Stephen A. Toth, *Beyond Papillon. The French overseas penal colonies, 1854-1952*

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saire de fournir les explications élémentaires concernant le fonctionnement de la justice. Il en résulte que le lecteur se trouve souvent confronté à la nécessité de devoir comprendre par lui-même ce qui n'est pas clairement expliqué. À titre d'exemple, Fabrice Maclair s'attarde assez longuement sur l'évolution des prix de la ferme des greffes, sans toutefois avoir pris la peine de mentionner au préalable que les greffiers n'étaient pas salariés par les tribunaux comme ils le sont de nos jours, ni d'expliquer quelles étaient les sources de leurs revenus.

En refermant le livre, on a l'impression que l'auteur n'est pas vraiment parvenu à remonter à la surface toutes les richesses qu'il a pu découvrir en se plongeant dans ses sources et qu'il faudrait s'y plonger à sa suite pour vérifier si elles sont vraiment aussi riches qu'il nous le dit. C'est dommage, mais on peut espérer qu'il exploitera certains de ces trésors dans des publications ultérieures.

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Stephen A. Toth, *Beyond Papillon. The French overseas penal colonies, 1854-1952*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2006, 212 pp., ISBN 08032 4449 5.

Within the history of punishment, transportation has been a relatively understudied phenomenon. As is generally known, the practice was especially characteristic for the early modern period, although Britain continued it until the mid-nineteenth century. The French were exceptional to the extent that their principal period of transportation started about that time and lasted for another hundred years. Shipments of convicts to French Guiana were halted in 1938 and the penal colony was dismantled in 1952. The other penal colony (or colonies, as there were several establishments in both regions), that of New Caledonia, had been discontinued a little earlier. For readers unfamiliar with the geography of these places: New Caledonia is a Pacific island roughly half way between New Guinea and New Zealand; French Guiana is on the North-East coast of South America between Brazil and Suriname. (Although in French it is spelled with a y, in English, as Webster confirms, with an i, except when the reference is to former British Guyana). The principal penal establishment was in the West of the country along the Maroni (or Marowijne) river. The French word *bagne*, originally designating the home port of the galleys, then referring to the labor camps which replaced them, finally came to mean penal colony.

The general public knows about French transportation practices mainly through the book by Henri Charrière and the subsequent film with Steve McQueen. Toth capitalizes on it with his title and the butterfly which adorns the title page. Then he quickly dismisses *Papillon* as largely fictional – probably rightly so, since, as this reviewer learned not long ago, the famous scene of *Papillon*'s escape from Devil's Island was shot at Maui. One of the few modern scholarly studies of French transportation is by Michel Pierre (*La terre de la grande punition*, Ramsay, 1982), which deals with Guiana only. Scholars and students who do not read French depended primarily on a few chapters in Gordon Wright's *Between the guillotine and liberty* (Oxford UP, 1983). Therefore, the appearance of Toth's book is welcome indeed. Readers of CHS may remember that he already published an article on the colonies' guards (The lords of discipline, CHS 2003, 2; here the spelling is Guyana). Much of

the material returns, under the same title, as chapter 4 of his book. Strangely enough, Toth mentions two other journal articles in his acknowledgment section, but not the one in CHS.

Apart from making use of the penalty of transportation in such a recent period, within Europe the French were exceptional as well in clinging to public executions until 1939. Is there a structural explanation for both practices? To my knowledge, no scholar has offered one and neither does Toth pose the question. He does explain, right from the outset, for which reasons the French embarked upon the adventure of penal colonization. After the defeat of Napoleon I the French had lost practically all their overseas colonies and the prestige of the navy, when compared to the army, was at its lowest point. Penal colonization might help give France a new empire and strengthen the position of the supervising Navy. Whereas the British relinquished transportation in the 1840s and 50s because they considered the practice too costly and lacking the purposes of both rehabilitation and deterrence, France began to adopt it. In 1860 or so it would not have required superhuman intelligence to predict that the French experiment would equally fail, yet the *bagnes* remained in existence.

This state of affairs invites a discussion of Michel Foucault's views. Toth cites David Garland's critique of Foucault in which Garland emphasizes that some elements of the penal system do not function as and are not even designed in the first place as techniques of control. However, Toth does not dismiss the French philosopher entirely. In the chapter on medicine in the *bagne*, for example, he draws inspiration from Foucault's work about doctors and the medical gaze. But the picture of a relative absence of control prevails. Rather than serving as specimens of *pouvoir-savoir*, the history of both *bagnes* was marred by tensions, power conflicts and contrasting images. From the start a major tension was visible between the goals of populating and cultivating the land on the one hand and punishment and deterrence on the other. Another contradiction concerned the image of the *bagnes*. Not only the hard work to be done there but also the frequency of tropical diseases would seem to guarantee that the principle of less eligibility reigned, but the French public, far away from the colonies, was not so sure. Many compared the *bagnes*, in particular the «tropical paradise» of New Caledonia, to vacation resorts where convicts loved to retire from their criminal career.

Toth's chapter about internal life, especially the perspective from below, offers fascinating reading. We hear about faking disease, gambling, escape plans, strong men cherishing their *mômes*, illegal tattoos and violence among convicts. Much of this, to be sure, was already dealt with in Michel Pierre's book. I found it particularly intriguing to read about the so-called *plan*: a cylindrical aluminium tube that a convict inserted into his butt to safeguard his valuables or contraband. Yet, I have my doubts about the reliability of the entire picture. Elements such as the prevalence of homosexual unions are consistent with what we know about male penal communities everywhere, but what about details such as nightly transvestite shows with convicts known as «la Marquise» and «la Tigresse»? To what extent did the reporters exaggerate and beautify their stories? Toth bases his picture primarily on published memoirs of ex-*bagnards* and information from visitors, without a discussion of the reliability of these works.

As it happens, Toth inadvertently raised my suspicion by calling one of his principal sources, Aage Krarup-Nielsen, a Dutch convict. I promised myself that I would eat my hat if it turned out to be true that a person with such a name was Dutch (and not Danish). In the second of two passages in which Toth labels him this way,

he has him charging his «fellow convicts» a dollar and a quarter for the fabrication of a *plan*. Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aage_Krarup_Nielsen]; accessed Aug. 8, 2008) identifies Aage Krarup Nielsen as a travel writer and lists no less than twenty-four books about all parts of the world that he published between 1921 and 1958. This information is easily confirmed by a look in the Dutch Central Catalogue, which lists twenty-eight of his books, in Danish and in Dutch, German and English translations. The book that Toth cites, published in New Jersey in 1938, originally appeared in Copenhagen in 1933. Krarup Nielsen continued publishing, about such exotic regions as New Guinea, in occupied Denmark during the Second World War. Obviously, if he ever really visited the countries he wrote about, the visit must have been rather superficial. Moreover, travel writers often simply copy details from each other.

My second critical remark concerns the prevalence of escape. It is connected to the previous theme, since Toth closes chapter 3 by saying that the officials were indifferent to the casinos and transvestite shows in the comfortable certainty that they would at least keep the *bagnards* in their camp. Escape was nearly impossible, as a prisoner would either have to turn to the jungle, which would soon overcome him, or try to reach Suriname on a raft. This information is repeated in chapter 7. In between, however, we read that the colonial authorities of Suriname were concerned about the many escaped convicts in their country and that the Dutch ambassador wrote a letter of complaint to Guiana's governor. Let me finish on a positive note: the entire chapter 7 again offers fascinating reading. It deals with the increasingly international interest in the Guiana penal colony during the 1920s and 30s. In this period, most journalists painted a brutal picture of the *bagne*. It prompted the French government to launch a counter-offensive, paying a journalist couple from Trinidad to publish favorable reports under fake names. Thus, Papillon and Krarup Nielsen indirectly triumphed, with fact and fiction inextricably interwoven. Toth concludes: «... the doors of the public imagination were now opened wide and the fate of the institution was henceforth sealed» (145).

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Élise Yvorel, *Les enfants de l'ombre. La vie quotidienne des jeunes détenus en France métropolitaine*, Rennes, Presses Universitaire de Rennes, 2007, 356 pp., ISBN 978 27535 0465 3.

Issu d'une thèse de doctorat en histoire contemporaine défendue à l'Université de Poitiers, le livre d'Élise Yvorel, *Les enfants de l'ombre*, s'offre comme ambition de combler un vide historiographique: la vie quotidienne des mineurs en prison en France métropolitaine entre 1880 et 1980⁸.

⁸ La notion de mineur est décrite par l'auteur dans son introduction. Élise Yvorel tient compte de deux majorités, légale (jusqu'à 21 ans) et pénale (jusqu'à 18 ans). Elle distingue systématiquement mineurs pénaux (moins de 18 ans à partir de 1906) et jeunes majeurs (de 18 à 21 ans).