

It seemed too good to be true and it was:

The exploitation of Pacific Island Labourers in ‘White Queensland’

Emma Roberts

Between 1869 and 1906 more than 60,000 islanders from the South-West Pacific were recruited to work on sugar plantations in Queensland. For many this plantation work provided economic opportunities unavailable to them in their home countries and they came willingly; others were kidnapped by recruiters. This paper will argue that the labour trade overall was a scheme by the Queensland government to exploit islanders as an inexpensive means for agricultural development with minimal concern for their health, welfare and living conditions. Upon Federation the Commonwealth government ordered that all islanders be returned to their homelands but about 2500 were able to avoid deportation. The descendants of these ‘South Sea Islanders’ reside in Australia today as a marginalised and forgotten people, with the efforts of their ancestors mostly unacknowledged. This year (2013) they have called on the Commonwealth Government to make a formal apology for the hardships endured by their ancestors.

“It’s a sad story, but at the same time, I’m proud of the contribution that our families have made to the fabric of this nation. . . ”¹

This year, 2013, is an important milestone for Australia’s South Sea Islander population (ASSI). It is exactly 150 years since the first of over 60,000 Pacific islanders were bought to Australia as indentured labourers in 1863. While most of these labourers died, returned to their home countries at the expiration of their contract or were deported after Federation, ASSI are the direct descendants of the 2500 islanders who were either forced or chose to remain in Australia after the implementation of the White Australia policy in 1906.²

The labourers, who were mostly from the Solomon Islands and New Hebrides (present day Vanuatu), came to Australia on three-year contracts and were nicknamed “Kanakas,” a Hawai’ian term meaning ‘human being’ [Saunders, 1976, p. 39, Maclellan, 2012]. During the 1860s and 1870s Kanakas were employed in both sheep stations and agricultural sites, however from 1884 legislation was passed confining Melanesians to tropical and subtropical agriculture [Corris, 1970, p. 45]. This article will focus on sugar plantation labourers post-1884.

With Kanakas comprising about 85% of Queensland’s sugar workforce in the 1890s, the government was heavily dependent upon their labour [Megarrity, 2006, p. 8]. However, the government and plantation owners were quick to regard the islanders as “expendable units within tropical undertakings” [Saunders, 1976, p. 50] which is evidenced by the often forceful manner of recruitment, appalling working conditions and the failure to account for islanders’ health or cultural requirements. Further, despite their invaluable contribution to the establishment of Queensland’s

sugar industry, the efforts of these islanders are too often unacknowledged; rather, praise is frequently attributed to European labourers.³

1 Context surrounding islander recruitment

The majority of islanders were recruited to Queensland’s sugar industry during the ‘White Queensland’ policy, which began in 1880 and lasted until Federation. This was a “powerful racial ideal similar yet subtly different to the White Australia policy pursued by the Commonwealth after 1901” [Megarrity, 2006, p. 1], and was described by Sir Thomas McIlwraith⁴ as the idea that Queensland should remain a “white man’s colony influenced by white men and owned by white men” with a Melanesian labour force performing jobs which the white man would not.⁵

Kanakas were regarded as “loyal but childlike exploitable workers” [Mercer, 1981, p. 38] and first time recruits were usually paid £6 a year (which was extremely low considering white ploughmen earned about £66 annually) [Megarrity, 2006, p. 2]. Islanders were also forced to assume subjugated positions in society through segregation; trains had carriages specifically for non-Europeans, and islanders had to purchase goods from “Kanaka stores” [Mercer, 1981, p. 37]. Despite attempts to ban the labour trade by Sir Samuel Griffith,⁶ many farmers continued to employ Pacific Island labourers up until Federation, as the hard manual labour for little return remained unattractive to white workers.⁷

2 Why islanders came to Queensland

A “Blackbirding”

Mainstream literature refers to the time of islander recruitment as the “Blackbirding” [Anonymous, 2011, p. 39] era, with academic articles also contending that in the trade’s early years many islanders were kidnapped [Scarr, 1967, p. 5]. In some cases islanders were seized from canoes as they came alongside ships to trade [Scarr, 1967, p. 5]. On less drastic occasions “there was only a fine line between the energetic recruiting agent, sensitive to the wishes of the would-be recruit, and the outright kidnapper” [Scarr, 1967, p. 19]. In 1870 Queensland appointed government agents onto recruiting ships to ensure islanders came willingly [Scarr, 1967, p. 13]. However, as discussed later, the control of these government agents was often overridden by ships’ masters.

B An opportunity for economic prosperity?

Islanders who were not “Blackbirded” came to Queensland in pursuit of economic opportunity and global engagement, and thus many scholars have argued that the labour trade was beneficial to islanders [Corris, 1970, p. 49]. Of those recruited from the Solomon Islands, over 50% came from Malaita, a highly disadvantaged socio-economic area, as the work abroad offered an opportunity for remuneration which did not exist in their homeland [Allen, 2005, p. 63]. Also European goods, especially firearms, were greatly coveted by the islanders.⁸ Nevertheless, even if it can be established that islanders came at their own agency, the Kanakas had no choice of employer and were not afforded many rights and liberties enjoyed by Europeans [Munro, 1998, p. 939].

It has also been asserted that Kanakas did not arrive in total ignorance of what to expect, as the ‘old hands’ (time-expired labourers) informed the ‘new chums’ about plantation life [Corris, 1970, p. 49]. However, while this may have been the case for main recruitment areas, labour supply from the Solomon Islands and New Hebrides diminished in the 1880s and the nearly 5000 islanders recruited from new areas did not have this benefit and were often misinformed by recruiters [Saunders, 1976, p. 40].

Although about half of islanders signed on for a second term and many campaigned against the deportation order of 1906 [Corris, 1970, p. 54, Munro, 1998, p. 935], their desire to stay was not always entirely voluntary. Some had gambled away all their earnings and therefore stayed on rather than facing the humiliation of returning home empty handed and others were unable to settle back into home

communities so returned to Queensland [Corris, 1970, p. 53, 55]. Employers also offered incentives (higher salaries and living standards) to islanders for them to reengage as they sought men who were experienced [Corris, 1970, p. 55]. These factors indicate that the choice of many islanders to remain in Queensland is not substantial evidence to validate the view that the Queensland labour trade offered empowerment, rather than exploitation, to islanders.

3 Aspects of exploitation during the labour trade

As is discussed above, many islanders did indeed come willingly to work on Queensland’s plantations. However this section will discuss the poor conditions encountered by Kanakas during their indenture, which reiterates the exploitation experienced by the workforce overall, including those who were not “Blackbirded.”

A Dangerous journey to Queensland from the Pacific

The journey to Queensland was so treacherous many islanders died before even commencing plantation labour, with little sympathy from ships’ masters. If heavy weather set in, Kanakas were confined below the deck which encouraged the spread of diseases, often with fatal consequences. The Queensland governor had openly declared that the life of a white man is more sacred than that of a black man [Saunders, 1976, p. 40], which meant ships’ crews were largely indifferent to the loss of these “expendable” [Saunders, 1976, p. 35] people. To compound this tragic situation, the government agents who were appointed to ensure the islanders’ welfare were often overruled by ship masters who were mostly “men of inferior character generally drunkards, and not infrequently of the worst possible moral habits” [Scarr, 1967, p. 10]. Although the actual deaths of Kanakas en route to plantations cannot be directly condemned as government exploitation, the lack of concern by the recruiters demonstrates that the Australian government was not seeking to give opportunity to the islanders in recruiting them but rather sought to exploit them for their cheap labour.

B Poor working conditions

In 1880 two doctors, Wray and Thomson, conducted a study of plantation labourers and found the kind of work performed too strenuous for young recruits, with a high potential for mortality [Saunders, 1976, p. 32-33]. The working hours were extremely long (generally 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.)

and the huts (which Melanesians often constructed themselves from grass) were overcrowded and poorly ventilated; breeding grounds for disease [Corris, 1970, p. 43, Saunders, 1976, p. 32-33]. Also, the sort of food given to the labourers, mostly unpalatable meat with carbohydrates such as white bread or rice, was deemed unsuitable for the natives who were commonly vegetarians in their home communities [Saunders, 1976, p. 32-33]. This study, along with the high recorded death rates, clearly highlights the ordeal of many islanders during their time in Queensland, of which most were not fully aware when they agreed to recruit.

C Death by disease

A high risk of infection, primarily due to poor living and working conditions, was very prevalent on plantations. The mortality rate of Kanakas (of whom a majority were young males) was five to six times higher than the rate amongst the whole European population.⁹ If islanders survived their first year they did have a much greater chance of surviving subsequent years [Scarr, 1967, p. 8], however even those who had grown resistant to many diseases were still at risk of contracting tuberculosis, and almost all fell victim to it eventually [Scarr, 1967, p. 9].

Insufficient medical care for islanders greatly escalated the problem of disease. As already mentioned, the white community was generally unconcerned about islander deaths. In 1876 the Pacific Islanders Inspector at Maryborough alleged that some planters did not attempt to diminish the mortality rate as Melanesian deaths meant they were able to keep the deceased's earnings and save the cost of transporting them back home.¹⁰ However, even when sympathetic plantation owners did request hospital treatment for their workers it was often refused [Saunders, 1976, p. 36]. The few hospitals which treated labourers had strict segregation policies, where Melanesians were treated outside in 'rotten tents', even in seasons of severe rain, and were forced to lie on the often flooded ground in saturated clothes and blankets [Saunders, 1976, p. 37]. Islanders were all grouped together, irrespective of whether they had a broken leg or contagious infection, encouraging the rampant spread of disease [Saunders, 1976, p. 37]. Eventually it was conceded that separate hospitals should be built for the islanders, however these were mostly "ill-conceived, hastily erected, and maintained with an eye to minimum expenditure rather than to the patients welfare" [Saunders, 1976, p. 50]. The Pacific Islanders' Hospital in Mackay sustained a death rate of about 35% in 1884 [Saunders, 1976, p. 45]; for this reason, there was a common fear among Melanesians

of being sent to hospitals, many of them contending "I might as well die here [on the plantation]."¹¹ The indifference throughout Queensland towards islander healthcare clearly demonstrates that Kanakas were viewed as expendable units, and thus were exploited for their labour.

D Abuse by employers

In addition to health problems, Kanakas were sometimes subjected to violence and injustice by their employers. William Robert Goodall, the police magistrate at Mackay, confirmed there was much intimidation and violence suffered by the Melanesians at the hands of white men.¹² This existed in forms such as beatings, withdrawal of food, deprivation of leisure time and separation of couples [Mercer, 1981, p. 37]. Some Kanakas recall being slapped, rudely roused in the morning, shouted at or having their ears tweaked if work was not perceived to be satisfactory [Corris, 1970, p. 51]; however as only the most experienced Kanakas understood pidgin, the language of trade, it was often difficult for others to scope what was expected of them and they were punished accordingly [Mercer, 1981, p. 44]. Pacific Islander Inspectors were generally quite sympathetic and understanding to islanders' complaints,¹³ however these inspectors' concerns for the islanders were not always acknowledged by the Queensland government.

E Legal injustice

The injustice encountered by many islanders by the wider colonial legal system is also worth noting. Although many "old hands" were aware of their rights and proactive in enforcing them through the courts, the islanders' low status meant they had limited success [Mercer, 1981, p. 48]. Europeans commonly believed that islanders "bore the curse of Canaan," [Corris, 1970, p. 58] with this widely-felt suspicion reflected in the more-than-adequate punishment for the rare cases of Kanaka criminality [Corris, 1970, p. 58]. Even more unjust was that the islanders generally had a very limited understanding of criminal procedures and thus did not receive fair trials, which is especially alarming where the death penalty was applied. One such case was that of Gosaro (a Malaitan found guilty in 1905 of murdering a European), who was believed by a clergyman who visited him just before his death to have had no understanding of his trial or the significance of his confession [Corris, 1970, p. 58-59]. Another unfair aspect was that although killing of a European was undoubtedly murder, the homicide of an islander often equated to only a manslaughter charge [Corris, 1970, p. 58]. However,

it was only very erratically that inquests into the deaths of islanders even took place [Saunders, 1976, p. 36]. Notwithstanding the considerable variation in treatment of islanders before the law (which was dependent upon factors such as the character and energy of the local inspector, the attitudes of the magistrates in the courts and the islanders' awareness of their legal rights [Mercer, 1981, p. 37]), it is clear that islanders experienced much injustice at the hands of the so called "justice system."

F Failure to account for ethnic oppositions

The Queensland government often failed to adequately account for the ethnic antagonism between islander groups, and thus left the islanders open to danger or ill-treatment at the hands of hostile communities. While New Hebrideans and Solomon Islanders were kept apart where possible with accommodation, the work parties themselves were decided according to the physical condition and experience of workers, [Corris, 1970, p. 51] and fights between men, which sometimes resulted in serious injury or death, were not uncommon [Corris, 1970, p. 57]. There was even an incident in 1883 in which people from antagonistic tribes were locked into a 'hospital' room overnight with no medical attention; the result in the morning was one fatality and several serious injuries [Saunders, 1976, p. 35]. Another consequence of ethnic mixing was that majority island groups on plantations attempted to assert their superiority over others by monopolising better jobs or rations [Corris, 1970, p. 57]. Queensland's inability to account for racial divides again emphasizes that the government was not concerned with the islanders' wellbeing, but purely with what labour they were able to provide.

The lack of appreciation for islanders' culture also caused problems in the return of time-expired Kanakas to their home communities. Coastlines were closely divided into territories of mutually hostile communities, so if a man from one community accidentally landed in enemy territory he was likely to be robbed of his earnings and killed [Scarr, 1967, p. 9]. Most of the time the recruiters were attentive to this, memorising locations of their recruits' homes and ensuring they were returned there. But too often ships would just land where it was most convenient [Scarr, 1967, p. 10]. In the worst cases, islanders were told that they would have to come back to Queensland if it was believed too difficult to reach the islanders' homeland [Scarr, 1967, p. 10]. This demonstrates clear coercion and exploitation of islanders' liberties.

4 The end of the labour trade

The Commonwealth government passed legislation after Federation declaring that all Pacific Islanders

would be deported by 31 December 1906, which formed part of the new 'White Australia' policy.¹⁴ Most of these islanders were forced to leave, however about 2500 managed to stay behind (both legally and illegally), often by marrying into Aboriginal communities [Maclellan, 2012].

Despite protests from the Queensland government that the sugar industry would collapse if islanders were not used as labour, its profits increased significantly during the 1910s¹⁵ and by 1912 the industry was operated almost solely by white workers. For this reason the contribution of the Kanakas is often forgotten. The extent of this non-recognition is clear in an official history of Queensland published in 1909: "European brains and European labour have brought into being a flourishing [sugar] industry, and converted [tropical Queensland] into one of the healthiest portions of Australia."¹⁶

5 Australian South Sea Islanders today

There are approximately 40000 South Sea Islanders in Australia today, a third of who reside in Northern Queensland [Munro, 1998, p. 931].

ASSI are primarily a marginalised and forgotten people [Munro, 1998, p. 931-932], living mostly on the outskirts of towns. They suffer from many of the same problems as Australian indigenous people; however receive only a fraction of the government support given to Indigenous Australians [Ingram, 2013]. For many years ASSI traditionally encountered difficulty in finding employment, with men hunting to provide for their families and women adopting subservient positions in white households [Munro, 1998, p. 935-936]. Until 1942, they were not eligible for old-age pensions. Children have often been segregated in schools, which has contributed to the community's overall poor education [Munro, 1998, p. 935-936]. Nevertheless, the Christian faith introduced to these islanders by missionaries such as Mrs. Mary Goodwin and the Queensland Kanaka Mission [Corris, 1970, p. 60-61] has allowed the community to maintain some vigilance [Munro, 1998, p. 936].

In honour of the 150th anniversary since the first indentured labourers arrived in Queensland, ASSI have united this year to demand a formal apology from the Australian government. It has been two decades since Prime Minister Paul Keating recognised ASSI as a distinct group and Kevin Rudd acknowledged their contribution to Australia earlier this year, yet many Australians remain unaware of this aspect of Australia's past or the presence of ASSI in Australia today. Ralph Regenvanu, former Acting Prime Minister of Vanuatu, has expressed his belief that formal recognition of the past by the Australian government would help ASSI to

feel “more Australian” and move forward [Ingram, 2013]. It is yet to be seen whether the Australian government will go forward with this apology and what impact this would have on improving the lives of ASSI.

6 Conclusion

Discussion of the conditions endured by islanders during indenture in Queensland clearly demonstrates that although not all islanders were “Blackbirded,” they encountered varying forms of brutality and injustice during their indenture. While it can be argued that “an islander’s ‘Queensland experience’ was determined by the time at which he went there, his age and personality, the kind of work and employer to which he was assigned, the district in which he worked and... the length of his stay in the colony,” [Corris, 1970, p. 45] it must nonetheless be contended that the labour trade in Queensland was exploitative of islanders’ common rights and liberties. Although the initial offer of global engagement and Western goods such as firearms in exchange for plantation work was very attractive for islanders, the appalling conditions experienced by Kanakas during their indenture and the continued suffering of ASSI today suggests that this offer really was too good to be true.

Notes

¹Emelda Davis, National Body for Australian South Sea islanders, quoted in [Ingram, 2013].

²Registrar-General’s reports, *Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, 1870-1907* (Brisbane: Public Library of Queensland), cited in [Scarr, 1967, p. 5]; [Munro, 1998, p. 931].

³Anon., *Our First Half-Century* (1909), 137 cited in [Megarrity, 2006, p. 12].

⁴Sir Thomas McIlwraith was the Premier of Queensland from 1879-1883.

⁵Sir Thomas McIlwraith quoted in *The Australian Sugar Planter: A Monthly Journal* (June 1883), cited in [Megarrity, 2006, p. 3].

⁶McIlwraith’s successor, Premier of Queensland 1883-1888.

⁷[Megarrity, 2006, p. 8]; *Pacific Island Labourers Act of 1880 Amendment Act of 1885*, 49 Vic. No. 17, s. 11, cited in [Megarrity, 2006, p. 5].

⁸Palmer Bevan, Winifred, 21-24 October 1886, cited in [Scarr, 1967, p. 7].

⁹O.W. Parnaby, *Britain and the Labour Trade in the Southwest Pacific* (North Carolina: Durham, 1964), 146, cited in [Scarr, 1967, p. 8].

¹⁰R.B. Sheridan, Inspector of Pacific Islanders at Maryborough, to Immigration Agent, 28 January 1876, cited in [Saunders, 1976, p. 30].

¹¹D. Clark, Maryborough, Pacific Islander Hospital Committee to Colonial Secretary, 11 January 1886, cited in [Saunders, 1976, p. 47].

¹²Goodall to Immigration Agent, 31 January 1876, cited in [Saunders, 1976, p. 33].

¹³Archibald Forbes, “The Kanaka in Queensland,” *New Review*, XXXVII (1892), 643, cited in [Corris, 1970, p. 52].

¹⁴[Saunders, 1976, p. 39]; *Pacific Island Labourers Bill 1901* (Cwth), cited in [Megarrity, 2006, p. 10].

¹⁵D. Wright, “The Expulsion of the Kanakas from Queensland”, *Queensland Heritage*, 1:10 (1969): 14, cited in [Megarrity, 2006, p. 12].

¹⁶[Megarrity, 2006, p. 12]; Anonymous, *Our First Half-Century* (1909), 137 cited in [Megarrity, 2006, p. 12].

References

Matthew Allen. “Greed and Grievance: the role of economic agendas in the conflict in Solomon Islands”. *Pacific Economic Bulletin*, 20(2):56–71, 2005.

Anonymous. “Islanders used as ‘cheap labourers’ ”. *The Daily Mercury*, 30 July 2011.

Peter Corris. “Pacific Island Labour Migrants in Queensland”. *The Journal of Pacific History*, 5(1):43–64, 1970.

Charmaine Ingram. “South Sea Islanders call for an apology”. *Australian Broadcasting Authority*, 9 February 2013. URL <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2013/s3839465.htm>. [Accessed 22 September 2013].

Nic Maclellan. “South Sea Islanders unite in Australia”. *Inside Story*, 27 August 2012. URL <http://inside.org.au/south-sea-islanders-unite-in-australia/>. [Accessed 22 September 2013].

Lyndon Megarrity. ““White Queensland”: The Queensland Government’s Ideological Position on the Use of Pacific Island Labourers in the Sugar Sector 1880-1901”. *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, 52(1):1–12, 2006.

Patricia Mary Mercer. *The survival of a Pacific Islander population in North Queensland, 1900-1940*. PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1981.

Doug Munro. “Indenture, deportation, survival: Recent books on Australian South Sea Islanders” (review essay). *Journal of Social History*, 31:931–948, 1998.

Kay Saunders. “The pacific islander hospitals in colonial Queensland: The Failure of Liberal Principals”. *The Journal of Pacific History*, 11(1):28–50, 1976.

Deryck Scarr. “Recruits and Recruiters: A Portrait of the Pacific Islands Labour Trade”. *The Journal of Pacific History*, 2(1):5–24, 1967.