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### **Perspectives on a Contemporary History**

When serving as a junior Australian diplomat to New Caledonia from 1982 to 1985, a posting that also involved several visits to French Polynesia and one to Wallis and Futuna, I from time to time thought: someone should write a general study of the history and politics of the French Pacific territories and of France's relations with the countries of the Pacific islands region. The books available at that time on this subject, whether in French or in English, were either very dated or inadequate, or both. My opportunity to attempt this task began, unexpectedly, in early 1988, after I was granted a research fellowship in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University.

The job had been advertised without particular reference to the French Pacific, and had attracted numerous applicants. I suspect the success of my application reflected in considerable part the heightened level of interest in Australia, at least around that time, in the Francophone Pacific, and in the implications for France-Australian relations of issues and trends in the French Pacific territories. In the light of this interest, in Australia and elsewhere, I set out to write a book that would appeal, it was hoped, to both the academic and general reader. This ambition helped shape my decisions on the book's format and style. I also decided, even though the main focus of the book is on recent decades, to include an opening chapter that reviewed the history of the French presence in the region up to around the time of the Second World War, so as to offer an overview in one volume.

I had scarcely settled in at the Australian National University when I was disconcerted to be advised that Robert Aldrich of Sydney University was engaged in what seemed to be a very similar project. Over a cordial lunch I was pleased to learn that our approaches were rather different. I had considerable firsthand knowledge of the French Pacific territories, but only a passing acquaintance, at that time, with metropolitan France; Robert's experience was the converse. My main focus was to be on contemporary political issues and their recent context; Robert put much of his emphasis on how French perceptions of and policy on the Pacific islands region had developed, and on how the territories fitted into the broader context of French colonial and contemporary policy. The eventual outcome was, I believe, two studies that are in important respects complementary. Each study, of course, has its particular strengths and weaknesses, as our distinguished reviewers have noted.

Albeit complementary, the two books do not of course, individually or together, offer the last word on the subjects they consider. For one thing, they are both studies by outsiders. This has some advantages, including that of a more dispassionate perspective. (Sometimes though one can be too dispassionate. I refer, accurately, to the bombing of the *Rainbow Warrior* as an act of "State Terrorism," whereas Robert declines the opportunity to give us his own assessment.) But in any case, we would learn much from further insider accounts, by members of the various communities in the Franco-phone areas. I will note in passing that two recent studies by members of the Caldoche community in New Caledonia provide some interesting steps in this direction (see Barbançon 1992; Terrier-Douyère et al. 1994).

Opportunities also exist for more intensive study of the various archival sources, especially as they relate to developments during the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> The main collections are in France, in the French territories, and, in some measure, in Vanuatu. But there are also important materials in the United Kingdom on the New Hebrides/Vanuatu and in the United States and, in some measure, Australia, on the Second World War period. These materials are highly fragmented and have many gaps. Some important series, notably those relating to "Native Affairs" in New Caledonia, are as yet only partly available. Other materials, relating to the period since the Second World War, are yet to be opened to public scrutiny.

Nonetheless, the available archival resources offer potentially rich harvests, when consulted in combination with other materials, which include some important private papers and a few notable memoirs, along with a surprisingly rich variety of press reports and of secondary materials. One example from my recent research concerns the extent to which Paris was severely rattled by conditions and trends in the French Pacific colonies and in the New Hebrides Condominium in the immediate postwar years, as it sought to reassert its authority. The nationalist movement in Tahiti was at its peak; an abortive revolt took place in Wallis; conditions in New Caledonia were unsettled; and the indentured Vietnamese workers in New Caledonia and, especially, the New Hebrides seemed to be on the verge of insurrection.<sup>2</sup>

The written sources should of course be consulted in conjunction with oral testimony of various kinds, to the extent it is accessible. Though I was not at the time consciously collecting material for a book, I learned much from a broad variety of conversations during my time on posting in New Caledonia. When I later returned, on several occasions, to the French territories, and also visited Vanuatu and other Pacific islands countries, I benefited greatly from numerous discussions and interviews. These encounters focused in particular on recent events, but often included consideration of a

broader time span, and enlightened me to varying and often conflicting historical traditions and perspectives.

Considerable work has been done in Vanuatu in the tape recording of traditions and recollections, in a project developed by Dr. Huffmann at the Cultural Centre. Historians and anthropologists have done some similar work on a smaller scale in the French territories, but across the board, much further work remains to be done. Such material, as it is collected and made available, will one day provide a valuable resource for subsequent efforts at historical synthesis. More immediately, it also provides an occasion for local communities and groups to develop and debate their own understandings of and perspectives on their own historical experiences.

One rewarding avenue for further research, based on the rich trove of material mentioned above, may be with respect to setting the experience of the French Pacific territories in their wider Pacific islands settings. The more I learn of the Polynesian cultural complex, the better I understand Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia, despite the pervasiveness of Western influences on that latter territory. Similarly, the Melanesian context helps illuminate aspects of New Caledonia's history and society. In addition, concerning New Caledonia, it remains especially important to explore, during the course of the twentieth century, the richness and variety of its connections with the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu). A fuller understanding of the recent histories of these two countries, I am convinced, will depend substantially on their examination in parallel.

When I sent my final typescript to the publishers, in late 1990, France continued to test its nuclear weaponry in French Polynesia, and tensions in New Caledonia had only recently subsided. In April 1992, a couple of months after the book was published, President Mitterrand announced the suspension of the testing program. By this stage, calm conditions had become routine in New Caledonia.

When one seeks to write a "contemporary history," one risks being in some measure bypassed by events. But fundamental issues and underlying trends often also display strong continuities, and the course of events often doubles back. As this article goes to press, a new French president, Jacques Chirac, has just announced the resumption of the testing program, unleashing a storm of criticism. His views and approach on New Caledonia may have evolved significantly since he was French prime minister in 1986-1988. But if this is not the case, his presence at the head of France could in due course unsettle the interim consensus established in that territory, especially as the referendum on the territory's political and constitutional future scheduled for 1998 draws closer.

Concerning nuclear testing, I commented in my *France and the South Pacific* that further investigation was necessary into the implications and possible risks of the tests. Now I would be inclined to take that suggestion a step further and support strongly the establishment of an independent international commission of enquiry, under the auspices of the South Pacific Forum, into these questions (see Henningham 1995a, 1995c:90). If France is genuine in its statements that it wishes to play a constructive role in the region, and if it has full confidence that the tests and their legacies are indeed innocuous except in a very small immediate area, it should have no fears--and should indeed welcome such a commission. Or am I being disingenuous?

### NOTES

1. I have been drawing on these materials in some of my recent work. See the articles listed in the references.
2. See Henningham 1995b. In his book Robert Aldrich examines the incident in Wallis, but rather sketches over the unsettled conditions in the other colonies.

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