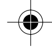

A name that featured once or twice a year

New Caledonia in mid-twentieth century Australia

Max Quanchi

THERE IS AN INCREASING INTEREST IN VISUAL HISTORY AND ANALYSIS OF THE Pacific Island colonial photography found in personal albums, in the loose, often incomplete collections of museums, institutions and repositories and in scientific and expedition reports.[1] Recent research has highlighted nuances in and beyond the frame and put individual images under aesthetic, scientific and philosophical scrutiny, thus beginning to create greater historical awareness of 'globally disseminated and locally appropriated' images and their impact on metropolitan self-identity (Pinney 2003: 1; see also Edwards 1992, 2001; Ryan 1997; McKenzie 1984). This research has usually focused on interpreting the evidential aspect of a single image, or images not seen by the general public, or images not seen at all until a hundred years later. The emphasis is often on the photographer in the field[2] or the use made of a particular image by seminal Euro-American thinkers, professors and authors who gained access through collaborators resident in Oceania. Photography archives and repositories are also trawled in search of illustration by authors and publishers who 'simply leaf through loosely organised card indexes of photographs to find visual "proof texts" for assertions that everyone tends to think must be true anyway'

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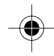
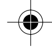


(Jenkins 2002: 160). Elizabeth Edwards argues that 'photographs cannot simply be reduced to signifiers of social forces and relations premised solely on models of alterity, or to models of spectacle and surveillance with a political matrix' (2003). Instead she argues for complexity and ambiguity and the use of photographs the better to understand the relationships in which they were created. The documentary, indexical nature of the cumulative mass of images published in newspapers, magazines, books and encyclopaedia (Quanchi 2003 a & c, 2006; Lutz & Collins 1993), as well as postcards (see Geary & Webb 1994), exhibitions and railway advertising campaigns is acknowledged, but the empirical research to measure public accessibility and the extent to which they shaped public opinion is only just beginning (Schwartz & Ryan 2003: Pt 2, 'Framing the nation'; Quanchi 2003b). Graham Clarke claims 'documentary photography has dominated the photographic history of the twentieth century … whether it was in *Picture Post, Time Magazine, Life* or a newspaper, the photograph as evidence of events was basic to the presentation of the story' (1997: 145). This is a reasonable claim but historians have been slow to examine circulation and consumption, and how much images influenced opinion in the social or public arena.

By not closely investigating the mass media impact of published photography, historians have missed photography's role in relation to the creation of national types and the stereotyping of territories and nations. Jens Jäger notes that nineteenth century landscape photography, representative of the countryside, aided the construction of national identities and distinctive 'imaginative geographies' (2003: 118) and this is what occurred in the public domain when the general public saw images of Hawai'i, Tahiti, New Caledonia, the Arctic or the Philippines in illustrated books and magazines. Photographs enabled European audiences to distinguish between indigenous French subjects in Morocco, Indochina and Tahiti.[3] But as Benito Vergara argues for the Philippines, 'readers/viewers were in no position to question the validity of the pictures for these were of a world beyond most of their experiences'. Vergara concluded that photography was the source of what American readers knew as 'the Philippines' (1995: 82). I wish to make a similar claim here, with the disclaimer that what Australians knew about 'New Caledonia' was partial and affected by the tendency of photo-journalism about



New Caledonia to be more silent and silencing than it was revealing. My interest in New Caledonia is part of a longer project comparing the published photographic archive of Australia's relations with, and knowledge of, neighbouring colonies and territories (its own and others') in the southwest Pacific in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Australian readers in the mid-twentieth century were offered a one-dimensional representation of New Caledonia as a European settler colony, integrated into world trade, modern and prosperous, and with a nearly invisible, presumably compliant indigenous population. The southwest Pacific was familiar to Australians in the early twentieth century through the forensic content of photographs, and the 'reality effect' or visual facts that generated meaning when they were seen in the public domain. However, the conceptualisation of a 'Pacific' region including the New Hebrides Condominium (Vanuatu), the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, the Australian Territory of Papua, the German (later Mandated) Territory of New Guinea and the British Crown Colony of Fiji encircled but did not include New Caledonia.[4] Based on illustrated English language books and illustrated magazines such as *National Geographic Magazine* and *Walkabout*, this paper positions what Australians learnt by looking-at, and looking-past, published photographs of New Caledonia in 1930 to 1970. Knowing New Caledonia only through mediated, uncontested and ambiguous visual evidence is then positioned against a background of broader Australia–New Caledonia histories and relationships.

Although Australia had historic trade, investment and shipping links with New Caledonia, for most of the twentieth century, as John Connell and John Lawrey noted, New Caledonia was marginalised as an imperial matter between France and the United Kingdom, and Australia had no reason to develop comprehensive bilateral relationships with Nouméa (Connell 1987: 106–07, 120; Lawrey 1975: 65–6; Dornoy 1984; Ward 1982: 1–12). The limited post–World War I Australian interest in the southwest Pacific declined when a promise of sub-imperial and commercial expansion came to nothing. Australia was left with only a joint mandatory role in Nauru and sole responsibility for the former German New Guinea, later linked to its existing colonial administration of Papua. New Caledonia became unimportant in the Australian

strategic, geographic and diplomatic consciousness of the region and as a French possession, it was of peripheral interest to Australian entrepreneurs and investors.[5]

Some Australians had been involved in mining, shipping and commerce in New Caledonia for much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During the 1895–1915 postcard craze, tens of thousands of postcards depicting New Caledonia circulated in Australia and, as the author Wilfred Burchett noted, Nouméa also featured as a port-of-call on post-1900 Pacific tourist routes. But English authors tended to highlight British colonies and, if visiting New Caledonia *en route* to other ports, included only one or two photographs to say 'I passed through Nouméa'. Later, the Nouméa *coup d'état* that removed the pro-Vichy government in 1940 was widely reported in Australia, but misunderstood and generally regarded as a minor side-show to the real war in Europe (Lawrey 1975; Simmington 1976). Although wartime censorship prevented news of the battle of the Coral Sea being published until after the battle was over, Australians knew Nouméa was a major supply base in the war. Fourteen years after the Pacific War, *Walkabout,* a popular Australian illustrated magazine (1934–74) reminded Australian readers that New Caledonia was 'nevertheless practically unknown to most Australians' (Lyons & Lyons 1959: 10).

Early in the twentieth century Australian readers were able to recognise locations, activities and indigenous people in an extensive gallery of published photography from the neighbouring Pacific Islands. There were at least fifty heavily illustrated English language publications offering a weekly, monthly or quarterly kaleidoscope of Pacific Island material including *The Queenslander*, *Sydney Mail*, *Australasian*, *Town and Country Journal*, *Wide World Magazine* and *Lone Hand*. These photographs were provided, randomly and unsolicited, mostly by travellers, officials and aspiring authors returning from a trip through the islands, and occasionally on commission. New Caledonia rarely featured in early British or Australian publications and visual material on New Caledonia was limited to a few photographs in books, novels and travelogues.[6] For example, in 1906, Clement Wragge in *The Romance of the South Seas* included 26 photographs of New Caledonia, in a profusely illustrated book of 307 pages. In 1924, W Ramsay Smith's *In Southern Seas* included photographs of

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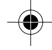

Ile Nou prison, an ox-cart, a Kanak skull and two views of Nouméa harbour and in 1933, twenty of the forty photographs in RR Bellamy's *The Real South Seas* were of New Caledonia.

The only English language books prior to 1940 to focus solely on New Caledonia were George Griffith, *In an Unknown Prison Land; an account of convicts and colonists in New Caledonia with jottings out and home* (1901) with 24 photographs of Nouméa and prison buildings; and Emma Hadfield, *Among the Natives of the Loyalty group* (1920) with 56 photographs of the Loyalty Islands. In a bibliography in his *Pacific Treasure Island* in 1941, Wilfred Burchett (1941b) listed nineteen books in French, but could list only Griffith's *In an Unknown Prison Land* and the news magazine *Pacific Islands Monthly* for English readers.

The Pacific War created a sudden strategic interest in the Pacific Islands and *National Geographic Magazine* (which had good sales in Australia), *Pix*, *Walkabout* and other magazines published illustrated articles to inform readers about New Caledonia's role in the war. *National Geographic Magazine* published articles by Douglas Oliver and Enzo de Chatelet in June and July 1942 but only one of the 22 photographs in Oliver's article was on New Caledonia. Enzo de Chatelet included 27 recently taken photographs, with nine full-page plates. Kanak were depicted in 30 per cent and mining and French officialdom in 40 per cent of the illustrations. The lack of published material on New Caledonia was again highlighted when an editor's footnote in *National Geographic Magazine* in 1942 (in Oliver 1942: 691) was able to cite only four articles generally about the Pacific, three previous articles on New Guinea and none on New Caledonia.

The war led to four new illustrated English language books being published. Wilfred Burchett's *Pacific Treasure Island* was re-issued in 1942, with a further three editions in 1944 in Bombay, Philadelphia and Melbourne, including 27 full-page black and white photographs or roughly one every ten pages. Sidney Reichenbach's *All You Wanted to Know about New-Caledonia* was published in Nouméa without illustrations in 1942 but reissued later in the year in Sydney with 16 photographs. Two more books were published in 1944: HEL Priday's *Cannibal Island: the turbulent story of New Caledonia's coasts* included 16 photographs and drawings; and HP Schmidt's, *New Caledonia: know her to*

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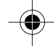
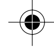


love her. A documentary survey of the French colony with illustrations, contained 30 photographs. Some of these images were provided from USA Army sources, but most were tourist views or reprints of postcards from the early 1900s, presented misleadingly as contemporary photographs. The quantity of accessible visual evidence on New Caledonia available to Australian readers was therefore minute, with only a hundred photographs of New Caledonia in English-language books prior to 1940, and another hundred in books published during the war.

In 1941, as a promotion for his book, Burchett published articles in *Digest of World Reading*, *The Age* (Melbourne), *Advertiser* (Adelaide), *Argus* (Melbourne), *Australia–Asiatic Bulletin* and *Pix*. Burchett thought New Caledonia 'a name that featured once or twice a year as a goal of a tourist cruise to the South Seas' (1941b: 11). Australian ignorance of New Caledonia was consistently noted by *Walkabout*'s authors. From inception in 1934 through to closure in 1974, *Walkabout*: *Australia and the South Seas*, later shortened to just *Walkabout*, was a popular magazine with high sales (by Australian standards) and a large readership in dentist's waiting rooms, private parlours and libraries. It consistently included illustrated articles on the western Pacific, particularly Papua and New Guinea. Fifty-two per cent of *Walkabout*'s Pacific coverage was on New Guinea. Although New Caledonia competed for space with other popular destinations – the Solomon Islands, Tahiti and Fiji[7] – the nineteen illustrated articles on New Caledonia in *Walkabout* comprised 25 per cent of the non–Papua and New Guinea coverage of the Pacific.[8] Balanced against this level of coverage was New Caledonia's omission from the monthly 'Our Cameraman's Walkabout' photography supplement (not appearing at all among 158 featured Pacific Island photographs) and omission from the special 'Island Walkabout' feature on Pacific countries that ran over six editions in 1971–72. In January 1942, an anonymous column (probably written by *Walkabout*'s editor, Charles Holmes) lamented that Australians did not realise the potential advantages of visiting a part of France a mere eight hours flying time away.[9] HEL Priday's *Walkabout* article repeated this plea a few months later (1942: 10).[10] This alleged ignorance prompted *Walkabout*'s editors to take the unusual step of including maps showing Australia's proximity to New Caledonia, a practice not adopted for other Pacific Island

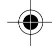


articles[11] and in April 1940, *Walkabout* tried to prompt some interest by including a small column on 'A corner of France in Australia' on the La Pérouse monument and land gift in perpetuity at Botany Bay, Sydney ('A corner . . .' 1940: 45–6).

The first photographs of New Caledonia to appear in *Walkabout* included a view of Nouméa looking over the town towards the *Vallée du Génie* and the military barracks and a crowd scene of uniformed indigenous *gendarmes*, French officials and colonists waiting on the quay for an arriving steamer. Three years later a portrait of a Kanak *gendarme*, a view of Nouméa's wharves and harbour and an urban streetscape were published and while clearly taken in a French colony, they could have been photographed anywhere in the French colonial empire in the 1930s. Many of the photographs contained no indexical sign within the image to suggest the setting was New Caledonia, and the streetscapes, harbour views and a car parked at a scenic lookout were common to rural areas or provincial cities across the colonial world. In 1939, two more illustrated articles on New Caledonia appeared in *Walkabout* and included views of Nouméa, the harbour, mining, farming, the coast and mountainous interior, consistent with the ratio between urban, mining, shipping and plantation photography published about other Pacific Island colonies.

Walkabout depicted New Caledonia as a successful French settler colony by including photographs of city and harbour scenes in Nouméa (21%), missions, mining and farming, (33%) and Japanese, Javanese and Tonkinese workers (11%). Kanak and Loyalty Islanders were anonymous in labouring roles and in the foreground of scenic views (14%). The emphasis on nickel, cattle and coffee underplayed the impact in New Caledonia of copra, cotton, chrome mining, tourism and the massive economic, infrastructure and social changes wrought by the American presence during the war. Reflecting the travelogue nature of some articles, 21% of the photographs in *Walkabout* were picturesque views of rivers, coasts and particularly the mountainous *Chaîne centrale*.[12]

The photographic evidence suggested a level of planter prosperity but this was not matched by actual development. Prior to 1942, 'life for European settlers especially in the more remote regions of the *Grande Terre* was narrow,



introspective and for many one of considerable poverty' (Connell 1987: 111). Cattle, coffee, sisal, cotton and copra were struggling. In 1939, Basil Hall, a regular commissioned photographer and writer in *Walkabout*, included five photographs of rural industry and declared cattle and coffee was a strange combination but spoke enthusiastically of *la brousse* (the bush) where he found 'the sort of self-reliant bushman any country would be proud to own. These are the people who use the mountain tracks – the real New Caledonians' (Hall 1939a: 15–18).[13] Photographs of cattle grazing in grassy river valleys, substantial farm buildings, laden ox-carts and groves of coffee gave the impression visually that rural settlers were doing well. In 1944, HP Schmidt noted 'every kind of vegetable thrives well with the exception perhaps of celery and cauliflower, although in the cooler inland valleys cauliflowers can be grown. Fruit is abundant.' The photograph on the facing page depicted a fine tree lined road leading to an allegedly successful planter's residence (Schmidt 1944: 64–5). A caption in Basil Hall's article (1939a), on a scenic view of the Farino Valley, informed readers there was little cultivation in the interior and cattle relied on unimproved natural pasture. In 1953, Charles Sayers reported there was little likelihood of rural prosperity until French settlers developed better crops, grazing practices and breeding. Kanak were dismissed as 'fair farmers' left to themselves to use simple farming methods to meet their own needs (Sayers 1953: 29–32).

The selection of a few photographs for publication occurred across several layers of judgement by photographers, authors, editors and publishers. These judgements included the picturesque, investment promotion, human interest, comparisons with other colonies or islands, picture quality, previous usage, author's insistence and often, the accident or convenience of having commissioned or unsolicited photographs on hand. The randomness of the images published meant industries such as sandalwood, bêche-de-mer, trochus, chrome, copra, and cotton and kauri pine were ignored. The coffee industry was highlighted and in particular, the unusual manner in which it was grown under plantation rows of shade trees. Coffee was an exotic and unusual crop to most Australians and was linked by Australian readers to the French preference for drinking coffee not tea. In 1953, New Caledonia was reported to be exporting a respectable 2000 tons of coffee a year to France and

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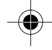

producing 'a good quality palatable *arabique* (Arabica) which yields well and could be further developed' (Sayers 1953: 31; Connell 1987: 140). Later, however, coffee cultivation collapsed in the 1960s and by the 1980s it was being imported from Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea. Burchett thought Kanak coffee growers on the East Coast who produced for profit were 'small capitalists' and 'Europeanised' compared to Kanak in the interior who grew coffee for their own domestic, subsistence consumption (Burchett 1941b: 65; Sayers 1953: 31).

Nickel mining was presented in both images and text as a New Caledonian success story. Photographs of equipment or actual mine operations were rare until 1959, as photographers were not able to visit the remote mining locations. Numerous views of Doniambo smelter, harbours at Anse du Tir and Baie de la Moselle, and photographs of railway lines and trains (a popular colonial icon of modernity and economic progress) suggested a busy export trade. Coverage in the magazine stressed Australian involvement in the early exploration, engineering and mine development, and the sale of coal from Port Kembla and Newcastle to the SLN (*Société le Nickel*). There was no reference in the text to the post–World War II domination of the nickel industry by SLN or its enormous social and economic impact in what was 'a company colony' (Connell 1987: 124; Lyons 1986: 109). Readers were not offered any visual clues to the power exerted by an alliance between French capital and the local elite, or the colony's reliance on an imported labour force (Ward, Connell & Spencer 1988: 7). Australian readers had a positive association with mining as it was being promoted in Australia as a successful, technological industry offering export earnings and employment and the New Caledonian industry was depicted similarly in Australia as a clean industry, conducted in remote mines, bulk-carrier terminals and ports.

Links to Australia were stressed. Student language exchanges, kauri pine and cattle hide imports were cited in the accompanying *Walkabout* text as potential relationships of mutual benefit. In 1935, Basil Hall predicted a closer association on the basis of economic links through reciprocal nickel, chrome and coal exports (Hall 1939b: 17).[14] He made mention of the *niaouli* tree (*Melaleuca leucodendron*) because its oil was similar to the eucalyptus of Australia, where it was also distilled and bottled as a medicinal essence (Hall 1939a: 15).

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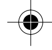
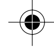


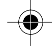
Elizabeth Nicholls thought 'the vegetation appears to be not unlike that of the Australian bush' (Nicholls 1938) and the attitude that Europeans 'could not stand up to manual work in the tropics', a popular belief in nineteenth century Australia, was reported to be still voiced in New Caledonia (Hall 1939b: 18). Many authors mentioned a café in Nouméa where it was possible to buy a pot of tea (Rees & Rees 1949: 13; Wrigley 1956: 18). The literary device in travel writing of finding similarities between the exotic and home partly explains the constant reference to Australia. But *Walkabout* was conceived as a nationalist platform to promote trade, investment and travel opportunities in Australia and the Pacific region, so readers expected to find literary and visual references to Australia.

New Caledonia's convict past was ignored. With only one photograph of the ruined *bagne* (prison) at Ile Nou, Australian readers of *Walkabout* could have missed the fact that New Caledonia had a recent penal history. Visually expurgating the penal past in *Walkabout* magazine contrasted with the regularity with which travelogues and books, well into the twentieth century, included prison images of and consistent literary reference to the convict stain and a legacy of despair. In 1906, Gambier announced, 'a more deadly and depressing hole than Port of France (Nouméa) cannot be well imagined with all the added horrors of cruelty and brutality' (1906: 135). In 1925 Muhlhauser still found Nouméa a depressing town in which convictism had 'cast blight on the place from which it has never recovered and even today it still seems the abode of terror' (1925: 133). Neither writer included photographs of the prison ruins or of ex-convicts working on concessions (farm allotments). Although the number of convicts transported in 1864–1897 was 23,000, several writers claimed 40,000 had been sent to New Caledonia.[15] The omission visually of the convict legacy is surprising as the penal histories of Norfolk Island and Port Arthur were popular in Australian illustrated magazines. Key events such as the 1917 rebellion, the *coup d'état* of 1940, the ending of the oppressive *Code de l'Indigénat* (1887–1946), the politicisation and Kanak emancipation symbolised by the founding of *Union Calédonienne* in 1953 and the doubling of the European population by immigration between 1946 and 1969 were also ignored. The visual record was of the natural, peaceful evolution of a settler-capitalist colonial society.



Although statistics noted by authors on the European population in the 1930s and 1970s were reasonably accurate, there was wide discrepancy in the cited population of Kanak. In 1935, *Walkabout* claimed there were 40,000 'natives' but this figure was adjusted in 1939 to 29,000. By 1949 the figure of 30,000 Kanak and Loyalty Islanders was being used. Either authors had not bothered to research these figures or they deliberately omitted mention of the slide to and gradual recovery from the tragic nadir reached by the original inhabitants. The Kanak population in the first recorded census of 1887 was 31,000 on *Grande Terre* and an additional 11,000 in the Loyalty Islands. It fell to the lowest recorded level of 16,194 in 1921, improved to 28,000 in 1939 and 40,000 in 1976 and then experienced a recovery that eventually saw Kanak move to 35% of the population in 1983. The nearly complete exclusion of the Kanak and Loyalty Islander population from the visual record was probably not noticed by Australian readers.[16] The sturdy Loyalty Islander depicted by de Chatelet (1942: 51), carrying two logs on his shoulder and dressed in a gaudy *pareu*, was an unambiguous stereotype – which Australian readers recognised from the previous hundred years of Pacific literary, art and photographic imaging – a 'native' and not necessarily from New Caledonia.

Despite exceptional interest in indigenous bodies, rituals, material culture and customs – especially after the mid-1890s when half-tone reproduction meant photographs could be published on newsprint – New Caledonia's Kanak population offered little attraction to authors, photographers and editors. They were not numerous and lived in remote locations; their movement was restricted to reservations. The dance, costume, weapons, material culture, canoes and pottery from the Pacific, Africa and Asia that dominated published photography world-wide from 1900 to 1930 was considered in the case of New Caledonia less interesting than settler economic prosperity, scenic grandeur and transplanted French customs and culture. Kanak culture was judged by authors and editors to be visually not of interest to Australian readers. A few human-interest, character-study portraits were borrowed from postcards produced thirty years earlier at the turn of the century and a *case* (house) with a distinctive identifying *flèche faîtière* (central rooftop totem) and two cars parked at the front was misleadingly or mistakenly captioned to suggest that modern Kanak owned cars. In contrast,



Tonkinese, Japanese and Javanese were shown working on farms, operating street markets and posing with their children, and authors wrote enthusiastically of Nouméa's plural society, hinting perhaps at the possible potential of Australia's own post-war ethnic diversity.

The selective nature of the photography entering the public domain reinforced an outdated view of *France australe*, an image criticised by Alain Saussol as the chimera of a European dominated settler colony. The pre-war dream of rural agricultural prosperity with French and Kanak settled on the land (but unequally) changed dramatically to a post-war dream that was urbanised, industrial and 'pluri-ethnic while remaining monocultural and unquestioning of the superiority inherent in the old colonial order' (Saussol 1988: 39). Photographers following conventions already established in nineteenth century colonial photography were offering an anachronistic, single-dimensional archaic view of 'old' New Caledonia. *Walkabout*'s editors could exercise some discretion but predilection and preconceived notions of France, French colonies and the 'civilising mission' meant they could not avoid being single-dimensional. Mid-century mass-media audiences preferred exotic locations and 'natives' rather than polemics and critical anti-colonial dogma. For example, Burchett's book included a 'series of pictures which have been since reproduced in many parts of the world' and followed the same photographic subject matter as *Walkabout* (1941b: 69; an article (1941a) also included two photographs). He included some Kanak material and scenic views but 50 per cent of the photographs were of economic activities. A photograph taken during the 1940 *coup d'état* that removed the pro-Vichy government Burchett had borrowed from an unnamed local photographer. He included photographs of Javanese and Japanese workers and in the only full-page photogenic, studio-style portrait he privileged a hotel's Tonkinese house-girl above rural Kanak subject matter and portraits. Schmidt's thirty photographs (1944) were similarly devoted to settler activities in mining, cities and rural industry (83%) and included only two portraits of Kanak and one of a village. HEL Priday's *Cannibal Island*, also released in 1944, included thirteen photographs evenly divided between Kanak portraits and scenic views. A comparison with the 52 photographs of Vanuatu in Kathleen Woodburn's *Backwash of Empire,* also released in 1944, reveals a sharp

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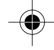
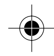


contrast.[17] Fifty per cent of Woodburn's photographs were ethnographic portraits of Ni-Vanuatu men, women and children, in groups or individually. She presented Vanuatu visually with a large indigenous population following a traditional way of life remote from the control exercised by the joint Franco-British colonial administration. In contrast, New Caledonia was depicted visually as a modern, urbanised, industrialised settler economy with an indigenous population hidden on *cantonnements*.

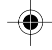
The geography of New Caledonia also affected the range of subject matter available to photographers. Nouméa dominated New Caledonia and lesser towns such as Bourail and Houailou were far away over rough roads or accessible only on small coastal steamers. *Cantonnement* and Kanak settlements were remote and photographers rarely visited them: they preferred European cash crops and export staples to Kanak subsistence gardens, and agricultural development was generally limited to coastal districts and a few river flood plains, only some with road links to Nouméa. Determined travellers like Beatrice Grimshaw in 1924, Burchett in 1941 and Coralie and Leslie Rees in 1949 could take less travelled routes but generally rural photography was limited to mining near the port of Thio, closely settled areas on the west coast and scenic highlights such as 'The towers of Notre Dame' at Hienghene (also known as 'The brooding hen' when viewed from a different angle). The only Kanak settlement to be cited in *Walkabout* was St Louis, a Marist Mission sixteen kilometres from Nouméa, and only because it was a Christian village and 'said to be one of the finest in the island' where Melanesians 'welcome a stranger with a smile and wave'. Although the text claimed photogenic 'black children wander about huts of mud and grass' (Henty 1935: 31), no photographs of St Louis were published in *Walkabout*.

The depictions of Kanak in English language illustrated magazines and books were racist and demeaning. Before the Pacific War, Kanak were described as a 'chocolate brown, woolly-headed race of Papuan origin', 'a poor type of Melanesian' and always a 'morose, sullen sort of chap who was an acknowledged cannibal not long ago' ('Nouméa' 1935: 51; Nicholls 1938: 37; Hall 1939a: 16). Charles Sayers alleged young boys 'were dedicated to warfare from birth'. He agreed that despite being 'head hunters and cannibals' they were also 'tall, muscular – expert bush men and tireless trackers … skilled



farmers and brought water great distances along channels and bamboo pipes to irrigate their lands' (1953: 29). In 1949, readers were told Kanak were amiable, but 'the naïve visitor cannot get out of his mind their background of fighting and cannibalism' (Rees & Rees 1949: 12). Ten years later, Kanak were described as a 'happy but not very industrious people living mainly in villages under tribal chiefs where time-honoured native foods still form their staple diet' (Lyons & Lyons 1959: 11). This romantic view of the 'South Seas' was a literary convention with a three - hundred-year history. In forty years of reporting, only the travelogue writer Stephen Henty declared in print that Kanak faced racial discrimination, commenting in passing that in 1935, 'evidently they were not allowed in' to a ball at the *Hôtel de Ville* in Nouméa (1935: 30). Mid-century Australian readers, unaware of the dispossession of the Kanak, probably agreed with *Walkabout*'s claim that Kanak had 'an easy life as tropical landowners' (Rees & Rees 1949: 12).

Of interest to readers and a significant motivation in Australian reportage of New Caledonia was French policy towards indigenous labour, or more specifically the untrammelled use of local indigenous peoples as cheap, accessible labour for mines, plantations and other exploitative European-owned enterprises in the colonies. Kanak, forced on to reserves or off-shore islands and choosing deliberately to withdraw as much as possible from the colonial wage economy, had not been integrated into New Caledonia's settler economy as indentured or conscripted labour (Denoon, Mein-Smith & Wyndham 2000: 170; Lyons 1986: 86–98; Connell 1987: 87–9, 117). Kanak reluctance to do the 'white man's hard labour' was explained to *Walkabout*'s readers by repeating the nineteenth century racist adage that 'as a general rule these people of the South Seas dislike regular employment' (Hall 1939b: 19: Rees & Rees 1949: 12). Yet photographs depicted, presumably wage-earning, Kanak and Loyalty Islanders working punts, serving in the police, loading ships, driving ox-carts, raking dried coffee beans and serving petrol at a garage. This contradiction between visual and text imaging is typical of illustrated magazines of the period and raises two questions. Was the text or the photograph more important in attitude formation, and when looking through or looking-past the photograph, were audiences able to grasp deeper nuances and meanings beyond the indexical?



Loyalty Islanders were rarely mentioned in books and magazines. HEL Priday praised the blending of Polynesian and European influences and the Loyalty Islanders' ability to harmonise, declaring they were 'more handsome, adaptable and energetic than the mainland natives, and they make fine sailors' (1943: 36). In 1941, Burchett wrote 'for those who believe Kanaks are stupid people, incapable and unwilling to learn, I should like to present Emile'. But Emile was a Loyalty Islander. Burchett also spoke of the Kanak 'boys' unloading ships at the wharf, only to discover they, too, were Loyalty Islanders. He thought Loyalty Islanders were 'handsomer, according to European standards, than the Melanesians. They lack too, the heaviness and sombreness of the New Caledonians' (1941: 20, 46, 184). Burchett, Schmidt and Priday either did not include, or failed to identify, photographs of Loyalty Islanders.

* * *

Walkabout's coverage conflated picturesque travelogue with economic forecasting, geological and geographic description, propaganda and nationalist posturing. *Walkabout* reminded readers New Caledonia was a foreign country just four days sailing away and argued Australians should not ignore New Caledonia as an investment, commercial or tourist destination. Old literary favourites like quoting James Cook's 1774 description 'Caledonia stern and wild' eventually gave way to repeating the phrase '*La vie douce*', a cliché used by visiting celebrity photographer Rennie Ellis in a *Walkabout* article in 1971. The classic photographs of colonial regimes, such as a uniformed indigenous *gendarme* welcoming passengers at the wharf, gave way in the 1970s to photographs of bikini-clad Australians frolicking in the lagoon, bare-chested Kanak men carrying home their daily catch of fish and Mother-Hubbard wearing women playing Melanesian-style cricket.

Although predominantly urban, Australian readers came from a settler society that had already marginalised its own indigenous people and maximised prosperity by agricultural and industrial exploitation of the land. Some mid-century readers may have critically scrutinised individual photographs and questioned the world order, the continuation of the colonialism, the capitalist expansion and the fate of indigenous peoples. However, Australian audiences probably accepted uncritically the one-dimensional visual record of New

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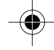
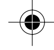


Caledonia's evolving twentieth century colonial history, and thought it quite like Australia.

A singular authoritative history of colonialism more recently has been displaced by multiple, critical histories 'manifested in scholarly monographs, verbal anecdotes and personal letters' and as Nicholas Thomas notes, citing Greg Dening, 'histories are told in film and novels as well as academic texts' (Thomas 1997: 33, 156; Dening 1995). Histories are also told in photographs. Elizabeth Edwards suggests the nexus between photography and history is revealed by the way audiences engage with photographs and by acknowledgement of the various possibilities that an image implies 'through absences within the image' and by looking through photographs to seek out the dense context (Edwards 2001: 87; see also Edwards 2003). But how could Australian audiences know what the absences were? Christopher Pinney notes that looking-past, recoding or resurfacing suggests 'a complexity of layers that endow photographs with an enormously greater complexity than that with which they are usually credited (2003: 4–5, 7)'. Superficially, the photographs used in illustrated magazines like *National Geographic Magazine* and *Walkabout* offered access to reality in New Caledonia, and it is fair to assume Australian audiences, accustomed to fifty years of pervasive photographic illustration, might have seen past the bridges, roads, uniforms and harbour views to seek out the 'dense context'.

The publication in Australia of photographs of New Caledonia was not French propaganda – a contribution to the formation of French metropolitan self-identity and intended to show the French public how far their colony had been 'civilised'[18] – but they may have carried out this role in Australia by affirming Australian self-identity, clarifying Australia's own historical evolution from penal, settler-colony to new nationhood and its role in a European Empire (Pinney 2003). Acknowledging these layers of evidence allows access to what Edwards called the forensic reality of the subject matter and reveals that New Caledonia and Australian histories do mesh within each image. The published images were able to 'explicate the mentality and emotive life' (ibid.: 3) of New Caledonia because they were either opportunistically snapped or carefully framed and composed when taken in Nouméa, *la brousse* or the *Chaîne centrale*. These photographs carried information of other worlds back



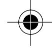
to Australia, but when published in books and magazines, passed around and remembered, they also reinforced Australians' views of their own history. The photography of New Caledonia published in Australia, although a small visual archive, reveals that each stage in a photograph's trajectory, from site of taking to being seen in the public domain, has its own absences, ambiguity, complexity and history.

Appendix

Articles on New Caledonia in monthly issues of *Walkabout* magazine

(number of illustrations in brackets)

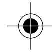
Jan	1935	Anon, 'Nouméa' (-)
Nov	1935	Steven Henty, 'New Caledonia' (2)
Apr	1938	Elizabeth Nicholls, 'In the French South Seas' (4)
Oct	1939	Basil Hall, 'Cross-country in New Caledonia' (8)
Dec	1939	Basil Hall, 'The tricolour in the South Seas' (5)
Jul	1941	WG Burchett, 'At Konienne Island, New Caledonia' (2)
Aug	1941	HL Priday, 'Escape from New Caledonia' (2)
Nov	1941	Charles Anjay, 'Nouméa' (-)
Jan	1942	HEL Priday, 'Fishing in New Caledonia' (2)
Jan	1942	WG Burchett, (book extract from his *Pacific Treasure Island*) (-)
Jul	1942	HEL Priday, 'The port of Nouméa' (2)
Aug	1942	HEL Priday, 'New Caledonia's mineral wealth' (4)
Jan	1943	HEL Priday, 'Explorers of New Caledonia' (3)
Aug	1945	Gordon L Clark, 'New Caledonia' (-)
Mar	1949	Coralie and Leslie Rees, 'New Caledonia today' (9)
Jul	1953	CE Sayers, 'New Caledonia' (2)
Oct	1956	Helen M Wrigley, 'New Caledonia – Australia's exotic next door neighbour' (3)
Mar	1959	Leo and Molly Lyons, 'New Caledonia and its links with Australia' (7)
Apr	1971	Rennie Ellis, '*La vie douce* in the South Seas; Nouméa' (13 including 7 in colour)



Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 16th Pacific History Association conference held at the University of New Caledonia, Nouméa, December 2004.

1. For example, since 1996 more than 60 papers have been presented at the 'images and representation' panels at the bi-annual Pacific History Association conferences. These papers have appeared in special issues of *Pacific Studies* (1997) and the *Journal of Pacific History* (2006) and in other publications.
2. For example, the photojournalist Thomas McMahon, see Quanchi (1994, 1995, 1997).
3. I cite the Philippines, Hawai'i, Tahiti, the Arctic and New Caledonia because they are the first 'nations' to be subjected to this type of research (see Vergara 1995; Trehin 2003; Kakou 1998; King & Lidchi 2000). This discussion does not include recent pictorial histories, which are mostly uninformed by current historiography and do not tackle questions of evidence, function, display, materiality, consumption or exchange.
4. Dutch West New Guinea was also excluded from magazine and newspaper reportage and rarely covered in popular travelogues. Nor was the Torres Strait seen as a separate entity, but part of Queensland, and later the Commonwealth of Australia.
5. As Roger Thompson has pointed out, by the 1920s Australian hopes of sub-imperialism in the western Pacific had faded and the 'age of expansion' was over (Thompson 1980, 1998).
6. Books with references to New Caledonia included Thomas (1887); Wragge (1906); Gambier (1906); de Courcy-Parry (1924); Smith (1924); Muhlhauser (1925); Dodd (1930); Grimshaw (1931), which includes 4 on New Caledonia out of 30 photographs; and Bellamy (1933).
7. Eighty-three articles and 293 photographs were devoted to these four colonial possessions. Roughly 60% of Pacific coverage, with 197 articles and 850 photographs, was devoted to Papua and New Guinea.
8. See appendix for a list of *Walkabout* articles on New Caledonia.
9. 'Pacific Treasure Island' 1942: 43. This was an editorial-cum-book review of Burchett's book of the same name.
10. HEL Priday contributed four illustrated articles to *Walkabout* (see list in appendix) as well as two books (1944, 1945).
11. A third of the New Caledonia articles in *Walkabout* included a map.
12. The phrase *Chaîne centrale* was used in many articles, but later disappeared from use in English language publications.
13. This article contains 8 photographs and a map. In a strange twist, Europeans claimed the title 'Caledoniens' although it was first attributed to the indigenous people of *la Grande Terre*. Equally, indigenous people lost Calédonien as a title but later claimed the originally derogatory French term *Canaque* as their own, but now spelt, as a political statement, as Kanak.



[14] This was Hall's second article after a trip to New Caledonia in 1939.

[15] The original source for this consistent mistake is not known. As well as convicts, 4,000 political deportees and 3,800 recidivists were sent to New Caledonia.

[16] The gap is, nevertheless, now obvious to historians alert to agency, indigenous rights and postcolonial analysis.

[17] In twelve photographs the subjects were named, an unusually high percentage in books of the era. The remaining photographs included five picturesque and two village scenes as well as shipping, cattle and sheep farming on the ranch she visited.

[18] The role of photography as evidence for comparable rates of 'civilisation' is discussed in relation to Japan's colonial conquest of Manchukuo (see Low 2003: 100–18). For a Philippines example see Vergara (1995).

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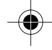

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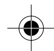

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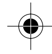

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