



**Louis-José Barbançon, L'archipel des forçats:  
Histoire du bagne de Nouvelle-Calédonie,  
1863-1931**

Lille: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2003, 447 pp., ISBN 2 85939 785 X

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# Louis-José Barbançon, L'archipel des forçats: Histoire du bagne de Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1863-1931

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- 1 In recent years there has been growing interest in the French overseas penal colonies. Scholars such as Matt Matsuda, Richard Price, Peter Redfield, and Alice Bullard have each published works—albeit from different methodological perspectives—that devote considerable attention to how these prison outposts illustrate issues such as historical memory, national identity, and colonial and post-colonial perspectives. To this already considerable bibliography, Louis-José Barbançon adds his social historical examination of the first 250 convicts transported from the last dockyard prison still in existence at Toulon to New Caledonia in May 1864. In its attention to historical detail and its specific focus on the early years of the penal colony, this study nicely complements the works of the aforementioned authors as well as the more general survey treatments of the subject that predominated in the 1970s and 1980s.
- 2 Given that there were 75 separate convoys that carried 22,000 prisoners to this Pacific island until 1897 when the colony was reserved exclusively for free settlement, the scope of the book may appear somewhat narrow, but Barbançon rewards his readers with a dense, richly textured prosopography that would have been impossible with a larger sample of prisoners. Based upon the prisoner dossiers housed at the *Archives d'Outre-Mer*

in Aix-en-Provence and the colonial archive in Nouméa, we see who the first «involuntary pioneers» of the island prison were. What Barbançon has discovered is that once the decision was made to close the shipyard jail at Toulon, penal authorities did not simply take all those who volunteered to be transported abroad, but were actually quite careful in selecting those who would make the maiden voyage to New Caledonia for they knew that if the venture were to succeed it would require a certain type of individual. In this regard the author has uncovered a typical prisoner profile: a non-violent offender of provincial origin who seemingly possessed the job skills necessary to build a colonial infrastructure. Thus, the first convoy was comprised of men who professed—as the author points out it was difficult for authorities to determine the validity of such claims—to be carpenters, masons, ironworkers, cobblers, blacksmiths, etc.

- 3 These first deportees were also distinct from their felonious cohorts in some other notable ways. For instance, only 34% of those sent to New Caledonia in 1864 were illiterate whereas 59% of the general prison population could not read or write. While those sent to the penal colony were around 35 years of age, their counterparts in the metropole were on average five years older. Moreover, unlike later denizens of the penal colonies, particularly after 1885 when the law prescribing the transfer of criminal recidivists to the penal colonies was passed, these first prisoners were not hardened criminals as over half (63.6%) had spent less than six months in jail prior to their exile (pp. 91-129). Such findings indicate that while the penal colony may have been a politically expedient solution to deal with prison overcrowding and to permanently rid France of its most unwanted citizens, New Caledonia was not a mere dumping ground, but a locale where the dream of penal-colonial settlement was never far from view.
- 4 Despite the best efforts of authorities to select those individuals best suited for the difficult work of colonization, little in the way of infrastructure was developed as a result of prison labor and settlement on the island remained scattered and insubstantial. This was due in part to the failure of administrators to reconstitute families in New Caledonia. While the state offered to transport the family members of newly released prisoners free of charge, of the 92 married convicts first sent to the penal colony, only 4 wives opted to rejoin their husbands. Authorities hoped that these desultory figures would be bolstered by the shipment of 160 female convicts to the island prior to 1875, but results in this regard were also somewhat mixed. While 80 former male prisoners wed female convicts between 1871-1880—resulting in the birth of 101 children—the majority of men died alone and childless (pp. 307-354).
- 5 In what could have otherwise been a dry recitation of statistics, Barbançon tells this story with verve and flair as he artfully weaves into his narrative some compelling human-interest stories that he has gleaned from his reading of prisoner files. Although there are some omissions—there is little discussion of race, or issues of gender and sexuality—this is a valuable study that contributes to a more refined understanding of French imperialism and French penal culture.

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