 26–27, Horne 2000, 290–361, Edwards 1971, 187–276). More importantly, however, was the failure of the Commune leaders to anticipate the significance of the 1859 changes in street alignments, which nullified the effectiveness of many of the barricades they had erected (Horne 2002, 362–401).

The bloodshed was appalling. Apart from the two generals, the Commune executed several gendarmes, several leading prelates, a judge, three Jesuits, a score of Dominican friars, and other hostages (Horne 2002, 362–401). But the bloody retribution by the French army and its supporters was much worse, most of the carnage occurring in one week (*la semaine sanglante* or 'Bloody Week'). Much of the slaughter was carried out coldly and systematically, in full knowledge and authorisation of the High Command (Tombs 1981, 163). Mass executions continued for days, in prisons, temporary detention centres, army barracks, railway stations, cemeteries and parks. Huge funeral pyres polluted the air and Paris became a waste land of destroyed and burning

buildings (Horne 2002, 362–379, Edwards 1971, 339–346). Between 20,000 and 30,000 people were killed, far greater than the number killed in the French Revolution's Reign of Terror (Tombs 1981, 191, Horne 2000, 363–433).

The trials for the surviving Communards and their sympathisers continued until 1875. Some 4,000 prisoners were sentenced to transportation, principally to New Caledonia, where they remained on average for about nine years (Branchion 2003, 13). According to Bullard, the government and its supporters largely succeeded in portraying the Communards as destroyers of civilization who had 'violated the basic premises of liberal, civil society'. Communard female activists, such as Louise Michel, were viewed as 'more dangerous than the most dangerous of all men' (Bullard 2000, 67–97).

A subsequent Parliamentary Inquiry condemned the Commune in the strongest terms, proclaiming that France was in the presence of a new invasion of barbarians. It was argued that by successfully colonizing New Caledonia, the exiled Communards would embrace a new morality and help regenerate France by increasing the 'domain of her rule' (Bullard 2000, 85–97).

Arrival of La Danaé, Les Archives Territoriales, Nouméa.

Michel Sérigné's escape from the French Government steamship *Orne*

The assurances of the French Government that all steps had been taken to prevent escapes were put to the test in April 1873, with the arrival of the steamship *Orne* in Melbourne. The ship had called into Melbourne for fresh provisions and medicine for its cargo of Communards bound for New Caledonia. The *Argus* correspondent, stated that most of the prisoners had been 'more or less' afflicted with scurvy, which he attributed to the emaciated state of the men on embarkation and the reliance on salted provisions.[6] According to one of the men, Achille Ballière, of the 549 prisoners 400 were sick, 330 with scurvy (Lageat 2014, 2–3).

Despite vigilant surveillance, one of the Communards, Michel Sérigné (referred to as Michael Seringue by most Australian newspapers) escaped. On shore he saw a Frenchman whom he had met on the boat the previous day. The Frenchman invited Sérigné to his home, where he later met Marcus Clarke, who interviewed him.[7] Sérigné had been an instructor and gunnery quartermaster in the French navy and had served in the Franco-Prussian War, before being conscripted into the Commune. Clarke was sympathetic to his plight and refuted the claims in some newspapers that Sérigné was 'a ferocious and ruffianly fellow'.[8] It is possible that Clarke's encounter with Sérigné may have influenced his characterisation of Rufus Dawes, the hero of *Natural Life*.

Sérigné's cause touched the heart of many Melbourne citizens, especially those of French descent and, according to the editor of the *Ballarat Courier*, he was 'quite the hero of the day amongst his fellow countrymen in Melbourne'.[9] Captain Vignancourt, however, refused to accept gifts of money for the prisoners, even if the money was converted into clothes and food (Duparc 2003, 76).

Following Clarke's article several letters from the Communards were published in the *Argus*. One letter told of the generally poor conditions on board the ship, particularly for those on the lower deck. Another letter

[6] *Argus*, 19 April 1873; also see, *The Australian Sketcher with Pen and Pencil*, 17 May 1873, p. 27.
[7] *Argus*, 23 April 1873.
[8] *Argus*, 24, 26 April 1873.
[9] *Ballarat Courier*, 25 April 1873.

thanked the 'good folks of Melbourne' for their sympathy, good feelings and friendliness.[10] Some days later Clarke wrote to the *Argus*, asking whether a subscription list could be raised for Sérigné. To this plea the editor agreed, and subscriptions totalling £9 6d (about $890 today) were received.[11]

A few days after the departure of the *Orne* another letter reached the editor of the *Argus*. The writer was Felix Meyer, a student of Wesley College, whose younger brother had found a message in a bottle on St Kilda Beach. It had been thrown from the *Orne* as it left Melbourne. Translated by Felix, its main content was the all too familiar circumstances of the Commune's bloody suppression. On a cheerier note, the writer stated that they were happy to be in Melbourne, 'since it had procured us the pleasure of entering into relations with some of you'.[12]

Sérigné made good his escape and in September 1873 he appeared in court, successfully claiming £7 10s in back wages from a Melbourne wine store-keeper.[13] His ultimate fate is unknown, but more than likely he returned to France after the 1880 amnesty. His escape was a huge embarrassment for the French Government, which claimed that all necessary precautions had been taken.[14]

The great escape

But, for the French Government, worse was to follow, with the escape from New Caledonia in April 1874 of six leading Communards. Their leader was Henri Rochefort, a journalist and strident critic of the Versailles Government. His companions were Paschal Grousset, an ex-Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Commune; François Jourde, an ex-Minister of Finance; Achille Ballière, an ex-Aide-de-Camp to General Rossel; Olivier Pain, an ex-Secretary of Foreign Affairs, and Charles Bastien (Granthille), an ex-Commandant of the National Guard[15] (Rochefort 1897, 92–117, Dutton 2002, 6–9).

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[10] *Argus*, 24 April 1873.
[11] *Argus*, 26 April 1873.
[12] *Argus*, 28 April 1873.
[13] *Argus,* 18 September 1873. The claimed back wages were for work undertaken between 30 May and 5 July.
[14] AJCP, Reel 3611, F.O. 27, 1984.
[15] *SMH*, 10 April 1874.

Described by Kenneth Dutton as one of the 'most celebrated, or perhaps notorious nineteenth-century visitors to Australia', Rochefort had owned several newspapers—*La Lanterne*, which was fiercely hostile to the Empire, *La Marseillaise* and *Le Mot d'ordre*—which were critical of Thiers and the Assembly. Rochefort fled Paris during *la semaine sanglante* but was soon arrested, imprisoned, and later deported (Dutton 2002, 1–7).

On arrival in Noumea, Rochefort had the good fortune to be sent to the Ducos Peninsula, which was close to Noumea, making escape more feasible. He was welcomed by two former colleagues, Paschal Grousset and Olivier Pain, and he was soon making plans to escape. Charles Bastien Granthille, a *déporté* employed in Noumea, had access to a boat, and a pliable captain and his ship were soon found. The chosen boat was a Newcastle based vessel, the *P.C.E*, and the compliant captain was Captain Law (Rochefort 1897, 92–117).

Once in Newcastle, Captain Law paraded the men around as if they were trophies. In Sydney, Rochefort and his men were given a reception by the leading political and civic leaders of the day and presented with a testimonial address and a bottle filled with gold nuggets. The *Empire* revised its earlier negative opinion, stating that the men had been 'quiet and unobtrusive' (Dutton 2002, 21–24).

Eugène Simon, the French Consul, rebuked Sydneysiders for their generosity.[16] In response, the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* stated that the arrival of Rochefort's group justified the apprehension already felt in the Australian colonies over the establishment of the nearby penal settlement, and suggested that there may have been some 'intended negligence' by the French authorities, given that all of the men were leaders of the Commune.[17] However, the ire of the Governor and the authorities appears to have been real enough. Suspect shopkeepers were given twenty-four hours to wind up their businesses and leave the colony, twenty officers were removed from their positions and the Masonic Lodge was closed (Bullard 2000, 247, Thomas 1888, 53). In April 1874 Rochefort, Jourde, Pain and Grousset left Sydney for England. Ballière remained in Sydney to practice as an architect.[18]

[16] *SMH*, 3 April 1874.
[17] *SMH*, 28, 31 March, 3 April 1874.
[18] AJCP, F.O. 27, 2094.

The Rochefort incident gave rise to a fresh burst of correspondence within the Colonial Office, and between the French and British Governments.[19] In April 1874 James Francis, the Victorian Chief Secretary, wrote to the Governor of Victoria, Sir George Bowen, and commented that the 'apprehensions expressed' by the Victorian Government in 1871 had 'now been realised by the recent escape of prisoners from New Caledonia on two different occasions'. He remarked that the Australasian experience demonstrated the difficulty, if not the impracticability, of entirely preventing prisoners escaping from penal settlements and making their way to neighbouring colonies.[20]

Accounts of escapes soon became a regular feature in the Australian newspapers, and a constant irritant to French-Australian relations which had hitherto been relatively calm (Aldrich 1990, 199–210). The next escapee, in June 1874, was M. Cutlet, apparently a colonel in the National Guard, who arrived as a stowaway on the *Egmont*.[21] Two more alleged French escapees arrived at Moreton Island in early 1875, and in December 1875 five convicts claiming to be escaped Communards landed near Fraser Island, also in Queensland.[22]

Once in Australia many of the escapees were in the news, and for all the wrong reasons. In March 1879 Louis Lefete [sic], an ex-Communard, was sentenced to three months gaol in Melbourne with hard labour for stealing. The same month a boat with eleven escapees, all of whom were convicted criminals, arrived in Cape Moreton.[23] Some months later, Rene Thibault, an escaped convict sentenced for robbery and murder, was apprehended and extradited to New Caledonia.[24] Australian apprehensions were raised further by the erroneous news, in December 1879, that sixteen convicts had escaped I'île Nou in a schooner, throwing the *surveillant* into the sea and murdering the captain.[25]

[19] AJCP, Reels 3612 and 3613, F.O. 27, 2092, 2094.
[20] AJCP, Reels 3612 and 3613, F.O. 27, 2095.
[21] *Wagga Wagga Express*, 3 June 1874.
[22] AJCP, Reel 3614, F.O. 27 2146; *Brisbane Courier*, 7 December 1875.
[23] *Gippsland Times*, 14 March 1879.
[24] *Town and Country Journal*, 24 May 1879.
[25] *Riverine Herald*, 23 December 1879.

Reports in July 1883 of the French Government's intention to introduce a *Recidivist Bill*, with the intention of sending repeat offenders to New Caledonia, set the alarm bells ringing again.[26] The *Sydney Morning Herald* editor remarked that if the French Government really wanted to know how penal colonisation worked it should look at the Australian experiment, for it was only when the potential of Australia for wool growing was discovered that the basis for nationhood was laid. The French were trying to create an experiment which the British Government had tried under far more advantageous circumstances and found wanting, and the editor predicted that the New Caledonian experiment would be a sure failure.[27]

Although the number of French convicts in Australia was not very large (247 in late 1883), it drew a vehement response from some Australian politicians.[28] Sir James Service, the Premier of Victoria between 1883 and 1886, was a particularly fierce critic of the New Caledonian penal colony and ensured that it was a major item on the agenda at the Australasian Convention in December 1883. At the banquet he told the French representative that Australia would never submit willingly to having the 'offscourings of any other nation cast upon her shores'. Service remarked that the hundreds of escaped French convicts in Australia were a 'drop in the bucket' compared with what was now being proposed, that is, to send out 'double-dyed criminals'.[29] He asked whether it was an exhibition of fraternity that France should 'send amongst us men who had more than once been convicted of the "grossest crimes" ' (Serle 1980, 179–215).

Service reiterated these concerns at the Intercolonial Trade Union Conference in Melbourne in May 1884, stating that the convicts were 'not merely the bad, but the very worst possible siftings of the bad', to be 'thrown on our shores to taint the present generation and our posterity for all time to come'.[30] The attitudes of Service typify Australian fears of France in the Pacific, but also testify to designs on the Pacific Islands by Australian traders and missionaries, a lobbying group to which Service belonged (Aldrich, 1990, 226–236). But not everyone agreed with Service.

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[26] *Hobart Mercury*, 3 January 1885.

[27] *SMH*, 10 July 1883.

[28] *South Australian Register*, 23 December 1883.

[29] *Portland Guardian*, 12 January 1884.

[30] *South Australian Register*, 24 April 1884; *SMH*, 23 May 1884; *The Queenslander*, 10 May 1884.

The editor of the *Northern Miner* stated that although it was no doubt 'highly disgusting' that the criminal convicts of France should be brought so near the 'highly-toned and aristocratic descendants of English convicts', the absurdity of the situation 'must cause intense amusement to the French people'.[31]

By 1880 the new arrivals included ex-Communards, who had been either pardoned or amnestied. The distinction between criminal offenders and political prisoners, including those who had served their sentence was, however, lost on most Australians. It was enough that they were French and that they were committing crimes in Australia. One such man was Jean Paul, who was arrested in September 1883. He stated that almost every steamer that left Noumea for the Australian colonies conveyed a number of pardoned Communists.[32] One of these men was Lucien Henry, who arrived in Sydney in 1879, and became active as an artist and a teacher of painting and sculpture.[33]

New Caledonian convicts were in the news all through early 1884. In January a group of escapees arrived off the coast near Rockhampton, the fourth party to arrive in the area within the previous twelve months.[34] Colonial apprehensions were heightened further by a report in March that in the first fortnight of that month thirty-two convicts had escaped, mainly from the French road gangs. Thomas (1886) queried whether the criminal system was not a 'perfect farce', for there were dozens of convicts with hard labour sentences of over 200 years. They cared for nothing and walked off when they wanted 'a change of air'.[35] In May it was commented that robberies by escaped convicts in the La Foa area of New Caledonia had been so frequent that many farmers had been forced to leave their properties.[36] Thomas stated subsequently that the latest batch of arrivals in Noumea posed an even greater danger to the Australian colonies than normal, as most of the men

[31] *The Northern Miner*, 20 May 1884.

[32] *Evening News* (Sydney), 15 September 1883.

[33] Arthur McMartin, 'Henry, Lucien Felix (1850–1896)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University/henry-lucien-felix-3755/text5913, published first in hard copy 1972, accessed on-line 25 February 2018.

[34] *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, 31 January 1884; *Portland Guardian*, 8 March 1884.

[35] *Evening News (Sydney),* 17 March 1884.

[36] *Hobart Mercury*, 26 May 1884.

were under thirty years old, and would have a much greater desire for liberty than the older convicts.[37] The arrest of a large gang of French burglars and 'coiners' in Melbourne in September 1884 added to these concerns.[38]

In May 1885 the French Senate modified the terms of its recidivist legislation, greatly reducing the numbers of convicts to be sent to the Pacific. Despite this positive development, however, the news in February 1886 that Earl Granville, the new Colonial Secretary, had given a cautiously favourable response to a French proposal that France be allowed to annex the New Hebrides in return for the abandonment of transportation plunged French-Australian relations to new depths. Service appealed to Lord Rosebery, the British Foreign Secretary, saying that 'We are sick and wounded at heart'. In Victoria, pressure groups swung into action immediately and the Victorian Premier, Duncan Gillies, was besieged by deputations. He questioned the concept of imperial federation 'when events like this could happen'. The New Hebrides question was barely out of the news from that time forward (Serle 1980, 207–208).

These passionate colonial responses did not go unnoticed by many French observers. Following the 1883 Confederation Conference (which included representatives from the Australian colonies, Fiji and New Zealand), the French Consul in Sydney stated that although the ostensible goal for the conference was the announcement of federation, the main motive was the establishment of an Australian Monroe Doctrine, initially for the profit of England, but with a projected great Australasian Confederation in mind. The French Consul stated that the real purpose of the Conference was to establish ways and means for the Confederation to achieve domination over all the Western Pacific. At the core of the Australian Monroe Doctrine was a deal that Australia would assume responsibility for the stability, order and development of the Pacific as a condition for unwelcome interests staying out of the region (Aldrich 1990, 226–228). In June 1886 Eugène Mourot, a former private secretary to Rochefort, referred to the 'passionate and exciting [sic] language of the Australian newspapers' and the 'discourteous, if not outrageous and insulting' language used in various Australian Parliaments. He commented that the arrival of the first batch of recidivist convicts had overcrowded New Caledonia, and that the ship would probably

[37] *The Queenslander*, 7 June 1884.

[38] *Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser*, 2 September 1884.

have been turned back if it had not been for the 'unreasonable and insulting remonstrations' of some Australian colonies and politicians, 'for France did not yield to menace'.[39] At the first Australasian Federal Council meeting in September 1886, Service again antagonised the French with his negative comments on the New Hebrides and transportation (Aldrich 1990, 228–29).

Notwithstanding an agreement reached in late 1886 between England and France over the New Hebrides, the convict question continue to rankle, and in early 1888 a petition to the Queen was drafted by the Federal Council complaining about escaped convicts[40] (Serle 1980, 207–208). French-Australian relations were not improved by Service's comment in 1890 that:

> France is friendly to Australia when she gets her own way, but what her friendship is worth must always be measured by the moral filth which she causes to overflow from New Caledonia into the Australian colonies.

Meanwhile colonial apprehensions continued to be fuelled by a number of reports on escaped convicts in New Caledonia. One such article, in November 1888, outlined the exploits of escaped convicts turned bushrangers, who were terrorising the Boulaparis area. The writer stated that before long the colony would be nothing but 'an immense cutthroat place'.[41]

What were the convicts escaping from?

Arthur Martin (1884) referred to Clarke's observation in the 1874 publication of his novel, *His Natural Life,* that France had established at New Caledonia, a penal settlement 'which will, in the natural course of things, repeat in the annals the history of Macquarie Harbour and of Norfolk Island' (Martin 1884, 101–102, Clarke 1997, 9–10). Just how bad was the penal settlement, and how accurate was Clarke's prophecy?

Convicts could be given plots of land (*mise en concession*), and even wives, but there were important downsides, not the least of which was the hostility of the native Melanesian population. Thomas remarked that the Kanaks

[39] *Brisbane Courier*, 22 June 1886.

[40] Federal Council of Australasia, 'Deportation of French Convicts to the Pacific. Address to her Majesty the Queen', *Journals and Printed Papers*, vol. 2, paper nº 2, 16 January to 9 February 1888.

[41] *Albury Banner and Wodonga Express*, 30 November 1888.

(the Melanesian inhabitants of New Caledonia) hated the convicts and regarded them as degraded whites. They were aware that their own lands were stolen to make *pénitenciers agricoles* and farms for the *libérés* (Thomas 1886, 119).

In 1878 the fertile Faokako Valley was seized. The great chief Ataï protested to Governor Pritzbuer, who took little notice, and in June of that year a violent insurrection began, involving most of the west coast tribes. Thomas stated that 200 French people were killed in one week. He accompanied the French on one of their punitive expeditions, which included twelve convicts. The predominant emotion of the convicts must have been fear, for 100 convicts were massacred in the first two days of the rebellion (Thomas 1886, 48–76). According to Thomas some Communards joined the Government forces, but most of the convicts were from the criminal population (122–123).

In a subsequent expedition, which also included convicts, they came across the skulls of recently massacred comrades lying on the ground. Thomas spoke of an epidemic of fear. It seemed to him that nearly everyone in Noumea was 'mad', and that if some of the advice offered to Governor Olry had been taken seriously then the whole native population would have been in revolt. Luckily for the French, other tribes joined in the fight against Ataï and the rebels were eventually defeated (Thomas 1886, 77–93).

It was, however, the brutality of the penal system that forced so many to seek their salvation on Australia's shores. In 1888 an escapee named Cory stated that 'atrocities and infamous acts of every kind are committed, and this by officials, both high and low, in different ways'. This more than anything else drove a large number of unfortunates to escape.[42] According to Rochefort, every Wednesday late in the morning they could hear the yelling from those being whipped, the severity depending on the number of coins that could be slipped to their tormentors. One day Rochefort met an old convict who had been wrongfully implicated in a failed escape attempt. To make him confess his fingers were put in pincers and so badly crushed that they had to be amputated the next day (Rochefort 1897, 80–91).

The scale of punishments depended on the seriousness of the offence, and ranged from the removal of or reduction in rations to wearing irons

[42] *South Australian Advertiser*, 9 August 1888.

or chains, demotion to a lower (and less privileged) class, *bastonnade* (beatings with a whip) and finally, execution by guillotine. The lowest class (composed of convicts who had committed the more serious crimes, such as attempted escape, assault and attempted murder) were imprisoned in special quarters on I'île Nou and used in the hardest and most difficult work. Their punishments were harsher than those applying to other convicts. Other tortures included the use of a white hot iron on the skin after each whipping during the *bastonnade*, confinement in cages, where the condemned could neither sit nor stand, and *la crapaudine*, where the men's hands and feet were tied behind and they were suspended from a tree (Cormier 1993, 22–27). Leading Communards such as Grousset, Jourde and Henri Brissac said that the pain from the whippings was atrocious and that it required a superhuman effort not to cry out (Branchion 2009, 63–63).

Forced labour gang, some in chains, Les Archives Territoriales, Nouméa.

But it was not until the amnestied Communards began to arrive back in France that the general public became fully aware of the scale of the abuse. Alphonse Humbert, a journalist and *déporté*, was one of the critics (Bullard 2000, 243–251). Another prominent critic was Simon Mayer, who described in detail the arbitrary nature of the punishments, for a convict could be whipped for the slightest infraction, alleged or real (Toth 2005, 122).

In December 1879 an inquest was held into the reports of abuse and torture. The enquiry was led by Deputy George Perin and lasted for two years. Communards sentenced to forced labour suffered by far the worst treatment among the *déportés*. Perin's investigation identified two periods, 1868–69, and 1874–76 as the times of greatest abuse. In the first period there was a total lack of control as the penal regime was instituted. The second period followed the escape of Rochefort and his comrades, when the colony was purged of anyone with the slightest sympathies with the prisoners, the Republic or the Commune. Outside these 'bad eras' Perin's investigation uncovered many other unacceptable practices. Dysentery, scurvy and anaemia plagued all prisoners, and those who reported ill were more than likely to be thrown in the stocks than allowed to see a doctor. The meagre rations were further reduced by theft and pillage from the guards and other personnel, and whippings could be incurred on the whim and fancy of a guard. On l'île Nou whippings were a weekly ritual which all other prisoners were forced to watch (Bullard 2000, 243–251).

The evidence of whippings and other tortures outraged members of the investigating commission and many recommendations were made for reform. In June 1880 the Commission banned all flogging and other physical punishment and instituted a large number of non-corporal punishments, which were still severe (Toth 2005, 64–69). Arbitrary punishment was stopped. But, as noted by the Commission, there was one major drawback to the success of the reforms—the remoteness of New Caledonia from French society and public opinion (Bullard 2000, 251–252).

There were many critics of the new regime, most focussing on the diminished capacity of the administrators to enforce discipline, and many stating that the convicts had it too easy (Toth 2005, 64–69). General Borgnis-Desbordes commented that discipline and punishment were much harsher in the army. He also remarked that because of the dispersal of the prisoners in small work crews there had been a marked increase in escape

attempts and criminal infractions. In 1883 escape attempts nearly tripled, and crimes against personnel and property doubled in the periods 1879–82 and 1883–86. His observations led to the introduction of a harsher regime in 1891 (Toth 2005, 69–132).

The Communards

But what of the Communards? How hard was it for them? Most lived on the Isle of Pines and a smaller number on the Ducos Peninsula. They were not incarcerated, but had their own huts and garden plots and were paid a small wage if employed by the Government. They lived under martial law, however, and were under constant surveillance. Failure to attend the evening muster resulted in imprisonment, and captured escapees and some other offenders were incarcerated with the convicts on I'île Nou. Many of the Communards had money sent to them by friends and had a comfortable if unchallenged life.

Communards at carpentry, Isle of Pines, Les Archives Territoriales, Nouméa.

Thomas suggests that those with families were happier there than after the amnesty when they were seeking work in Paris and several had opened stores and cabarets (1886, 121–131).

Hippolyte-Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray, a Communard who was not exiled, remarked that not everyone could find employment and for those that did the wages were very poor. The Government painted 'the most charming picture' of New Caledonia to their wives, but most of the women, suspecting something was amiss, refused to go unless invited by their husbands. Communards incarcerated with the convicts had a particularly hard time of it and were subjected to the same labour as the convicts, the same 'rule of the stick and whip', and were 'beset by the special hatred of the jailers, who incited the convicts against them' (Lissagary 1898, 447–458). One man wrote:

> This life is really too hard to bear in this filthy *bagnio*, exposed to all insults, to all blows, shut up in grated caves; in the workshops treated as beasts; insulted by our jailers and our comrades of the chain, we must submit to it all without a murmur; the slightest infringement entailing terrible punishment—the cell, quarter ration of bread, irons, thumbscrews, the lash… Many of our comrades are in double chains in the correction platoon, subjected to the hardest labour, dying of hunger (Lissagary 1898, 452–453).

Rochefort stated that his convict-warden officer was hated by the prisoners, for he rode purposely through plantations that had taken months to cultivate. He commented that their sole distractions were swimming parties. A lazy torpor hung over them all, making even the reading of letters from home, let alone the writing of them, difficult (Rochefort 1897, 80–91).

As implied by Rochefort, many men suffered from what Bullard has referred to as a 'fatal nostalgia'. Louise Michel wrote of the 'homesickness' that pushed so many into their graves. She was amazingly resilient and self-contained, but lamented that her fellow prisoners 'nurtured premature hopes of amnesty'. The penal officials argued that alcohol caused the suicides. But as the Communards' memoirs and letters attest, nostalgia or depression was the more likely cause. Correspondence with loved ones was their only consolation. But the time spent waiting for their letters was hard to endure and afterwards they would fall back into a void, all of which was not made

any easier by the taunting and harassment of the guards (Bullard 2000, 187–197, Branchion 2009, 146).

A letter, written sometime in the late 1870s, by E. Chamallet, described the Communard's life as a slow death. He had read a lot of books, learnt English, studied a French literature course, and learnt music. But he still felt bored and very weak, as did many of his comrades. He remarked that while the deaths had not been excessive, last month they buried nine men in eleven days. Forty men had committed suicide by hanging, and many men had become insane (Buisson 2001, 99–100).

The beginning of the end

By 1889 reports of escapes begin to fade. Changes to the penal system by Governor Nöel Pardon, who was appointed in January 1889, had led to a more rigid surveillance, with evasions diminishing accordingly. The editor of the *Brisbane Courier* commented that Pardon was giving practical effect to the wishes of M. Étienne, Minister for the Colonies, that France strengthen the commercial ties between Australia and New Caledonia and act the part of a good and loyal neighbour.[43]

In January 1890 the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* commented on remarks made at the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1889 that transportation had been a failure. He reminded his readers of the comments made some years ago on the inappropriateness of the French penal system and the belief that transportation would help colonisation. The convicts now sent to New Caledonia were the 'vilest of the vile', and while New Caledonia had a little cultivation and a little mining, it depended largely upon government expenditure. The New Caledonia experience had simply repeated the lessons learned in NSW, Van Diemen's Land and Norfolk Island more than fifty years earlier. With barely disguised glee, he stated that:

> The failure was what we expected, what we predicted, what we hoped for. We look to the recognition of the failure as affording the best chance of re-establishing amicable relations with France. At present that country is doing us a wrong, and it spite of all our protests, persists.[44]

[43] *Brisbane Courier*, 7 March 1890; *Launceston Examiner*, 12 March 1890.
[44] *SMH*, 31 January 1890.

He concluded that the whole system was 'a gigantic failure, morally, socially and economically'.[45]

The end of transportation

In a debate on supply in early 1891, the Under Secretary of State, M. Étienne, admitted that the system was costly and that the colony was already overpopulated by convicts. He considered that transportation should be discontinued and referred to the strong urgings of the Australian colonies on this matter. The Under Secretary reminded the deputies, however, that France was mistress of her colonies and that any decision on the matter would be done in her own time and at her own pleasure.[46]

In November 1894 the French Government announced that transportation to New Caledonia would cease. Biard d'Aunet, the Consul-General for France, stated that one motive influencing the French Government was a desire to maintain friendly relationships with Australia. He considered that the convict system would gradually die out and that its extinction would be hastened by the transfer of some convicts to the new penal settlement in Gabon. He denied that France had decided to cease transportation to New Caledonia in return for being allowed to occupy the New Hebrides, as that would have been unfriendly to Australia.[47]

The last convict transport arrived in 1897. But it took until 1921 for the last *mise en concession* to be granted, and the colony's status as a place of transportation and banishment did not officially end until 1931. Paul Feillet, the new Governor of New Caledonia in 1894, had been a supporter of free colonisation. Yet thirty years after his installation, there were only 200 km of passable roads, and there were hundreds of condemned buildings in the most fertile valleys, with thousands of *libérés* wandering over the colony, often living by pillage (Cormier 1993, 59). It had been an expensive and unsuccessful experiment in every regard. According to Aldrich 'any spirit of egalitarianism, much less reformist ardour…was notable by its absence' (1990, 146).

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[45] *SMH,* 31 January 1890.

[46] *The Morning Bulletin*, Rockhampton, 28 January 1891.

[47] *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, 29 November 1894.

Conclusion

The existence of a French penal colony so close to Australia's shores over such a long period of time is well documented. Less known to the general reader is the disruption to French Australian relations caused by concerns about escaped convicts. Until the early 1890s the French Government was completely unmoved by Australia's protestations, many of which increasingly came to be expressed in the most vehement language. Clarke's 'prophecy' was accurate: New Caledonia had indeed mirrored the mistakes of Norfolk Island and Macquarie Harbour.

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