

Beatrice Grimshaw: Traveller, Writer and Advocate for Australian Imperialism in the South Pacific

Elizabeth Rechniewski¹

The photographs that remain of Beatrice Grimshaw represent her, conventionally posed and elegantly attired, as a woman of traditional ideas and habits, living a retiring life in the halls of middle-class respectability. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth, for Beatrice Grimshaw, as soon as she was of an age to do so, threw off home-loving respectability and the ties of family, marriage and children, to become one of the most intrepid female travellers of the early twentieth century, making frequent and extensive trips to many international destinations but notably, and of particular interest to this article, to the recently colonised islands of the South Pacific. She was not only a traveller but a prolific writer, of novels, pamphlets and cruise brochures, newspaper and magazine articles that, I will argue, were highly influential in forming the contemporary public's representations of the Pacific islands and their inhabitants. She also sought to intervene in the political affairs of the nascent Australian nation, encouraging and seeking to facilitate through her writings and her contacts with leading Australian politicians its imperialistic ambitions over the neighbouring islands, including those partly or wholly claimed by France, the New Hebrides and New Caledonia.

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¹ <https://www.sydney.edu.au/arts/about/our-people/academic-staff/elizabeth-rechniewski.html>.

This article focuses on the years 1905 to 1908 when she wrote extensively about the New Hebrides and was involved in political affairs with the second Prime Minister of the new Australian nation, Alfred Deakin, advocating, and offering her support to, the cause of Australian sub-imperialism. Her journalistic interventions and the encouragement she received from Deakin are highly revealing of the politics of the era in relation to French, British and Australian imperial ambitions for influence and control over the South Pacific.

Literary itinerary of a ‘Revolting Daughter’²

Grimshaw was born in 1870 in County Antrim Ireland into a long-established Protestant family, though she converted to Catholicism in her early twenties. Given quite a good education for girls at the time, including some years in Caen, France, at the Pension Retillaud and at Bedford College, London, she disappointed her parents, who had hoped that she might become a teacher of literature. Shaking off the shackles of home, and rarely returning to Ireland, for the rest of her life Grimshaw lived by her pen, and did so very successfully, in several genres. She worked first as a journalist and editor in Dublin, then London and then acquired a range of roving commissions for newspapers, colonial interests and governments. She was the author of over forty best-selling novels and collections of short stories, mostly romances set in the Pacific, that were almost invariably reprinted in multiple editions, often serialised in newspapers and some of which were translated into French and other languages.³ Hundreds of her short stories were published in magazines across the English-speaking world, while her newspaper articles, reviews, reports, opinion pieces and essays on a range of divergent

² Grimshaw described herself thus, in capitals, in her article ‘How I Found Adventure’, published in *The Blue Book Magazine*, April 1939, reprinted in *The Green Book: Writings on Irish Gothic, Supernatural and Fantastic Literature*, 14 (2019): 43–47, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48573147>.

³ For example, Béatrice Grimshaw, *L’énigmatique Lady Mary* (Paris: Soc. parisienne d’éd., 1946), a translation and ‘adaptation’ by Louis Labat of her 1920 novel, *The Terrible Island*. Sometimes her work was simply appropriated and re-written: Georges Clavigny claimed authorship of *Vaiti, la Panthère du Pacifique* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1929) which was a reworking of Grimshaw’s *Vaiti of the Islands*, 1907, <https://www.le-rayon-populaire.com/node/6347>.

issues must have totalled many thousands.⁴ The late nineteenth century saw an expansion in steamship routes from Australasia to the Pacific islands that both facilitated and fostered growing public interest in leisure travel.⁵ Grimshaw took on commissions from the new cruise companies to write essays to encourage travel.



Beatrice Grimshaw, 1907, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland

⁴ Even this very extensive bibliography, which runs to many pages, is incomplete: <http://grimshaworigin.org/prominent-grimshaw-individuals/bibliography-of-beatrice/>.

⁵ Nicholas Halter, *Australian Travellers in the South Seas* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021), 61.

She was a prolific correspondent for newspapers and magazines across the English-speaking world, from the *Times* in London, to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in Sydney, to *Life* in the USA. She wrote many series of articles on her travel experiences, mostly in the South Pacific, each series consisting of between eight to fifteen articles and many of them thousands of words long. The articles she wrote between 1905 and 1906 on the New Hebrides for the *Sydney Morning Herald* are listed in the Appendix, the word count for each article revealing her extraordinary productivity. Only a year later she wrote a series of fifteen articles, 'The Truth about Papua', also for the *Herald*, again totalling many thousands of words, and several books in the same period, including *Fiji and its Possibilities* (1907), published as *From Fiji to the Cannibal Islands* in London, that will be discussed in detail later in the article.⁶

As the century progressed, she ventured beyond the written word, adapting her talents to the new opportunities that film and radio offered: several of her novels were made into films—*Thunder Island* in 1921, *Conn of the Coral Seas* in 1928, also a silent film but the first, claimed the publicity, with a soundtrack of 'native music'. It was filmed in Australia under the title *The Adorable Outcast* by Norman Dawn, the follow up to his celebrated *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1927) and was quite successful.⁷ She spent the longest stationary period of her peripatetic life on Papua, where for many years she ran a plantation, before retiring to Bathurst in New South Wales in 1936 where she lived until her death in 1953. Just as she adopted the interests of Australia, so Australia adopted her, the press regularly referring to her from the 1930s as 'our Australian writer' or 'an Australian author at her best'.

Grimshaw's 'imperial eye'

It might be thought that a woman who flouted gendered conventions in her independent travel across the world also harboured other unconventional ideas, perhaps in relation to racial hierarchies or imperial ambitions. There has been heightened interest in recent years in the role in the colonial project of European women, who had been long dismissed as merely the adjuncts

⁶ Beatrice Grimshaw, *From Fiji to the Cannibal Islands* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1907); *Fiji and its Possibilities* (New York: Double Day, Page & Co., 1907).

⁷ It was shown in America under the title *Black Cargoes of the Pacific*.

of conquest, taking no part in colonisation as writers or active agents but merely adding to military control a moral and domestic dimension.⁸ In the case of Grimshaw's writing, however, intention and agency are clearly demonstrated. Writing in the period of 'high imperialism' she was, despite her Irish roots, closely aligned with British imperialism, until she found her true home in identification with the cause of Australian sub-imperialism. In her travel writing, fiction and reporting, Grimshaw shared overtly and unapologetically what Mary Louise Pratt termed the 'imperial eye': she was centrally concerned with the 'possibilities' of the colonised territory, as the title of one of her books, *Fiji and its Possibilities*, reveals. In other words, she wrote from the viewpoint of the acquisition and appropriation of Indigenous territories for European settlement and recorded what she considered the 'progress' of these islands under white rule and missionary contact. She sought through her writing and her political interventions to foster the interests of Australia in the islands of the South Pacific, those belonging to both the French and the British Empires. Accounting for her motives in *In the Strange South Seas* she declared this to be the principal aim of her writing:

To find out as far as possible what were the prospects for settlers in some of the principal Pacific groups was the main object of my journey to the Islands. It had always seemed to me that the practical side of Pacific life received singularly little attention in most of the books of travel.⁹

Writing at the height of the belief in social darwinism and rigid racial hierarchies, she adopted and propagated these ideas in relation to the Indigenous peoples she encountered in the South Seas. The fear of miscegenation underpinned some of the romances in her novels where the love between the hero and heroine can be fulfilled only when the latter is discovered to be 'really white', as the synopsis of the film *The Adorable Outcast* exemplifies:

⁸ Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference. An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 62–63.

⁹ Beatrice Grimshaw, *In the Strange South Seas* (London: Hutchinson, 1907), 51.

A young adventurer, Stephen Conn (Edmund Burns) is in love with an island girl, Luya (Edith Roberts). An evil blackbirder Fursey (Walter Long) kidnaps Luya to get his hands on some gold, but Stephen rescues her with the help of Luya's tribe. When it is revealed that Luya's parents were white, she and Stephen are married.

Grimshaw also shared the belief in racial hierarchies that drew supposed distinctions between Polynesians and Melanesians to the disadvantage of the latter. The contrast between her portraits of French Polynesia and the Tahitians and those of the islands and islanders in the Melanesian group is stark, although it must be borne in mind that this contrast also reflected the different objectives and conventions of the genres in which she was writing, whether cruise publicity or assessments of the prospects for settlement. In *Islands of the Blest*, 1910, written for the United Steamship Company based in New Zealand, the largest shipping company in the southern hemisphere which ran regular services to the islands of the South Pacific, she wrote glowingly of the tourist destinations of Rarotonga and Tahiti, while lamenting that France had secured the latter, the jewel of the Pacific. The country and inhabitants of French Polynesia are described in a series of superlatives: 'Nowhere in all the great South Seas is anything to be found more lovely, more fascinating, more full of subtle, lingering charm than exquisite Tahiti'. Its women are the most beautiful in the region; the scenery 'magnificent beyond description'.¹⁰

As this article will show, quite different aims and considerations underpinned her descriptions of the New Hebrides: less sought after as a tourist destination, Grimshaw was not called upon to sing that territory's praises. On the contrary her interest lay in representing these islands and their inhabitants in the most negative light.

Her influence on the public imaginary

Other writers, such as Louis Becke, Frederick Marryat (mid-nineteenth century), Stevenson and Conrad had written or were writing novels about the South Seas; Australian-born Louis Becke was a prolific and popular

¹⁰ Beatrice Grimshaw, *Islands of the Blest* (Dunedin, New Zealand: Union Steam Ship Company of NZ, Ltd, 1907), 20 and 26. The title is a quote from Kipling.

writer whose writings ‘were better known and admired at the turn of the century than those of his now more famous contemporaries’.¹¹ In addition to her numerous novels and short stories, however, Grimshaw contributed to the representation of the Pacific islands in the public imaginary through her extensive reports and travelogues, with their claim to the authenticity of personal experience. She wrote well, in a lively, confiding style, her impressions conveyed with the vividness and immediacy of an eyewitness account, and therefore all the more able to draw in the readers and convince them of the accuracy of her representations. She addressed the reader as a good acquaintance and wrote with humour about the travails and hardships of travel; her colourful descriptions were highly evocative of the sights, sounds, smells of the places she visited, and the tastes of the exotic foods she readily ate.

Her numerous writings on the South Pacific islands must have had an impact on a public that had little direct knowledge of the islands. I have already commented on the number, prominence and length of her newspaper articles, sometimes illustrated with her own photographs, and the regularity with which her articles appeared in the press in a country described in the 1880s as ‘the land of newspapers’.¹² She flattered the readers’ prejudices and satisfied their taste for sensationalism—stories of cannibals were a prominent feature of her reporting. That these made popular copy is certain: an article with ‘cannibal’ in the headline would be reprinted many times across different papers, as the Appendix illustrates. Stories of her encounters with cannibals even appeared in the French press from time to time.¹³

¹¹ Jennifer Fuller, ‘Terror in the South Seas: Violence, Relationships and the Works of Louis Becke’, *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* 20, no. 2 (2015): 42–57.

¹² Richard Twopeny: ‘This is essentially the land of newspapers. Nearly everyone can read, and nearly everybody has the leisure to do so’. ‘Newspapers’, *Town Life in Australia* (London: Elliot Stock, 1883).

¹³ ‘Poursuivie un jour par l’un de ces ogres, Miss Grimshaw ne dut son salut qu’à son éloquence persuasive et à son browning de bonnes dimensions’. ‘Miss Béatrice Grimshaw,’ *La Dépêche*, May 11, 1922.

The alleged practice of cannibalism, as Karin Speedy has written,¹⁴ was considered an infallible marker of the savage. More than that, argues Tracey Banivanua Mar, it constituted a ‘functional knowledge ... that compelled, explained and justified a continued colonial presence’,¹⁵ for it was represented as a practice that would spring back if the natives were ‘released from white control’, a convenient justification for ongoing colonisation. In 1907, Grimshaw predicted that ‘the Fijian of to-day, freed from the white control and example that have moulded his life, would spring back like an unstrung bow to the thoughts and ways of his fathers’.¹⁶

Grimshaw’s articles catered to her audiences’ prejudices but also created and reinforced them: in Foucauldian terms Grimshaw produced, through her discourse, the South Seas for her early twentieth century readers. The impact of her reporting was all the greater in that it was often accompanied by photographs that she took herself. The technique for reproducing photos in newsprint had been mastered only in the mid-1890s, leading to a boom in sales for illustrated newspapers and magazines that coincided with Grimshaw’s early reporting. Moreover the portable box Brownie camera, invented only in 1900, suddenly made photography accessible for the traveller:

... illustrated magazines and weekend newspapers offered visual short cuts to knowledge of other worlds and the experience of being there with the photographer, traveller, missionary or patrol officer. They provided evidence to support long-held or newly adopted, opinions, beliefs and attitudes. Photographs were a new media and assumed to

¹⁴ Karin Elizabeth Speedy, “‘After me fellow caicaï you’”: Eating The Other/The Other Eating’, *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 10, no. 2 (July 2013).

¹⁵ ‘Cannibalism was neither fact, fiction nor fantasy. It was a functional knowledge that derived from a particular European colonising gaze on a world it surveyed and sought to order. The irrepressible savagery of a former cannibal bore the physical and intellectual features of a racial inferiority that compelled, explained and justified a continued colonial presence.’ Tracey Banivanua Mar, ‘Cannibalism in Fiji: A Study in Colonialism’s Discursive Atavism’, *Collisions of Cultures and Identities: Settlers and Indigenous Peoples*, eds Patricia Grimshaw and Russell McGregor (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2006), 155–175.

¹⁶ Grimshaw, *Fiji and its Possibilities*, 71.

be from real life and to offer a level of truth superior to literary and artistic representation and the annotation “taken by the author” carried authenticity and accuracy.¹⁷

Reporting from the New Hebrides

From the time of her journalistic career in London, her dream was to go to the Pacific islands. On the walls of her office ‘there were maps of far-away places, maps with tantalizing blanks in them; maps of the huge Pacific, colored an entrancing blue. I swore that I would go there’.¹⁸ Having obtained the first of many newspaper commissions, she embarked from San Francisco in 1904, sailing first to Tahiti, then Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, Rarotonga and some of the Cook Islands.

At the end of ‘twenty months’ wanderings’ through the islands of the Eastern and Middle Pacific, Grimshaw eventually found herself in Sydney in September 1905, where, she wrote, ‘everyone was talking about the New Hebrides’.¹⁹ Although everyone had an opinion about them, about the tariffs, the labour question and the impact of the White Australia policy, no one knew, she claimed, anything about the place. This was a lacuna that Grimshaw decided to fill and, armed with the commission of Special Correspondent for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, she set off on the regular monthly steamship from Sydney to Port Vila operated by Burns Philp.²⁰ She was not the first Special Correspondent appointed by the *Herald* to report on the New Hebrides—such was the public interest that three years earlier,

¹⁷ Max Quanchi, ‘The Power of Pictures; Learning-by-Looking at Papua in Illustrated Newspapers and Magazines’, *Australian Historical Studies* 35, no. 123 (2004), 38–39. Quanchi lists multiple examples of Grimshaw’s illustrated articles. *Isles of Adventure*, discussed later, was lavishly illustrated with sixteen leaves of plates of her own photographs.

¹⁸ Grimshaw, ‘How I Found Adventure’, 43.

¹⁹ Grimshaw, *Fiji and its Possibilities*, 201.

²⁰ Grimshaw was later to report that Burns Philp, which received a Commonwealth grant to serve the New Hebrides route, represented the most prominent British presence in the colony: ‘to the outsider coming from far-away Britain, it seems as though France and Burns, Philp [*sic*] were politely disputing the ownership of the New Hebrides, rather than France and Australia’. ‘Life in Vila: An Explosive Magazine’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 25, 1905, 6.

the paper had appointed Banjo Patterson to accompany a group of settlers to the islands.²¹

From that date began her involvement in the new nation of Australia's attempts to exercise control over its immediate Pacific neighbours. Although she increasingly devoted her efforts to fostering settlement and investment in those islands (notably Papua) that Australia directly controlled (from 1906), her early interventions in South Pacific politics were directed towards those that had 'escaped' British control, and should ideally be brought under its governance, notably New Caledonia and the New Hebrides. Between 1905 and 1908, through her reporting and her political lobbying, she argued for a British or preferably Australian takeover of these groups of islands. Her interventions were not, moreover, at odds with the disposition of the times since, for a range of security and commercial reasons, the political class, press and public, particularly on the east coast of Australia, were generally in favour of such a policy.

From late 1905 to early 1906 Grimshaw, armed with her Special Commission, wrote a series of articles, not only for the *Herald* but for other Australian papers, from the New Hebrides, governed jointly by France and Britain and coveted by Australia. The earlier 1880s Agreement between the two imperial powers was about to be revised and formalised as the Anglo-French Condominium, despite the opposition of Australia which was kept out of the discussions and presented with a *fait accompli*. What portrait did she offer of the New Hebrides? While it is difficult to summarise the many thousands of words that she wrote on the islands during this period, it is notable that her articles were redolent of tropes typical of colonial discourse. Describing the lands as 'unused', she deplored the precarious life of white settlers whose 'commerce [is] dependent on the Santo man's fancy to welcome, or not welcome, strangers on his unused lands'.²²

²¹ Elizabeth Rechniewski, "'Voyage of the Pilgrims": New Hebrides, June 1902. Australia's First Attempt at Colonisation'. *French Australian Review* 65 (Australian Summer 2018–2019): 3–22.

²² 'The New Hebrides. New System of Control. Have We Been Out-manoeuvred? British Settlers Disenfranchised. The French Gain a Distinct Advantage. Strategic Points Secured', *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 8, 1906, 7, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/1323665>.

But, she asserted, the land is ‘valuable’: ‘the extraordinarily productive soil of the New Hebrides’, indeed of ‘all these fertile tropical islands’ had the potential to be rich and productive if ‘worked by the energetic white races, assisted by Indian or Chinese labour’.²³ Her articles deplored the chaos over land claims that led to uncertainty of ownership and the lack of any effective administrative or judicial oversight, all prejudicial to the efficient exploitation of the land.

It was a standard cliché in the Australian press, flattering to British ears, to assert that the French were poor colonisers and administrators, unable to manage the land productively—and crueller than their British counterparts. Grimshaw obligingly furnished her readers with examples of such ill-treatment, though these were based on secondhand reports.²⁴ Moreover the lurid descriptions that she gave of the wild and precarious conditions on the islands, ruled by their evil inhabitants, justified an eventual takeover by British administration: ‘Westward of the Fijis lie the dark, wicked cannibal groups of the Solomons, Banks, and New Hebrides, where life is more like a nightmare than a dream [and] murder stalks openly in broad daylight ...’.²⁵ Julie Evans writes:

such representations of the region’s indigenous peoples ... supported the imperial pretensions of the new Commonwealth of Australia, which cast its own colonising gaze northwards towards the peoples and resources of Papua/New Guinea, as well as inwards towards those it had already dispossessed.²⁶

²³ ‘Life in the New Hebrides II. New Hebridean Politics’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 2, 1905, 6, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/1324810>.

²⁴ ‘... far too much knocking about goes on in French plantations. There are planters who are known each to have kicked a man to death; and shooting is not unknown’. ‘Life in the New Hebrides. I. Life in Vila—an Explosive Magazine’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 25, 1905, 6, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/1324726>.

²⁵ Beatrice Grimshaw, *From Fiji to the Cannibal Islands*, 39.

²⁶ Julie Evans, “‘How White She Was!’ Race, Gender and Global Capital in the Life and Times of Beatrice Grimshaw”, *Collisions of Cultures and Identities: Settlers and Indigenous Peoples*, eds Patricia Grimshaw and Russell McGregor (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2006), 142–154, 143.

This article extends Evans' conclusions to include Australian ambitions over the New Hebrides and to a lesser extent, New Caledonia.

The British settler Maurice Witts, who kept a diary of his years at Hog Harbour on Espirito Santo in the New Hebrides, recorded meeting Grimshaw in late October 1905, when she arrived at Malekula on board the *Tambo*. He cynically remarked: 'Ms Beatrice Grimshaw—the veracious chronicler of “island” life—has been a passenger as far as Malekula, where she stayed in hope (for the sake of copy) of being eaten alive by cannibals or something of that sort'.²⁷ While Witts reported one possible instance of cannibalism during the two years of his diaries, Grimshaw's description of life in Malekula was very different from his: 'Darker spots upon the surface of the earth than Malekula there cannot be; worse fiends in or out of it than most of the natives not the wildest imaginations of madhouses could picture'.²⁸ As Susan Gardner writes: 'legitimation of foreign control required debasement of New Hebrideans, and Grimshaw accomplished this with typical thoroughness, in both reportage and fiction'.²⁹ Grimshaw intended her dire depictions of life there to condemn the lax governance of the islands by an administration split between the French and the indifferent British, and to urge the transfer to British or preferably Australian sole control.

Grimshaw's strongest protest at the 'encroachment' of the French in the New Hebrides came in an article on March 8, 1906, the last in the series written for the *Herald*. In it she lambasted the supine indifference of the British government and the ignorance of the officials who negotiated the Condominium agreement: 'on the English side there was not a single person who really understood or cared about island affairs'.³⁰ As a result the French, who had for years, she argued, been encouraging and facilitating settlement in the most strategic points of the islands, were in prime position to extend their influence and control. 'Have we been outmanœuvred' she

²⁷ Maurice Myles Witts, *Diary for 1905*, entry for October 21, 1905. Original diary held under p.m.b manuscript no. 8, at Pacific Manuscripts Bureau, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University.

²⁸ Grimshaw, *Fiji and its Possibilities*, 262.

²⁹ Susan Gardner, 'A "vert to Australianism": Beatrice Grimshaw and the Bicentenary', *Hecate* 13, no. 2 (November 1987): 31–68

³⁰ 'New Systems of Control', *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 8, 1906.

asked rhetorically, her use of the pronoun ‘we’ in discussing the future of the islands revealing her total identification with white, Australian interests. To these strictures against the British she added a critique of the ‘apathy’ of the Australian government and their unfavourable treatment of British settlers, whose crops, produced by ‘black labour’, faced tariffs on entry into Australia.

Political advocacy

How influential were Grimshaw’s writings? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the *Herald* accorded them considerable importance, citing them in an editorial in December 1905 that warned of the dangers of inactivity over the New Hebrides,³¹ and again in an editorial in February 1906:

The two Powers agreed to appoint a Commission to settle the disputes of their respective nationals in the said islands with regard to landed property. Articles which have appeared in our columns from our special commissioner in the New Hebrides, Miss Beatrice Grimshaw, have had a special bearing on these questions.³²

Beyond the readers of the *Herald*, her articles were noticed and cited by the political elites of the day. Several paragraphs from an article in her series ‘The Truth About Papua’, also written for the *Herald*, were read into Hansard in Federal Parliament on March 24, 1908 by Elliot Johnson, who described her as an ‘observant and vigorous writer’. Johnson used her text to advocate for the abolition of tariffs on Papuan produce, and also to warn against Japanese encroachment on Thursday Island and elsewhere.³³ During a lengthy debate in the House of Representatives in September 1909 on the disadvantages under which the British settlers in the New Hebrides laboured, Dr Frank Liddell, a proponent of free trade, quoted at length from Grimshaw’s opinions on the intentions of the French and the general progress of the islands.³⁴

³¹ ‘Australia’s Neighbours’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 23, 1905, 10, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/14739360>.

³² ‘The New Hebrides. Ownership of Lands’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 1, 1906, 7, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/1325519>.

³³ William Elliot Johnson (1862–1932) was a long-serving member of the House of Representatives (1903–1928) and a free trader.

³⁴ ‘Question. Papua and the Pacific Islands’, House of Representatives, September 2, 1909, https://historichansard.net/hofreps/1909/19090902_reps_3_51/#subdebate-14-0-s2.

Although Australia had been thwarted by the 1906 Anglo-French agreement in its aim to secure exclusive British control over the New Hebrides, the political class and the press on the east coast of Australia in particular, had not entirely renounced their claims over the islands, a fact of which Grimshaw was clearly aware. In January 1908, she reached out to Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, offering to help Australia secure control over the New Hebrides and even New Caledonia, though one might have supposed that prize had long since slipped from Australia's grasp. In her newspaper articles she had written scathingly of the foreshadowed Condominium agreement and Australia's apparent reluctance to intervene in defence of its own interests:

at the present showing, the New Hebrides tangle does not seem likely to untangle itself before the trump of doom... Australia, to whom the islands should rightly look for their preservation, will have none of them. France—conspicuously unsuccessful with every Pacific colony she has ever owned—is anxious to take them, rightly or wrongly. Great Britain will not let either have them and will not take them herself. So the tangle drags on, and the reign of terror continues unabated.³⁵

To Deakin, more confidentially, she wrote to offer her services, boasting of her ability to support the Australian cause both under her own name and anonymously. Deakin had been a determined supporter of Australian interests in the New Hebrides since the 1880s. Speaking in the Federal parliament in August 1905 during a debate on the New Hebrides, Deakin had said: 'for more than twenty years I have been acting with those who sought to increase Australian interests in the New Hebrides, and to secure the islands for the Empire'.³⁶ In January 1908 Grimshaw wrote to him:

³⁵ 'Life in the New Hebrides. VII. Netik', *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 6, 1906, 6, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/1325214>.

³⁶ On August 10, 1905 a lengthy debate took place in the House of Representatives on a motion by Elliot Johnson for 'the promotion of British and Australian settlement in the New Hebrides Group'. Declaring the Government's 'entire sympathy' with the motion, Deakin expressed his personal commitment to the 'patriotic opinions' expressed in the House that day. https://historichansard.net/hofreps/1905/19050810_reps_2_25/#subdebate-13-0.

Having seen something like the beginning of the contest over the islands [the New Hebrides] and heard practically all that has gone on since, I am anxious to be of use to the Australian side in any way that I can.... I am acting as occasional correspondent (by special arrangement) for *The Times* and I have active and intelligent agents in London and also in Sydney, who place anything I may send them in the most effective manner, when I need it. I have a very satisfactory system of spreading any desired information or impression widely through the press of the world, not necessarily under my own signature.

If you can give me your views about the recent aspects of the New Hebrides question, and what you most wish to see done, I will do my best to assist the end that may seem to you best for Australian interests. It is my belief... that New Caledonia will really be for disposal sooner or later. The two of course hang together.³⁷

Did Deakin encourage Grimshaw to use her contacts in this way and did she do so? It is known that Grimshaw had written articles under a pseudonym for *The Social Review*, and no doubt she had a network of contacts in the newspaper world from her time in Dublin and London and her extensive publishing activity. Grimshaw referred to a reply from Deakin in a later exchange but there is no record of his letters to her among his papers. In mid-1908 Grimshaw wrote once again to Deakin to ask if ‘the time [wa]s ripe’ to raise the issue of the New Hebrides and New Caledonia in the ‘home papers’—she meant in the UK—and discussed whether the Solomons, New Caledonia and the New Hebrides could and should be taken over by Australia. She argued against the suggestion, apparently circulating in some official circles, that the New Hebrides and New Caledonia, if taken over by the British, should become Crown colonies, instead advocating direct administration from Australia by a governor who ‘really understands the needs of his country’.³⁸

³⁷ Letter from Grimshaw to Deakin, January 25, 1908, Port Moresby, <http://grimshaworigin.org/prominent-grimshaw-individuals/beatrice-grimshaw-south-pacific/#DeakinLetter>.

³⁸ Letter from Grimshaw to Deakin, June 2, 1908, <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-228370479/view>.

Grimshaw returned to Australia in September 1908 and took up residence at the Grand Hotel in Melbourne. There followed over the next month further correspondence and some meetings between Grimshaw and Deakin. Although we do not have copies of his letters, hers were clearly reciprocated, since she referred to his replies. Moreover her letters make clear that they met on several occasions in Melbourne: one handwritten note of October 14, 1908, reveals that she is sending him nerve pills because she thought he looked rather poorly when they last met. It is clear that, in the absence of any progress on the issue of the New Hebrides, they have been discussing Australia's interests in the development of Papua, and that she has been lobbying for an official government commission to report on the colony in order to encourage settlement and investment.³⁹

The award to her of this commission, without prior discussion in Parliament nor open competition, was not without its critics both within Parliament and without; a few MPs questioned the accuracy of her accounts of life on South Sea islands, a criticism echoed in parts of the press. Deakin however, argued that she was an excellent choice: no one could rival her first-hand knowledge of the region and her experience in promoting its attractions and the 'possibilities' offered by the South Pacific islands. He assured the members, moreover, that the money she would receive 'barely reached three figures',⁴⁰ a small fraction of the AU20,000 pounds that the Parliament voted each year for publicity to promote the development of the North of the continent and the neighbouring British islands—a budget that had apparently gone almost entirely unspent until then. And so on October 23, 1908 Grimshaw set sail for Papua armed with a commission from the Federal government.

It is not clear exactly what form her work on the commission was to take.

³⁹ Letter from Grimshaw to Deakin, October 1, 1908, Grand Hotel Melbourne, <https://nla.gov.au:443/tarkine/nla.obj-228370743>.

⁴⁰ Correspondence between Atlee Hunt, Secretary of the Department of External Affairs and the Governor of Papua, Hubert Murray, when Grimshaw submitted the manuscript of her book *The New New Guinea*, reveals that there was no written agreement; Hunt cites an official who 'remembered' that she was to be paid \$100 by the Papuan administration. Atlee Hunt, October 6, 1909, to Hubert Murray, in the file 'The New Guinea book written by B. Grimshaw under arrangement with the Commonwealth Government', NAA: A1, 1909.15261, item ID 5921.

In parliament Deakin referred to ‘one or more descriptive pamphlets’.⁴¹ A pamphlet, or official report submitted to parliament, if one was requested or written, has not survived but it seems likely that she was asked by Deakin to do exactly what she had offered to do: to ‘place’ articles in the anglophone press lauding the prospects of settlement in the British and Australian controlled Pacific islands. Indeed she went far beyond her commission, publishing the following year under her own name in London, Australia and the United States, several articles and a book whose thrust was to promote settlement.⁴² Moreover it is entirely possible that she also published articles under a pseudonym, as she had previously offered to do.

Writing about New Caledonia

Deakin left the office of Prime Minister in November 1908 and I have found no further correspondence between him and Grimshaw. From 1909, Grimshaw, now nearly 40 years old, settled in Papua where she lived for most of the next 26 years. Following her own advice on the prospects for profitable investment, she ran several plantations, including for copra and tobacco, with one of her brothers, although at least one of these ventures, a tobacco plantation bought in 1933, seems to have been a failure, since it was sold in 1934. She continued to write as prolifically as ever, and although many of her short stories and novels were now set in Papua, she also drew on a range of sources that bore witness to her earlier travels to New Caledonia where, she wrote, she had slept in a former convict cell in a building converted into a hotel, on the ‘famous, infamous French penal island’.⁴³

In 1930 Cassell published *The Star in the Dust*, the story of a French woman, Yvonne Salle, daughter of a disreputable father whose activities

⁴¹ ‘Question. Mr Bowden. Papua: Miss Grimshaw’s Pamphlet’, October 14, 1908, House of Reps, https://historichansard.net/hofreps/1908/19081014_reps_3_47/#subdebate-3-0-s1.

⁴² Two illustrated articles about Papua appeared in *Life* (Sydney) in 1909 under the telling title, ‘Australia’s Island Asset’. ‘Australia’s First Colony’ was published in the *Times* (London) September 21, 1909. These were accompanied by more articles and books on the same topic the following year, including *The New, New Guinea* (London: Hutchinson, 1910).

⁴³ Grimshaw, ‘How I Found Adventure’, 45.

lead to the young girl being deported to New Caledonia and the penitentiary in Bourail from where her lover Piers eventually helps her to escape.⁴⁴ The reviewers noted the ‘grim’ portrayal in the novel of the horrors of penal settlement and convict life:⁴⁵ ‘there is no glossing over of the details of the trials endured by the wretches who are called upon to serve a sentence there’.⁴⁶ Several chapters of her part autobiography *Isles of Adventure* (1930) recounted her visit to New Caledonia in 1928: one is entitled ‘New Caledonia. Land of the Lost’, another, about the Île Nou, ‘Nightmare Island’. These chapter titles convey well the thrust of Grimshaw’s description of the French colony; while acknowledging that ‘we’ had inflicted the same terrible suffering on convicts transported to Tasmania and Norfolk Island, she saw in the ‘ghosts’, the pathetic old men who wandered the town or starved in the remaining jails, the lingering presence of this ‘cruel’ punishment, and a constant reminder of the past.⁴⁷ These grim depictions of the penal colony and its legacy, years after it had closed, perpetuated the association between New Caledonia and convictism explored by Alexis Bergantz.⁴⁸

Suffering from occasional bouts of malaria, she retired to ‘Wayside’ in Kelso near Bathurst in 1936, though she continued to undertake trips internationally and to the Pacific Islands until war broke out. During the war she wrote many articles and stories for the Australian press. In one she reflected on the best way to acquire a foreign language and, using the example of the teaching of French, criticised the formal approach of grammarians and advocated what we would today call a ‘bain linguistique’.⁴⁹ She also spoke on radio, on topics ranging from tales of her travels on 2BL in June 1941

⁴⁴ Beatrice Grimshaw, *The Star in the Dust* (London: Cassell & Co, 1930).

⁴⁵ ‘Books of the Week’, *Derbyshire Times and Chesterfield Herald*, June 28, 1930, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000541/19300628/016/0002>.

⁴⁶ ‘The Star in the Dust’, *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, March 22, 1930, 2, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000577/19300322/070/0002>.

⁴⁷ Beatrice Grimshaw, *Isles of Adventure: from Java to New Caledonia but principally Papua* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1930).

⁴⁸ Alexis Bergantz, *French Connection: Australia’s Cosmopolitan Ambitions* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2021), 59–80.

⁴⁹ ‘Towers of Babel. Learning New Tongues’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 27, 1943, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/17838530>.

to suggestions for frugal cooking and the growing of vanilla beans, as the war progressed. In the short story ‘Strange Choice in Caledonia’ published in 1941, she spun a highly coloured tale of the supposedly true story behind the revolt of Ataï in New Caledonia,⁵⁰ drawing on Henri Rivière’s briefer and more sober account in his *Souvenirs de la Nouvelle-Calédonie* that she had apparently read in a library in Noumea.⁵¹ With her usual unerring eye for telling detail and an appeal to the reader to contemplate what choice they might have made, Grimshaw embroidered a highly-coloured portrait of Ataï as the spurned lover of a white woman, Madame A. In the introduction to the story, she noted that the Kanak had recently declared themselves for de Gaulle and commented with some amusement on the political distance covered in the last sixty years.

In 1948 she was granted a literary pension by the Commonwealth Literary Fund, although Gardner states that she turned it down as the amount was so small. Grimshaw lived in poverty at Oberon, where she had moved in 1941, until her death in 1953, her grave unmarked until a plaque was placed beside it by Susan Gardner in the 1980s. More recently still, in 2017, Grimshaw was named as one of the ‘pillars of Bathurst’, her epitaph reading simply ‘Writer and Traveller’. Behind these anodyne words lies the remarkable story of a woman whose writings, both because of her own commitment to the cause of Australian imperialism and in response to the expectations of her public, crystallised the representations of the South Pacific islands in the public imaginary in the early twentieth century. Not only did Grimshaw justify an imperial viewpoint at a critical time in nation formation and in the context of the White Australia policy, she was also an agent of colonisation, undertaking commissions to encourage settlement whether from the Governor of Fiji,⁵² or from the Australian government.

⁵⁰ ‘Strange Choice in Caledonia’, *The Home, an Australian Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (April 1, 1941): 31 and 56. A shorter version of this story appears in *Isles of Adventure*, 284–285. Ataï was a Kanak chief, the leader of a revolt against the French colonisers in 1878.

⁵¹ Henri Rivière, *Souvenirs de la Nouvelle-Calédonie. L’insurrection canaque* (Paris: Calmann Levy, 1881). The story on which Grimshaw drew is found on pages 140–142.

⁵² Hugh Laracy, ‘Pride and Prejudice in Papua’, *Watriama and Co, Further Pacific Island Portraits* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2013), 141–168, 145.

Largely overlooked until now has been the attention she paid to Australia's relationship to France in the context of early twentieth century Pacific rivalry. Her negative portrayal of the neighbouring islands under French colonisation, New Caledonia and the New Hebrides, in her reporting, travel writing and fiction, reflected and contributed to the general distrust with which Australia viewed France's presence in the region. New Caledonia could not escape, in her portrayal, its convict past, prolonged in its cruel neglect of the libérés and remaining prisoners, while the 'tangle of the New Hebrides' condemned those islands to the half-life of savagery. Concerning those further afield such as French Polynesia, object of touristic curiosity rather than political ambition, she perpetuated the tropes of a tropical paradise. That she wrote so well about these places, in such a vivid and compelling style, may be seen as compounding or redeeming her reputation—it certainly made her writing all the more influential.

The University of Sydney

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Appendix

Results of a Trove search for articles about the New Hebrides written by Beatrice Grimshaw that appeared in the Australian press between 1905–1907. I have included the word count of each article in the series she wrote for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, so that their prominence and likely impact can be recognised.

‘Life in the New Hebrides I. Life in Vila—An Explosive Magazine’.

Sydney Morning Herald, November 25, 1905: 6.

(4136 words)

‘Life in the New Hebrides II. New Hebridean Politics’.

Sydney Morning Herald, December 2, 1905: 6.

(2680 words)

‘Life in the New Hebrides III. Among the Heathen. S. W. Bay, Malekula, Oct. 24’.

Sydney Morning Herald, December 9, 1905: 6.

(4010 words)

‘Life in the New Hebrides IV. A Call On the Cannibals’.

Sydney Morning Herald, December 16, 1905: 6.

(4122 words)

‘Life in the New Hebrides V. Hot Times in Tanna’.

Sydney Morning Herald, December 23, 1905: 6.

(2266 words)

- ‘Life in the New Hebrides VI. Avenging a Chieftain’.
Sydney Morning Herald, December 30, 1905: 5.
(2276 words)
- ‘Life in the New Hebrides VII. Netik’.
Sydney Morning Herald, January 6, 1906: 6.
(2035 words)
- ‘Life in the New Hebrides VIII’.
Sydney Morning Herald, February 24, 1906: 6.
(2138 words)
- ‘Life in the New Hebrides IX. The Burning Mountain’.
Sydney Morning Herald, March 3, 1906: 8.
(3736 words)
- ‘The New Hebrides. New System Of Control. Have We Been Out-
Manoeuvred? British Settlers Disenfranchised. The French Gain a
Distinct Advantage. Strategic Points Secured’.
Sydney Morning Herald, March 8, 1906: 7.
(3038 words)
- ‘In the Cannibal New Hebrides I’.
Wagga Wagga Advertiser (NSW), March 16, 1907: 3.
(2017 words)
- ‘In the Cannibal New Hebrides II’.
Wagga Wagga Advertiser, March 23, 1907: 6.
(2039 words)
- ‘The Cannibal New Hebrides. Newly Visited Places’.
The Register (Adelaide, SA), March 29, 1907: 7.
(1396 words)
- ‘In the New Hebrides. A Cannibal Fortress’.
Canowindra Star and Eugowra News (NSW), May 3, 1907: 6.
(327 words)
- This article was reprinted in:
Quirindi Herald and District News (NSW), May 10, 1907: 2.
Examiner (Launceston, Tas), April 4, 1907: 7.
The Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser (NSW)
May 4, 1907: 4.