

**REVISING THE REVISIONISTS:
THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF IMMIGRANT MELANESIANS
IN AUSTRALIA**

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The Queensland Labor Trade

Between 1863 and 1904 in Queensland, Australia, 62,000 first-indenture agreements were entered into by Pacific Islanders, mainly from what are now Vanuatu, New Caledonia (the Loyalty Islands), the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea; and by a few Micronesians from Kiribati, and Polynesians from Tuvalu and outliers in Melanesia. In 1901 the new Commonwealth government of Australia banned further recruiting and attempted to deport all immigrant Melanesians. A royal commission further considered the matter in 1906 and allowed various categories of exemption. By 1908 there were around 2,500 immigrant Melanesians left; today they have approximately 15,000 descendants in Australia.

Since 1908 there have been more than 240 books, chapters, articles, documents, and contemporary accounts published about the Queensland labor trade and descendants of the Kanakas.¹ Academic writing on the Queensland labor trade dates back to B. H. Molesworth's 1917 master's thesis from the University of Queensland. Earlier historians viewed the labor trade as an aspect of British imperial history and concentrated on the legislation and regulations that controlled the sugar industry and the labor trade, seldom doubting that recruiting was a euphemism for kidnapping. They knew little about the working or private lives of the Melanesians who provided the labor to establish Queensland's sugar industry.

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The Revisionists

A change in interpretation is evident in the 1960s and 1970s, when Canberra-based historians such as Dorothy Shineberg (1967), Deryck Scarr (1967; Giles 1968), and Peter Corris (1973) argued that the mobilization of labor in Melanesia last century was characterized not so much by violence and illegality as by a substantial degree of active cooperation by Islanders, who had considerable control over their lives and labor in the sandalwood trade and on sugar and coconut plantations. More recent academic studies of the Queensland labor trade have modified and extended, though not changed, the essence of this conclusion. However, there never was a coherent revisionist school of thought relating to the Queensland labor trade. Nonacademic writers such as Holthouse (1969, 1988) continued to produce popular histories, oblivious of any revision in thought, and the media largely ignored the revision. Academic historians have continued to approach the Queensland labor trade from different perspectives: geographically, as part of the history of both Australia and the Pacific; and ideologically, taking on J. W. Davidson's brief to write island-centered rather than empire-centered history, or in terms of race relations in colonial Queensland, or from a Marxist perspective. Research techniques have also varied considerably, from sampling of information available, to detailed examination of total runs of archival and documentary sources, to quantification and large-scale use of oral testimony.

Kay Saunders has produced the most thorough documentary study of the Queensland labor trade and made a significant theoretical contribution through her analysis of indenture and race relations. But her study grew out of an interest in colonial Queensland and the plantation as an institution. In seeming contradiction to Scarr and Corris, she argued for greater recognition of the exploitation and oppression of the laborers. Adrian Graves's argument is similar, but he also challenged most previous analyses of the Pacific labor market, which he saw as based on neoclassical economic assumptions. Charles Price produced statistical tables on Melanesian immigration. Ralph Shlomowitz provided detailed analysis of wages, work categories, and mortality. Patricia Mercer, Mark Finnane, and I have added to this quantification. Tom Dutton and Peter Mühlhäusler have researched Kanaka pidgin English. And Mercer and I, with two South Sea Islander authors, Faith Bandler and Noel Fatnowna, have used oral tradition to provide an Islander perspective that was missing from previous writing.

Much recent research has been a natural progression from early

studies, which sampled evidence. The more comprehensive studies inevitably found some shortcomings in the pioneering works but also explored new areas. But the changes go farther than this. The historiography of the Queensland labor trade sits uniquely midway between that of the Pacific and Australia. Study has progressed from an initial focus on the actual labor trade (1863-1908) to longer-term investigation of the descendants of those involved, in Australia and, to a lesser extent, in the islands. This article begins by surveying the twist and turns in recent writing on the Queensland labor trade, argues the case for a wider methodology, places the labor trade within the historiography of indigenous and non-European Australia, and ends with some suggestions on directions for future research.

Economics and Class Analysis

Adrian Graves attributes neoclassical economic assumptions to the revisionists, who (he says) do not provide a satisfactory explanation for the operation of the labor market. He is correct in doubting the earlier emphasis on individual motivations and in claiming that there has not been enough serious consideration of changes that may have occurred in the laborers' own societies and economies (Graves 1984: 113-115). But his reason for doubting the emphasis on individual motivations relates to capitalist exploitation, not, as I have argued, the communal obligations of the recruits. He exaggerates the extent of capitalist intrusion and proletarianization of the Melanesian subsistence economy during the nineteenth century, and its increasing dependence on the sale of labor power to secure the subsistence of its members (Shlomowitz 1985c, 1987, 1989:590-591; Scarr 1984; Moore 1987). Over the last 130 years the traditional Pacific mode of production has been restructured toward a capitalist norm and accompanying class formation (Naidu and Leckie 1990), but the major changes occurred this century, not in the last. The arguments supporting capitalist intrusion are often based more on theory than on hard evidence.

Graves sees the Melanesians as the exploited labor component in the Pacific capitalist mode of production, but his revisionism fails to appreciate their incorporation of capitalism within their own cultural schemes. The importance of exchange varied considerably in precapitalist societies, and labor was not considered a commodity to be bought and sold. Both neoclassical and Marxist economics fail to grapple with the dilemma caused when capitalist labor and commodities are indigenized in other cultural logics. From the point of view of the indige-

nous people, their exploitation by the world system may well be a welcome enrichment of their local system.

The argument over proletarianization and the development of class has recently been extended by Mark Finnane and me. Hard evidence is provided in our statistical analysis of Islanders within the Queensland criminal justice system in the 1890s. We argue that proletarianization of the long-staying members of the Islander community in Queensland had begun by the 1890s but was truncated by the mass deportation of 1906-1908. Melanesians' changing experiences with the criminal justice system in the 1890s confirms their place in colonial society as transitional (Finnane and Moore 1990). More extensive quantification of the data available in government and mission records in Queensland will allow the debate to continue, but it seems likely that the data from the islands are too fragmentary to go beyond conjecture.

Revising the Revisionists

Recent refinement of the scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s goes well beyond disputes over motivations and the extent of capitalist development to the cultural accommodation and health of the immigrants. For instance, Corris's and Scarr's work on the labor trade is highly regarded, but they lack understanding of the various subcategories and wages rates among the indentured laborers, now provided by Ralph Shlomowitz (1981a, 1982a, 1985a). Corris totally underestimated the degree of cultural retention by immigrant Melanesians in Queensland, particularly in relation to magic and sorcery (Corris 1970b:63; Corris 1973:96-97; see also Mercer and Moore 1976), which has repercussions for our understanding of the mechanism by which individuals coped with the traumatic relocation from their small-scale societies (Moore 1985:68-69, 263-273). Saunders and Graves erred in their assessment of the Islanders' diet and the relationship between diet and health. Saunders concluded that the official dietary scale was not nutritionally balanced and not sufficient to sustain men and youths engaged in hard manual labor (1974:293; 1982:82-86). She uses this argument to explain the high mortality rate, but in doing so overlooks the fact that the majority survived. Graves (1979:96) supports Saunders's assessment. Although the diet was different from that to which the Melanesians were accustomed in the islands, even the official diet was adequate. Furthermore, analysis of the official dietary scale is fairly pointless, firstly because it is doubtful if it was ever more than a rough guide to what was provided by employers, and secondly because the Islanders

supplemented employer-provided food supplies with produce from their own gardens and they foraged and hunted in the bush (Moore 1985:218-235). Starving Melanesians into submission when they were surrounded by the bountiful bush of tropical Australia would have been nigh impossible. The earlier historians have misread the documentary evidence and been unfamiliar with Islander oral testimony.

The high mortality rates among immigrant laborers related to their lack of immunity to diseases, not to lack of food or to substantial physical mistreatment (Shlomowitz 1987, 1989). Further, many of the early studies were of the labor trade itself, within limited time boundaries (usually 1863-1908), rather than analyses of the communities in the islands that the laborers came from and returned to or of the substantial Islander settlements that remained in Queensland. These refinements have substantially extended the scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s.

Accounts by Descendants of the Kanakas

The revisionist historiography has been augmented by another source, one difficult to argue against but nevertheless flawed. There are now several accounts written by the descendants of the Melanesian laborers, notably Faith Bandler and Noel Fatnowna, a large collection of taped oral testimony, and continuing media interest in the "Forgotten People," the descendants of the original Kanaka laborers who remained in Australia after the mass deportation of 1906-1908. The Islanders' view was first presented on television on the Australian Broadcasting Commission's (ABC) most popular series for 1975 (Peach 1976), and then on "The Big Country" in 1976. In 1978 Matthew Peacock prepared three one-hour ABC radio programs, consisting of oral histories of the Islander community in Australia. These were edited and published the following year (Moore 1979). The next substantial television programs on the Islanders were screened by SBS (Special Broadcasting Service) in 1989 and the ABC in 1992. Faith Bandler has been the most consistent spokesperson for the Islanders, in the print media and on numerous radio and television programs over many years.

In 1977 Bandler published *Wacvie*, the story of her father, Peter Wacvie Mussington, from Ambrim island in the New Hebrides (Vanuatu), written in semifictional form. *Wacvie* and later books by Bandler (1984; Bandler and Fox 1980) are significant as a Melanesian perception of the Kanaka days, but unfortunately they perpetuate the legend of the Islanders as a kidnapped and unhappy people forced to work for callous white masters. No mention is made of the complex intransigent society

that developed in Australia: the traditional feasts and dances, reciprocal relationships, sorcery, leadership, and kinship patterns that helped the Islander community maintain a distinct identity in an alien environment. Noel Fatnowna's *Fragments of a Lost Heritage* manages to capture the Melanesians' spirit, strength, and survival strategies (1989). It comes much closer to agreeing with the views of most Pacific historians and has been well received by scholars (Quanchi 1989).² Fatnowna tells the story of his family on Malaita and in Australia. The book deals with the twentieth century as much as the nineteenth, strengthening my conclusion that the worst injustices to the Melanesians were perpetrated not during the years of the labor trade but after 1906. At that time they and their children were pushed out of the sugar industry, which (because of the occupational restrictions placed on them in the 1880s and 1890s) had been their only means of gaining a livelihood.

Australian Islander families are also beginning to research their own family histories, to hold centennial gatherings, and to publish booklets. Carol Gistitin's short history of St. John's Anglican church at Rockhampton (1989), a predominantly South Sea Islander congregation, provides the first information on the Islander community in that district. The Togo, Corowa, Dodds, and Moss families have published reminiscences of the lives led by Islanders in northern New South Wales (Bellar et al. 1990). At Mackay the Mooney and Andrews families held reunions in the late 1980s, and the Eggmolesse, Bikwai, and Bowda families of Nambour are researching their history. At Rockhampton, Mabel Edmund has completed a short biography and is negotiating publication. Other Islander families are taking similar interest in their heritage. *The Forgotten People*, Bandler's and Fatnowna's books, and recent Islander family histories provide biographical details on individuals, families, and communities that are missing from histories written from conventional documentary sources. Where they are at odds with the academic historians is over their interpretation of the recruiting process.

The general public and Australian South Sea Islanders steadfastly believe that the original Melanesian immigrants were kidnapped, a view reinforced by the writings of Bandler. This is contradicted by the historical revision of the 1960s and 1970s, and by the view from the islands, where oral testimony confirms that many willingly participated in the labor trade. My introduction to *The Forgotten People* (Moore 1979:5-8) and other publications (Moore 1978-1979, 1981, 1985:337-343) provided explanations of how the kidnapping myths arose and the effect they have had on the outlook of Australia's immigrant Melanesians. Similar arguments appeared in reviews by P. M. Mercer (1980)

and Bob Reece (1978-1979) of *The Forgotten People*. Individual instances of kidnapping may have occurred as long as the labor trade lasted, but we know that the majority came willingly, many more than once. There is also the fact that most of the Islanders allowed to stay in Australia after 1906 had already been living there for more than twenty years, taking their recruitment back to a period when the labor trade was less regulated: some of them are likely to have been kidnapped. The transfer system that operated in varying degrees throughout the trade also gave the appearance of slave auctions down by the docks when ships arrived; this still holds its place in the contemporary memory of the labor trade. But the main arguments relate to the influence of the media and education, cosmology and psychology. The media still constantly sensationalize the labor trade, taking little notice of academic views expressed over the last twenty years. The education system, from primary and secondary schools to Christian Sunday schools, still does not present the revised view of largely voluntary participation by the laborers. Feedback from the media and formal education on a wide variety of topics connected to the Islanders is evident in the oral testimony collected from the Islanders in the 1970s and 1980s (Moore 1985: 338-340) and in community attitudes that bolster the Melanesian view.

No matter how willing they may have been to participate, for some the experience of leaving their small-scale societies was extremely traumatic. They feared pollution, diseases, strangers, malevolent spirits, strange foods, the alien nature of the land and its people, and the regimentation. Some seem never to have fully comprehended the migration they undertook. The explanations they gave to their children many years later seem to contain evidence of this incomprehension. Finally, perhaps we are dealing with a different reality and with a different concept of truth: the objective truth confronted with an emotional or psychological truth. It is possible that their alienation from mainstream Australian society for more than a century has produced a historical myth: an alienation that needs the balm of kidnapping? As Patricia Mercer suggests, the view that their forebears did not come willingly is an essential component of contemporary Melanesians' attitudes to white Australia: "so psychologically imperative is it, that 'blackbirding', if it did not exist, would have to be created" (1980: 126).

Quantification

A most valuable advance in the study of the immigrant Melanesian community came in the second half of the 1970s when runs of statistics were subjected to quantitative analysis. Charles Price and Elizabeth

Baker's useful research note (1976) contains a set of tables that divide the estimated 62,475 Melanesian labor contracts into island groups and individual islands over the years 1863 to 1904. Before these lists were available, the best accessible statistical source was an appendix to Parnaby (1964), which drew figures from the published annual Queensland immigration reports. Corris based his estimates on the same deficient sources. Price and Baker were able to compute better figures by using a number of official registers held in the Queensland State Archives to supplement official published sources. Their research note has become a standard reference point for later work on the Queensland labor trade, enabling researchers to know the island origins of the Melanesian labor force in Queensland at any particular time. This is important in estimating the degree of previous contact the laborers may have had with foreigners and the composition of the various categories of laborers in Queensland.

Ralph Shlomowitz, already skilled as an analyst of the economic history of American slavery, the plantations, and postbellum labor systems, applied his experience to the economics of the Pacific labor trade and the Queensland and Fiji sugar industries. He has now completed a detailed analysis of the Queensland indentured and time-expired labor market, the interrelationship of different categories of labor, and market arbitrage. Shlomowitz's work ranges from analysis of the profitability and viability of indentured labor categories, particularly the time-expired market (1981a, 1982a, 1985a, 1985b) and the search for institutional equilibrium in the sugar industry (1979a, 1982b), to statistical investigation of the recruiting voyages (1981b), the development of the Butty Gang as a system of organizing labor (1979b), and health and mortality on the plantations and farms (1987, 1989). These Queensland studies have now been supplemented by similar comparative studies on labor in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and Ocean Island and Nauru.

There can be no doubt of the benefits that have accrued from the tabulation and analysis of demographic and economic data from the labor trade. The retrieval of data on individuals who made no individual impact upon the world gives us access to another historical dimension and facilitates developments in social history. Shlomowitz's findings on the extent and importance of time-expired and ticket-holding laborers in Queensland have stimulated our understanding of social and class developments in the colony. Nevertheless, undue reliance on statistics can be misleading. To use health and mortality as an example, in Melanesia the spiritual and physical worlds intermingle, and this

Melanesian world was transported to Australia. Sickness and death had supernatural causes and needed to be avenged if ancestors were to be appeased. Murders, either through sorcery or by physical violence, had to be avenged to maintain social equilibrium (Moore 1985:244-273). But how can this be revealed in any statistical analysis of mortality and health statistics? Just as care is needed in dealing with traditions and myths, statistics also should be treated with care.

Oral Tradition and Ethnohistory

Systematic collection of Kanaka oral testimony began with Robert Tan in 1960 and Tom Dutton's interviews in Ayr in 1964 (1980). Peter Corris interviewed some of the original Kanaka laborers and their descendants in the Solomon Islands and Queensland (1970a), and Edward Docker contacted descendants in northern New South Wales and Queensland (1970). An Islander-centered view of the labor trade was beginning to emerge, but what was missing in the research was large-scale involvement of the descendants.

The advance on Corris's valuable start came through an innovative approach to the collection of oral tradition from indigenous and immigrant peoples in North Queensland, sponsored by the History Department at James Cook University in Townsville. Under the auspices of a black oral history project, Patricia Mercer and I began in earnest to accumulate a bank of Islander oral testimony. Over several years, beginning in 1974, we spent our spare time traveling in coastal North Queensland gathering oral testimony, concentrating on the oldest of the Islanders and on what they could remember of the plantation days. We were already too late to meet any of the original Kanakas.

The Australian-born descendants of the Kanakas whom we interviewed, often children of the original immigrants, were aged up to ninety-nine, with many in their seventies. The majority lived along a thousand kilometers of coastal Queensland between Maryborough and Ingham; most around Mackay, at Bowen, at the twin towns of Ayr and Home Hill in the Burdekin delta, and at Ingham. Over eight years, eighty-seven tapes were recorded, varying in duration from two hours to a few minutes, most being an hour or so of structured conversations based on the lives led by Pacific Islanders in Queensland. The tapes form only a fragment of our experiences with Australian Pacific Islanders, but they are the kernel of these experiences and are designed to represent the full range of conversations in which we participated.³

While Mercer concentrated her research efforts in North Queensland,

my research extended to the Solomon Islands to study the island origins of leading Queensland families. Because of the relationship I had established with the Mackay Malaitan families, I was able to participate in the relinking of the Fatnowna (1989) family with their descent group, the Rakwane of Fataleka language district, east Malaita. I spent five months on Malaita in 1976 and 1978, mainly inland from Fakanakafo bay in east Fataleka; returning briefly in 1981, 1984, and 1987; and have visited Malaitans in Honiara on three other occasions. I went in search of oral testimony on the labor trade, but soon became just as immersed in the myth-history of Malaita, was adopted into a leading Fataleka family, and gained an appreciation that the labor trade years were but a small part of a history that began when their ancestors first reached Malaita.

First-indenture agreements were issued to 9,187 Malaitans in Queensland. This was 14.7 percent of the total Melanesian migration and 51.7 percent of all Solomon Islanders recruited to Queensland. In comparison with the next most important islands (Epi provided 5,084 laborers, Tanna 4,241, Guadalcanal 4,188, and Ambrim 3,400), Malaita was of outstanding importance (Price with Baker 1976). I was able to compile short biographical notes on 132 labor recruits and generally to follow Keesing's (1974) injunction to historians to stay longer and to learn more of the cast of characters and the local political system and culture. In excess of 9,000 first-indenture contracts were entered into by Malaitans arriving in Queensland. Unfortunately we do not know how many of the laborers were actually reenlisting, nor is there a complete list of their names or of the exact bays and passages from which they were recruited. By using several documentary sources from the government archives, company records, and diaries, 2,815 (30.64 percent) of their names were located, plus details of the ship's voyages on which they left for Queensland, and often the name of the passage or bay at which they boarded the recruiting ships. For 2,023 (22 percent) of them, enough details remain to indicate the dialect group or coastal area from which they came: this provided the first detailed picture of recruiting patterns from any one island (Moore 1985:81-100, particularly 83, 87).

The detailed Malaitan study confirmed many of Corris's conclusions but differed in showing that inland people were closely related to the coastal people and that they were recruited much earlier than had been previously supposed. Individual recruits also emerged as characters in history, their lives described and traced from Malaita to Queensland.

Back in Australia, access was gained to Anglican, Presbyterian, and

Catholic records of Islander baptisms, marriages, and deaths, as well as funeral parlor and municipal records. These sources were checked with the most knowledgeable informants, who were able to sort out some anomalies and provide supplementary information. Useful though this was, the data were still not in a readily accessible form. A solution was found in using the university's mainframe computer to reorder the records into chronological sequences of names, places of residence, and islands of origin. The initial 1,210 register entries from multiple sources, covering the years 1878 to 1959, when resorted (allowing complex variations in names used and in the spelling of names)⁴ produced 4,938 entries. The computerized data, partly based on the interpretations by informants of the original lists of names, and used in conjunction with other oral testimony and documentary sources, particularly files on crop liens and mortgages, have produced reliable biographical information on the recruits who remained behind in the twentieth century and on their families.

Mercer (1981) used a combination of oral testimony with colonial, state, Commonwealth, local government, parish, and company records to complete her history of the survival of the Pacific Islander communities in North Queensland from 1900 to 1940. She found abundant materials contained in the records of cemeteries, hospitals, churches, sugar mills, and other organizations, which, combined with oral testimony and more conventional documentary sources, enabled her to reconstruct family histories and general histories of the various Islander communities in North Queensland. From historical fragments Mercer has been able to produce an admirable study of the survival of immigrant Melanesian families in the unfriendly environment of a White Australia and a white-dominated sugar industry in racist North Queensland. As a result of the approach used by Mercer and me, exploiting a wider range of sources than ever before, and, crucially, involving the descendants of the Kanakas in the islands and Australia, many of the previous spatial and time barriers have been removed.

Australian Historiography and the Kanakas

The "decolonization" of Pacific history was under way from the 1940s and 1950s, yet in Australia in 1968 the Boyer Lecturer W. E. H. Stanner could still speak of "The Great Australia Silence" on Aboriginal matters (1969: 18-29; see also Howe 1988; Reece 1979; Reynolds 1984). While Pacific historians were writing island- and Islander-centered history, historians of Australia were still standing firmly on the European

side of the frontier. Corris's doctoral thesis on Solomon Islands labor migration to Queensland and Fiji, at the time seen as pathbreaking in its methodology and findings, was submitted in 1970 and achieved wide circulation after its publication in 1973. Through Corris, and to some extent through Saunders, the historiography of the Queensland labor trade in first half of the 1970s had more in common with Pacific historiography than with that of Australia.

In Australian history early in the 1970s there was still an emphasis on the destructive impact of European capitalism and racism, typified by Saunders's major studies (1974, 1982) and Evans, Saunders, and Cronin's study focused on race relations between Europeans, Aborigines, Melanesians, and Chinese in colonial Queensland (1975). A few years later the writings of Henry Reynolds and Noel Loos (Reynolds and Loos 1976; Loos 1982), and particularly Reynolds's *The Other Side of the Frontier* (1981), were lauded as original and pathbreaking in the emphasis they gave to Aboriginal resistance. But as Kerry Howe pointed out in his review of *The Other Side of the Frontier*: "Historians of culture contact in Africa, the Americas, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands have been looking at 'the other side' for twenty to thirty years now, and many of the issues Reynolds examines are *deja vu* in any context other than Australian history" (1983:82; see also Howe 1988:602).

Reynolds and Loos's emphasis on resistance served a useful purpose in quantifying conflict and showing that Aborigines were not passive victims, but their enthusiasm to prove the point led them to neglect Aboriginal accommodation, which was just as important to Aboriginal survival. The evidence is there in their writings, but they have not stressed it, leading Bob Reece to suggest that perhaps their arguments, largely formulated in the 1970s, are sometimes purposefully (Reynolds 1981:1), but often unwittingly, related to the needs of black radicalism at that time (Reece 1987:117). The same is true of Saunders's thesis (1974), and Evans, Saunders, and Cronin's (1975) and Ryan's (1981) books. In their preface to the 1988 edition of *Race Relations in Queensland*, Evans and Saunders provide an excellent description of the political milieu in which they researched and wrote, and discuss their motivations.

By the 1980s the "victims" and "resistance" approaches were less evident, replaced by a new paradigm for Aboriginal-Islander-European interactions on the frontier, typified by the later writings of Reynolds and by Ann McGrath (1987, 1989) and Marie Fels (Attwood 1990). Regional studies modified the general pictures and more rounded histories emerged, using notions of accommodation, action, and agency to show the complexity of alliances that emerged. Reinterpretation of

Aborigines on the frontier and of Chinese (May 1984) and Melanesian immigrants as active agents in retaining a goodly measure of control over their own lives has brought Australian history into line with that of the Pacific.

The methodology and the style of writing on the Queensland section of the Pacific labor trade and Australia's immigrant Melanesians, as well as studies of indigenous Australians, both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, now fit equally into the historiographic traditions of Australia and the Pacific. But the bulk of the literature on the Queensland labor trade always has had an Australian, not a Pacific, orientation.⁵

Future Directions for Research

Historians often see their main task as to organize and establish a rhythm in history, to identify the pivotal moments, static phases, sudden accelerations, and periods. Certainly the biggest failing of research and writing on the Queensland labor trade and the Australian immigrant Melanesian community is that it has been too bound by British academic traditions, by European time boundaries (particularly the 1906-1908 deportation period), and by colonial and national boundaries between Melanesia and Australia. Most of the writing relates to the labor trade and terminates at 1906-1908, as if the world of the immigrant Melanesians stopped dead at the end of 1908. And most of the writing deals only with the actual recruiting process in the islands and the Islanders as immigrants within Australia, ignoring their retention of Melanesian cultural values and the circular nature of the migration. Little detail is known of the effect on island communities when the laborers returned home.⁶

Although the history of the British Pacific has theoretically been "decolonized" since the 1960s, in fact colonial periodization is usually still observed and the historical methods are still of a British school.⁷ Islander-centered history falls short of the total social history approach of the French *Annales* school begun by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, which emphasizes the long perspective and integral relationships among all facets of human existence. Jacqueline Leckie noted that much of the writing passed off as social history in the Pacific is not total history, merely narrative empiricism from an Islander perspective (1983:55).

David Routledge followed Leckie's earlier advocacy in examining what he termed a potentially negative fragmentation in the study of Pacific history:

First, Pacific historians who wish to maintain a unity and coherence in their speciality, must study the past of entire societies, not merely multicultural situations that formed only a part of the actions of these societies. Secondly, they must study process, and not merely sequences of events. And thirdly, they must emphasize social categories rather than individuals, even if such a category can only be defined through an accumulation of detail about individuals. (1985:90)

English-language Pacific historians have too often maintained arbitrary starting and finishing points that relate to the British imperial history they claim to have left behind, and too rarely ventured beyond a timid empiricism. Colonial episodes such as the Queensland labor trade are still unthinkingly bound to firm dates, almost as if the people involved came out of thin air in 1863 and went back into the same ethereal realm in 1908. We need to include as much as possible of the pre-1863 period to provide the context from which the laborers came, and to go beyond 1908 to the 1990s. Immigrant Melanesians have lived in Australia for more than eighty years since the labor trade ended, double the time the labor trade operated. The 1863-1908 years can be reliably assessed only within a much wider perspective.⁸ Despite being ethnographically informed and innovative in many ways, the writings of Scarr, Corris, Saunders, Graves, and Shlomowitz do not seek to achieve a "total history" approach, mounted as they are within a colonial time frame and bereft of Melanesian cosmological context.

A "total history" approach could use industrial archaeological investigations on plantation mill or barracks sites, or Melanesian settlement areas, of the type that made vivid plantation life in Jamaica (Craton 1978), other areas of the Caribbean, and the American South. Although Melanesian sensitivities could be offended (for fear of disturbing ancestral spirits) if archaeological digs were carried out at the sites of Islander encampments, there are intact plantation mill sites, such as Richmond and Nindaroo at Mackay, that could reveal a great deal about the dynamics of the plantation regime of more than a century ago.⁹ There has been one successful attempt at marine archaeology, a Queensland Museum investigation of the wreck of the *Foam*, a recruiting schooner that foundered on the Great Barrier Reef in 1893 (*Daily Mercury* [Mackay], 18 Nov. 1982; *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 1 Dec. 1982; *Australasian Post*, 27 Jan. 1983), but given the lack of access to similar wrecks more work of this type is unlikely.

The collection of oral history in the Islander community from Mackay northward during the 1970s was immensely successful in preserving testimony that has added a totally new perspective to our understanding of immigrant Melanesian life in Australia, not only during the years of the labor trade, but perhaps more crucially in capturing the tribulations of the community during this century, allowing a total picture to emerge. No substantial additions have been made to the collection since the early 1980s. Urgently needed is an extension of the original project, beginning at Rockhampton and moving southward into northern New South Wales. Very few of the children of the original Kanaka laborers are still alive. But it is possible to extend our knowledge of the southern Queensland and northern New South Wales Melanesian community during this century. Indications are that the findings would be rather different, as the southern communities are better integrated into local society than those of northern Queensland. The other area where oral testimony needs to be collected is in Torres Strait, the home of a substantial number of Pacific Islanders, many of whom are descendants of the same indentured laborers.

It is feasible to write a history of all or sections of the southern immigrant Melanesian community, which would complement the earlier work done by Mercer and me in the north. It would also be possible to work on the Vanuatu-Australia links, through families such as the Corowas from Tanna or the Lammon and Henaway families from Epi and Tongoa, to provide a Vanuatu comparison with the Solomon Islands-Mackay link already researched through the Fatnowna-Bobongie families from Lau lagoon and Fataleka in Malaita.

At the end of the 1970s Howe suggested six directions by which to escape what he aptly called "monograph myopia": writing the histories of specific islands and island groups and concise histories of the Pacific, adopting thematic approaches, viewing the South Pacific from the perspective of the Pacific rim, and engaging in more comparative studies and interdisciplinary investigations (1979:87-89). The last decade has seen most of these avenues explored, and much of Howe's criticism from a decade ago is no longer valid. There are now three new general histories of the Pacific (Howe 1984; Campbell 1990; Scarr 1990), making redundant earlier efforts (Oliver 1951; Barclay 1978). Several important histories of island groups have been written collectively, through the University of the South Pacific's Institute of Pacific Studies,¹⁰ and independently, such as Judith Bennett's history of the Solomon Islands (1987). Thematic approaches have now been taken to many issues,

including labor, migration, gender, domestic violence, leadership, resistance to colonial regimes, and Islanders' experiences in the Second World War.

But two general criticisms still stand, in relation to theory and comparative studies. Howe (1979:89), Leckie (1983:52-57), and Routledge (1985:95) all acknowledge the general reluctance of Pacific historians to theorize. Howe suggests more interdisciplinary investigation using theory developed by the social sciences. Leckie and Routledge advocate the adoption of the methods of French social history rather than just select borrowings from anthropology and sociology. The interpretation of culture systems and cultural change in the Pacific needs to be given emphasis, rather than empirical narratives, no matter how much they may purport to be Islander-centered.

Australia's immigrant Melanesian community is the largest group of Melanesians living outside of the islands. They now range from the children of the original recruits to sixth-generation Australians. The quantification of information concerning their lives, the oral testimony collected, and the depth of regional knowledge now available allows fairly intense scrutiny of their history as individuals, as families, and as communities. A distinct minority group within Australian society, they have maintained strong links with their original culture. They are not just a historical curiosity left over from a plantation era. They have evolved a pan-Melanesian society, an amalgam of elements from dozens of island societies, yet are now firmly Australian. Wedged between indigenous and other immigrant Australians, and linked to the Pacific Islands, the Australian South Sea Island community is suited for any study of the dialectical process of change. Equally, knowledge of their history allows historians to theorize about cultural change and class analysis in the Pacific. The methodology used in piecing together their past should serve as an example for ethnohistorians elsewhere.

We need to pursue more vigorously a comparative approach, within the Pacific but particularly internationally. As far back as 1963 Geoffrey Bolton noted that plantation life in Queensland was "unlike the social pattern elsewhere in Australia" and in "the tradition of planter paternalism found in other British colonies" (1963:87, 89). Adrian Graves noted that "the hierarchical management of the Queensland estate with its tiered status and ethnic-cum-class structures" was "not unlike wage labour plantations in other parts of the colonial world" (1986:253). Ross Johnston compared British jurisdictional policy in Africa with that of the Pacific (1973), which included bringing the labor trade under legal and administrative supervision. Saunders's doc-

toral thesis (1974) compared Queensland with the American South, and she described the Queensland sugar plantations as a “classical sugar plantation system” locking Queensland “inextricably and securely into the patterns in former slave societies of Mauritius and the Caribbean” (1982:40). Shlomowitz has used a comparative approach, relating the Queensland sugar industry and its Melanesian labor component to other Pacific colonies and world cotton and sugar economies (1984). Graves and Richardson (1980) have compared sugar production in Natal with that in Queensland, and Saunders and Graves have published chapters on Queensland within the context of Pacific and international labor migration, convict labor, and indentured labor worldwide (Graves 1984, 1986; Saunders 1982, 1984). And recently Munro has attempted to define and characterize “protectors” of plantation laborers (1989), taking examples from Samoa, Fiji, Hawaii, and Tahiti, as well as from Queensland.

The comparison is not straightforward. Queensland was one British colony among several in Australia. Sugar was only one element in the Queensland economy, alongside mining and pastoralism. The Queensland plantation era was brief, and land ownership in the colony was not as concentrated as in many plantation areas in the Americas. And by the 1880s the industry was being transformed by the introduction of central mills served by small farms (Shlomowitz 1979a). The Melanesian workers were not slaves (Moore 1985:153-155, 197-199; Buckley and Wheelwright 1988:251) and were divided into a series of categories of labor, some quite removed from indenture. Wage labor became more significant than indentured service. But further comparisons with rural immigrant workers in the Americas and Africa may well enhance our understanding of the Queensland sugar industry in the nineteenth century and of Pacific migration and cultural change, both back in the islands, where returning laborers were catalysts for change in village societies; and in Australia, where the immigrant Melanesian began as a separate category of indentured worker and slowly melted into the wider immigrant working class while maintaining closer links with indigenous Australians than any other immigrant group.

Conclusion

Although much of the revisionist writing on the Queensland labor trade from the 1960s and 1970s has stood the test of time, essential parts have been revised or at least refined by use of quantification, oral history, and the involvement of South Sea Islanders in writing their own history.

Part of the change is due to technique; sampling has given way to detailed analyses of statistics and communities. Part is due to more recent writings being centered on the people in the labor trade, not just on the labor trade itself. This article has argued that there never was a coherent revisionist school of thought relating to the Queensland labor trade and that the best avenue for future research is the history of the people in a total history context, without the strictures of dates, industries, and governments.

NOTES

1. Kanakas, Polynesians, and South Sea islanders were terms commonly used in the last century to describe Australia's Pacific islands immigrants. Today their Australian descendants prefer to be called South Sea Islanders.

2. Roger Keesing's editorial work and consultation with historians of the labor trade and the local district ensured the books veracity.

3. We also collected early Islander family photos, now stored with the tapes at the Department of History and Politics, James Cook University of North Queensland.

4. For example, the searches keyed in for the modern family name "Fatnowna" included all of the following variations: Fatnahoonia, Fatnhoona, Fatnahona, Fatnahonia, Oleania, Olerum, Orani, Orrani, Malta, Abelfai, Kawi, Kwailiu, Kwan, and Coquasha. Searches for islands of origin also included six or seven variations in names and spelling for some islands.

5. Perhaps the only point of disjunction remaining is that Aborigines, Melanesians (indigenous and immigrant), Chinese, and other Asian groups in Australia are usually treated as discrete entities, relating to Europeans but seldom to each other. I am indebted to Doug Munro for drawing my attention to this point.

6. A few studies give some emphasis to the effect of the returning laborers: Heath 1974; Bedford 1971, 1973a, 1973b; Bennett 1974, 1979, 1987; and Whiteman 1983.

7. I am not aware of any substantial writing on the Queensland labor trade in any language other than English. Gundert-Hock's study of Vanuatu (1986), written in German, includes material on the motivations of the recruits and their effect on their home societies. Panoff's excellent but neglected interpretative article in the French language discusses the Bismarck Archipelago in the years directly after the cessation of recruiting for Queensland (1979). And Firth and Munro (1990) have published some of the results of their work on the German labor trade to Samoa in the French language.

8. Ron Adams's study (1984) of a century of European contact with Tanna island is an excellent example of placing the Queensland labor trade within a wider indigenous context.

9. There is also the possibility of investigating old village sites in the islands.

10. Though the quality of the histories produced by the Institute of Pacific Studies is highly variable.

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