

Convict Suffering and Salvation in New Caledonia and Australia: The Life and Writing of French *Bagnard*-Poet Julien de Sanary*

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In 1931 two volumes of original French poetry composed by a certain ‘Julien de Sanary’ were published (Meranda 1931, vols 1 & 2) by Sydney printer William Brooks under the editorship of and financing by an Australian woman, known to the Australian literary world as ‘Wolla Meranda’ (Karlsen 1989, 27). While Sanary was a total unknown in the world of letters, Meranda was a minor poet and novelist. Born Gertrude Poyitt, Meranda’s work had been championed by the celebrated Sydney literary editor A.G. Stephens (Wilde et al. 1994). While it is unclear how many copies of the volumes of Sanary’s poetry were printed or how wide the distribution was, the fact that today they are listed in the catalogues of several libraries around the world suggests that the reach was not insignificant.¹

‘Julien de Sanary’ was the nom de plume of a Frenchman named Marius Adolphe Jullien, born in Saint Nazaire near Toulon.² Sanary had arrived in Australia in 1920 under Meranda’s sponsorship and had lived with the Australian poet on her property in Sunny Corner west of the Blue Mountains until his death in 1929 at the age of sixty-nine. On his death, the *Lithgow Mercury* (28 February 1929, 5) published a short obituary under

* All translations of Julien de Sanary’s poetry from French to English presented in this article are by the author, Briony Neilson.

¹ Copies are today known to be held in the State Library of New South Wales, Sydney; the National Library of Australia, Canberra; the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, Paris; the British Library, London; and the University of Toronto Library.

² For simplicity, this article will refer to Wolla Meranda and Julien de Sanary.

the heading ‘French litterateur dead. Respected Sunny Corner Resident’. It described ‘Marius Adolphe Julien’ [sic] as ‘a highly cultured and deeply read man’ who had ‘published many poetical works in his native language’ and ‘had seen much of the world, having followed the sea as a calling in his younger days’. The obituary’s most glaring omission, however, was the almost four decades of Sanary’s life between 1881 and 1920 when he was held in the *bagne* of New Caledonia as a transported convict. It seems reasonable to presume that Meranda had kept this significant detail from the newspaper editors in order to cast Sanary in the best possible light. Two years later, however, when she collected and published Sanary’s poems, Meranda had fewer qualms; although the poems were published under a pseudonym, Meranda revealed Sanary’s identity in a biographical note. To have attempted to downplay the significance of the *bagne* for Sanary would have been an almost impossible challenge for Meranda: it was the central theatre of his life and his poems speak of little else.

This article seeks to amplify the small amount of scholarship produced in recent years concerning Julian de Sanary (Rabah Ben Aïssa 2011; Collin 2015b) and to bring his story to an English-speaking readership for the first time. It offers the first extended study of Sanary’s life and work, and the first ever translations and analysis in English. Along with a discussion of the meaning of the act of writing for the French convict and an analysis of some of the major themes of his poetry, a larger argument is made about the significance of Sanary’s work. Placing him and his relationship with Meranda within the broader context of relations between New Caledonia and Australia in the early twentieth century, the author makes the case for understanding their relationship as illustrative of a predominant trope at that time of the backwardness of New Caledonia as a European settler colony relative to Australia. In keeping with this concept, while Sanary portrays New Caledonia as a place of cruelty, corruption and permanent suffering, Australia is presented as a land of generosity, freedom and tranquillity. Yet so great is the suffering he experienced in New Caledonia that even after his migration the shadow of permanent torment cast by incarceration in New Caledonia cannot be left behind. Through a contextualised analysis of Sanary’s poems, this article gives particular emphasis to their central themes of suffering and redemption, which arguably illustrate the above-mentioned characterisation of French settlement of New Caledonia as colonial failure as opposed to Australia as colonial success.

Wolla Meranda and Julien de Sanary: Australian and New Caledonian settler colonialism

Wolla Meranda, the pen-name of the woman born Gertrude Poyitt, began her life in 1863 in Sunny Corner, a flourishing silver-mining settlement in central western New South Wales between Lithgow and Bathurst. A book written by one of her descendants, Christine Karlsen (1989, 3–9), recounts how Meranda's father, David, had come to Australia from Scotland, lured by the prospect of finding gold. Trying his luck first in the Victorian goldfields, he then moved on to Sunny Corner where he met Meranda's mother, Elizabeth Armour. Elizabeth and David had five children, Meranda being the eldest.

Educated at Sunny Corner School, Meranda excelled at her studies and in 1882 was accepted by the Department of Education as an assistant teacher and appointed to posts in nearby Wolgan Valley and later in central Sydney. While in Wolgan Valley she met her future husband, George Nicol Williams, and over the following years the two maintained an extended correspondence. By 1890 Meranda had chosen to return to Sunny Corner, assuming the position of mistress of the newly created Infants' Department. In late December 1891 she and George married and in November 1894 they welcomed a baby boy, Roy Nicol Williams. Tragically, however, the baby did not survive; a death notice in the *Australian Town and Country Journal* recorded his passing at just nine weeks (13 January 1894, 18). A few years later, as a depression gripped the silver-mining industry in Australia, George accepted a post as mine manager in New Caledonia, leaving Meranda in Australia. In 1904 tragedy struck once again: George was killed by undetonated explosives while conducting a safety inspection of a mine.

On George's death, the *Lithgow Mercury* reported that Meranda travelled to New Caledonia to attend to administrative matters (8 April 1904, 5). It is plausible that it was during that visit that she first came into contact with Julien de Sanary, the transported French convict. Meranda had some knowledge of the French language, having studied it at school (Karlsen 1989, 9–13), and therefore would have been in some position to converse with people she encountered in the French colony. A different scenario, however, was presented in an article published in 1936 by the Orléans newspaper *Journal du Loiret* (17 February 1936, 4) where it is claimed that it was in 1919 while Meranda was visiting New Caledonia as a tourist

that she visited Île Nou, the site of the archipelago's mental hospital. 'Madame Wolla Meranda', the article claims, 'was rather surprised to receive there, in secret, by mysterious means, a manuscript in French verse, entitled *Souvenir du Cap Brun (l'abattoir des forçats de Calédonie, 1887–1895)*. Although the details are hazy and the precise chronology of events is unclear, somehow Meranda was exposed to Sanary's writing, perhaps in the form of a handwritten notebook, as was the French medical doctor Léon Collin in 1910 (2015). At least two of Sanary's notebooks have survived: Collin's copy has recently been digitised (Sanary 1910) and another is today held in the Territorial Archives in Noumea (Rabah Ben Aïssa 2011).

It is not hard to see why a French *bagnard* poet would have struck a chord with Meranda, herself a schoolteacher with literary aspirations who had experienced personal tragedy in New Caledonia. What Meranda was hoping to achieve by publishing the volumes of French poetry in Australia is suggested in an editorial note inserted beneath a poem entitled '*Libération*' (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 112–113). The poem describes a *bagnard's* day of release into free society in New Caledonia after more than thirty-five years spent in the '*bas-fonds du bagne*' (112).

Far from being a positive step to real freedom and acceptance into colonial society, departure from the penal colony means utter destitution—the freed convict leaves the *bagne* with nowhere to go, without any belongings save for a walking stick. The years spent in detention have not prepared him materially for life in ordinary society. Instead the decades of hard labour in the *bagne* destroy his prospects of finding the most standard employment (in the mines), and the taint of his criminal background ensures that he will struggle to be accepted into civil society: the settlers will treat him with contempt and the police like a suspect or vagabond. In utter contradiction to any of its claims to enlightened, humanitarian principles, Sanary exposes the transportation system as condemning the freed convict to a fate of permanent ostracism, not only from metropolitan France but from the colony into which he is supposed to be absorbed.

It was upon reading '*Libération*', with its evocation of the cruel state of a living death for former convicts, that Meranda was prompted to act, petitioning the French president and successfully securing Sanary's release

from New Caledonia in January 1920.³ By the time Meranda intervened, Sanary had served his full term but, in keeping with the terms of the sentence of transportation with hard labour, he was destined to remain for life on the archipelago, denied the right ever to return to metropolitan France and requiring presidential approval to leave New Caledonia. The cruelty of these policies of refusal of the right to re-enter France (*'interdiction de séjour'*) and the requirement that the freed convict permanently remain in the colony, albeit as a free agent (*'obligation de résidence'*) struck Meranda as profoundly unjust and to run counter to the professed aims of the transportation system which, along with punishing convicts, was supposed to provide the means of rehabilitating them. In her note (1931, vol. 1, 113) Meranda implores the men in power in France to 'abolish these cruel contradictions', thus seeking a political impact for Sanary's poetry.⁴ More generally, Meranda was giving voice and dignity to a person whose one transgression early in life had sealed his fate and whose experience in the penal colony was anything but redemptive.

While the story of Meranda and Sanary's relationship is fascinating in itself, its greater significance is revealed when contextualised within a broader frame of the dynamic of relations between the two neighbouring settler colonies of Australia and New Caledonia. The failure of New Caledonia to attract free settlers injected new breath into a longstanding discourse about the alleged inferiority of French colonisation in comparison to the British and helped construct a widely held cliché about Australia as a progressive settler colony built on voluntarist principles of free settlement as opposed to the backward New Caledonia, to which settlers had to be coerced to migrate and where development was hamstrung by an overly intrusive, tyrannical 'State' (Neilson 2018). Meranda's charity to Sanary can be understood as both embodying and furthering the solidification of this broader pattern of relations between the two settler colonies: Meranda, the robust Australian, plays saviour to Sanary, the debilitated French convict.

³ A search of the online records of the *bagne* preserved at the *Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer* indicate that Sanary was one of only four prisoners to successfully petition for a lifting of the *'obligation de séjour'*—his fate was thus not a common one. http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/bagnards_dossiers_individuels/, accessed 1 October 2018.

⁴ *'Hommes de pouvoir, daignez abolir ces contradictions cruelles.'*

Although certain basic aspects of the economic relationship between Australia and New Caledonia have been established (Simington 1978) and the influence of Australia's settlement in inspiring the French to adopt penal colonisation in New Caledonia is well understood (Forster 1991; 1996), historians have not fully explored the dialectical nature of the connections between these adjacent European settler colonies, developed through penal colonisation. Even within the current trend of research into the global history of penal colonies spearheaded by Clare Anderson (2018), this aspect is receiving little scholarly attention. A century or so ago, New Caledonia loomed large in the formulation of policy in Australia (Thompson 1980). In the decades before Federation, anxieties about escaped French convicts helped the various Australian colonies reach common ground, together crafting discriminatory policing practices against anyone suspected of having spent time in the *bagne* (Bergantz 2018; Neilson, forthcoming). As outlined recently (Neilson 2018), a discourse of panic pedalled by elites in the Australian colonies throughout the second half of the nineteenth century gave way in the twentieth century to a more compassionate attitude to the French settlement in New Caledonia, assisted by both the suspension of convict transportation in 1897 (though not the total closure of the *bagne*) and, arguably even more significantly, the forging of close ties between Australian and French servicemen on the battlefields of France in the First World War.

In the early nineteenth century British transportation of convicts to Australia constituted a seductive model for the French, who were seeking ways to address the problem of crime and political dissent and to recoup colonial territories lost at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. In the 1850s, after decades of debate and just as the practice was being wound back by the British in the Australian colonies, transportation of common law convicts to penal colonies was written into the French penal code. Against significant opposition from criminal justice reformers in France, advocates of penal colonisation held up Australia as evidence of the utility of penal colonisation as an instrument for winning the war against crime by decisively cleansing the *métropole* while also enabling the settling of distant, under-developed colonial territories. In the second half of the nineteenth century, in contrast to the British experience, where coerced migration from Britain to Australia was increasingly replaced by free migration and convict transportation was generally held to have been a failure, France's policy of penal colonisation

appeared decidedly archaic. Transporting convicts to distant territories and subjecting them to hard labour (at the expense of the public purse but often for the benefit of private capital) was seen by most criminal justice reformers, who organised themselves into the International Prison Congress, as generally inferior to the modern penitentiary which emphasised separation and introspection for social and moral uplift and professional oversight for protection against mental health degradations as a result of imprisonment (Neilson 2015). The *bagne*, given its very isolation and distance from the *métropole*—which, after all, was the whole point of convict transportation (Redfield 2000, 59)—made it difficult to put into practice and complicated the idea of exemplary punishment, as well as impeding access for reformers who wished regular, independent oversight of the everyday functioning of the penal settlement.

Sanary's incarceration and the meaning of the act of writing

Composed while he was in detention in New Caledonia and later living in freedom in Australia, Sanary's poetry constitutes an exceptional source, providing a window into the experience and long-term effects of decades spent in varying states of incarceration. Historiographically, the poems are unusual in three ways: they were written in New Caledonia rather than Guiana; they are the work of a common law convict (*transporté*) rather than a Communard (*déporté*); and they were placed in the public domain rather than either being hidden away in private collections or bundled up and put away by penal authorities (Buisson 2001). While there is some research focused on New Caledonia (Barbançon 2003; Toth 2006), the bulk of scholarly research on the history of the *bagne* is primarily concentrated on Guiana. This is understandable, given that it was Guiana that received the majority of transported convicts (Spieler 2012; Sanchez 2013). Although for a couple of decades, between 1867 and 1886, New Caledonia did act as the only destination for transported French convicts on account of Guiana's fatally harsh climate, overall the South American penal colony received the bulk of convicts and remained in operation for far longer than New Caledonia. The latter received its last shipment of convicts in 1897 and France transferred all control over the penal colony to local authorities by the late 1920s (Gascher 1974). In the final decades of the nineteenth century, public attention and sympathies were directed far more to the perspectives and experiences of the political prisoners deported to New Caledonia after

the Paris Commune than to transported convicts. Granted total amnesty in 1880, many of the Communards penned memoirs of their time in the penal colony (Ballière 1889; Jourde 1877; Rivière 1881; Michel 1886). Overwhelmingly portraying their experiences in the so-called savage state of New Caledonia as devastatingly negative (Bullard 2000), the voices of the Communards drowned out those of common law convicts.

The autobiographical nature of Sanary's writing is clear; the poems read as a blend of personal diary entries, letters and social commentary. At the heart of the two volumes of published poems is the *bagne*, which is described as a site of suffering and immorality—not immorality on the part of the convicts, but rather the exploitative capitalists who seek to take advantage of the low cost of labour and extract the land's valuable mineral deposits. In 'Un crime' (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 36), convicts labour in nickel mines in conditions that recall slavery in earlier times. The final line of each stanza in another poem, 'Beau Monde (Satire)' (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 34–35), is 'the most honest [people in the *bagne*] are the convicts'.⁵ In 'Cruel géôlier' (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 38) Sanary describes his cruel treatment by a prison guard who deliberately breaks the convict's most treasured possession: a framed photo of his late mother. Sanary reacts to this provocation and as a result is placed in solitary confinement, where begins the harshest period of his incarceration, described in 'Dans mon cabanon de fous' (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 39–41). There, within his two-metre-wide cell with iron door and barred windows, he suffers headaches and nausea, unable to eat the insect-infested broth he is given. The only thing to occupy him is to fling peas against the surfaces of his cell. To the medical doctor who comes to assess his mental state, he insists that he deserves humane treatment: 'Although a convict, I'm still a human being' (40).⁶ In 'Le Camp Brun' (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 47–53), one of his longest poems, Sanary describes the harshest settlement in the New Caledonian archipelago, which ran from 1887 to 1895 and which was reserved for convicts deemed dangerous. In this 'abattoir of convicts' (47)⁷ prisoners are routinely shackled in cells, have their throats cut and are shot dead. He urges the reader to let Paris know this truth, but recognises in frustration that no one will believe him and

⁵ 'Le plus honnête est le forçat'.

⁶ 'Moi, quoique condamné, je suis encor [sic] humain'.

⁷ 'L'abattoir des forçats'.

his fellow convicts, and that people will heap blame on them instead (48). Here Sanary's deployment of poetry as public exposé is quite apparent. He condemns the unregulated use of force, the indefinite use of torture: 'Law no longer exists, as Force overrides it' (49), he writes (52).⁸

In this earthly hell where reigned horror,
terror and fear, what would Dante have said,
if his tomb were to have briefly opened?...
No, this is not the way that one should take action
Against the unfortunate ones, in the century in which we are,
For after all, finally, these convicts are men.⁹

This poem, damning in its observations, ends with an imagined dialogue between Sanary and another person (53):

- It's quite exaggerated, this poem, isn't it, Julien?
- No...there were many things too horrible even to be written about at all.¹⁰

Writing appears to have been many things to Sanary: a source of consolation, an irrepressible urge aroused by his muses, and an outlet for the expression of defiance and resistance to authority. Many of Sanary's poems are assertively condemnatory of the French criminal justice system, and we get a sense of his awareness of the risks he ran in writing them. In '*Prendre Garde*' (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 46), directed towards the reader of his poem, he writes of the retaliation he would be subjected to by the prison guards if they became aware of what he had written:

I've just written [the present poem] in secret.
Oh! Do not allow it to be seized;
Misfortune would come down on my head,
A cell would witness me die.¹¹

⁸ '*Le Droit n'existe plus, car la Force le prime*'.

⁹ '*Dans cet enfer terrestre, où régnaient l'épouvante,/ La terreur et l'effroi, qu'aurait-il dit, le "Dante",/ Si sa tombe, un instant, avait pu s'entrouvrir?.../ Non, ce n'est pas ainsi que l'on devrait sévir/ Envers des malheureux, dans le siècle où nous sommes,/ Car après tout, enfin, ces forçats sont des hommes.*'

¹⁰ '- *C'est bien exagéré, ce poème, n'est-ce pas, Julien?/ - Non... il y avait bien des choses trop horribles de s'écrire du tout.*'

¹¹ '*Je viens de l'écrire en cachette./ Oh! ne te fais pas saisir;/ Le malheur fondrait sur ma tête,/ Un cachot me verrait mourir.*'

As Philippe Artières (2000) has explored, prison doctors in the nineteenth century, in an attempt to diagnose the mental state of criminals, were responsible for turning prisoners into writers. On the prompting of doctors, most prominently Alexandre Lacassagne, incarcerated subjects produced pages and pages of autobiographical writing intended for the medical expert's eyes only. When viewed against this archival standard, Sanary is an unusual French prison writer in several respects: his writings are not purely autobiographical in focus and they were collected outside of the prison administration and subsequently published, albeit shortly after his death. But evidence in his poetry indicates that he, too, was subjected to this method of writing as diagnostic tool. '*Dans mon cabanon de fous*' (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 39) is a poem about, paradoxically, Sanary's refusal to produce poetry for the medical doctor who wants to use the writing to diagnose the convict's inner state:

You want lines of verse?... Let the devil take me
If I make any more of them before I am let out
Of this cursed den... No, no verse for you,
Even if it incurs your wrath.¹²

Sanary's work sits within a long tradition of poetic writing where the travails of confinement are transcended through flights of the imagination (Brombert 2015). For many incarcerated writers, the act of writing enables the triumphant freeing of the mind despite the imprisonment of the body, as famously expressed by Lord Byron (Scott 1887, 463) in his 1817 poem 'The Lament of Tasso':

I stoop not to despair;
For I have battled with mine agony,
And made me wings wherewith to overfly
The narrow circus of my dungeon wall...

For Romantic poets, incarceration is often characterised as a *felix culpa*, and thus (paradoxically) venerated for the way it nourishes the spirit while denying the body. For some Romantic writers, the cage of incarceration has the happy effect of providing a framework within which

¹² '*Vous désirez des vers?... que le diable m'emporte/ Si j'en fais encore un avant que je ne sorte/ De cet antre maudit... Non, pas de vers pour vous,/ Au risque d'encourir même votre courroux.*'

their identity can be refined. For instance, the nineteenth-century French poet Tristan Corbière in his poem ‘*Libertà*’ (1920, 153–157) celebrates imprisonment as a launching mechanism for poetic expression and as a space of refuge: ‘Prison, certain conquest / Where the poet is king!’ (156).¹³ This sense of liberation is not quite so apparent in Sanary’s writing. Consider, for example, his depiction of birds. In the symbolic vocabulary of many Romantic poets, birds can represent the ambivalence of incarceration—the bird outside of the cage suggests the cage and is thus at once an evocation of oppression and a prompt for transcendence and self-knowledge that incarceration supposedly enables (Brombert 2015, 13). For Sanary, the symbolism of birds is more straightforward: they are emblems of freedom and a means for linking him back in time to his distant homeland in France and forward in time to some more hopeful place other than New Caledonia. In ‘*L’Oiseau de la liberté*’ (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 77), Sanary describes the daily visit of a little bird at the window of his cell. He tells the bird:

You do not like to see me in this vault,
in misery and adversity;
And in your flight you show me the route
to Australia and freedom.

...

Little bird, your advice is sublime...
I... want to see my Provence again and its sky.
Until this day I have lived in doubt;
but hope dies, and my heart grown sad
vows to one day take the route
to Australia and freedom.¹⁴

Here, significantly, Australia is presented as synonymous with freedom. And, as Meranda remarks in an editorial note at the foot of this poem, Sanary would himself eventually take this route to Australia twenty years later.

¹³ ‘Prison, sûre conquête / Où le poète est roi!’

¹⁴ ‘Tu n’aimes pas me voir sous cette voûte,/ Dans la misère et dans l’adversité;/ Et dans ton vol tu me montres la route/ De l’Australie et de la liberté. ... Petit oiseau, ton conseil est sublime,/ Je ... veux revoir ma Provence et son ciel./ Jusqu’à ce jour j’ai vécu dans le doute;/ Mais l’espoir meurt, et mon Cœur attristé/ Fait le serment de prendre un jour la route / De l’Australie et de la liberté.’

Birds express a yearning for and a feeling of connection and friendship—they can potentially carry word to or from home, they provide companionship in the absence of human contact. These birds prove defiantly loyal. In ‘*Je quitte mon taudis*’ (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 128–129), as he prepares to leave New Caledonia bound for Australia, Sanary bids farewell to the little birds with whom he has shared his meals every day and expresses the wish that they will soon visit him in his new home in Australia. Miraculously, as Meranda notes, his wish is apparently later realised (128, note): ‘Coincidence? These little birds... never seen previously [around Sunny Corner], arrived during his first spring here’.¹⁵

Sanary’s personal dossier from the *bagne* indicates that before being transported he could read and write, but his background appears modest. At the time of his detention in metropolitan France he was ‘sans profession’, and prior to his transportation to New Caledonia he had received training as a rag shredder (*effilocheur*).¹⁶ Sanary invokes his humble origins in one of his poems, ‘*À Jupiter*’ (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 57), expressing regret that his lack of education means that he cannot compose poetry in Latin. In terms of Sanary’s cultural influences, the only information available is that his favourite poem was ‘*Les hirondelles*’ (also sometimes known as ‘*L’hirondelle et le prisonnier*’) by the popular nineteenth-century French poet and lyricist Pierre-Jean de Béranger. Béranger’s poem is reprinted at the end of the second volume of Sanary’s poetry and its influence on the convict-poet’s style, tone and subject matter is quite clear (Meranda 1931, vol. 2, 177–178). In the poem, Béranger conveys the isolation and yearnings of a prisoner of war held for several years, shackled in irons. From his cell window the captured soldier entreats swallows to approach him. Symbols of hope, the birds help connect the prisoner to his homeland, just as they do for Sanary in his poems.

Death, rebirth and permanent suffering in New Caledonia and Australia

For Sanary, death, decay and hypocrisy pervade the archipelago and the brutality of the system of the *bagne* haunts its every aspect.

¹⁵ ‘*Une coincidence? Ces petits oiseaux ... jamais vus auparavant, sont arrivés en son premier printemps ici.*’

¹⁶ ‘*Dossier individuel de bagne: Jullien, Marius Adolphe,*’ FR ANOM COL H 1688.

Inanimate objects of the colony that have borne witness to the ubiquitous torture of the penal colonial system offer subtle but constant reminders of the horrors inflicted. In ‘*La Cloche*’ (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 55), the sounding of the bell in a clock tower arouses terror and Sanary calls for the tower, the witness of so much torture, to be destroyed. Everywhere one looks, Sanary writes in ‘*Sol des malheurs*’ (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 54), lie the instruments of torture—even a beautiful tree is contaminated by the fact that it once was used to hang convicts. The rustling of its leaves in the breeze causes Sanary to perceive a whisper commemorating those who remain on New Caledonia—the dead and the permanently exiled (the living dead). Animate figures in Sanary’s poems are frequently devoid of their vitality—the convicts are starved shells, the prison guards cruel monsters. The *bagne*’s resident executioner is ‘a ghost’ (*un fantôme*) pursued by the violence that he has inflicted (‘*Le bourreau*,’ Meranda 1931, 88). In ‘*La mort d’un bourreau*’ (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 115) Sanary speaks of the ignoble end afforded to this contemptible figure:

The death-knell did not ring out for the slicer of heads.
He is dead, the executioner, as animals die,
without priest, without pastor, without belief, without faith,
without repenting, without tears, without regrets, without prayers,
without a friend’s hand having closed his eyelids.¹⁷

Children and childhood are prominent recurrent themes in Sanary’s poetry. In ‘*L’enfant*’ (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 14), ‘*Petit ange!*’ (Meranda 1931, vol. 2, 15), ‘*Cueille les fleurs*’ (43) and ‘*Deux sœurs*’ (45–46), Sanary presents a romantic vision of children, evoking their proximity to nature, their purity, joy and innocence. The presence of children in the *bagne* serves to reinforce the dysfunction, cruelty and tragedy of the penal colonial project, while evocations of Sanary’s own often idyllic early childhood in ‘*Douce chose*’ (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 15) heighten the pathos of a life spent in incarceration. The theme of the child persists in Sanary’s characterisation of his relationship with Meranda, who is portrayed very much as an idealised mother figure.

¹⁷ ‘*Le glas n’a pas sonné pour le trancheur des têtes./ Il est mort, le bourreau, comme meurent les bêtes./ Sans prêtre, sans pasteur, sans croyance, sans foi,/ Sans repentir, sans pleurs, sans regrets, sans prières,/ Sans qu’une main amie ait fermé ses paupières...*’

In ‘*Au paradis*’ (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 150) composed one month after his arrival in Australia, Sanary writes that he feels he has been transported into an earthly paradise where he is cocooned in comfort like a tiny infant:

I am in the paradise of angels,
I smile at this new time
Where I am wrapped up in swaddling clothes
Like a baby in its cradle...
I would need many more quills

In order to write down everything in this moment;
My bed is made up of tiny feathers,
And I am pampered like a child.¹⁸

In ‘*Suis-je un vieillard?*’ (Meranda 1931, vol. 2, 63) he describes how Meranda’s kindness transforms him:

Am I an old man? Truly, you would not say so.
I feel like a child who holds out its arms,
With a gentle smile, to its mother.¹⁹

But although Meranda’s kindness lifts him, it also causes Sanary great shame and distress as he feels incapable of experiencing the joy he believes she wishes him to feel:

Oh Madam, forgive me, if before your good deeds,
Sadly, I lower my head!
My poverty blushes to always be receiving;
My heart tells me quietly: ‘How can you pay it back?’
My God, how great is your debt!’

If I have a glimmer, a shadow of honour left,
must I close my ear to this voice full of heart?
I ask you at this moment.

¹⁸ ‘*Je suis au paradis des anges,/ Je souris à ce temps nouveau/ Où l’on m’enveloppe de langes/ Comme un bambin dans son berceau..../ Il me faudrait bien plusieurs plumes/ Pour tout écrire en cet instant;/ Mon lit est fait de fines plumes,/ Et suis choyé comme un enfant.*’

¹⁹ ‘*Suis-je un vieillard? Vraiment, on ne le dirait pas./ Je crois être un enfant qui tend encor [sic] les bras,/ Dans un doux sourire, à sa mère.*’

I smiled with pleasure and joy for a moment,
Me, an old man, I smiled like a little child.
Now, I think and I cry.²⁰

While his migration to Australia offers Sanary a rebirth, his aged body and troubled mind mean that he, unlike an infant, has little hope of ever overcoming the state of arrested development that decades in the *bagne* have left him in.

While the *bagne* is at the heart of Sanary's poems, only occasional and oblique references are made to the circumstances that placed him there. In 'La Justice de 1882' (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 30–31) so oblique is the reference to the fateful event that saw Sanary sentenced to transportation for life that Meranda feels the need to issue an explanatory editorial note (exceptionally, and for unclear reasons, written in English): 'the impetuous youth,' she writes, had been charged with returning the blow of a person in authority. Despite the victim appearing in court 'quite uninjured', Sanary was handed a guilty verdict for attempted murder and given the sentence of hard labour for life. As Meranda notes, this is the same sentence handed down to Rufus Dawes in *For the Term of his Natural Life*, Marcus Clarke's novel (1886), which, given that the book had not been translated, was unlikely to have resonated with an audience in France. Interestingly, this is the only allusion, and a vague one at that, in either volume of poetry, to Australia's own convict past. Sanary's portrait of the incident that resulted in his sentence of transportation is bound up in a biting critique of the injustice of the justice system which targets the powerless and acts in the interests of the wealthy: 'barbarous justice strikes one down while puffing on a cigar'. The poem's speaker, who *tutoies* justice, declares that (Meranda, vol. 1, 30):

²⁰ 'O Madame, pardon, si devant vos bienfaits,/ Tristement, je baisse la tête!/
Ma misère rougit de toujours accepter;/ Mon Cœur me dit tout bas: "Comment t'en
acquitter?/
Mon Dieu, quelle est grande ta dette!"
'S'il me reste un reflet, une ombre de l'honneur,/ Dois-je fermer l'oreille à cette voix du
Cœur?/
Je vous le demande à cette heure. J'ai souri de plaisir et de joie un instant,
Moi, vieillard, j'ai souri comme un petit enfant. Maintenant, je pense et je pleure.'

...if the rich man likes you, and idolises you and loves you,
I, the convict, hate you—that is the only right I have—
For you do me harm and you treat the rich man well.
Money makes you spin like a weathercock.²¹

In this poem, personal feeling—the convict’s capacity to hate—is transformed into a type of possession, the only sort not taken over by the justice system.

Although his personal suffering dominates the volumes, Sanary also articulates an awareness of and opposition to broader issues of social injustice and exploitation beyond the *bagne*. He reveals an acute sensitivity to the unjust scapegoating of vulnerable groups by the powerful and urges the powerless to recognise their common oppression and to resist the attempts of the powerful to divide and set them off against each other.

In ‘*Facit indignato versum*’ (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 104) he pledges his commitment to taking a principled stand: ‘Since protection is given to those who are hypocrites,/ disloyal, informers, myself, I will die a convict’.²² In ‘*Fleurs du ruisseau*’ (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 26) Sanary describes paupers witnessing a group of female prostitutes decked out in costly jewels and urges them not to hate the women, but to see them as their sisters. In ‘*Bobonne*’ (Meranda 1931, vol. 2, 47–48) he recounts the tale of a young servant girl who is made pregnant by her master and then thrown out onto the streets, her only prospect for survival being via prostitution. In ‘*Iniquité*’ (Meranda 1931, vol. 2, 60) he expresses his full solidarity with the suffering of the impoverished mother whom a rich man squeezes for payment for shelter and food: ‘the world inspires in me disgust mixed with deep horror’.²³ In ‘*Faute de pain*’ (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 27) he issues a sharp rebuke to the heartless disregard of the wealthy towards the plight of the poor and calls on them to display charity to those who know greater hardship than they have ever known.

²¹ ‘...si le Riche t’aime, et t’adule, et t’adore./ Moi, forçat, je te hais – ce droit seul m’appartient— / Car tu me fais du mal, et au Riche du bien./ L’argent te fait tourner comme une girouette.’

²² ‘Puisqu’on est protégé qu’en étant hypocrite,/ Déloyal, délateur, moi, je mourrai forçat.’

²³ ‘le monde/ M’inspire le dégoût joint à l’horreur profonde.’

'*La Foudre chôme*' (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 28–29) is a declaration against child labour; he speaks of factories as '*des bagnes pour l'enfance*'. But Sanary takes pains to point the finger at the real force of exploitation—not the parents (they too are forced labourers), but the system of exploitative labour. In '*Humanité*' (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 117) he lambasts society's absence of Christian charity and warns selfish people: 'Ah! Understand well that God looks at poor people with love'.²⁴

In '*2ème Épitre, C'est la légalité*' (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 105), Sanary accuses contemporary society of disingenuousness when it comes to upholding moral values and he questions why it is that the prison director is empowered to treat the prisoner however he so chooses irrespective of the prisoner's conduct:

It is the century, so they say, which spreads light;
Holy Humanity who preaches love to us;
Sublime Progress which moves; but backwards.
A deaf ear is turned to the cry of Reason;
Law is told: 'Be quiet!' if it challenges and protests;
Tempers are lost, threats are made, prison is invoked;
A pretext is chosen in order not to listen to it.²⁵

Suffering and sorrow are most prominent in Sanary's poems about New Caledonia, but the occasional acts of kindness are also recorded—their significance and preciousness accentuated by their very exceptionality. Not all members of the penal administration are painted in unrelentingly dark colours. For instance, in '*Merci!*' (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 75–76) Sanary expresses his profound gratitude to a certain doctor who provided attentive ministrations and relief of pain to all the convicts (75):

When a cry of pain escapes from my throat,
I see you running up, disciple of Asclepius,
To give me the care that my body cries for.

...

²⁴ '*Ah! sachez bien que Dieu regarde/ Les pauvres gens avec amour.*'

²⁵ '*C'est le siècle, dit-on, qui répand la lumière,/ La Sainte Humanité qui nous prêche l'amour;/ Le Sublime Progrès qui va; mais en arrière,/ On fait la sourde oreille au cri de la Raison; On dit au Droit: "Tais-toi!" s'il réclame et proteste;/ On s'emporte, on menace, on parle de prison;/ Pour ne pas l'écouter on choisit un prétexte.*'

And I see you still, going from bed to bed,
Tending with zeal the dreadful criminal...
You have no fear of contact with the dishonourable,
And your noble heart pities the cursed.²⁶

The poem ends with Sanary first pledging, if he makes it back to France one day, to carve the doctor's name into the rocks of Provence, but then shaking himself out of his unrealistic reverie (76): 'But is this not all impossible? Stop thinking about it then.'²⁷ Beneath this poem, Meranda asks (76, note): 'And yet, reader, is it not possible?'²⁸—a teasing allusion to her own subsequent interventions on Sanary's behalf.

In the first volume, Sanary's migration to Australia functions as a pivot, a fresh start away from the torture and hopelessness of the *bagne*. In the second volume, alongside poems about the experience of young love and the emotional turbulence of unrequited passions, it is the after-effects of the *bagne* that are placed centre stage: the emotional, psychological and physical damage caused by decades of detention in the penal colony cannot be erased by simple removal. One type of taint is replaced by another: having been marked by infamy in New Caledonia, in Australia Sanary is permanently marked by years of maltreatment: his body is prematurely aged, his mental health is fragile. That sense of unending suffering is accentuated by the comfort in which he lives in Sunny Corner. Australia is his refuge and he is cared for with the utmost courtesy. Yet that very care paradoxically exposes to him his inadequacies. He describes himself as being made to feel like 'the prince of Warragulla', a reference to the name of Meranda's property (Meranda 1931, vol. 2, 81), but he berates himself for being incapable of paying back her kindness through his happiness. In '*Je touche au port*' (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 151), he describes his unsettled state of mind living with the anxiety of imminent death, despite living in tranquillity and comfort in Australia:

²⁶ '*Lorsqu'un cri de douleur, de ma gorge, s'échappe,/ Je vous vois accourir, discipline d'Esculape,/ Pour me donner les soins que réclame mon corps.... Et je vous vois encore, aller de couche en couche,/ Soignant avec ardeur, le criminel farouche... vous n'avez point peur de contact de l'infâme,/ Et votre noble Cœur a pitié du maudit.*'

²⁷ '*Mais tout cela, mon dieu, n'est-ce pas l'impossible?.../ Cesse donc d'y penser*'.

²⁸ '*Et pourtant, lecteur, n'est-ce pas possible?*'

I am dressed, fed, better than any could be,
Cared for like a child, and I have no master,
I am free and independent.
What makes me so worried and morose?...
I search in vain to work out the cause;
And yet there is one.²⁹

In *'Elle et lui'* (Meranda 1931, vol. 2, 82) he describes Meranda as a 'beautiful Australian woman,/Queen among flowers'; Sanary has 'come to break your poor heart.' In *'Je vivrai pour vous seul'* (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 162) Sanary expresses his utter devotion to Meranda. It is she who has given him his reason to live:

I have, in my aged days, but one desire, but one wish:
To prove to you that I still feel my heart beating.
If it were not for you, what would life matter to me?...
I can no longer love it; it horrifies me.³⁰

Before Meranda made her appearance, Sanary's existence was one of pain (162): '[Life] was, for me, but a dark hell, a pit/ Whose depths I knew only too well'.³¹ But tragically, although his sufferings are now behind him, rather than being able to experience joy Sanary finds himself caught in a cycle of ongoing trauma and torment. What concerns Sanary is the effect his traumatised state has on Meranda. To display joy, he feels, would be the way to demonstrate gratitude. But despite her infinite kindness, he is unable to feel constant joy, which arouses shame for having ever accepted her generosity: 'I ought to have refused your help and your support; By accepting it, I believe I made myself guilty, I have bitter regret to say it today' (162).³²

²⁹ *'Je suis vêtu, nourri, mieux que nul ne peut l'être./ Soigné comme un enfant, et je n'ai pas de maître./ Je suis libre et indépendant./ Qui peut me rendre ainsi soucieux et morose?.../ C'est en vain que je cherche à deviner la cause;/ Il en est une, cependant.'*

³⁰ *'Je n'ai, dans mes vieux jours, qu'un désir, qu'une envie:/ Vous prouver que je sens vibrer encor [sic] mon cœur./ Si ce n'était pour vous, que m'importe la vie?... Je ne puis plus l'aimer; elle me fait l'horreur.'*

³¹ *'Elle ne fut, pour moi, qu'un noir enfer, qu'un gouffre/ Dont je connais que trop les sombres profondeurs.'*

³² *'J'aurais dû refuser votre aide et votre appui;/ En l'acceptant je crois m'être rendu coupable./ J'ai le regret amer de le dire aujourd'hui.'*

While Sanary was able to find some solace in nature, he is nonetheless constantly plagued by the experiences of his past. Although no longer subjected to detention and forced labour, he still struggles with the events and encounters of ordinary life. In *'Je vais partir'* (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 158), he describes his difficulty being around other people:

Living in company is, alas, too sombre
In the depth of my heart;
I would like to be alone, always alone, and in the shadows,
Consumed by bitter sorrow....
Cursed by fate, I cannot be free,
From slave I become martyr.³³

Although Australia provides Sanary with refuge, the tranquillity of life is not enough to overcome the trauma of decades of hardship spent in detention. Significantly, while Sanary promotes Australia as the 'promised land!' (*la terre promise*) (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 136), his vision elides the violent history of Indigenous dispossession and convictism that lies at the heart of European settlement. There is not one single reference to Indigenous Australians in any of Sanary's poems and only minimal allusions to Indigenous Kanaks of New Caledonia. In *'Le Spectacle!'* (Meranda 1931, vol. 1, 33) Sanary parodies an unnamed French settlement in the antipodes and its corrupt pursuit of profit, paraded as enlightened and just. The speaker of the poem invites the reader to pay a visit to witness the antipodean idyll, each stanza ending with the line 'Come; the spectacle is worth the money'.³⁴ The final stanza describes the treatment of the Indigenous inhabitants:

...we have Indigenous people,
who are being civilised—you have to see it—
And who are raised to drive out, onto plains,
The region's small game.
It is reminiscent of ancient Rome,
But more moral and more civilised;

³³ *'Pour vivre en compagnie, il fait, hélas! trop sombre/ Dans la profondeur de mon Cœur;/ Je voudrais être seul, toujours seul, et dans l'ombre/ En proie à l'amère douleur... Maudit par le Destin, je ne puis être libre,/ D'esclave je deviens martyr.'*

³⁴ *'Viens; le spectacle vaut l'argent.'*

Come at least for the manhunt...
The spectacle is well worth the money.³⁵

Along with the minimal references to Indigenous peoples, it is similarly striking that Sanary makes no mention of Australia's own convict past. Indeed, apart from Meranda's passing allusion to Marcus Clarke's novel there is no other acknowledgement of the shared histories of Australia and New Caledonia as settler colonies built out of convict labour. Having been rescued from New Caledonia and yet remaining silent on Indigenous dispossession and the legacies of the convict past in Australia, Sanary contributes to the fiction of Australia being a superior settler colony, flourishing, forward-looking and free.

Conclusion

After forty years of suffering, hopelessness and despair in New Caledonia, Sanary suddenly finds himself the recipient of an extreme act of kindness from Meranda, an Australian woman. The relationship between Sanary and Meranda can be read as something more than just an isolated story of suffering and altruism. The dynamics of their relationship echoed the broader relationship between Australia and New Caledonia in the era of the *bagne*. Historians have much to learn about the ways in which settler colonialism was constructed through the study of trans-colonial/trans-imperial interactions. This portrait of the lost French convict saved by the resourceful and independent Australian woman can be seen to have helped reinforce the notion of the superiority of Australian society over its New Caledonian neighbour and, in turn, served to exonerate Australian settler colonialism from its dark past of convict labour and Indigenous dispossession.

While relations between Australia and metropolitan France are becoming ever better known thanks to commemoration projects in French battlefields, Australia's connections with New Caledonia, its much closer neighbour, geographically and ideologically, have been downplayed (at least from the Australian side). The richness of the shared history of Australia and New Caledonia, as European settler colonies with convict histories

³⁵ '*...on a des indigènes,/ Que l'on civilise – il faut voir –/ Et qu'on dresse à chaser, en plaines,/ Le menu gibier du terroir./ Ça rappelle l'ancienne Rome,/ Mais c'est moral et plus décent; Viens toujours pour la chasse à l'homme.../ Le spectacle vaut bien l'argent.*'

and historically troubled relations between settlers and indigenous peoples, deserves greater recognition and closer attention, as it has the capacity to deepen our understanding of the processes by which the narrative of Australia's earliest European settlement was constructed. Over the course of the nineteenth century and, especially into the twentieth century, Australia has emerged as the superior settler colony, its successes amplified by New Caledonia's failings. The experiences and interactions of Julien de Sanary and Wolla Meranda open a window onto these dynamics on a personal scale.

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