

# Deakin Research Online

*Deakin University's institutional research repository*

**This is the published version (version of record) of:**

Smith, Anita and Buckley, Kristal 2007-12, Convict landscapes : shared heritage in New Caledonia, *Historic environment*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 27-31.

**Available from Deakin Research Online:**

<http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30033400>

**Reproduced with kind permission of the copyright owner.**

**Copyright :** © 2007, Council for the Historic Environment

# Convict landscapes: shared heritage in New Caledonia



Anita Smith and Kristal Buckley

## Introduction

The New Caledonian landscape is a mosaic of colonial enterprise.<sup>1</sup> Between 1864 and the end of the transportation at the turn of the 20th century, around 30,000 deportees were sent to the Pacific Island to establish and populate the French colony. This created a cultural landscape across parts of Grande Terre and Isle of Pins in which built and archaeological heritage and landscape features reflect the diverse social and economic relationships that underpinned the establishment and growth of the penal colony (Figure 1).

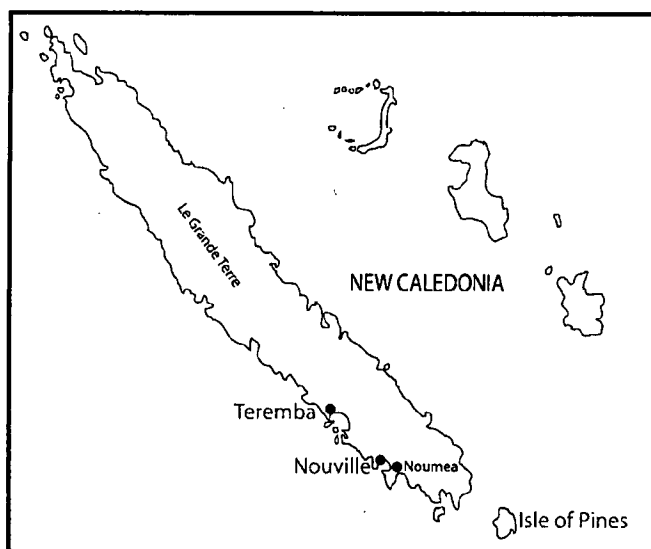


Figure 1. Map of New Caledonia showing location of places mentioned in the text.

New Caledonia's Southern Province Government recently held its first heritage conservation workshop to provide an initial focus for the development of cultural heritage conservation policy and legislation. Since the ethnic tensions and independence movement of the 1980s there has been increasing awareness of the need to reconcile the histories of the Kanak and Caldoche (New Caledonians of European descent) (Sand *et al.* 2006a) and the other ethnic communities of this multi-cultural country to move forward – perhaps to independence – with a shared 'national' identity. New Caledonia is an overseas territory of France known as a 'territorial collectivity' since the signing of the *Noumea Accord* in 1998. The Southern Province is home to the country's capital, Noumea, and a large percentage of the non-indigenous population who make up New Caledonia's rich ethnic diversity. The Caldoche represent around 35 per cent of the total population and as many as 80 per cent of the Caldoche have convict ancestry (Sand *et al.* 2006b).

It is only in relatively recent times that a small number of the convict sites in New Caledonia have been actively managed as heritage places. With the enthusiasm of local communities and limited government support some have undergone substantial restoration although not within a coordinated approach and

without the research and guidance of conservation management plans.

Many convict heritage sites, in particular those constructed as prisons or for prison-related functions are evocative and decaying ruins in the landscape, commonly in areas of heavy vegetation and with little visitor access or interest. Few, if any, have been systematically recorded. There are many other convict built structures – churches, government buildings, missions, bridges and roads however the number of these places and the extent of convict involvement in their construction and use are unclear. To our knowledge, this has not been an area of historical research.

Some tourists do visit convict sites but the tourism industry of New Caledonia strongly promotes the 'white sand and sun' resort images common throughout the South Pacific. The cultural heritage of New Caledonia, and in particular the historic heritage, has a minimal presence in the tourism materials for New Caledonia. Most convict heritage places have no on-site interpretation.

In this paper we propose that recording, appropriate management and interpretation of this colonial heritage offers the opportunity for recognition of the historical contributions of Kanak and Caldoche and the other minority ethnic communities of New Caledonia to the emerging shared national identity. Through discussion of several prominent New Caledonia convict sites, we suggest that achieving this requires a holistic approach to recording, conserving and interpreting the diverse expressions of the early colonial heritage as a cultural landscape. Such an approach has the potential to yield insights into the various elements of the colonial system, the diverse communities and cultures in New Caledonia during the convict period and their differing experiences in the colony during and following the cessation of transportation.

## French transportation and New Caledonian convict heritage sites

The transportation of convicts to New Caledonia began in 1864, 11 years after the French annexed the islands of Le Grand Terre and the tiny Isle of Pins to create the South Pacific colony of New Caledonia in 1853. France was determined to create a new French society in the Pacific.<sup>2</sup>

From the outset the French government considered the islands to be a potential penal settlement, an alternative to French Guiana that had been established in 1852, but had an unacceptably high convict death rate from tropical diseases (Aldrich 1990:144). Prior to the commencement of transportation to New Caledonia, the French Government sought to attract free settlers to the island to establish the colony but the French were reluctant colonizers and little had been achieved by 1864 when the first convicts arrived in the south of La Grande Terre near small port town of Noumea the centre of the French colonial administration established as a trading settlement in the early 1840s.<sup>3</sup>

France consciously drew on the British experience of convict transportation to its Australian colonies although by the time transportation to New Caledonia began Britain had ceased sending prisoners to New South Wales and Tasmania and transportation to Western Australia ceased in 1868. France adopted the Australian model of establishing penal settlements to both lay the foundations of a new society and to rid the homeland of criminals (Merle 1996).

To achieve this, in 1854 the French government had introduced a system of sentencing for convicted criminals known as *doublage* whereby those prisoners who received sentences of more than eight years hard labour were exiled for life and those with a lesser sentence, once freed, were obliged to remain overseas for a period equivalent to that of their sentence, effectively doubling the length of their sentence. According to historian Isabelle Merle (1996:24),

Permanent exile or *doublage* formed the keystone of a system which did not abandon hopes for reform of prisoners and indeed hoped to make rehabilitation possible and permanent – though in a place far removed from mainland France.

Roughly 30 per cent of *déportés* to New Caledonia died before gaining their freedom, the vast majority never returned to France.

The site of Nouville immediately west of Noumea was established as an early camp site for convicts and is one of four New Caledonian convict sites that are regularly visited by tourists, albeit in small numbers. Originally located in the small island of Ile Nou, the camp would over the next quarter of a century become the largest penitentiary site in New Caledonia and the administrative centre for the convict system. Ile Nou has since been joined to mainland Grand Terre creating 'Nouville'.

The heritage site is extensive, comparable in area with the site of Port Arthur in Tasmania although with many more structures, not all of which date to the convict period. The site is used for a variety of purposes. Some structures have been in continuous use throughout the post-convict period, while others such as the convict built store, now a theatre have had recently conservation works. There is however no overall planning for or systematic management of the site's heritage values. In recent years there have been some conservation or restoration works to particular buildings and features but these have been done on an *ad hoc* basis, without prior detailed recording or the development of a conservation management plan. Early engravings and photographs indicate the evolution of the site from camps to permanent structures during the period of transportation. The chronology of the buildings or stages in their construction is unclear but some early structures remain such as the Boulangerie, constructed in 1868 (Figure 2). The Boulangerie was refurbished in the 1950s, covering the large domed ovens to the rear of the site. Recent archaeological work has removed these additions to the building revealing the grand oven structures with the aim of opening the site for visitors (Sand *et al.* 2006b:10).

The administrative buildings and officers quarters appear to be in good condition as does the commandant's house but the prison barracks, standing in rows below the officer's quarters, have been significantly altered and some demolished. Although those remaining suggest the original layout, the extent to which original fabric survives is unclear. Isle Nou was the

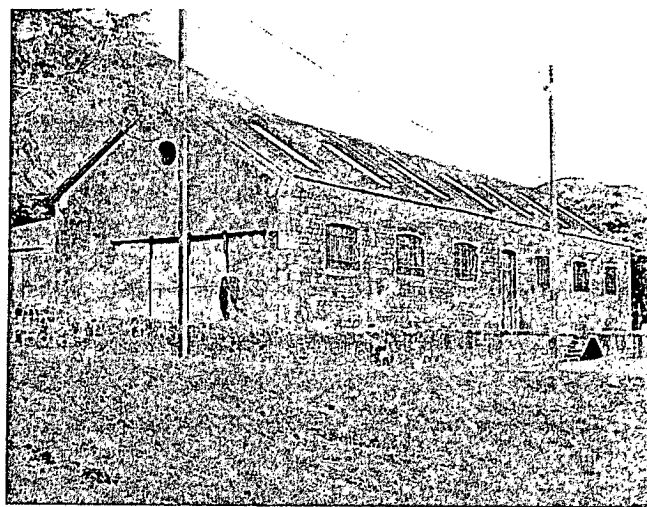


Figure 2. Boulangerie, Nouville. (Photo: A. Smith 2006)

administrative centre for an economic and social system that encompassed colonial Grand Terre and the site has the potential to demonstrate many aspects of the convict system and how these changed over time. However Nouville is just one of several large convict heritage sites in close proximity to Noumea. The city sits within a cultural landscape patterned by convict labour. This is now in danger of being obliterated by urban expansion.

The convict system in New Caledonia was both a closed and open institution whereby some convicts were interned and others were distributed to work camps throughout the islands, building roads and bridges, quarrying stone, cutting timber and, after 1880, hired out to privately owned nickel mines. In the early years of the colony convicts mainly lived and worked in open agricultural settlements. Following the revolt of the Indigenous Kanak in 1878, many settlements became fortified and the ongoing forced removal of Kanak from much of the south of Grand Terre accelerated (Merle 1996:29). For the

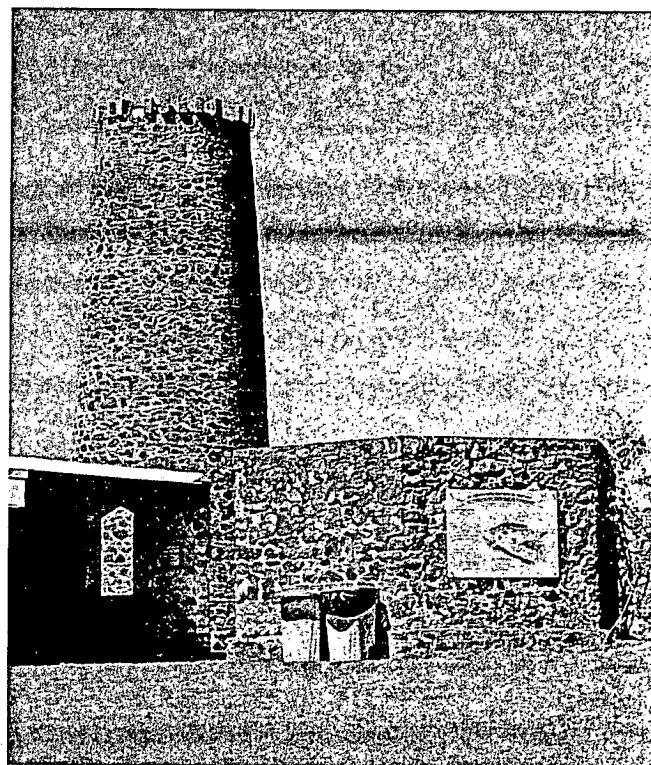


Figure 3. Fort Teremba, Grand Terre. (Photo: K. Buckley 2006)

majority of Kanak there had been little or no European contact prior to the arrival of Marist missionaries in Grande Terre in 1843 although it is likely that European diseases, introduced through infrequent contacts with explorers and traders had already had a devastating effect on the Kanak population and social systems (Sand 1996). As settlement in the colony expanded the Kanak were increasingly alienated from their land. This freed large tracts of land for colonial settlement and created the patterns of land tenure still much in evidence today.

The fear and reality of Kanak armed resistance is reflected in the fortification of sites such as Fort Teremba on the west coast of Grand Terre about 130 km north of Noumea. Located in the vicinity of La Foa, open early agricultural convict settlement established in the 1870s, Teremba was a military outpost that housed convicts working in gangs on road and other construction and in agriculture. The central Fort area was enclosed with high stone walls following the 1878 Kanak revolt (Figure 3). The occupation lasted just another couple of years before abandonment.

In 1994 Teremba became the first of New Caledonia's convict heritage sites to have a conservation plan (Harbulot 1994) and extensive 'cleaning up' and restoration of the site has subsequently taken place. Restoration has focused on buildings from the later period that are specifically related to the Fort structure.<sup>4</sup> 'Restoration' of the Fort included the construction of a large new building inside the walls in the late 1980s, on the ruins of the original blockhouse (Sand *et al.* 2006b:12). This houses a small community museum. Local community members are responsible for day to day operations of the site and host an annual community theatrical performance in the Fort. Outside the walls, over a substantial area indicative of the original extent of the settlement, are ruins of other structures including the post office and jetty. These have not had conservation works and some walls are in urgent need of stabilisation. Unfortunately use of a bulldozer to clear vegetation outside the fort is likely to have destroyed archaeological remains in and around these structures (2006:12).

It is unclear whether systematic recording of the site took place prior to the reconstruction of the Teremba's defensive walls, powder magazine and other associated structures. Historic photographs indicate many more buildings – both stone and timber – existed on the site but these have perished or been removed. The space inside the walls is, with the exception of the 1980s structure, mostly lawn. Dioramas at the site make reference to convict dress and accommodation, but it is the military defence of the Fort against the Kanak that is the focus of on-site interpretation.

Over the past decade the Department of Archaeology, Government of New Caledonia has undertaken several archaeological excavations at Teremba and Nouville led by Dr Christophe Sand. In both sites the excavations revealed the subsurface remains of structures previously unknown through archival evidence. In the main plaza adjacent to the jetty at Nouville the archaeological features included water drainage channels and the internal divisions of successive structures (2006b:10). The analysis of finds from these excavations is continuing but their importance in the short term has been to demonstrate to authorities and site managers the archaeological potential of these sites and the need to consider this potential when undertaking works on the site. These limited excavations demonstrate the multi-layered, palimpsest nature of the sites reflecting their establishment and evolution during the convict period and beyond.

The convict population transported to New Caledonia consisted of three major groups – over 22,000 convicted offenders, nearly 4000 habitual offenders and nearly 4000 political prisoners. The majority of the political prisoners were sentenced for having taken part in the Paris Commune of 1871 (Stephen 2001). This citizen's protest against the French Government's truce with the Prussian army following the four month siege of Paris in the winter of 1870-1871 ended with the death of some 25,000 Parisians and the arrest of many thousands more. The approximately 35,000 military trials of the Commune resulted in 4500 being sentenced to deportation to the penal colony of New Caledonia, only twenty of which were women (Merle 1996:30). It is from the writings of the Commune that much of the popular understanding of the New Caledonian convict experience is drawn.

As political prisoners the Commune could not be subject to hard labour and French law stipulated that the government provide them with food, shelter and medical care. The expectation of the French authorities was that in New Caledonia they would become farmers although almost all were from the city. They were educated people, artisans, artists, shopkeepers, factory workers, labourers, writers and teachers (Aldrich 1990:145). In the colony they were penniless and refused to cooperate with the administration.

The Commune were mainly sent to the Ducos Peninsula, near Noumea, and to the Isle of Pins where they built crude shelters and some established gardens. From 1871–1874 they were able to move freely within designated areas, associating with and purchasing food from the Kanak. However following the escape of a group of six on board a ship bound for Sydney in 1874, new rules strictly curtailed their movement (Bullard 1997).

We know most about life in the prison colony, or at least the period 1871–1880, from the extensive writings of the Commune – their letters, memoirs and the variety of newspapers they produced while in exile, in which they continued to articulate their responses to the uprising, the French authorities and the reality of exile. Of the 241 Commune who died during their time in New Caledonia, many were said to have died of nostalgia, longing for their loved ones and for France.

During the decade following the Paris Commune, the government of the Third Republic in France (1870–1914) moved away from a monarchist leaning to republicanism and in

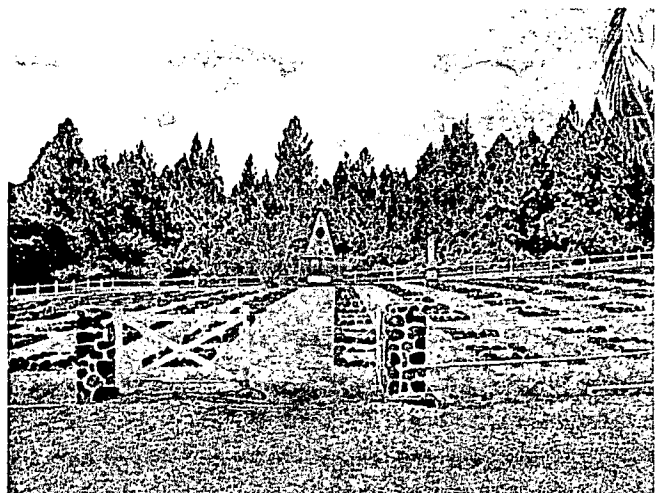


Figure 4. Commune Cemetery, Isle of Pins. (Photo A. Smith 2006)

1879 granted the Communard a partial amnesty, followed by a general amnesty in 1881 and repatriation to France of all but 140 still in New Caledonia.

The convict experiences of the Communard have become a celebratory, heroic history that is memorialised in the Communard Graveyard on the Isle of Pins – one of the few convict sites to have on-site interpretation (Figure 4). The Cemetery is said to contain the graves of nearly 200 of the Communard. The site was re-constructed in the 1970s by a community group from Noumea, the graves being neatly marked by rows of stones and enclosed by a white timber fence. The original layout and the extent of the cemetery are unclear. The position of two early grave monuments on the site suggests the original alignment of the graves was somewhat different to that now in evidence. Interpretation of the site stresses the hardship faced by the Communard during their imprisonment, their longing for home and sadness of their deaths far from France.

While there is no question the Communard suffered hardships in New Caledonia, their longing for home was no doubt shared by many, if not all, convicts, perhaps all the more poignant for the great majority who would never return home. Although we know most about the New Caledonian convict experience from the writings of the Communard, their background, their experiences as political prisoners, in particular being exempt from hard labour and then finally being repatriated to France, set them apart from the vast majority of convicts. Many of the Caldoche in New Caledonia have convict ancestry and yet the only heritage site memorialising the hardship of convict life celebrates the lives of a group who would have few descendents in New Caledonia.

Of the more than 30,000 *déportés* to arrive in New Caledonia, the overwhelming majority were men. Most were from mainland France however the remainder included convicts of Italian, Spanish and North African origin. At present the diversity of ethnicity, culture and religion in the convict population is not considered in the limited interpretative material available at the convict sites.

Particularly emblematic of this diversity were the Arab convicts of North African, primarily Algerian, origin. Algeria was a French colony from 1830 until independence in 1963. A map of the convict settlements on the Isle of Pins<sup>5</sup> indicates the western side of the island was divided into five *Commune* from south to north. These suggest distinctions based at least in part on ethnicity were made in the housing and treatment of convicts. In the large southern most *Commune* is the island's French administration centre, the settlement of Ouro (discussed below) and the Communard Cemetery. The northernmost area is simply labelled 'Camp des Arabes'. We have been informed that there are no known standing structures or ruins that specifically identify the site of an Arab camp. The descendents of Arab deportees retain a strong community identity in present-day New Caledonian society. Many still live in the vicinity of Bourail, established in 1869 as a convict village for those who had completed their prison term. Clarifying the location and any surviving built or archaeological evidence of the 'Arab camp' on the Isle of Pins or elsewhere is a priority for future research.

The later period of transportation from 1881 until its cessation in 1897 saw the incarceration of prisoners intensify. Alongside the agricultural settlements appeared large scale structures such as the Penitentiary at Ouro on the Isle of Pins. These are



**Figure 5.** Cell blocks, Penitentiary, Ouro, Isle of Pins. (Photo: A. Smith 2006)

the most visible remains in the landscape today and reflect not only the large number of convicts in the colony by this time and the severity of their punishment but also an intensification and diversification of the economic system run on convict labour.

For those tourists staying in the many resorts in the Isle of Pins or visiting the island from the regular cruise ships, the Penitentiary and nearby Communard Cemetery are likely to be their only tangible experience of New Caledonia's convict heritage.

The Penitentiary was constructed in several phases, the most recent being the construction of the high surrounding walls c.1881 and contemporaneous construction of cell blocks within the walls, of which four remain standing (Figure 5). The site has not been conserved beyond regular clearance of vegetation to permit access. The standing structures are missing roofs and the walls are in various stages of decay. Overall the absence of intervention at the site creates an evocative if somewhat romantic sense of history for the tourists who visit the site although the tiny size and lack of light in some of the isolation cells paint a stark picture of the reality of imprisonment during this period. There is no on-site interpretation beyond a rough sign at the entrance 'The vestiges of deportation 1870–1913'.

The tourists who visit the penitentiary unfortunately do not see the bewildering array of ruins in the surrounding landscape hidden by dense vegetation (Figure 6). These structures give an



**Figure 6.** Ruins, Ouro, Isle of Pins. (Photo: A. Smith 2006)

indication of the massive scale of the convict settlement and the complexity of the system required to maintain this colonial economy. During our short visit to the area we noted the ruins of a great number of buildings. Some such as those identified by our guide as the hospital and the officer's quarters are very large while others are modest. To our knowledge there are no immediate plans to manage or develop the area. While daunting in scale the area offers immense potential, in the first instance through systematic recording, to provide insights into the growth and development and the complexity of the penal colony over the second half of the 19th century.

## Discussion

Each of the sites discussed above are extremely important tangible evidence of the establishment and early development of the colony of New Caledonia. They provide insight into the early relationships between Kanak and Europeans and the present land tenure of southern Grand Terre and the Isle of Pins; they offer historical insights into specific administration and punishment in the penal colony; and they provide tangible evidence of the ancestry of many New Caledonians and a focus for burgeoning consciousness of and pride in New Caledonia's convict past.

Recognition of the heritage values of these places has been accompanied by well intentioned conservation works that have sought to preserve the tangible evidence of specific components of the convict system and to present this to visitors. While the conservation outcomes may not reflect best practice, these efforts have served to raise the awareness of historic heritage in New Caledonia and the potential of sites such as these to contribute to the writing of a shared history for the country. Alongside this, as elsewhere across the globe, rapid urban development in and around Noumea is increasingly being recognised as contributing to the loss of historic built fabric, galvanizing the Southern Province to initiate discussion toward development of heritage conservation policy and legislation.

Undertaken in this context, in our brief survey of convict period heritage places in New Caledonia we were struck by the richness of this heritage, the many different expressions of this heritage in the landscapes of southern Grand Terre and the Isle of Pins and the excellent state of conservation of many of these places and in particular those 'untouched' places which have not yet been subject to development pressures or the focus of tourism. Transportation to New Caledonia ceased in 1897 although the incarceration of *déportés* continued until the 1920s. Notwithstanding more than eighty years of post-convict history in New Caledonia, the patterned cultural landscape continues to reflect the early establishment of transport routes, agricultural areas and various functional components of the colonial system.

The sites in this paper are all nodes in that system. They individually have much potential to provide insights into the daily life and events at these places and the people who lived and worked at, were imprisoned and buried at these places through systematic recording, archaeological and archival research. In particular the very large and complex sites of Nouville and Ouro have much to offer as the subject of such detailed research for many years to come.

These sites are however the later stage in the process of construction and the development of institutional regimes that

took place in the colony and more generally in France over a period of 50 years. The current focus of conservation efforts on a limited number of extant structures tends to emphasise only the later period in the life of the penal colony and conflates evidence from all periods. This makes it difficult to interpret the evolution of the site through the extant fabric. As the work of Christophe Sand and the Department of Archaeology has demonstrated much is to be learnt about the development of these places, especially their establishment and early form, from archaeological research. In the absence of detailed research, conservation works at these sites, especially those that involve destruction of original fabric, will limit (and have limited) the potential for future research and understanding of New Caledonia's early colonial history.

The sites discussed above each tell an important part of New Caledonia's history however we consider that as heritage places, their historical and contemporary social significance will be best realised when they are envisaged as expressions of the larger social and economic system operating in New Caledonia in the second half of the 19th century that gave rise to many forms of tangible evidence in the landscape some of which is ephemeral. Such an approach should frame the development of conservation management plans for individual sites.

The recognition and management of convict heritage in New Caledonia is at an early stage. We trust that, coupled with the emergence of a shared national identity this will provide the opportunity for a broad-based, coordinated and community focused approach to identifying, recording and managing this colonial heritage that respects the histories of all.

## References

- Aldrich, A. (1990) *The French Presence in the South Pacific 1842 – 1940* Basingstoke : Macmillan
- Harbulot, M. (1994) *Fort Téremba, Commune de Moindou. Projet d'Aménagement du Fort et du Site Historique*. Direction de la Culture de la Province Sud. Noumea
- Merle, I. (1996) Colonial experiments, colonial experiences: the theory and practice of penal colonisation in New Caledonia. In Robert Aldrich and Isabelle Merle (eds) *France Abroad: Indochina, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, Mayotte*. Department of Economic History, University of Sydney.
- Sand, C. (1996) Recent developments in the study of New Caledonia's prehistory. *Archaeology in Oceania* 31:41-71
- Sand, C, J. Bole and A. Ouetcho (2006a) What is archaeology for in the Pacific? History and Politics in New Caledonia. In Ian Lilley (ed) *Archaeology of Oceania: Australia and the Pacific Islands*. Malden, MA : Blackwell. Pp. 321-345
- Sand C., J. Bole and A. Ouetcho (2006b) Historical Archaeology in Island Melanesia : First Research on the Convict Settlements of New Caledonia. *New Zealand Journal of Historical Archaeology* 27:5-21 p.7
- Stephen, A. (2001) 'Exile in the Pacific' in A. Stephen (ed) *Visions of a Republic. The Work of Lucien Henry*. Sydney: Powerhouse Publishing. Pp. 34-55

## Endnotes

- 1 The data presented in this paper was gathered during an initial field survey and assessment of convict sites in southern Grand Terre and Isle of Pins in late 2006. The research was funded through a Deakin University Faculty of Arts research prize awarded to Anita Smith in 2005. We wish to thank Dr. Christophe Sand, Archaeologist, Department of Archaeology, Government of New Caledonia and Vice President ICOMOS Pasifika for his energetic support, intellectual acumen and his comments and corrections on this paper. We would also like to thank Régis Vandegou of the New Caledonia Government for accompanying us to the Isle of Pins.

- 2 For a general discussion of French colonial policy in the region see Robert Aldrich, 1990. *The French Presence in the South Pacific 1842 – 1940* Basingstoke : Macmillan
- 3 See C. Ralston 1977. *Grass Huts and Warehouses*. Canberra : ANU Press and D. Shineberg 1967. *They Came for Sandalwood* Melbourne : Melbourne University Press. for early excellent histories of the pre-convict European period in New Caledonia and B. Douglas 1998. *Across the Great Divide: journeys in history and anthropology* Amsterdam : Harwood Academic Publishers for discussion of early Kanak European contact
- 4 This restoration has been undertaken with the best intentions of those involved but in the process original fabric has been lost along with important evidence of stages in the construction of the Fort. This 'cleaning up of the site' is reminiscent of approaches to conservation in Australian heritage sites during the 1970s.
- 5 Reproduced in L-J Barbancon 2003 *L'Archipel des Forcats. Histoire de bagne de Nouvelle-Calédonie*. Villeneuve : Septentrion Presses Universitaires