

**“OLFALA PIJA BLONG NIUHEBRIDIS BLONG BIFO”:
OLD PICTURES OF THE EARLY NEW HEBRIDES (VANUATU)**

Frédéric Angleviel
Université de la Nouvelle-Calédonie

Max Shekleton
Noumea

The postcard offers visual and documentary access to the past. As products of the transient and permanent European presence in the Pacific, postcards contain insights on the colonial mentality, missions, early ethnography, tourism, and the progress of colonial administration. They also reveal personal doubts, joys and loneliness, and mundane details of travel, weather, accommodation, friendships, and jobs. The photographic images on the front are less explicit but leave tantalizingly obscure and confused messages on a similar range of understandings of the colonial past. Postcards have been ignored by historians but eagerly sought by collectors. The Max Shekleton Collection is therefore a remarkable archive and our purpose here is to publicize the diversity and value of the 657 postcards listed in the catalog for the New Hebrides (Vanuatu), so that historians might be alerted to a wonderful new mass of evidence upon which to construct or revise their interpretations of the history of colonial Melanesia.

THE PICTURE POSTCARD is a genre that attracts dedicated collectors. The worldwide market for early cards in particular has developed tremendously since the 1970s.¹ Historians as well cannot afford to ignore this type of document, which beyond its iconographic interest conveys implicit information on attitudes in given time frames (Figure 1). The visual message is par-

Pacific Studies, Vol. 20, No. 4—December 1997



FIGURE 1. *Ouit-Oui* crew, ca. 1909. This early card of the New Hebrides was published by Berg-eret and Co. in Nancy, France. This schooner arrived from St. Malo, France, in October 1908 and her bearded master, Henri Gautier, seems quite contented staring at the camera, with his arms crossed. Renamed *Emile Mercet*, the ship was destroyed by fire in early 1910 after use for general cargo and blackbirding. The motley crew are New Hebrideans, New Caledonian Loy-alty Islanders, and a lone Tonkinese. (Max Shekleton Collection)

ticularly significant when a postcard bearing a caption and a message was actually posted. Unlike a plain photograph, a postcard is indeed a means of communication.

No systematic study of early New Hebrides postcards has been conducted to date. Our research is based on Max Shekleton's collection of such early New Hebrides postcards, painstakingly assembled over the past twenty years and representing an estimated 80 percent of all New Hebrides postcards published between 1900 and 1960.² This collection totals 657 different postcards, from 52 identified and 38 unidentified publishers. Our purpose is to study images of the New Hebrides as represented by the postcards and the implicit or explicit, voluntary or unconscious view portrayed of this former Franco-British Condominium.

In the future, the co-authors will ensure that this inventory is updated, and a complete catalog may be published in a few years. In order to achieve this goal, Shekleton will continue collecting actively, and we will attempt to enter into relationships with collectors around the world to complete our inventory and analysis.³

Because of the logistical difficulties and high costs involved in tracing and collecting such documents, this essay is limited to an overview, demonstrating the diversity of potential historical material as well as the importance of preserving this rarely studied record of our oceanic heritage. We will examine first the originality and diversity of early New Hebrides postcards, then the iconographic wealth of these mostly unknown images, and finally, the anecdotal interest and historical value of some of the rare significant messages crossing the seas on these small rectangular cards.

Background to a Reference Collection

Ever since the postal card was invented in Austria in 1869, it has been collectible. In France, a law of 20 December 1872 authorized handwritten documents to be sent without an envelope, and the first plain postcards began circulating in 1892. The first postcards showing French colonial scenes were published in 1895 and related to North Africa. French West African views were first published in 1898. These very first cards, published before 1900, caused quite a stir at the time and are referred to by collectors as "pioneers." The first seven New Hebrides postcards were published in New Caledonia in 1903 by Talbot. Others were published in Nancy, France, by Bergeret in 1904, at a time when retail trading between French and British interests became quite competitive; by Hume, with sixteen postcards in 1903; and by Maroney, with twenty-three postcards in 1905. Along with the New Caledo-

nian publishers, the first New Hebridean publishers, such as Talbot, Barrau, and Caporn, often conducted their business from New Caledonia.

Until 1904 postcards had undivided backs that were used for addresses only. The front of the card was used for correspondence, and the type and length of the message influenced the cost of postage (Abensur 1996). Text often overlapped the image. After 1904, the backs of postcards became divided, the righthand side being for the address and the lefthand side for a written message. This layout remains today. It not only has protected many images over the years but also offers historians access to contextual data in the personal written message.

For the New Hebrides, the golden age of this means of communication extended from 1905 to 1930. Postcards were popular for the documentary interest of their visuals as well as their offer of a rapid and reasonably priced way of communicating brief information to relatives back in New Caledonia or Australia. They often carried a precise message of social interest (Christmas greetings, birthday wishes, wedding or birth announcements). After World War I, typographic progress led to the establishment of printshops in neighboring countries and encouraged large-scale production of postcards. In the New Hebrides, however, the small number of traders, settlers, and civil servants did not allow production to reach figures as prolific as in Fiji (over 6,000 postcards) or New Caledonia (over 4,500 postcards).⁴ Still, talented photographers such as the Hobart-based John W. Beattie contributed a variety of images to what today has become a remarkable documentary corpus of an estimated 800 postcards.⁵

In the days before the availability of telephones, millions of postcards traveled the world, and they became the fastest and safest way of establishing contact. No information on mail flows of letters and postcards between the New Hebrides and the rest of the world is available, but no doubt the number of postcards mailed was quite low. This becomes apparent when one attends major international postcard shows such as Bipex in London or Cartexpo in Paris, as Oceania cards are scarce, and one is fortunate to find even a few New Hebrides postcards.

During the 1900–1960 period, the New Hebrides were postally isolated from Europe, particularly during World War II. In reference to New Caledonia, Philippe Foucher mentions that “some cards were published during this period, their quality and interest being mediocre, for the use of U.S. troops who, quite naturally, mailed them all back to the U.S.A.” (1984:5). In the New Hebrides they just used up existing stocks. With the introduction of telephones, radios, newspapers, and later television after the 1940s, postcards gradually lost their importance as a means of communication in the

New Hebrides. After 1960, as tourism and internal mobility grew, the local use of postcards increased again but for different purposes.

Collectors and Collecting

How were these fragile cards—used for private communication as well as to reveal the exotic surroundings in which one was living (Figure 2)—preserved? Since cards were not formally registered in archives and since most of the early publishers' records have disappeared, the only way was through the world of collectors. During the period between the world wars, when postcard collecting was popular, only one or two Condominium collectors sought out the magic of postcard images. Strangely enough, New Caledonian collectors posted New Hebridean postcards, published by New Caledonian firms (Talbot, Barrau, Gubbay, Ballande, de Béchade), to collectors in Europe, creating a related interest in the New Hebrides.

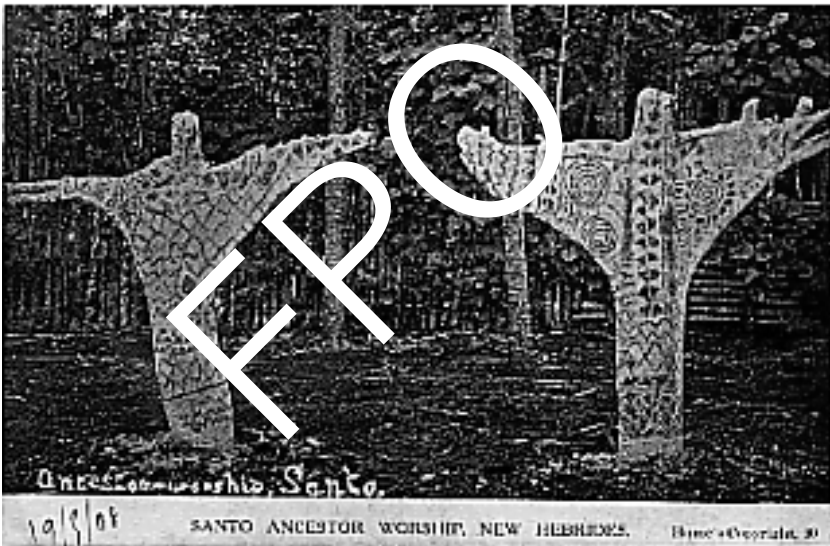


FIGURE 2. “Santo ancestor worship.” This Hume image is a typical anthropological and descriptive view. The English-language caption, shakily reverse-etched on the original glass-plate negative, suggests that, prior to postcard production, a limited number of photographic prints were made available to museums and collectors. (Max Shekleton Collection, H26)

Postcard collecting waned after World War II, and by the 1970s very few collectors were interested in South Pacific islands. In New Caledonia, Max Shekleton became one of the first to begin collecting those from Oceania seriously, and the market really only became active in the 1980s, when descendants of British settlers from Fiji or French settlers from New Caledonia attempted to seek out their roots. Concurrently, collectors in the former Condominium partners began to show nostalgia for the colonial period. However, the ambivalent attitude of younger ni-Vanuatu toward colonial times combined with the exodus in the 1980s of the descendants of French and Australian settlers and the economic difficulties of an emerging nation meant a local market for early postcards did not develop. Thus, the rare collectors of early New Hebrides postcards are found not in Vanuatu but in New Caledonia, Australia, France, or Britain. Interest by philatelists in early New Caledonian and New Hebrides postcards did result in steep price increases for New Hebrides postcards, as European dealers anticipated a rise in demand that in fact never eventuated. Dealers sell ordinary postcards for \$2.00 to \$3.00, better quality and unusual postcards cost \$10.00 to \$15.00, and rare or topical postcards can reach \$20.00 to \$40.00. This cost structure explains why historians find it so difficult to gather these precious pictorial representations of the first half of the twentieth century.

Postcards are viewed as the poor relatives of iconography. To date they have not been given any prominence in British or French colonial archives or in Vanuatu's national archives.⁶ If the New Caledonia Territorial Centre for Research and Pedagogic Documentation had not arranged to duplicate Shekleton's New Hebrides collection, this important corpus would not be available to students or academics.⁷ All postcards in Shekleton's collection as of 1992 are available as transparencies from the center following an agreement allowing liberal access to historians.

Who are the collectors? Most dedicated postcard collectors concentrate on one or more thematic topics: islanders, traditional dwellings, colonial buildings, transportation. Their collections are arranged according to their favorite subjects. In order to have on hand a rational inventory, collectors often keep up a secondary listing using publishers' and printers' catalogs and captions. Only some cards carry publishers' numbers. Whereas philatelists can refer to detailed catalogs and manuals, the postcard collector must rely on cross-referencing all available data to manage and keep track of a collection.

The Shekleton collection is filed in two large black binders. The first binder contains 172 vertical cards; the second contains 485 horizontal cards. Nowadays we are accustomed to the size of 10 × 15 cm., which is larger than the Union Postale Universelle size of 9 × 14 cm. stipulated in 1878. All postcards in the New Hebrides collection are of the latter size. Most are black

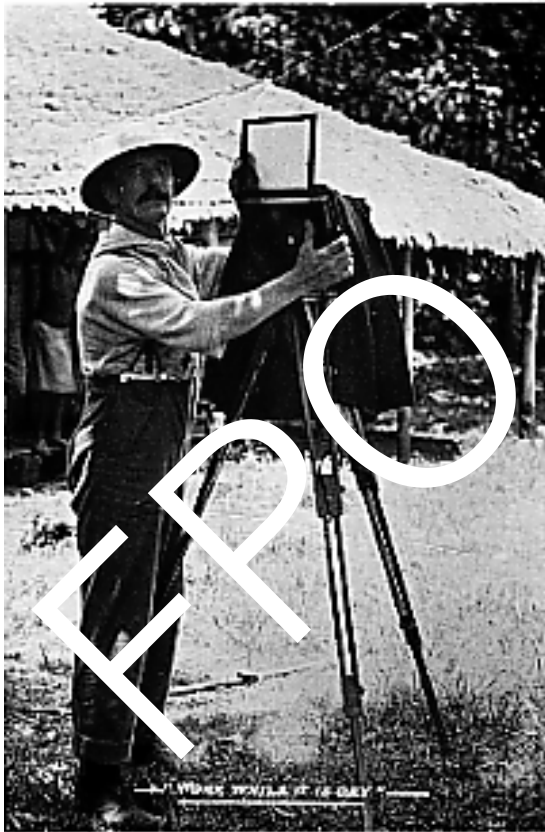


FIGURE 3. “Work while it is dry.” John W. Beattie was able to take remarkable photographs in the Solomons, Santa Cruz, Banks, New Hebrides, and Norfolk Island at the beginning of the twentieth century by gaining passage aboard the London Missionary Society’s vessel, the *Southern Cross*. This self-portrait was taken on Mota in the Banks Islands in 1911. Hardly adapted to a tropical climate, the pith helmet and clothing are indicative of the period. The camera equipment may have been state of the art at the time. (Max Shekleton Collection)

and white (72 percent). The rest are mostly sepia or green (24 percent), with a handful (4 percent) in color. In both albums, there is a geographic as well as a topical classification.

Publishers and Popularity

Merchants or publishers are identified on 68 percent of cards in our reference collection. Quite frequently they are photographers, such as J. W. Beattie, who incidentally is the only one to have left to posterity a self-portrait postcard, the reverse of which bears the following cryptic handwritten message: "Work while it is dry" (Figure 3). Some commercial firms chose postcards as a promotional tool. Examples include Gubbay's "General Store" in Port Vila and the New Caledonia-based coffee planters Les Cafés Jouve. One of their captions reads: "Kanaka family and their hut on the French New Caledonian coffee plantations (Café Jouve). All these native types, despite their primitive appearance, are most civilized and work on our plantations among white co-workers and ourselves." The card appears to be a New Caledonian postcard, destined for the home market in France (with advertising on the reverse side), but displaying a village scene in the New Hebrides. As Kanaks and ni-Vanuatu were easily distinguished, it would appear to be an intentional miscaptioning. The selection of the image may be the result of the firm's intentional voyeurism, as central to the bucolic image is a young, topless New Hebridean maiden wearing only a figleaf-type grass skirt.⁸ The Messageries Maritimes shipping line used the same image. On another card an Ambrym slit gong is mistakenly captioned "New Caledonia. Kanaka tabous." The various missions also used postcards to disseminate information on their activities and achievements. There are a number of Protestant series (Melanesian Mission, Presbyterian Mission), but Catholic postcards are rare (Procure des Missions de Marie, Religieuses du T.O.R. de Marie, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel).

Fifty-two different publishers have been identified, of which twenty-three are known on the basis of one or two cards only (see Table 1). Thirty-eight publishers remain unidentified, stimulating our interest in sharing findings with other researchers.

Some publishers produced three or four series, using different caption type, borders, or backs. When these variations are taken into account, a total of 114 series are distinguishable. There are 228 index cards describing the inventory.⁹ A future study will describe the different typefaces, artwork, and layouts.

The geographic distribution of the publishers is as follows: New Hebrides, 7; New Caledonia, 16; Australia, 8; France, 13; England, 10; New Zealand, 2;

TABLE 1. Identified Publishers

Catalog No.	Publisher	Number of Series ^a	Number of Postcards	Earliest Known Date
H1	Unis-France	1	21	1921
H2	La Maison d'Art Colonial	1	20	mint
H3	A. Bergeret et Cie, Nancy	1	17	1904
H4	J. Raché, ed., Noumea	1	23	1907
H5	L.B.F.	1	2	1909
H6	Coll. Barrau	1	15	1911
H7	D. Gubbay, Néa, Imp. Le Deley	1	9	1917
H8	G. de Béchade, ed., Noumea	4	35	1914
H9	W.H.C., Noumea	1	1	mint
H10	Café Jouve, Imp. Eymeoud, Paris	1	2	mint
H11	B & F	1	9	1914
H12	Maroney	3	23	1905
H13	C.F.N.H.	2	43	1925
H14	E.B.	1	23	1927
H15	(O'Connor)	1	33	1906
H16	Talbot	4	7	1903
H17	C.B. & Co.	1	5	1906
H18	J.C.	1	3	1907
H19	W. H. Caporn	2	4	1909
H20	Coll. H. Guérin	1	1	1916
H21	H & B	3	7	mint
H22	A. B. Shaw & Co.	1	1	mint
H23	The All British Picture Co.	1	1	1923
H24	J. W. Beattie, Hobart	2	21	mint
H25	Melanesian Mission, Britain	3	14	1914
H26	Hume	2	16	1903
H27	Presbyterian Mission Series	1	2	1909
H28	Melanesian Mission Series	1	2	mint
H29	T. J. McMahon	1	12	1923
H30	Empire Post Card (kangaroo in logo)	1	4	1910
H31	N.Z. Post Card	1	1	mint
H32	Miss. S. of Third Order Mary, Boston	1	1	mint
H33	Religieuses du T.O.R. de Marie, Lyon	1	2	mint
H34	Procure des Missions, Paris	1	2	1931
H35	École ap. P. Maristes Morhange	1	1	mint
H36	Oeuvre de la Prop. de Foi Fides	1	1	mint
H37	Polyn. Vic. Ap. des N.H.	1	1	mint
H38	Fung Kuei, Vila	2	16	1958
H39	John Lum et Fung Kuei	1	1	1960
H40	D. Gubbay	1	2	mint
H41	Braun & Cie, Paris	1	1	mint
H42	(Pentecost)	1	3	1943
H43	L.A., R. Domègue, ed., Perigueux	1	8	mint
H44	Messageries Maritimes	3	3	mint
H45	Melanesian Mission Pictorial	1	1	1906
H46	Cl. Agences Générale Colonies	1	1	mint
H47	Languedoc	1	2	mint
H48	Pamir, Port Vila	1	6	1978
H49	Souvenir des H. Hébrides	1	2	1951
H50	Photo Dunn	2	8	mint
H51	South Pacific Industry Co.	1	7	mint
H52	Bromarin (A. G. Steglitz, 1906)	1	1	mint
Total		72	447	

^a Boat series, plantation series, and so forth.

Germany, 2; Japan, 1; United States, 1. Most were not headquartered in the New Hebrides but had some interests there. They include missionary stations (Melanesian Mission, Marist Mission), trading stores (Barrau, de Béchade), and semipublic organizations (La Maison d'Art Colonial). Other off-shore publishers appeared to have had distribution agreements in Port Vila (Maroney, O'Connor). Only six local publishers have been identified (11.5 percent) and these are all from after 1945. However, it can be assumed that many of the thirty unidentified publishers of indeterminate geographic origin were businesses in Port Vila.

New Caledonian publishers are the largest group (31 percent of all identified publishers and 49.5 percent of all postcards with identified publishers). This is easily explained by geographic proximity as well as strong commercial interests. Indeed, the New Hebrides for many years were considered by the French as an extension of their territory. The high number of identified French (25 percent) and British (11.5 percent) publishers is due to the Condominium status of these islands. The presence of Australian (13.5 percent) and New Zealand (2 percent) publishers confirms that locally influential Protestant missions had their rear bases in both these countries and that trade between the New Hebrides and the Australian continent was important. The origins of the 657 postcards are distributed as follows: New Hebrides, 28; New Caledonia, 221; Australia, 71; France, 80; England, 56; New Zealand, 3; Japan, 7; Germany, 2; the United States, 1; and indeterminate, 188.

Postcards produced at the beginning of this century were all in black and white, with the exception of a few hand-tinted cards. In the 1920s, two series of colored cards went on sale on behalf of Australian Protestant interests, but because of their high unit cost they were printed on low-quality paper. Color cards did not become readily available until the 1970s.

Only five postcards in the Shekleton collection are not based on photographs. Three are paintings, one is a drawing, and one is a map of the islands. The lack of diversity combined with the limited use of improved backs, ornamentation, logos, or specific text signifies the limits of the market and the absence of competition.

Postcards that are actual photographs mounted or developed on a postcard backing (referred to as "real photographs"; see Figure 4), rather than commercially printed reproductions with printed reverse (referred to as "picture postcards"), represent nearly 38 percent of the total number. Real photographs constitute 20 percent of postcards with identified publishers but 77 percent of unidentified postcards (as opposed to 79 and 22 percent, respectively, for the reproductions) and illustrate that, because of the narrow market, many cards were produced in small runs. Some of these real-photograph postcards were no doubt produced locally; specific research in Vanuatu



FIGURE 4. De Béchade Store. The anonymous publisher of this real photograph with a Kodak postcard back was most likely the de Béchade store manager in Port Vila. Rail tracks allowed direct delivery of imported goods to the store from the nearby main wharf. The store staff had been asked to pose for the photographer. (Max Shekleton Collection, HA33)

archives may reveal more information. Photographic studio cards are very rare. There are six or seven, all shot in New Caledonia (Barrau, W.H.C., J.C., Caporn). The presence in New Caledonia of an easily recognizable resident New Hebridean labor force afforded the photographic studios readily available models. New Caledonian publishers were well aware that such cards could be sold to New Caledonian clients as well as through retail outlets in Port Vila or Luganville.

Postal Cancellation

Dated postcards are the exception, occurring only in the case of an official ceremony (a visit by the governor of New Caledonia in February 1913, the inauguration in November 1924 of a World War I cenotaph), an exceptional occurrence (a visit by H.M.S. *Drake* in 1912, the sentencing of the murderers in the Clapault case in 1923 [Figure 5], a store burning in Port Vila in Feb-

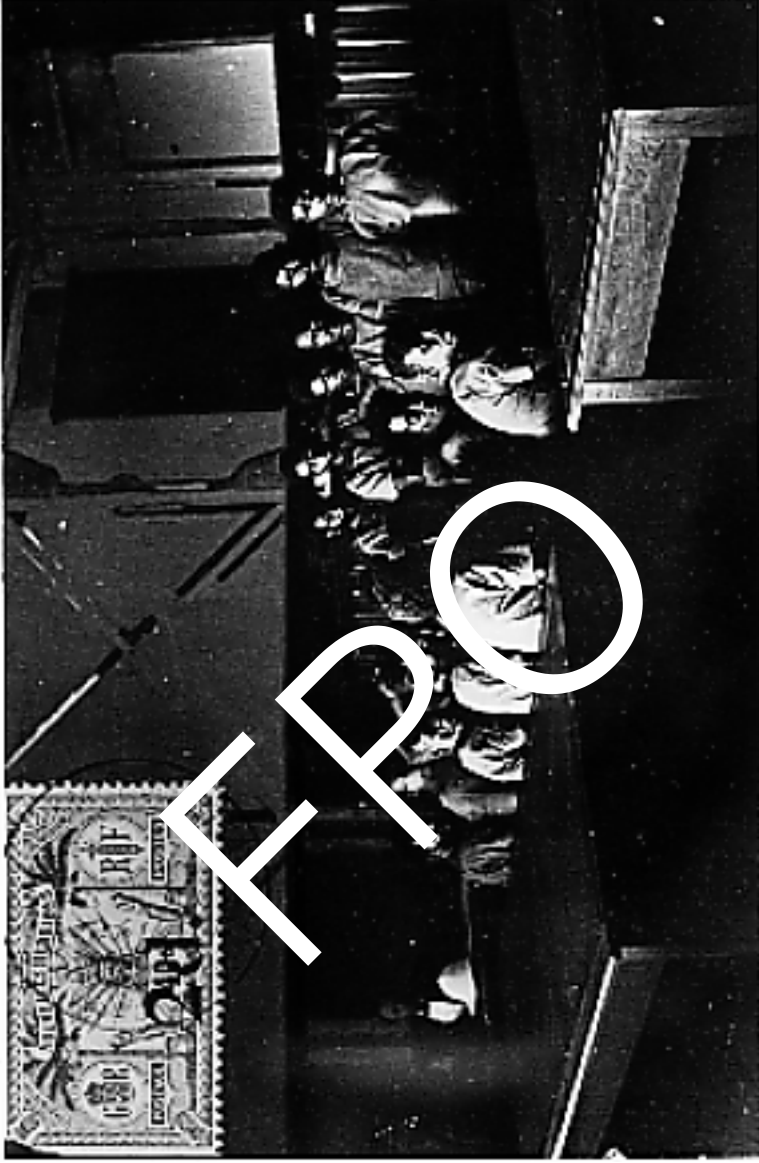


FIGURE 5. Trial of the murderers of the Clapault family, 1923. An anonymous publisher produced for immediate sale to Port Vila residents a postcard commemorating a shocking event. The accused appear in a deserted courtroom and their resigned looks would suggest that their fate is sealed: they are guilty. (Max Shekleton Collection, HA31)

ruary 1928), or a natural catastrophe (the destruction of the Ambrym hospital during the December 1913 volcanic eruption, a cyclone over Port Vila in March 1909). Only on five postcards is the date included in the caption. Some cards, such as the four large series (of thirty-five postcards) covering the “*Kersaint* campaign,” bear a caption implying their year of publication: this French warship visited the islands in 1913. Thus, New Hebrides postcards are not easy to date accurately; the alternative is to guess their date of issue by examining their style (size, color, artwork, caption, typeface) and the people or objects (costumes, buildings, vehicles) depicted. The active period of particular publishers and photographers can also be used for dating, but if this period is lengthy, data on output generated are rarely available to fix the date more precisely.

The best clue to dating postcards is the postal cancellation. On each postcard the date stamp is tangible proof that the card was issued somewhat earlier. Also, most senders dated their cards by hand, if only to let their correspondents know how long they took to arrive. That postcards were circulating in the early 1900s confirms that the postcards became of interest quite early to consumers in the New Hebrides and to publishers in neighboring countries.

A large proportion of postcards in the collection are mint (68 percent), that is, they were not posted. Before the widespread use of personal photography, travelers often purchased postcards as a memento of their trip or as souvenirs. Many collectors bought postcards for their beauty, their rarity, their topical interest, or their exotic content. Such cards were sent inside a letter, glued into a diary, or stored in albums and are much sought after by today's collectors and dealers. The Rev. Fr. Patrick O'Reilly was of the opinion that only a third of New Caledonian postcards had been postally cancelled (1973:153). For the New Hebrides the figure is reduced to 26 percent. Of 169 cancellations in the current collection, 7 cards were posted to local addresses in the New Hebrides, 88 posted overseas from the New Hebrides, 56 posted in New Caledonia, 9 in Australia, 6 in France, and 3 elsewhere.¹⁰

Location, Typology, and Categorization

A geographic classification by locations portrayed is generally the easiest classification method for a collector, since printing the place name or name of the island on the card is intrinsic to the genre (which does not always avoid ambiguities or error). However, this pattern cannot apply in the New Hebrides, where there is a high proportion of unlabeled “real photograph” and uncaptioned postcards.

A large number of the 289 postcards with an explicitly identified location

relate to the capital (31.8 percent) and to Efate Island (7 percent). There were fewer residents and visitors on the other islands, but a reasonable number of postcards are available for the better-known islands: Mallicolo because of its nearness, Santo for its plantations, Ambrym and Tanna for their volcanoes, but also the Banks. For this last group of islands we are thankful to the photographer John W. Beattie, who seems to have concentrated his photography on this small group.

When looking at the geographic location of postcards, one should bear in mind that at the beginning of the twentieth century, while cards were bought by visitors, often as souvenirs, residents also bought them as a practical correspondence medium. Civil servants and residents could acquire multiple views of Iririki Island, the seat of the British residency, and of commemorations or unusual events. For example, complete photographic series exist of the Port Vila church fire, the 1913 eruption of the Ambrym volcano, and the burning of a Port Vila store in 1928.¹¹ Residents tended to choose classic images of the town where they resided or surrounding curiosities. Among the “real photograph” cards, a “look where I am now” message adorns over thirty postcards. As Henry Belbéoch has noted, “all aspects of economic, social, and cultural life were used as subjects through the lens of the photographers. An irreplaceable documentary corpus that allows us to recreate, and for some to discover, the realities of life at the beginning of the Century. . . . This is not grand history but this history has a lived-in ‘flavor’” (Belbéoch 1993:194).

A typology of the sites and subjects represented on cards yields the following figures:

<i>Category</i>	<i>Number of Cards</i>
Huts (houses, kitchens, etc. of New Hebrideans)	69
Seaside	63
Dwellings (of Europeans)	46
Agriculture (coconut, coffee, bananas, cocoa, rubber)	42
Drums and totems	40
Ships	40
Churches	37
Canoes	34
Urban life	29
Administration buildings	17
Eruptions	14
Bush	11
Horses	11
Monuments	7

<i>Category</i>	<i>Number of Cards</i>
Cyclones	6
Vegetables, yams	6
Cattle	5
Schools	4
Fishing	4
Horse-drawn carts	2
Automobiles	2
Bicycles	1

Except as background for views of commercial agricultural activities (Figure 6), scenic views, flora, fauna, and topography are poorly represented. However, note that the above typology represents central themes, and secondary visual elements have not been noted.

A topical classification is an arbitrary one. Apart from scenery and natural oddities, two main areas seem to emerge in the collection: one relates to the indigenous world and the other to the expatriate colonial world. On the one hand, the camera lens registers indigenous events and freezes the presumed authenticity of the location. This is a permanent and fixed world inhabited by men and women and characterized by their dwellings and activities such as laundering (Figure 7). On the other hand, the expatriate world takes shape through the symbols of its involvement (monuments, buildings accommodating institutions) and through technical, economic, or educational achievements suggesting change and progress.

The proportion of postcards relating to the indigenous world exceeds 80 percent, which corresponds to the imaging of the New Hebrides between 1900 and 1960 ethnographically as an isolated, colonial culture. New Hebrideans are shown as being primitive and gentle. Photographs of the period concentrate on folkloric effect, showing, for instance, bushmen wearing penian sheaths (in 97 cards), long after coastal Small and Big Nambas had progressed to the sarong (shown in 69 cards representing men and 18 cards representing women). Weapons, jewelry, and ornaments are also featured. Standing portraits of one, two, or a group of men dominate the cards featuring men—148 of 207 cards. Two-thirds of the men are adults, one-third children or teenagers. These images conform to the “native type” category popular in colonial imaging. As a reflection on the place of women in the New Hebrides, only 47 cards depict women, and very few are of young women. The few images of young girls (20 cards) and the larger number of images of young men (74 cards) might reflect the colonial interest in young men as a potential labor force.

Even in the absence of any written comment, the message of colonial-era



FIGURE 6. “Loading bananas at Franceville.” J. Raché, a Noumea postcard publisher, intended to demonstrate the success of time and motion management applied to productivity on French plantations in the New Hebrides. When this image was shown in 1996 to history students at the Université Française du Pacifique, their reaction was one of shock to the labor conditions close to slavery and to the disparity in clothing between the natives and their colonial masters. (Max Shekleton Collection)

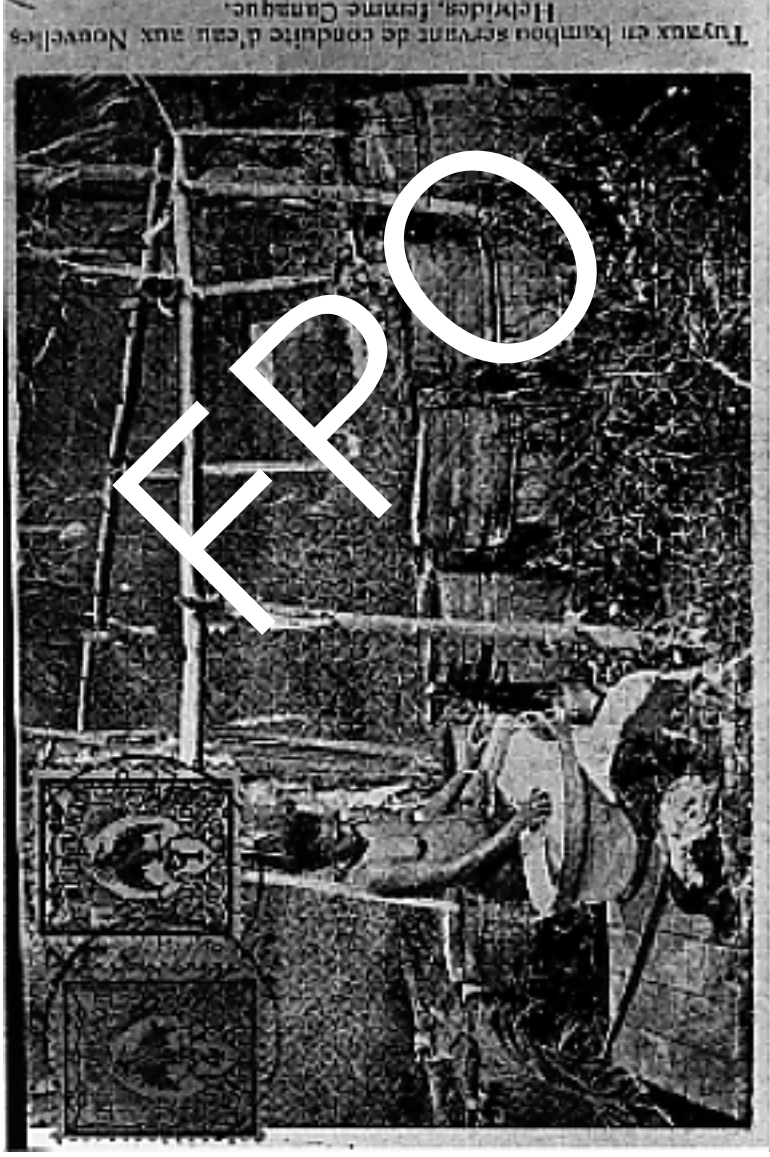


FIGURE 7. “Bamboo pole water pipes in the New Hebrides, Kanaka woman.” This well-framed Maroney image reveals a perceptive photographer who focused on what can be considered an everyday scene. A further interpretation would allow this composition to pay tribute to an identified character trait encouraged in the French world and known as “system D,” *système débrouille* (resourcefulness). (Max Shekleton Collection, H12bis)

postcards is quite clear. It related first to distance, geographic as well as that separating two different worlds. This duality, so often applied to the New Hebrides, resides also in the visual imaging, at once ethnographic and ethnocentric. The European, actor of modernity, is seldom featured in the imagery of this exotic forgotten land. It is significant that publishers from Port Vila are alone in affording some exposure to the settlers.

A Thousand and One Things to Say

Seventy-three percent of all New Hebrides postcards are captioned, a lower percentage than in Fiji and New Caledonia (Angleviel and Shekleton 1995). Only 31.5 percent of the “real photograph” postcards are captioned.

The vast majority of captions are in French (60 percent) or English (25 percent). Interestingly, the five publishers of French-English bilingual postcards are French (La Maison d'Art Colonial, W.H.C., O'Connor, Caporn, Dunn). Maroney published two series in French, but they are characterized by inaccuracies and misspellings that prompted us to include him among English publishers. There are also nine German-language and Japanese-language postcards, of which six have an English-language caption as well. Too frequently, the captions are bland and conventional. This frustrates the historian who seeks clear and even technical identification. By necessity, publishers published views and captions sufficiently general for their clients to identify with their habitual surroundings, seeking to interest the greatest number of buyers possible.

It would be interesting to study the veracity of captions and the reuse of identical or similar images. We thought that a Barrau postcard “New Hebrides (Tanna Island) Kanaka Chief in War Dress” had originated from a Noumea photographic studio. But a Raché postcard shows the same Melanesian wearing the same clothes and ornaments, together with another Melanesian, in a photographic studio postcard, captioned “13. Kanakas from Houailou.” As the publisher Raché operated earlier and Barrau probably did not have its own photographic studio, one can surmise that Barrau's agent deliberately or involuntarily wrote an inaccurate caption. Talbot published several postcards showing the same pipe-smoking elderly Maori woman, alternately presenting her as Kanaka, a Tahitian, or a New Hebridean.¹² Bergeret, a French publisher from Nancy, produced three captioned New Hebrides postcards showing Fijians bearing weapons. Was this error caused by his distance from the Pacific, contempt for the integrity of the image, or ignoring the location in an attempt to use the image to shock? One of these Fijian postcards is obviously staged and bears an amazing caption: “New Hebrides. Cannibalism—Back from the Manhunt. Preparing the Feast.”

When available, the message handwritten by the sender of a postcard becomes an integral part of the document. But what does it add? One must remember that until 1904 correspondence appeared on the opposite side from the address, in the margin by the image or even on the image itself, on which the stamp was often also affixed. Senders gradually began writing their messages on the address side, even before the regulations changed. Sometimes the text covers the entire back of a postcard that was mailed in an envelope so that the addressee could receive an exotic illustration as well as a confidential message. One New Caledonian writer who had been requested to forward some New Hebrides postcards to a correspondent in Rosny sous Bois, France, wrote: "I am sending you the only card of New Hebrides in my possession. It is quite old. If I don't send them in envelopes, my cards will never reach you."¹³

Postcard correspondence—which in a certain way is unconsciously influenced by the choice of the visual—adds text to an imaged vision of a country, society, or period. We have attempted a typology of postcards bearing texts. They offer considerable insight on the daily life of expatriate New Hebridean communities during the first half of the twentieth century.

We classified the correspondence on the back or margin of 239 postcards and found the following major categories: topical events (41 cards), family information (125), various wishes (46), and postcard exchange (27). The forty-one texts judged to be informative on topical issues cover mainly daily preoccupations: eight postcards relate to family life, six refer to transportation, and seven to the economy. One observes, however, the absence of any reference to politics or religion. This observation confirms that postcards, owing to the limited space for correspondence as well as their public nature, were not meant to convey critical opinion or commentary. Only a few provide evidence of historical events. Still, Condominium residents commenting on their daily lives and private family correspondence from the beginning of the twentieth century can provide useful historical insights.

One writer refers only to mundane events: "I am writing on some photos, they will increase your collection. On the first one both my houseboys are holding a flying fox that one of them shot in my garden because it was eating my paw-paws."¹⁴ Several postcards are adorned with descriptive handwritten captions. Resident L. Dumont captions one card "The Post Office, three French militia, the Postmaster and myself."¹⁵ Another classic is a Port Vila resident who marks with a cross "my bedroom."¹⁶ Photographer John W. Beattie personally hand-captioned several postcards addressed to the Comte de Fleurieu, a serious collector. On one he wrote: "Vila—Sandwich Island or Efate. View taken from the front of the French Residency. British Residency shown on the left hand side of picture. Presbyterian [*sic*] mission in back-

ground, on Vila Island. French New Hebrides Cons Store in the foreground.”¹⁷ Others commented on recent events, such as a warehouse fire in Port Vila in 1928: “Scene of the fire taken the following morning at 9, the fire broke out on the 17th at 9 p.m. Coprah and cocoa kept burning for 4 days after.”¹⁸

Cyclones are important news. In 1939 a recent arrival indicated: “Our new country, despite its bad reputation in France, is pleasant to live in. On board ship we were warned of fevers, malaria, bilious attacks. Up to now nothing of all that. A high temperature 33°C in a draft at home, 50°C in the sun; very humid, torrential rains that we can hear 5 minutes before it reaches us because of the heavy foliage. Very frequent cyclone warnings: extremely strong wind, blowing in all directions, removing roofs, uprooting trees and causing much damage.”¹⁹ In 1960, a tourist notes on a postcard of Port Vila: “Well, this place is a hell of a wreck. Every single house is damaged and many of them are flattened.”²⁰

Fragmentary Evidence: Conclusion

The small things that make up daily life are documented in this spontaneous correspondence, written quickly, avoiding the constraints of official wording and the self-censure and artificial construction of the tale. The statements are partial and disjointed, but their sincerity appeals to us. A settler writes: “You can see in this photograph the results of our hunting and fishing trip and the boat we went on. Fishing with dynamite there is no need to wait for the fish to bite. All you need to do is pick them up and there were many.”²¹

Although critical economic comments and information on plantation life are notably absent, we learn that in 1929 ships en route from Noumea to Batavia via Rabaul called at Port Vila: “Having left New Caledonia a week ago with a cargo of chrome ore, a little nickel, coprah, coffee, cotton and cocoa we are topping up here with coprah, sandalwood, mother of pearl and cocoa.”²² A settler informs us that in the 1930s copra “is selling for 2500 francs a ton in the country. I would have liked to come here 30 years ago and take[n] over some land. I would have made a fortune by now.”²³ Finally, an anonymous European writes: “I have been told that trading wasn’t what it was in the Hebrides, the profit margin is only 10% now when it used to be 50 to 80%, it would seem that the Debéchade subsidiary have spoilt the prices.”²⁴

Several cards include comments on travel, particularly on passengers’ perceptions of their travels by sea. A young man writes: “I arrived in Vila after a rather emotion fraught trip. The *Pacifique* went aground at 5.30

in the morning only 5 or 6 miles out of Vila. It was not funny at all and even though land was only about 200 meters away, I thought for a while that we might remain stuck there.”²⁵ A few cards are useful in tracking visits of one or another vessel: “I have received your long letter, I was delayed by all the festivities on this week on the occasion of the visit by the cruiser *Australia*.”²⁶

The New Hebridean native is the object of ethnographic commentary. Strangely enough, all these descriptions are based on utilitarian or caricatured iconographic representations. On the back of a postcard captioned “Marchands de porcs. Pig dealers” can be found the following information: “In the New Hebrides the natives raise pigs and take particular care of their teeth. They manage to grow on them long curved teeth which are much sought after.”²⁷ On the back of a card captioned “Tanna tribe going to a *pilou-pilou*,” the description states: “The *pilou-pilou* is a native dance. The Kanakas dance it dressed as you can see on the other side. The *pilou-pilou* is now forbidden. The dancers were unable to calm down. They became excited and ended up fighting.”²⁸

A postcard about the *Kersaint* campaign captioned “Tanna natives on board” is adorned by the following comment: “We could do with some of these savages against the Germans.”²⁹ During the same year, 1914, another correspondent jotted on the back of a postcard of an elderly Fijian captioned “1. A cannibal”: “There are still some man-eating Kanakas inland in the New Hebrides but their number is decreasing daily as we are hunting them down most determinedly.”³⁰

These snippets of correspondence bring us a living and spontaneous view of the manner in which the European population perceived Vanuatu in the years from 1900 to 1960. Much is obviously left unsaid. Postcards offer very little personal reflection on political or religious policies and events and limited information on travel or the world of the indigenous people of the New Hebrides.

Subsequent study of postcard collections will no doubt afford the opportunity to integrate these images and words with archival materials and the words of New Hebrideans. At the same time it would be of interest to contrast the diversity of the postcard view of the New Hebrides with comparable views of other islands of Oceania. Postcards are fragmentary evidence of the past, suggestive but also frustrating in that they leave so much unsaid. As Corre has noted: “The unsaid means that we don’t say but that we leave keys so that our successors may rediscover. It was not the intention to deprive of a past. But has this right to temporary forgetfulness not deprived the emergence of an identity quest?” (1996:30–31).

NOTES

1. Note the evolution of annual catalogs by Neudin in Paris or International Postcard Market in London. Books on postcards are proliferating. Gérard Neudin listed twenty-six new titles for 1995–1996.

2. Shekleton, a travel agent by profession, is a fourth-generation Anglo-Caledonian. He is a member of the Société des Océanistes and of the Société d'Études Historiques de la Nouvelle-Calédonie. His collecting interests cover books, drawings, engravings, maps, and related ephemera. His main collecting interest, however, is early picture postcards of New Caledonia and other Pacific islands.

3. To the best of our knowledge, there is one major collection in the New Hebrides (Reece Discombe), two in New Caledonia, and possibly three or four in Europe. In the rest of the world, some thematic collections are likely to include New Hebrides postcards, particularly in the areas of ethnography, transportation, and missions. To achieve recognition one must be in possession of at least one hundred to two hundred postcards and actively seek out and acquire additional material as well as being knowledgeable in at least one cartophilic area. In the past, at least three collectors took an interest in collecting New Hebrides postcards, as revealed by the existence of their personal collector's marks: the Comte de Fleurieu (a small circle surrounding a stylized sun), Mr. Alain (a small circle), and one other, represented by an illegible signed small mark. The only French publication (Desbois 1996) attempting to list any collectors is obviously incomplete. Only two listings appear for New Hebrides postcard collectors: Jean-François Aubry in Reunion Island and Max Shekleton in Noumea.

4. A catalog of New Caledonia postcards was privately published in 1984 by Philippe Foucher. A catalog of French Polynesia postcards was privately published in 1992 by Dr. Michel Pierre. Dr. Elsie M. (Pat) Stephenson's exhaustive manuscript on Fiji postcards was published by Caines, Jannif in Suva on 9 October 1997. Regional cartophilic publications provide insight on some islands of Oceania: see *Australian Cartophilic Society Newsletter* and *Bulletin of NSW Postcard Collectors Society*.

5. The quality of work by amateur photographers was high, but not that of travelers, patrol officers, tourists, and family members. There were not enough professional studios and photographers to maintain supply, but from all sources an amazing number of quality, inexpensive cards were published.

6. Very few libraries, archives, or other repositories keep separate collections of postcards. They are usually subsumed under photograph or document collections arranged by country. The few identifiable card collections are small, often numbering ten to twenty cards.

7. At the CAOM (Centres des Archives d'Outre Mer in Aix-en-Provence) there is a carton containing Pacific postcards: CAOM 52 PA, carton 1, albums 1 and 2. Fewer than fifteen relate to the New Hebrides. A government-produced colonial album contains postcards relating to the entire French empire: CAOM 5F1, postcards, index updated in 1990. The French Embassy in Vanuatu acquired a complete set of New Caledonian Centre transparencies in 1992, to allow this young nation to regain part of its memory. The plan is to donate them to the new cultural center opened in 1995.

8. The same card, tinted and slightly enlarged, was published in New Caledonia by Caporn under the fantasy caption "Natives of La Conception."

9. There are two index cards per series. The first one shows a photocopy of both sides of a representative card, usually the first one of the series we came across when studying the reference collection. This index card is useful for classification by publisher and by series. For classifying anonymous publishers, the layout of the back of these postcards is used: the typeface of "Postcard" or "Carte Postale," the contents and typeface of any other text, the size and layout of dividing lines, and possible logos or artwork.

The second index card, known as the inventory card, contains the following types of data: (1) format (vertical or horizontal); (2) date or cancellation ("mint" refers to a postcard used without cancellation); (3) identification number; (4) color; (5) cross-references to duplicates in another series; (6) whether the card is a "real photograph"; and the caption, our description, and any handwritten description that appears on the card.

10. In some cases cancellations are authentic, but only an address is written down. Others are canceled but do not bear an address, showing that they were sent in an envelope in order to ensure their safe delivery. A number of postcards are adorned with canceled stamps. These have been cataloged as postally canceled cards, but possibly these stamps were stuck on after the event, as the cancellation on the stamp does not carry over onto the card. This practice, which today would depreciate a card, proves that collectors during the 1910–1920 period preferred postcards that had been posted.

11. This type of series is found worldwide.

12. The same deliberate fabrication occurs on a Caporn Kanaka postcard (H19bis) where the New Caledonian *bagayou* is quite different from the New Hebridean penian sheath. The postcards of an elderly New Hebridean Melanesian couple (H16, H16ter) by Talbot were published later by J. Raché and captioned "Kanaka couple from the La Foa area." When one realizes that four or five other postcards show the same elderly woman close to a typical hut of the La Foa (New Caledonia) area, it is understood that Talbot had deliberately miscaptioned the original card, no doubt in order to be the first to offer for sale a view of the New Hebrides.

13. Correspondence from Rachel Reboulet to E. L. Memet, Noumea, n.d., Album MS.H2, publisher H15, postcard captioned "Cueilleurs de café. Coffee pickers."

14. Anon., correspondence to his sister, New Hebrides, HA25, postcard no. 3.

15. Correspondence from L. Dumont, Port Vila, n.d., Album MS.H2, publisher HA12, handwritten caption on back.

16. Correspondence from L. Dumont to ?, Port Vila, n.d., H21.

17. Correspondence from John W. Beattie to the Comte de Fleurieu, n.d., H24.

18. Correspondence from L. Dumont to ?, Port Vila, 18 February 1928, HA38.

19. Anon., correspondence to Jeannette, 1 March 1939, MS.H2, publisher H13, postcard no. 111.

20. Correspondence from Max Shekleton to his parents, Port Vila, 3 January 1960, MS.H2, publisher H39, postcard captioned: "Looking down the main street of Port Vila."
21. Correspondence from Louis to his sister, New Hebrides, n.d., HA14.
22. Anon., correspondence to his cousins, Port Vila, 21 February 1929, MS.H2.
23. Correspondence from Francis to his "beloved," New Hebrides, n.d., HA14.
24. Correspondence from illegible to ?, New Hebrides, n.d., Max Shekleton's duplicates.
25. Correspondence from A. Gall to "Miss," Vila, 31 May 1911, Max Shekleton's duplicates.
26. Correspondence from illegible to Moizard, Noumea, 28 November 1911, H15.
27. Anon., correspondence to Odette Verdier, New Hebrides, n.d., H8bis.
28. Anon., correspondence to Berthe, Port Vila, 14 September 1929, HA33.
29. Anon., correspondence to anon., 17 August 1914, geographic origin unknown, H8bis.
30. Correspondence from Luc to Luce, New Hebrides, 30 July 1914, Max Shekleton, Fiji postcards vertical album.

REFERENCES

- Abensur, Brigitte, and Robert Abensur
 1996 Postcard or Letters? When the Post Office Decides That a Postcard Is a Letter. *L'Echo de la Timbrologie*, no. 1687: 19–21.
- Angleviel, Frédéric
 1995 *Report on an Assignment to the Overseas French Archives (C.A.O.M.) Relating to New Caledonian Heritage*. Noumea: French Pacific University.
- Angleviel, Frédéric, and Max Shekleton
 1995 What the Postman Saw: Paroles Calédoniennes au fil des cartes postales. In *Parole, communication et symbole en Océanie: Actes du septième Colloque C.O.R.A.I.L.*, 335–363. Noumea: Université Française du Pacifique and Coordination pour l'Océanie des Recherches sur les Arts, les Idées et les Littératures; Paris: L'Harmattan.
- n.d. Contribution à l'inventaire des CPA des Nouvelles-Hébrides. In *Annuaire des correspondants cartophiles*. Paris: H. Desbois, forthcoming.
- Belbéoch, Henry
 1993 *Douarnenez: Souvenirs . . . souvenirs*. Quimper: Palantines.
- Corre, Bruno
 1996 Territorial Archives: Memory for a Society in Transition. *Pôles Nord* (Koné), no. 18:30–31.

Desbois, Henri

1996 *Annuaire des correspondants cartophiles*. 14th ed. Paris: H. Desbois.

Eidler, Jack, and Edith Koplin

1989 *26 Postcards of Early Hawaii*. Honolulu: Maile Press.

Foucher, Philippe

1984 *Nomenclature cartophile de Nouvelle-Calédonie: Cartes postales anciennes, 1900–1945*. Paris: published privately.

Kerven, Andre, and Martial Yvan

1991 *Cartes postales du passé, l'île Maurice*. Papeete: Editions du Pacifique.

Neudin, Gérard

1996 The Best Cartophilic Books of the Season. *Collectionneur Français*, no. 344: 20–21.

Noury, Jean

1996 *Les cartes postales anciennes racontent la France d'Outre Mer*. France: Quistinic, L'aventure carto.

O'Reilly, Patrick, S. M.

1973 *La Nouvelle-Calédonie au temps des cartes postales* [New Caledonia at the time of postcards]. Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines.

1989 *Calédoniens: Répertoire bio-bibliographique de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*. 2d ed. Paris: Société des Océanistes.

Stehle, G.

1995 Fire of the Cargo Ship "Maroni" in Guadeloupe. *Association Tropiques* newsletter (Association des Collectionneurs de Cartes Postales et Documents d'Outre-Mer [ACAPOM], Meudon), no. 4: 17–19.

Stephenson, Elsie

1997 *Fiji's Past on Picture Postcards*. Suva: Caines, Jannif Limited.