

Review: COLIN NEWBURY
OXFORD UNIVERSITY

As a “contemporary history,” Stephen Henningham’s *France and the South Pacific* is an able survey that aims to inform the Anglophone Pacific about the policies and practices of Francophone neighbors. It is accurate, balanced, and soundly based on a wide variety of sources intelligently deployed and clearly presented. By reviewing the recent past the author helps to explain the present; and a final Conclusion ventures into prognostication about the later 1990s.

As such, it compares well with other works from Australians alerting Anglophones to the complexity of issues behind the “French presence”—too often seen as a simplistic regression in “colonialism” in an age of “independence.” It does not quite have the historical depth or make use of primary sources in the style of works by Robert Aldrich and John Connell. But the author has an advantage rare in Australian historiography of the Pacific, that of field experience in the consulate general in New Caledonia and

a

diplomatic career in the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. And from that experience Henningham has managed to combine an academic detachment with a knowledge of the compromises worked out between new states and former colonial powers to serve current interests. In short, *France and the South Pacific* modestly challenges by its understatement the assumptions of intellectual Whiggery--steady progression for all societies toward a democratic and autonomous statehood. The limitations to this model encouraged in the Pacific since the 1960s are now better understood, after two decades of decolonization. But acceptance of French modes of internal autonomy and external patronage is still difficult for an Anglo-phone generation reacting to evidence of racial conflict in New Caledonia, the nuclear defiance in Moruroa, and the *Rainbow Warrior* affair. Why should France still have a "presence" at all so far from Europe in a sphere of Asian, American, and Australasian influence?

This underlying question is one of several that require deeper analysis. How far did France's position in Europe and the wider world after 1945 determine local French policies in the Pacific? Were there social and economic changes in possessions in that region peculiar to French Overseas Territories, which might serve as an explanation for the degree of political accommodation or resistance to French policies? And, following from this question, who were the local leaders who acted as power brokers between distant European ministries and islanders of mixed origins? This is not to assert that the author is unaware of these basics for understanding the contemporary outcome of past history. But these basics are not always addressed directly by Henningham in this book; and to some extent they are obscured by the structure of the analysis and the arrangement of chapters by geographical territories--Vanuatu, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna. Because of this serial rather than thematic treatment, much of the logic behind French actions since 1945 is less easy to disentangle; and the important similarities between political elites in the territories are not emphasized.

In outline, the analysis of French policies and their results begins with the case of Vanuatu. It is treated as a failure on the part of officials and an example of successful Melanesian resistance to European control, because successive French administrators misread the signs of genuine local "nationalism" and were bypassed by their British counterparts, who were willing to withdraw. In detail, as Henningham shows, the factions behind the political movement Nagriamel, the complex land claims, and a movement for independence--based in part on a reactionary defense of *kastom* and in part on the organizational framework of the Protestant churches--preclude such easy conclusions. Although the French may have underestimated the popu-

list roots of the independence movement and overestimated the influence of Francophone parties, the main characteristic of Vanuatu politics has been fragmentation, not “national” cohesion. And within that weak framework, Stephens’s utopian bid for secession at Santo made as much political sense as French settlers’ bid for power under French patronage. In the event, British indifference left the way open for the Vanua’aku Pati to bid for single-party control of the machinery of government, much as one-party states have been created elsewhere.

Another interpretation of this recital of events is that Paris and the local French administration failed to appreciate that their political constituency in the group was too narrowly based and that the politics of aid alone could not make up for the weakness of a pro-French elite in the face of the cohesion of local Protestant churches, who had patrons of their own in Australia and New Zealand and an ideology of devolved self-government. Lack of awareness of this Anglophone tradition, built up in Western Samoa and Fiji and practiced even within the special arrangements for the Cook Islands, left France without a convincing political argument. There is also the point, though it is not clearly made, that by the 1960s and 1970s, French ministries viewed their stake in the New Hebrides as more important for the French position in New Caledonia and Tahiti than for the survival of French settlers. As in the nineteenth century, labor migration could not be left to chance.¹ The lesson of Vanuatu for French businesses and settlers by the 1970s was simply to confirm their point of view about the continued need for settler control in New Caledonia.

The succeeding two chapters deal with this central example, dividing chronologically at 1978. The first (chapter 3) analyzes the reasons for French unwillingness to change the socioeconomic structure of New Caledonian societies during the period of reform and representative government that brought the Union Calédonienne (UC) into the position of partnership with the administration. The reasons why the UC was unsuccessful in challenging the business and settler oligarchy are thoughtfully discussed (p. 54). Behind the lack of metropolitan will lay broader issues encouraging conservatism, not least the nickel boom that brought in white and Polynesian immigrants, the reform of municipal government funded directly by France, and the marginalization of local Melanesians by the sheer pace of socioeconomic change. Chapter 4 deals with the increasing radicalization of this constituency from 1979 to 1989, the reasons for the rise of the Front de la Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste, and the later disasters and compromises leading to the Matignon Accord of August 1988.

Again, it would have been helpful to have made a more nuanced analysis of New Caledonian society. Leadership patterns on the Kanak side cover

wide variety of education and experience of the French system of centralized control and representation, union representation, and office within the Catholic and Protestant churches. Ethnicity is not all; and there are important generational differences that may, in the end, be as important as intellectual positions when the referendum comes in 1998. Some Kanak leaders--Tjibaou, Machoro, Yewene--have had their power base in the Melanesian subsistence and cash-cropping peasantry with a long memory of land loss and a political rhetoric emphasizing the wider community of Melanesian liberation grievances and successes in Vanuatu, the Solomons, and Papua New Guinea. They share a sense of alienation, rather than full participation in the stops and starts of the political process in New Caledonia since the 1950s. Others--Ukeiwe or Nenou--have had a greater faith in political redemption through a share of economic development, and they have taken a different view of the predicament of "independence" among their neighbors. It is important to realize that these leaders may be no less "nationalist" for that, but have a different constituency among a local Melanesian elite emerging from the opportunities for social mobility in the 1980s (limited though they have been). Similarly, as is better appreciated, divisions between rural Caldoches and the immigrant commercial and administrative bourgeoisie have also run deep. Of the Vietnamese, Indonesians, Wallisians, Tahitians, and ni-Vanuatu, little is said--mainly because so few studies have been made of these marginal but politically important groups in New Caledonia (with the partial exception of immigrant Tahitians). Their vulnerability, however, makes them important in the political demography between the two antagonistic major ethnic groups, because neither of those--Melanesian or white--will command a clear majority.

Two chapters follow on French Polynesia, tracing the decline of a trading economy and the rise of services in a military-dominated outpost. Populist separatism in the shape of Pouvana'a never recovered from the 1958 referendum; since then, local politics have turned on local perceptions formulated by a *demi* elite on the advantages of relative autonomy and association as a French Overseas Territory. The rise and decline of Gaston Flosse as local broker in this system of high-level representation and simmering social discontent is presented as part of the politics of containment through state spending. The bigger issues--land, unemployment, an increasingly differentiated class structure with low levels of education at one end outbalanced by inflated incomes at the other--were simply postponed. Chapter 7, on France's nuclear-testing program, in effect supplies some of the explanation behind the political chronology of earlier chapters; and a final chapter analyzes French foreign policy in the Pacific, tracing efforts to make up ground lost in Melanesia, Australia, and New Zealand in the 1960s and 1970s.

For clarity of historical explanation, much in these latter chapters ought

to have prefaced the details of territorial analysis. For example, it is not made clear that by 1958, after the important *loi-cadre* reforms that opened the way for ministerial representative government in the territories, de Gaulle began to have second thoughts about the importance of the Pacific as an area for nuclear testing and that this change of mind had immediate political consequences. This conservative reevaluation in Paris coincided with the formation of a more determined conservative set of opposition parties in New Caledonia (usefully tabled on p. 58) and accounts for tacit metropolitan support for the destruction of the UC and Lenormand. Similarly, ministerial posts for the Tahitian Government Council were abolished in favor of direct executive control; diplomatic representation by foreign powers in the French Pacific was removed to Paris; and in 1963, to ward off American entry into New Caledonian nickel, greater executive control was also exerted and ministerial portfolios were abolished in Noumea. In other words, in the eight years before the explosion of the first French atomic bomb over Moruroa, there was a complete reassessment of the pace of political change and the strategic unity of French Pacific possessions. The consequential influence of the ministries of Defense and Atomic Energy on the territories also requires to be spelled out (for example, the Ministry of Defense's own analysis of these changes does not feature in the bibliography).²

A similar caveat applies to the analysis of the economic history of the territories. New Caledonia's nickel production was not merely a high revenue earner in the local balance of payments (the territory was the only French Pacific possession to pay its way); but in the Gaullist perception of France's position in a nuclear club of great powers, both nickel and chrome were independently sourced, free from North American or other constraints on French foreign-policy decisions outside NATO.

Finally, despite the excellent tables on political parties and demography, the analysis of social change required to explain the increasing instability underneath the patronage politics is minimal. In French Polynesia, for example, the constituency once appealed to by Pouvana'a has now changed from a rural peasantry to the urban unemployed. The events of October 1987, when Papeete was set on fire, are an indication of deep-seated problems in the structure of the Maohi and *demi* classes and a warning that the statute of 1984 that returned the territory to full internal self-government may make it more, not less, difficult to meet local aspirations. And as in New Caledonia there is a gap between disaffected youth and the older generation of power brokers drawn from among the *demi*.

One outlet for disaffection enjoyed by the French territories is, of course, emigration to France. Indeed, it is one of the bigger bonuses of continued political dependency. Unfortunately, migration is a topic not listed in the

index, though European immigration is treated in the text along with references to intraregional migration. There are signs that this avenue, too, may become more difficult within the regulations adopted for the European Union as a whole, in conditions of unemployment and recession in the metropolitan heartland. For, sentiment apart, the history of the relationship between France and its territories has been dominated by metropolitan interests--"interests of state." The French public, except at a superficial level, has never known or cared very much about Pacific possessions; and efforts of self-appointed spokesmen to direct attention to the Pacific as a new center of world power have not really been supported by intellectuals or politicians.³ In any case, the Asian Pacific is a very different order of economic growth and political importance, and it is difficult to sustain an argument that automatically links Pacific island territories of whatever status to the new chariot wheels to the north. It is surprising, moreover, how little the political communities in New Caledonia or Tahiti are aware of the regional associations created in the context of Asian and Pacific Rim countries over the past few decades. The history of the Far East (Near North) does not figure in the curriculum of the French University of the Pacific as yet. And for France--with more direct links to the Far East markets and a tradition of direct diplomacy with China and Japan, Singapore and Malaysia--minor possessions such as New Caledonia, Tahiti, and Wallis and Futuna are very marginal bases from which to launch any regional initiatives.

In a sense, then, "contemporary" histories, even the best of them, are bound to be overtaken by events--the moratorium on and renewal of nuclear testing and the current French emphasis on educational reform, research, and mending fences with Australia and New Zealand. The politics of influence, rather than the politics of domination, would seem to feature more prominently in the calculations of a European power with worldwide interests. Henningham's book at least will help Australians and New Zealanders or Americans to reach beyond the journalistic polemic that has surrounded "France in the Pacific" to an intelligent, if limited, account of the reasons why France is still present in the region. Taken together with other works by Aldrich and Connell, it also stands well above any Francophone contributions to that explanation.

NOTES

1. This point is made in Robert Aldrich, *France and the South Pacific since 1940*, 225.
2. Ministère de la Défense, *La défense de la France* (Paris, 1988).
3. See the useful account of this effort by academic journalists to force French attention on a South Pacific-Asia axis. Aldrich, *France and the South Pacific*, 318-335.