

These works together embody much of the best recent scholarship on French territories in the Pacific and are essential reading for the subject.

The collection edited by Robert Aldrich comprises relevant papers presented at the 1990 George Rude seminar on French history. It includes papers on French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna before 1888 by Pierre-Yves Toullelan and Bernard Gille, both teaching at the Université Française du Pacifique in Pape'ete, and by Frederic Angleviel who teaches at the Nîmea centre of that university. Their contributions, rich in historical detail, reflect the important effort being made by their university to establish scholarly links with Australian universities. Isabelle Merle, writing out of her doctoral research for the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, has contributed a fine study of the consequences of penal colonization in New Caledonia. Xavier Pons, of the Université de Toulouse, has provided an analysis of perceptions of Australia in New Caledonia, significantly entitled “Neighbors and Strangers.” His sampling shows a variety of attitudes, not always as positive as Australians might wish, even among Melanesians. But Paul de Deckker, who heads the Pacific Studies section of the Centre Universitaire de Nouvelle-Calédonie, in his paper “Perceptions of France in the Pacific Islands,” applauds Rocard’s 1989 economic agreement with Australia (in contrast to Chirac’s attempt to ignore or browbeat the regional states) as the kind of approach that is necessary if France wants to be a power “of the region, and not merely in the region” (Aldrich, 183). Frederic Bobin, until recently the Le Monde correspondent in Australia and the South Pacific, writing on “Kanak Activism and Political Cycles in New Caledonia,” shows a sure understanding of long-term and short-term influences at work in that very complex society. He reveals a certain pessimism about whether the “over-bureaucratised and in fact powerless” Kanak regions will adequately balance the white-dominated South region, where social problems stemming largely from urbanization “are becoming a permanent source of instability” (Aldrich, 134–135).

Among the anglophone contributors to the Aldrich volume, John Connell, University of Sydney, has unraveled the complex demographic, economic, and political influences in Wallis and Futuna, and among the immigrants from those islands to New Caledonia. While noting the more independent attitudes of younger Wallisians, as manifested by the Union océanienne, he does not seem to expect a sudden reversal of the “complex, partly negotiated dependency” that Wallisians generally have accepted so far (Aldrich, 113).

Roy Willis, University of California,
has written of the structural dependency and social dislocation in French Polynesia following from the nuclear testing installations. Although generally understood, the point needs Willis's lucid explication and reiteration if only to rebut the facile tendency of some French apologists to quote per capita income as indicative of the alleged superior living standard of their dependent island peoples over their independent Pacific neighbors.

Allan Clark, University of Canterbury, has contributed a succinct and penetrating historical review of Mitterrand's policies toward African nationalism as a minister in 1950s governments, and suggests, from Mitterrand's own statements, that the French president's policies have not essentially changed: the hope and design behind the Matignon Accords is to ensure the continuance of a substantial French presence in New Caledonia after the 1998 referendum.

Stephen Henningham, Australian National University (ANU), argues that a form of independence-in-association is a likely outcome for New Caledonia. Although rejected on all sides in 1985 when urged by Edgard Pisani, it is a solution that is likely to gain ground, not least because of a growing realization among metropolitan French politicians and officials that France has no fundamental national interest in remaining in New Caledonia "especially if its presence is contested by militant indigenous nationalists and attracts regional and international opprobrium" (Aldrich, 196); and because the Kanak leadership might have to recognize that, pragmatically, this is the best that can be gained in the medium term.

The volume edited by Scarr embodies a further sixteen papers presented at the 1991 conference at Australian National University on "France in the Pacific" plus a useful bibliography, compiled by Honore Forster, of French monographs relating to the Pacific and published between 1984 and 1991.

Closely researched and finely written papers are provided by Colin Forster (ANU) on "French Penal Policy and the Origins of the French Presence in New Caledonia"; by Dorothy Shinesberg (ANU) on "New Hebridean Indentured Labour in New Caledonia"; by Bronwen Douglas (La Trobe) on the war of 1878-79 in New Caledonia; by Hugh Laracy (Auckland) on "The Pentecost Murders: An Episode in Condominium Non-Rule, New Hebrides 1940"; and by Karin Von Strokirk on the complex and elusive politics of modern French Polynesia. Darrell Tryon's article on "The French Language in the Pacific" exhibits once again the superb command the ANU linguists have of their field, and of the linguistic legacy of historical influences in the Pacific.

French scholars have again provided data and insights on the contemporary Pacific not otherwise accessible. Patrick Pillon and Francois Sodter (ORSTOM, Noumea) have written on the impact of colonial administrative policies on indigenous social customs. Bruno Saura, author and journalist from Huahine, summarizes the differing stances of the churches in French Polynesia on contemporary issues. J-L Rallu (Institut National d'Etudes Demographiques, Paris) provides a clear analysis of the 1988 census in the French territories. His projection, which many will await with interest, is
that Melanesians will form 50 percent of the New Caledonian population in the year 2005, given no significant immigration. Michael Panoff (Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, Paris) has neatly compared French, British, and German attitudes and values in plantation systems, tackling the elusive question of differing racial attitudes and the situation of mixed-race peoples. Isabelle Merle has provided a detailed study of Voh, 1892–1899, a west coast New Caledonia town based on free settlement. In contrast to many of Panoff’s planters, she depicts a struggling, introspective white community, fearful and socially remote from their Kanak neighbors, archetypal of much Caldoche society until recent times. Jean Chesneau, in his lively insightful prose, elucidates the Fifth Republic’s conception of itself as a “puissance mondiale moyenne,” and hence the importance to France of its Pacific territories. This theme is supported by Karis Muller (ANU) who shows in “New Caledonia, Another Corsica?” how New Caledonian independence movements are seen in relation to those of other French departments and territories.

Alaine Chanter (ANU) has provided a very revealing analysis of the media in New Caledonia, both French and Kanak, including the purchase of Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes by Robert Hersant, proprietor of Le Figaro and Le Soir. Her discussion of the former Kanak journal Buenando and the station Radio Dijiido offers the best insight available in these volumes to the competing currents within the FLNKS.

Frederic Bobin has been forthright in his analysis of the 1980s in New Caledonia. Citing Pisani, he suggests that the role of hardline extremists among the Pieds Noirs and metropolitan immigrants, notably retired army officers, was “decisive” in the anti-independence offensive, ideologically through the local media, actively in street demonstrations and in “the networks of militias controlled by the RPCR and directed by terms sent from Paris by Jacques Chirac of the RPR.” Without their influence, supported by the French Right, Bobin argues, “the Caldoche would have been tempted to compromise,” and Pisani’s plan of independence-in-association might have had a chance (Scarr, 311).

These comments in particular undermine, if not destroy, Scarr’s bland suggestion (133) that “if these islands are French it is because in 1958 their vote was to remain in the French Republic” and that under the Matignon Accords New Caledonia will be “free again” to vote on its constitutional future in 1998. In contrast, de Deckker has stated that, in 1956, France felt the need “to start its principal Pacific territories on the path of internal autonomy, prelude to a constitutional independence which it granted its African colonies. Yet for reasons which concerned only the metropole it made a sudden about-face in French Polynesia and New Caledonia” (Aldrich, 182). If the “only” overstates his case, de Deckker is nevertheless more right than Scarr. In the light of the French scholars’ writings in these volumes France will again have the decisive influence in 1998. How will the government of the day shape the constitutional choices that Caledonians will face? Which of the nondemocratic forces in the Pacific territories will be restrained and which will be loosed?
The writers point to imponderable factors. The return of the conservatıves to power in France “could bring renewed problems,” says Henningham. And France’s commitment to its independent nuclear deterrent could increase, rather than diminish, with the end of the Cold War and the likely decline of United States influence in Western Europe (Aldrich, 196, 201). It is incumbent on the peoples of the region to retain a critical scrutiny of France’s policies and performance in its Pacific territories. The excellent research and frank scholarly collaboration revealed in these volumes make a significant contribution. The fact that the present French administration has provided funding to support the Scarr volume is an encouraging indication of its willingness to accept scholarly critique. The absence of authoritative Kanak contributions is regrettable.

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Over the past few years a small but significant body of Australian scholarship has emerged concerning the French presence in the South Pacific and, more generally, metropolitan France’s policies with regard to its overseas territories. One only need mention the special issue of The Journal of Pacific History 26 (2, 1991), Nic Maclellan’s (with Jean Chesneaux) La France dans le Pacifique: De Bougainville à Moruroa (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1992), and France’s Overseas Frontier: Departments et Territoires d’Outre-Mer by Robert Aldrich and John Connell (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

A natural reaction would be to view this surge in interest for “la France australe” as a response to a series of specific events that climaxed in 1985—the ever-increasing anger within the region at France’s pursual of its nuclear testing program, the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior, and the rapid succession of crises in New Caledonia that gave rise to the sentiment that the territory was on the brink of civil war.

Such a narrow interpretation would, however, be misleading. Transcending the events of the 1980s is the fact that Australia, like France, has interests in the South Pacific, and in Melanesia their interests overlap and may well be conflictual. New Caledonia lies right at the tip of the Melanesian “Spearhead” and that spearhead is pointed at Australia. In the circumstances it is scarcely surprising that Australia seeks stability throughout Melanesia, elaborating in a more or less covert manner an antipodean version of the United States’ Monroe Doctrine for its particular “backyard.”

Against such a perspective France and the South Pacific “makes sense,” as does the fact that its author, Stephen Henningham, has gravitated over the past decade between an academic career at the Australian National Uni-