

THE DIARIES OF S.M. SMITH, GOVERNMENT AGENT:  
A NEW LIGHT ON THE PACIFIC ISLANDS LABOUR TRADE

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Between the separation of Queensland from New South Wales in 1859 and federation of the Australian colonies in 1901 the Pacific Island labour trade was probably the most contentious perennial issue confronting Queensland legislators. From its inception in 1836 the trade aroused opposition; from its abolition in 1906 to the present day it has continued to provoke controversy. It has been calculated that 62,475 Pacific Islanders were brought to work in Queensland between 1863-1904.<sup>1</sup> They came almost exclusively from Melanesia, the south-western Pacific Islands lying between the Bismark Archipelago, Fiji, New Caledonia and Australia:<sup>2</sup> approximately 64% hailed from the New Hebrides, the remainder largely from the Solomons.<sup>3</sup> Several thousand did not see out the term of their three-year indentures. Some perished on the voyage to Queensland; the bulk of the deaths occurred in the canefields. Most survivors were repatriated, but there remain today, mainly in the sugar-growing areas of Queensland, small communities descended from the Pacific Island field labourers, a reminder of a dubious episode in Queensland history.

There has been considerable writing on the subject, especially in recent years.<sup>4</sup> Much of it reflects the hostility aroused by the trade, and is unbalanced, partisan and emotional, even when not frankly sensational. A new level of understanding was reached in the late 1960s by academic historians, in particular by workers of the Australian National University's School of Pacific Studies.<sup>5</sup> However the work of these scholars has not yet made much impact on the general reading public. That there were abuses in the labour trade in the early years, which led to its regulation by Governments, is undeniable. Scholars such as Peter Corris and Deryck Scarr have highlighted several instances. Scarr has concluded:

There is good evidence that in some areas recruits were first obtained by outright force....there is no reason to dispute the established view that in Melanesia...many

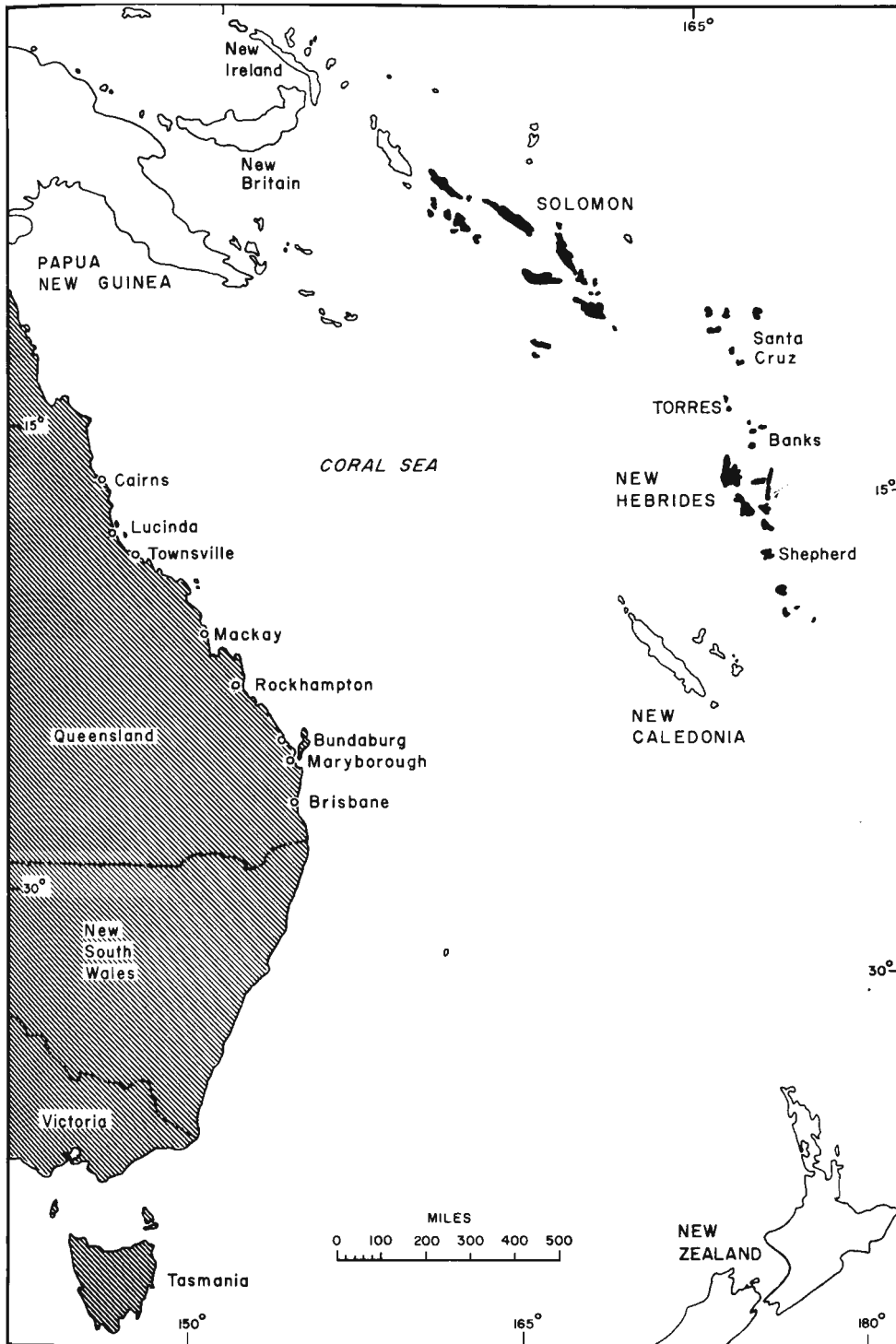
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recruits in the early years of the labour trade to Fiji, Queensland, Noumea and Samoa were kidnapped.<sup>6</sup>

However, after years of careful research, these historians emphasise that in each of the areas successively opened up by recruiters, abuses disappeared rapidly. By the early 1870s in the New Hebrides, and the early 1880s in the Solomons, recruiting was largely a voluntary affair of mutual benefit. Moreover, the vast majority of Pacific Islanders came to Queensland in the last three decades of the trade.<sup>7</sup>

After the first ten years of intensive recruiting, it was a regulated two-way exchange between discerning entrepreneurs on both sides. By the early 1880s most Island groups were familiar with the trade: many of their kinsmen had been to Queensland, had returned with a cache of trade goods and could tell others of their experiences. By this time many could understand English and some could speak the language. They comprehended what was expected of them and that they, and indeed their community, had much to gain by recruiting and working in Queensland for three years. Contemporary accounts indicate that, by this time, many were well able to discriminate between different ships, captains, employers, and localities. Before offering their services they would often inspect both the ship and its trade goods as well as asking to which port it was destined.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Queensland Government officials and recruiters had become increasingly familiar with the culture and behaviour of the Islanders: both the legal framework and its enforcers were far more suited to the task after 1885. Corris has argued that "the majority of Solomon Islanders venturing abroad went in the later years of the labour trade when the regulation of recruiting was at its most strict, when conditions on the plantations were at their best, and when the rewards for labour migration were at their highest."<sup>9</sup>

By the 1890s significant numbers of recruits were returning for a second or third term in Queensland, a fact often cited by those who defended the trade.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that these "old hands" were sometimes motivated by unsatisfactory conditions at home rather than by the attractions of the Colony: fear



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of punishment for tribal offences, inability to re-adjust to traditional life, and the effects of tribal warfare all played their part. While recruiting was largely voluntary, there were isolated exceptions. And, though recruits understood their agreements, the outward voyage and the impact of a new diet and lifestyle in unfamiliar surroundings must have been traumatic for many. To acknowledge however that the trade was in the main voluntary, legal and well-regulated does not imply that it was morally justified, or that the lot of the Islander in Queensland was not one of harsh monotonous toil.

Although historians now concur on many of the trade's features, little research has hitherto dealt specifically with the 1890s, not least because of the paucity of contemporary evidence. For the period 1890-1906, there are but two official Government Agent's logs: F. Gooding, *Roderick Dhu*, 2 September-24 November 1898; and John Kirkpatrick Craig, *Clansman*, 13 July-12 October 1904, held as evidence for an enquiry.<sup>11</sup> In addition, there are the private logs of W. Wawn mate of the *Borough Belle*, 21 October 1890-24 April 1891; *Para*, 26 April-12 October 1894.<sup>12</sup> Another contemporary source on the later period is the writings of Joseph D. Melvin, a journalist who sailed incognito with the *Helena* on a recruiting trip throughout the Solomon Islands in 1892. Originally printed as a series of articles for the *Melbourne Argus*, Melvin's reports were collected and published by Corris in 1977.<sup>13</sup> Collectively, these accounts can give only glimpses into the nature and character of the trade. Any new addition to the literature would be valuable and welcomed by researchers to substantiate or challenge their conclusions on the nature of the trade.

Only recently has there become available to the historian the *Smith Diaries*, compiled by Government Agent Sydney Mercer Smith who undertook 18 voyages between the years 1893-1904. These are not Smith's official logs, but a personal record kept in conjunction and covering the same ground in greater detail. While only 12 of the

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*Diaries* have survived they are an exceptional collection: authentic un-retouched daily records of the whole of a substantial number of recruiting voyages, spanning nearly the entirety of his career as Government Agent. They are unique for the period after Griffith's renewal of the trade in 1892. A significant contribution to the history of the labour trade, the *Diaries* make it possible to study the work of a Government Agent in greater detail than ever before, and therefore to examine generalizations against a solid body of hard evidence.<sup>14</sup> A photocopy of the *Smith Diaries* was first presented to the History Department at James Cook University by a family member a decade ago. More recently, the originals were lodged with the John Oxley Library, Brisbane.

At first sight, Smith's *Diaries* may appear repetitious, even tedious, giving endless accounts of routine events and the weather. But closer scrutiny provides an intimate insight into the day-to-day existence not only of a Government Agent but also of all people, European and Melanesian, on board Queensland labour trade vessels. During his eleven years in the trade, Smith experienced the whole gamut of conditions from boredom while becalmed, to malaria, armed attack, storms and shipwreck. Historically, the most significant record is of the long undramatic periods spent landing returns and enlisting new recruits. There is every indication that the events were recorded dutifully, usually at the end of each day. Smith probably wrote his brief, compulsory, official log at the same sitting. Accounts of some voyages were entered in diaries especially acquired for the purpose, others in ordinary exercise books. Conditions for writing were obviously not ideal - the originals betray occasional haste, the ink is sometimes blurred, and there are often indications of strain and weariness. There is no trace of later revision and nothing to suggest that he ever thought of publishing. However, there is good evidence that his wife read at least some of them: she published some stories on the trade which clearly drew on the *Diaries* for background, if not for actual incidents. As regards the six missing *Diaries*, it is much easier to believe that they were accidentally lost than that they were destroyed deliberately or that Smith discontinued

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a custom which he had followed for so many years and which was so deeply rooted in seafaring practice, especially as there is a *Diary* for the thirteenth voyage, but none for the twelfth.

Government Agents were first appointed in 1870 to enforce Queensland regulations on board vessels engaged in the labour trade. In view of their importance to the trade, it is surprising that they have received so little attention. What comment they have attracted has been almost uniformly unfavourable. Contemporary and recent writers alike have judged the Government Agents who served in the final fifteen years as unequal to the responsibilities of the post.<sup>15</sup> This was a natural consequence of their lack of independent authority and the absence of effective backing from the government, of poor remuneration and casual employment status. Improvements in 1875, by which some were made permanent civil servants, were considered inadequate remedies. However too many generalizations about Government Agents are based on these early years and too little account has been taken of the transformation brought about after 1885.

Like so much else in the labour trade, this change was the work of the newly-elected Griffith Ministry, reacting to the public outrage in the wake of a Royal Commission into the atrocities of recruiters in New Guinea.<sup>16</sup> No government thereafter "could afford the scandal involving corrupt colonial officials, either as Inspectors, Government Agents or even Immigration Agents".<sup>17</sup> With only one exception, all men involved in the New Guinea incidents were debarred from the trade. Moreover, Griffith thereafter took a personal interest in the appointment of every Government Agent. No other crew member - master, mate or recruiter - could be employed on a recruiting vessel without the approval of the appropriate minister. Not only was the Government Agent's salary raised but his position was at last firmly defined: he was responsible to the Government only, and could rely on *its* authority. Prosecution for an erring crew member was no longer an idle threat. That Government Agents were cursed as "Griffith Sneaks"<sup>18</sup> implies that not only were men of integrity appointed, but also that the Government was supporting them.

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Our popular notion suggests that most men who became Government Agents did so when they could get no other employment.<sup>19</sup> But after careful investigation, Scarr has concluded that although it was true in some cases, biographical details were insufficient to test the view thoroughly.<sup>20</sup> This did not prevent him reaching broad conclusions: while conceding that there were some good men amongst them, Scarr claims that around Government Agents

the prevailing air was one of seediness and general dilapidation. The best of them would hope to become minor civil servants in some other branch of the administration...To grub around in the lower ranks of the colonial service was a precarious way of living.<sup>21</sup>

This has little relevance to the conditions established in 1885, when all Government Agents became permanent civil servants on a salary 250% above the rate set in 1870 and 50% higher than that paid the minority granted permanent status in 1875. A civil servant on £300 a year, together with full board during voyages, was not exactly "grubbing", especially in the depression years of the 1890s. Indeed, it is significant that Smith regarded the salary and the security as outweighing the many disagreeable aspects of his job. After the labour trade was closed he became a Pilot in the Port of Brisbane, an eminently respectable and responsible permanent civil service post but with a salary one third lower than he had drawn as Government Agent.<sup>22</sup>

Smith's career before and after his years as Government Agent cannot be reconciled with the usual disparaging stereotype. By 1893 he had served 14 years in the merchant marine, on emigrant ships plying between Britain and Australia, and in the Australian coastal trade. He had held a Master Mariner's Certificate since 1884, and had served as Navigating Lieutenant and second-in-command on board the Queensland Naval vessel, *Gayundah*, for three years, terminating when the ship was laid up in October 1892.<sup>23</sup> The certificates of discharge from the successive vessels on which Smith served, carefully preserved among his papers, reveal an unbroken record of professional competence and exemplary conduct.<sup>24</sup>





Sydney Mercer Smith, as Lieutenant in  
Queensland Maritime Defence Force



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Smith was appointed Government Agent on 27 January 1893. His first engagement was the schooner *Helena*, on 26 February. Griffith, the Premier who had inaugurated the strict new regulations of 1885, had intended the traffic to end in 1890, but, by a reversal of policy in 1892, guaranteed its continuance for a further ten years. Smith's appointment therefore coincided with a marked upsurge in the traffic which lasted until importation of Pacific Islanders ceased under legislation passed by the new Commonwealth Parliament in 1901. There is no direct evidence why he took the job and persisted in it, but it is reasonable to see a major part of the explanation in a diary entry during his first voyage: "...wish I could get £300 a year in any other way."<sup>25</sup> The attractions of a secure position carrying a relatively high salary would not have diminished as the full impact of the maritime strikes was felt, the long depression of the nineties dragged on, and the Smith family grew from two to four children. He remained in the labour trade for 12 years during which he made 18 voyages as Government Agent in ten different vessels from various ports in Queensland to the Pacific Islands and back.<sup>26</sup> In June 1902, as the trade was gradually coming to an end, Smith, along with many others, was placed on supernumerary staff.<sup>27</sup> Although he remained on this list until 15 February 1905, his last voyage was completed in November 1903.<sup>28</sup> In retrospect, Smith described this period of his life as

not a very happy time, what with fever, shipwreck and being amongst niggers, being shot at and other little troubles. And if asked to describe the manners and customs of the Natives, I would answer like Marriett, 'Manners they have none and their customs are beastly.'<sup>29</sup>

It would be quite mistaken to presume that Smith was guilty of bigoted racism, of tolerating his job for the lucrative salary alone. On the contrary, his dislike for the conditions under which he had to work as Government Agent make the more impressive the dedication he displayed throughout his ten years' service. The Immigration Agent's comments at the end of that service were no mere conventional tribute

Referring to the manner in which you performed your duties, sometimes necessarily under very difficult circumstances, I will always be glad to testify that

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I know of no officer who has given greater satisfaction nor in whom I would with confidence place more trust.<sup>30</sup>

In February 1904, at the age of 47, Smith rejoined the Australian United Steam Navigation Company, serving as Second Officer for the next two years.<sup>31</sup> Finding promotion slow, he sought and received appointment to the Pilot Service where he served for the remainder of his working life - more than 20 years - as a Pilot in Brisbane. During the First World War he served in the Naval Reserve as Chief Examining Officer for the Port of Brisbane and later was awarded the General Services Medal and promoted to the rank of Commander (retired). He died in Brisbane in 1933, aged 75.

The duties of Government Agent during Smith's years of service were onerous, prescribed in detail and carefully policed. They called for firm character and independent judgement in conditions often unpleasant and sometimes dangerous. His primary function was to supervise the recruitment and return of labourers, to see that the laws and regulations were observed. Before departure from Queensland he was required to check that all food, water, clothing, medical supplies and accommodation facilities were satisfactory. Until this was done, a licence could not be issued to the ship's master.<sup>32</sup> He was instructed to keep an official log, listing each day every occurrence of consequence and each recruit's full particulars. He was responsible for the general welfare of the Islanders, for ensuring that they were fed, and issued with the prescribed tobacco, clothing and blankets. When medical treatment was needed, he had to provide it. He also had to see to the cleanliness of their quarters. Any irregularities or offences by crew members had to be reported either to the first Naval vessel he sighted or immediately on arrival in port. He was vested with discretionary power to order a ship's immediate return in the event of any impending danger (e.g. shortage of provisions) or serious offence. Should he fall gravely ill, or die, the ship could not continue recruiting but had to return to Queensland immediately. He was required to accompany the boats at all times whether recruiting, landing returns at their correct domiciles or simply procuring wood, water or native food. Escorting the boats

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frequently meant considerable discomfort and danger as the craft were often launched at dawn, pulling around bays and river mouths, along coasts characterised by tropical downpours and severe exposure to the sun, heavy seas and inhospitable communities. While ashore there was a considerable risk of contracting diseases such as dysentery or malaria as well as being attacked or shot at by hostile Islanders. The boats often had a long pull back to the ship, returning after dusk. On board he had to re-inspect the recruits, ensure that they understood their contracts and complete the certificates of engagement. Paperwork was then begun. Entries were made to his official log, ready for delivery and inspection by any Naval vessel which might come along, and for the Immigration authorities immediately on arrival at port in Queensland. The evidence from Smith's voyages makes possible a substantive comparison with popular notions of the labour trade during the 1890s, an assessment of Government Agents and their overall importance to the character and efficiency of that trade.

What is immediately apparent from the *Diaries* is the sheer physical effort that was involved in recruiting 60-100 labourers during the 1890s. It was not a matter of sailing to a convenient island and enlisting the complement at one anchorage. Occasionally it was possible to recruit up to a score of labourers in one day but almost invariably they were enlisted in ones and twos. There were also periods of up to a fortnight on some voyages when not a single recruit was to be had. For example, during 111 days of recruiting in 1902 Smith obtained only 26 recruits.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, a lot of time was spent landing returns at their correct "passages": "nearly a week lost in trying to land one 'Return'."<sup>34</sup> The evidence from every voyage completely refutes the persistent allegation that returns were dumped at any point convenient to the recruiter, without regard to their proper destinations.

As Smith's *Diaries* are the only records of the kind known to survive from the period 1893-1902, it is of some importance to

consider whether they can be taken as typical of conditions prevailing in these years. There are a number of reasons for concluding that they can. From official records kept of every recruiting voyage of the period it can be calculated that the average recruiting voyage lasted about four months - 121 days - and enlisted about 80 recruits: the corresponding figures for Smith's voyages conform to this median.<sup>35</sup> As regards the origins of recruits, Smith's agree with recent overall estimates for the same period (1893-1904) by Price and Baker,<sup>36</sup> indicating that the Solomons were the main labour supply source at the time: 59% of Smith's recruits hailed from the Solomons, 40% were New Hebridean and a further 1% came from other Islands.<sup>37</sup> In the labour trade, an "old hand" was an Islander who had previously worked a three-year term in the sugar industry, usually in Queensland. Corris found that a significantly high proportion of Solomon Island recruits in the 1890s were old hands.<sup>38</sup> Smith's figures for the same period illustrate the trend: table VIII, a breakdown of his voyages shows a similar pattern for both the Solomons and the New Hebrides with an overall average of 20.9%, exceeding 30% in two separate years, and never falling below 12% in any single year.<sup>39</sup> Though lower than the figures given by Corris, they are still high enough to support his conclusion that knowledge and understanding of the Queensland labour trade system was widespread in the Islands. They make nonsense of the view that any large proportion was recruited by force or fraud or in ignorance in this period.

The one clear respect in which figures from Smith's voyages are atypical concerns female recruits. Queensland Government Statistics indicate that throughout the 1890s females constituted just on 6% of recruits, a reflection of legislation which did not favour female field labourers:<sup>40</sup> Corris estimated that they represented approximately 8% of the Solomon recruits during this time.<sup>41</sup> Only 1.82% of Smith's recruits were female. Even more significantly, the largest number on any voyage was three, and on six voyages - one third of all he undertook - there were none. The figures might suggest simply a particularly strict regard to the restrictions on recruiting women.

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The *Diaries* indeed, furnish ample evidence of Smith's scrupulous regard to the regulations on this score, but they show more. Throughout, Smith displays a preference for not recruiting women at all: "We got no less than 17 Recruits, the most ever I have seen in one day, two women are included in this lot. I did not want them but could not get out of taking them."<sup>42</sup> However, it is not altogether clear why: to say that he regarded them as a source of trouble is not so much an explanation as a paraphrase of his attitude; but the fact remains. In his study of the Malaitans, C.R. Moore concluded that it would scarcely have been possible to have any Melanesian women on board a recruiting vessel without infringing very powerful taboos governing male/female relationships.<sup>43</sup> While neither Smith nor anyone else in the trade would have had more than a vague notion of these taboos, they would certainly have encountered some of the reactions to infringing them.

The *Diaries* are also valuable for providing further evidence on aspects of the labour trade already familiar to Pacific historians but not yet reflected in more popular works. Much writing on the labour traffic depicts the Islanders only as the objects of white actions, passively exploited in the early phase, successfully accommodating to white practices in the later stages.<sup>44</sup> Apart from underestimating their intelligence, such interpretations ignore the direct actions of Pacific Islanders. Violence, exploitation and deceit were not one-sided: there are numerous examples of Islanders attacking open boats and even ships.<sup>45</sup> During his time in the trade, Smith received many warnings of premeditated armed attacks. While recruiting in 1901, the boats were fired on at Malaita and the European recruiter, James Arthur, was killed.<sup>46</sup> Understandably crews were usually well-armed and continually on their guard. The few respites were welcome relief: "...quite a treat to be in a missionary Island again, no guns in the boat and no one to watch."<sup>47</sup> Clearly, even after thirty years, recruiting was still a dangerous affair. Indeed, Scarr contended that in the 1890s shooting at boats was on the increase, largely because the older members of the community resented the absence

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of so many of their young men.<sup>48</sup> Evidence to substantiate this view can be found in the *Diaries*,<sup>49</sup> but this was not the reason for Arthur's fatal shooting - seemingly an act of revenge for the misdeeds of a storekeeper in Queensland. Smith explained:

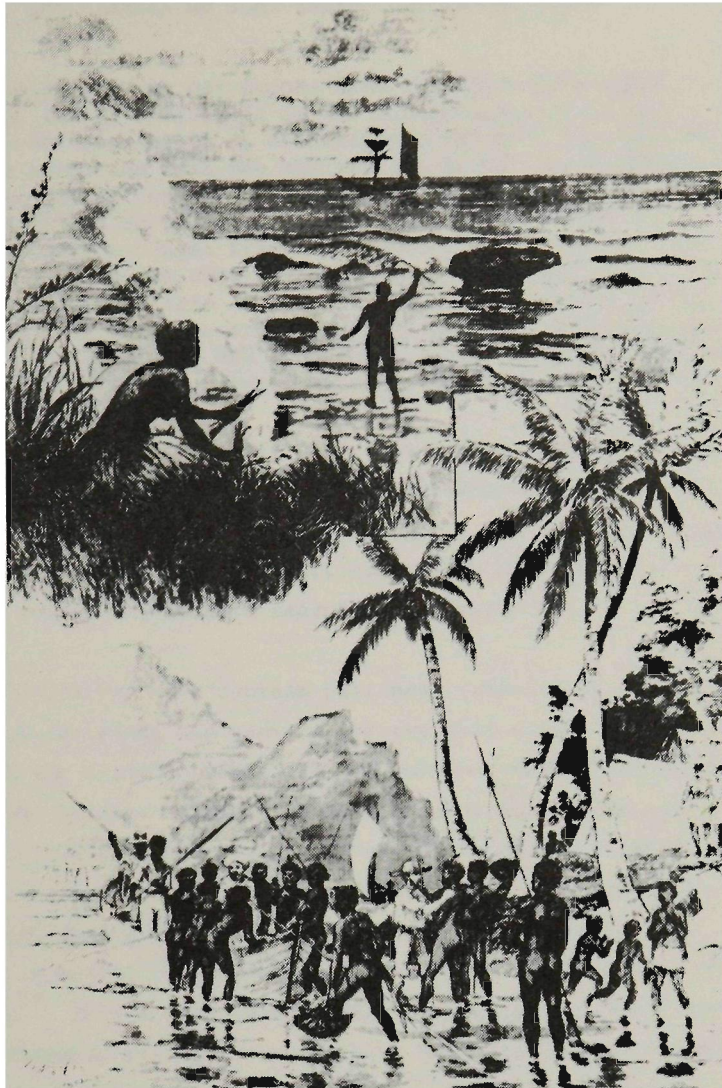
...it was in revenge for the defrauding of a large number of Malayta men by a sum amounting to over £1,300 by a Bundaberg Storekeeper named Williams who received the Boys' hard earned wages in trust, and then levanted....When returning home the Islanders gave warning that 'Government better look out'.<sup>50</sup>

Sometimes Pacific Islanders enlisted only to abscond after receiving their payment in trade. This was one of Smith's most persistent problems.

In New Britain, New Ireland and many parts of the Solomon Islands, some recruits could be obtained through "chiefs" or "passage masters", local dignitaries who were paid in trade for their services.<sup>51</sup> Contrary to popular belief, none existed in the New Hebrides.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps the best known in the Solomons was Kwaisulia of Ada Gege, an artificial island in the Lau Lagoon area.<sup>53</sup> Both Scarr and Corris concluded that such men had acquired an undeserved reputation as instrumental to satisfactory recruiting. Smith's experiences reinforce this view. In eleven years of recruiting, he mentioned having had contact with two chiefs: twice with Kwaisulia and once with "Gaela", also a Malaitan.

In 1877, the Queensland Government outlawed the offering of gifts to relatives and friends of recruits because of allegations in Queensland that captives were being sold in the Islands, especially by "chiefs".<sup>54</sup> This was a hasty, ill-considered measure which completely ignored Melanesian custom. It was customary to "buy" a recruit: this term simply meant that in exchange for the temporary loss of one of their members, the community received compensation in the form of trade goods; if this was not provided he was considered "stolen". Misinterpretation of this term, as being synonymous with "kidnapped" created much misunderstanding. So did its antonym "catch", which, to the Islanders, meant "legitimately recruited". In a report to his Commodore, Captain Dale of the Australian Station pointed out the difficulty:





a) Signalling a labour vessel in the Pacific Islands

b) Recruiting

Backed into shore, surrounded by armed Islanders, the boat is very vulnerable despite the covering boat in the background

[*Queenslander*. 9 July 1892]



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If the present or pay passes from the Recruiting Agent to the tribe, Article 22 of the Queensland Instructions to Government Agents is distinctly infringed. If, on the other hand, the rule was carried out by any vessel engaged in the labour traffic...there is little doubt but vessels would obtain no recruits. Article 22 is therefore practically expunged from their Instructions by the Government Agents them-selves, [sic] and the pains and penalties in Article 23 are without doubt never enforced. In the case where no present or pay passes from Recruiting Agent to the tribe, and the native surreptitiously recruits, the tribe considers itself cheated, and bloodshed invariably follows.<sup>55</sup>

Even missionaries had to comply with this custom. Bishop Patteson himself obtained young trainees for his missionary schools by methods essentially the same as those of legal recruiters. In the 1890s Smith continually ignored that particular regulation in order to ensure the well-being of both recruits and recruiters.

The *Smith Diaries* also contain pertinent evidence about labour vessels. Overcrowding has been by far the most common criticism levelled at the trade's ships. This should be viewed from three aspects: the outward voyage, the period spent recruiting in the Islands, and the homeward voyage. Complements on the outward voyage varied considerably. For his part, Smith admittedly participated in three voyages during which the number of returns exceeded the registered capacity;<sup>56</sup> for each, official approval had been obtained beforehand.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, ships he accompanied had fewer than a dozen returns to transport on at least one third of his voyages. Queensland Government Statistics indicate that this same pattern prevailed in the case of other vessels in the trade. Having reached the Islands (after less than two weeks at sea) as many returns as possible were usually landed before recruiting was commenced. This minimised responsibility and maximised space on the recruiting vessel. There is no evidence to suggest that any of the vessels Smith supervised were overcrowded during the period of recruiting. Indeed, the landing of returns exceeded the rate of signing on recruits by the general ratio of one return per day disembarked to one recruit per three days enlisted. Furthermore, Smith's vessels never managed a

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full complement of recruits. Ratios of actual tonnage to recruits indicates that this was most often the case with other Queensland labour vessels, a fact tending to negate the possibility that Smith was much more scrupulous than others.<sup>58</sup> The usual licence to recruit was of six months' duration. Obviously, captains were returning vessels to Queensland with less than a full complement after only four months out. Once a substantial number of recruits was on board in the Islands, the captain, traditionally a part-owner of the vessel, would have to weigh the risks to health and discipline of recruits and crew against the chance of completing the complement in a reasonable period. The condition of ship, sails and rigging, food supplies, the weather and the season were all factors to be considered, which, combined with the rigours of inspection both at home port and in the Islands, suggests that serious overcrowding was highly unlikely.

Another widely-held view is that Queensland labour trade vessels were plagued by disease, and that the Government Agents' physical examination of the recruits was perfunctory. This allegation cannot be sustained in the light of Smith's figures for the homeward voyages. Out of a total of eighteen recruiting excursions, during which in excess of 1,300 Islanders were transported, there was only one death. Further, only seven recruits were rejected after medical examination on arrival in Queensland, four with measles.<sup>59</sup> Occasionally recruits were hospitalised on arrival, but invariably for minor treatment. In contrast, the mortality rate among returns on board Smith's vessels was more substantial.<sup>60</sup> Much of the sickness and death on board can be attributed to medical conditions probably contracted while working in Queensland.<sup>61</sup> Smith was only too well aware of the problem. He said of one return: "poor beggar is dying of consumption, six years in Queensland!!!!"; and of another who died on board before the vessel even cleared Maryborough: "one Islander dead, not surprised, no business to have been sent aboard, consumption".<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, all cases of "insanity" were among returns only. The practice of the Queensland authorities repatriating recruits

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on the expiry of their indentures even when their medical condition was suspect was probably the most tangible factor in the death rate amongst returns. It is to be noted that the Government Agent had no authority to reject returns placed aboard his vessel.

In addition, there has prevailed a notion that labour ships were unseaworthy, capable of remaining afloat only while the bilge pumps were constantly manned. That four out of 18 Queensland vessels engaged in the trade were lost at sea in the period 1893-1903 might seem to support this view, but these figures are of little value in the absence of comparative statistics.<sup>63</sup> Considering the size of the vessels, the perils of uncharted reefs, and the frequency of cyclones and tidal rips in the Island waters, it is surprising that a greater number were not lost. Smith, a master mariner, served on 10 different labour vessels, more than half the number operating out of Queensland during his years as Government Agent. That he commented adversely on only one of them is significant.<sup>64</sup> The only wreck he was involved in was the unavoidable sinking of the *Ariel* which he repeatedly described as "a very good little sea-boat".<sup>65</sup> Moreover, he never found cause to complain about the crews' seamanship.

Throughout his *Diaries*, however, Smith displays a general disapproval of the character of white crew members, expecting "officer-gentleman" behaviour from all seamen: "Owner and Cook had a big row in the cabin at 8 a.m. I could hear the Owner call the Cook a s-n of a b--h and a b--y, d--n, b--d; labor (sic) trade language I suppose, very unpleasant to hear, spoilt my breakfast."<sup>66</sup> Even so, he only lodged two complaints in eleven years: both concerned members of the notorious Tornaros family. Smith had no hesitation in reporting people like Agesilaus Tornaros who breached the Queensland regulations while on board the *Sybil* by selling four gallons of rum to a trader and leaving two cases of brandy in the latter's charge to be sold. Significantly, Captain Tornaros, the owner of the vessel, was only ever carried as pilot and passenger after 1892.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, the incident illustrates that at least some Europeans were prepared to

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violate regulations if not checked by a responsible Government Agent. Another facet of Smith's voyages which merits attention is the amount of contact he had with Europeans while recruiting. On every trip he made, Smith met with other vessels in the Islands. Often they were Island traders or mail steamers, but on other occasions they were Queensland, Fijian, Samoan or French recruiting ships and British or Colonial men-of-war. Over the years, the number of his friends and acquaintances in the Islands multiplied. They were mostly missionaries, copra traders and Island-based officials who welcomed conversation and exchanged reading material. Smith too looked forward to company, a brief escape from the loneliness and monotony of his job, even though most acquaintances were in a sense rivals, ready to lay complaints against competitors. Missionaries were no exception.<sup>68</sup> Only one complaint was ever laid against Smith, and upon investigation it was found to be false. The trader concerned was an ex-recruiter and long-standing opponent of the labour trade whose previous complaints concerning the trade, once examined by the Immigration Department, were also proven to be without foundation.<sup>69</sup> Rivalry sometimes developed into outright hostility. This was reflected by an entry in 1893: "...We got five recruits....'Sybil' in company and her owner Old Tornaros very wild with us for getting so many recruits."<sup>70</sup>

Overall, the *Smith Diaries* confirm the impressions of present day historians that the period from 1892 to cessation of the labour trade was well-regulated. To suggest that Smith's personal character was typical would be pure conjecture: sufficient biographical details on other Government Agents simply are not available at this stage. Without doubt, Smith was an exemplary officer, deeply concerned for his human cargo, but there is reason to believe that most of his contemporaries<sup>71</sup> maintained a similar high standard of official conduct because in this period when the traffic was continuously subject to close scrutiny there were but two serious charges laid. In 1904 the

*Clansman* inquiry established that Government Agent, John Craig, had not been accompanying the boats to shore.<sup>72</sup> Although the *Clansman* was only returning labourers on this occasion, Craig was dismissed and debarred from the trade. There was nothing in Craig's official diary to suggest negligence, demonstrating that little escaped the authorities at this time. And the *William Manson* case supports this argument.<sup>73</sup> The ship's captain, Joseph Vos, and Government Agent, George Olver, were charged under the Imperial *Kidnapping Act* of 1872 following allegations by three young Islander missionaries who were on board the *William Manson* at the time, that Vos, the owner of the vessel, had offered Kwaisulia (a Malaitan chief) a lucrative reward to supply recruits. The plaintiffs further testified that Kwaisulia, with only a handful of his men, siezed three members of a neighbouring tribe in the presence of the captives' chief, Sooba (and his large band of heavily-armed warriors) and forcibly delivered them to the *William Manson's* recruiting boats. The proceedings leave no doubt that the plaintiffs were not impartial witnesses: they had joined the *William Manson* intending to disembark at Kwaisulia's stronghold and establish a mission. Kwaisulia's unwillingness to share his domain was attributed to Vos' influence. Disgruntled, they had no option but to return to Queensland. Faced with conflicting evidence, the court dismissed the charges, but Vos and Olver were subsequently banned from the trade. It is clear that the recruits in question were at least unwilling. But it is equally patent that the *William Manson* incident was an isolated exception: Vos offered Kwaisulia a whaleboat, an unusual inducement, one that neither he nor anyone else would be in a position to hold out often. As well, Vos had not been involved in the trade for almost a decade and his actions might be considered more characteristic of the trade's earlier phase when avenues for complaint were not so numerous. Indeed, in response to a sweeping suggestion that the *William Manson* incident was typical, O'Neil Brenan (Immigration Agent to the Colonial Secretary's Office) sagaciously replied:

Such an assertion is untrue and most unjust to the respectable staff of Government Agents in the service. People who know anything of the trade nowadays are well aware that irregularities cannot take place and remain undiscovered and the *William Manson* case, I submit, proves it.<sup>74</sup>

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The limited and more fragmentary documentary evidence for these years surviving from other hands reinforces this conclusion. For example Melvin's newspaper articles contain sentiments strikingly similar to those of modern Pacific historians:

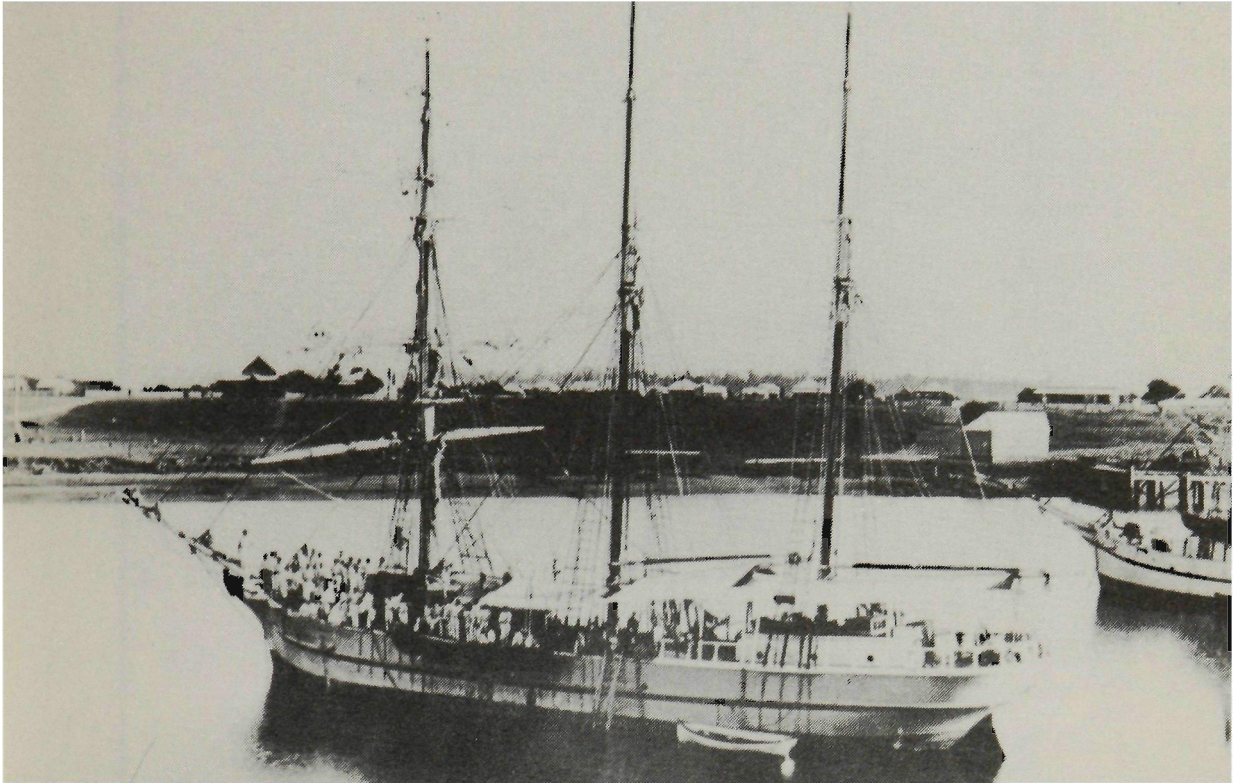
Whilst kidnapping and fraud in the traffic has been made by wise and elaborate laws, by strict supervision, and by enlightenment amongst the islanders themselves, as impracticable as crime in a well-governed, civilised community, the desire on the part of the natives to recruit for Queensland is so pronounced that kidnapping is rendered unnecessary.<sup>75</sup>

In addition, Henry H. Montgomery, Anglican Bishop of Tasmania who voyaged throughout the Islands in the Melanesian Missionary vessel *Southern Cross* in 1892,<sup>76</sup> wrote to the Governor of Queensland, Sir Henry Norman, on completion of his journey:

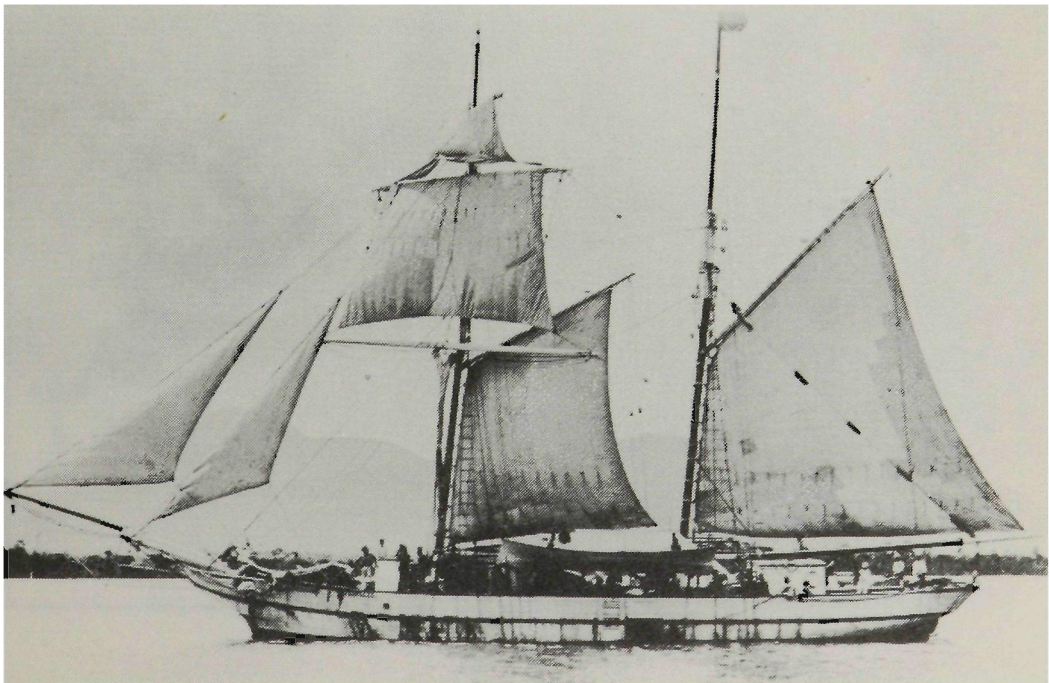
I imagined that natives were induced to engage themselves for Queensland while they were in ignorance of the real terms of the contract. This I believe to be an entirely erroneous conclusion. The lapse of time has altered the old condition....I am convinced that the boys are treated with the greatest kindness....and your regulations are carried out in their spirit as well as in the letter.<sup>77</sup>

That there were only two serious breaches of the law reported after 1885 indicates that Government Agents were doing their duty. True, the possibility that some abuses went undetected cannot be dismissed entirely. But given the extent of Government intervention, the awareness of the Islanders, the avenues for complaint both in the Islands and at port, the readiness of rivals to lay complaints, the vigilance of organised philanthropic bodies and the eagerness of the press to expose abuses, it is unlikely there were many. The collusion between captain and Government Agent, and silence from all crew and recruits, necessary to a successful cover-up would not be easy to engineer or to sustain. In making the Queensland labour trade an orderly, well-regulated business, Government Agents played an important, commendable role.



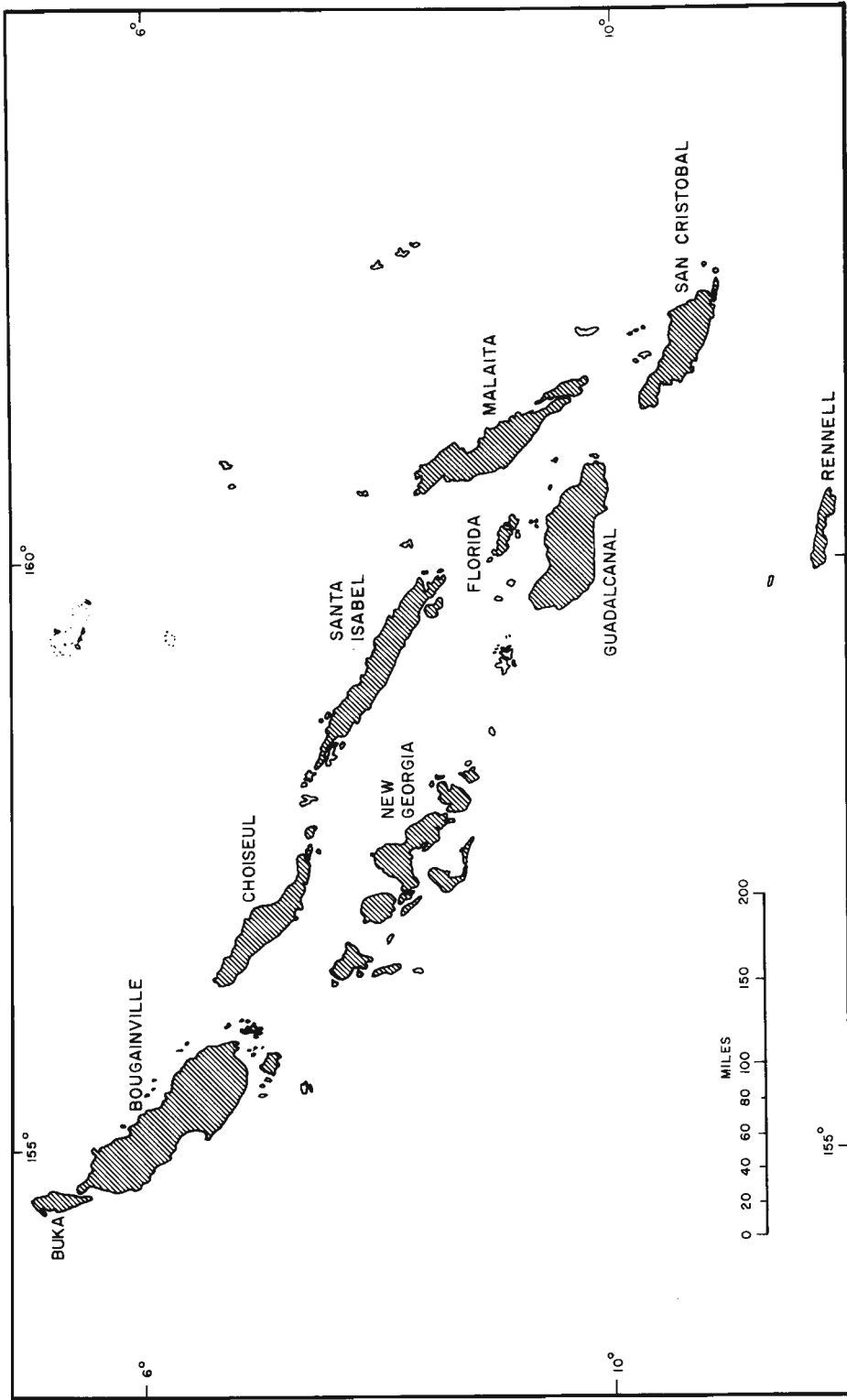


The *Sydney Belle* at Bundaberg, returning Islanders mustered on deck  
[A.C. Davies Collection, John Oxley Library]

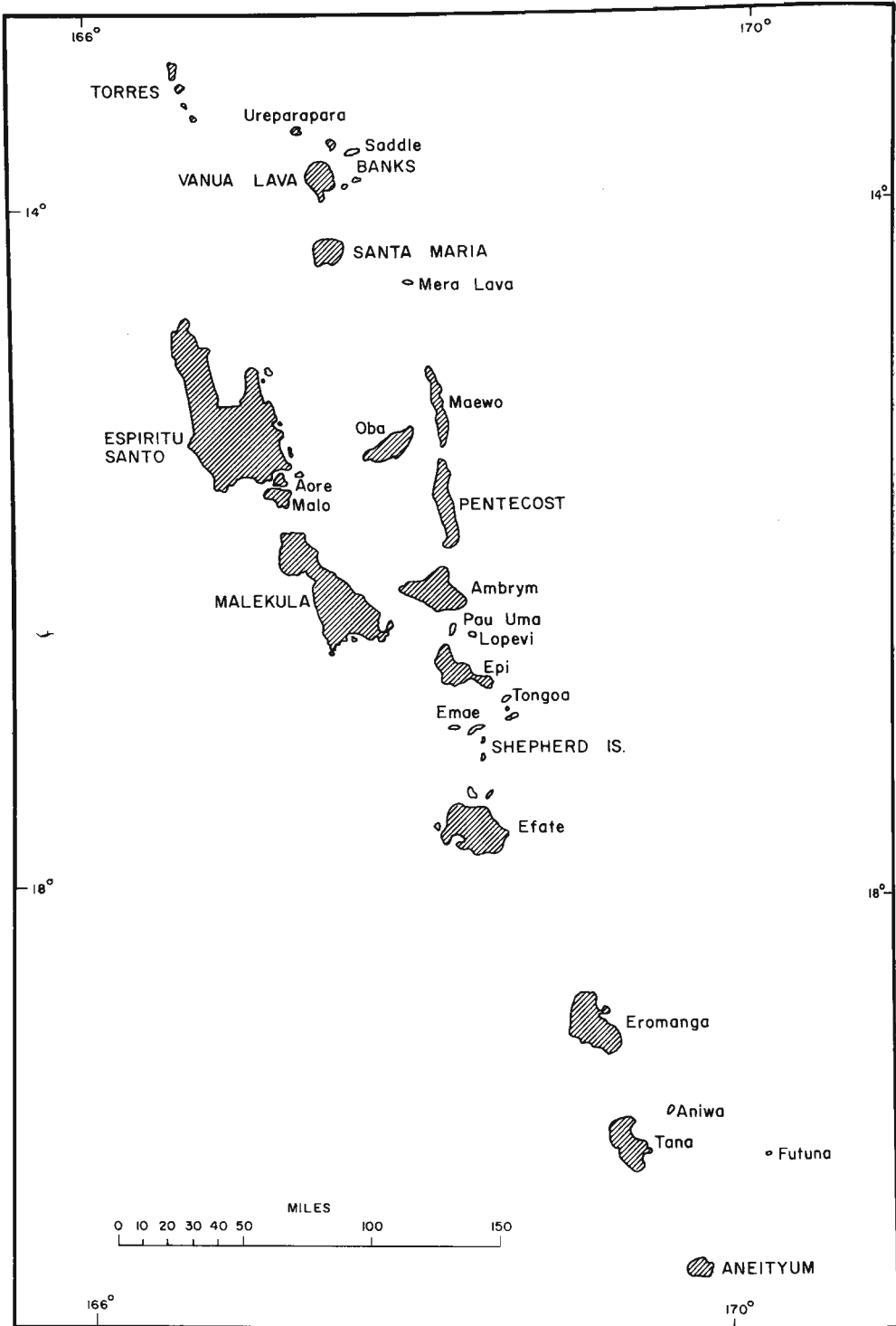


The *Fearless* at Cairns  
[Cairns Historical Society]





THE SOLOMON ISLANDS



THE NEW HEBRIDES

THE DIARIES OF S.M. SMITH, GOVERNMENT AGENT

REFERENCES

1. Charles H. Price & Elizabeth Baker, "Origins of Pacific Island Labourers in Queensland 1863-1904: a research note", *Journal of Pacific History*. Vol. 11, 1-2, 1976, p.111.
2. There were a few Polynesians, and an estimated 2,800 Papuans introduced from the New Guinea Islands during the period 1883-1884. *Ibid.* The majority of the Papuans were returned after arrival when it was revealed that many had either been kidnapped or did not understand their contracts.
3. I have calculated this percentage from the statistics in *ibid.*
4. Carol Edmondson, Government Agent: S.M. Smith and the Queensland Labour Trade 1893-1904. B.A. Hons. thesis, History Department, J.C.U.N.Q. pp.vii-xii.
5. See especially, Peter Corris, *Passage Port and Plantation: A History of Solomon Islands Labour Migration 1870-1914*. Melbourne, 1973; and Deryck Scarr, *Fragments of Empire: A History of the Western Pacific High Commission 1877-1914*. Canberra, 1967.
6. Deryck Scarr, "Recruits and Recruiters: A Portrait of the Labour Trade." *J.P.H.* Vol. 11, 1967, p.226.
7. See table I.
8. W.E. Giles, *Cruise in a Queensland Labour Vessel to the South Seas*. Deryck Scarr [ed] Canberra, 1968, p.13.
9. Corris, *Passage*, p.43.
10. Ralph Shlomowitz has estimated that between 1892-1903 about 1/3 of recruits were re-indentures; 22% had been previously employed in Queensland and 6% outside their own Islands in places other than Queensland. Shlomowitz, "Markets for Indentured and Time-expired Melanesian Labour in Queensland 1863-1906. An Economic Analysis". *J.P.H.* Vol. 16, No. 1-2, 1981, p.70.
11. *Roderick Dhu* IPI 3/21 No. 2840 QSA. *Clansman* PRE/A91 No. 4419 QSA.
12. *Borough Belle* and *Para*; original, Mitchell Library, Sydney, microfilm J.C.U.N.Q. Another Wawn diary can be consulted in this repository - *Ariel*, 18 July-22 December 1888. All are reproduced in William T. Wawn, *The South Sea Islanders and the Queensland Labour Trade*, (first published, London, 1893) Peter Corris [ed] Canberra, 1973. Another useful earlier reference is the personal diary of the *Roderick Dhu's* recruiter, Medland Mitchell, covering the period 16 February-16 June 1889, private possession, Brisbane.

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13. J.D. Melvin, *The Cruise of the Helena. A Labour-Recruiting Voyage to the Solomon Islands*, Peter Corris [ed] Melbourne, 1977.
14. Throughout his years in the trade, Smith had 23 contemporaries.
15. See Scarr, *Fragments*, pp.150-4; Giles, *Cruise*, pp.10-12; Scarr, "Recruits", pp.233-240.
16. 1884 Royal Commission into New Guinea and Papuan Islands, *QVP* 1885, No. 11, pp.813-832. See also Peter Corris, "Blackbirding in New Guinea Waters 1883-4: An Episode in the Queensland Labour Trade." *J.P.H.* Vol. 3, 1968. New Guinea was closed to recruiters by the Queensland Government in 1885 and most masters and officials directly involved were debarred from the trade.
17. Kay E. Saunders, *Uncertain Bondage: An Analysis of Indentured Labour in Queensland to 1909 with Particular Reference to the Melanesian Servants*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Queensland, June 1974, p.115.
18. Wawn, *South Sea Islanders*, p.159.
19. See Saunders, *Uncertain Bondage*, p.107. Saunders claimed that this was particularly so after 1885.
20. Scarr, "Recruits", p.239.
21. *Ibid*, p.240.
22. Blue Books (annual) *QVP* and *QPP*.
23. Autographed Letter Signed (hereafter A.L.S.) F.P. Taylor, Captain and Naval Commander, H.M.Q.G.S. *Gayundah*, Brisbane, 30 September 1892. For details of H.M.Q.G.S. *Gayundah*, see Ross Gillet & Colin Graham, *Warships of Australia*, Melbourne 1977, p.109. For information re. Q.M.D.F. see Commander Norman S. Pixley, "The Queensland Marine Defence Force", *Royal Historical Society of Queensland Journal*, VI, No. 3 (1960-61); Gillet & Graham, *Warships*.
24. For fuller discussion of Smith's career, see Edmondson, *Government Agent*, Chpt 1.
25. Sydney Mercer Smith, *Diary of the "Helena"*, 15 May 1893.
26. Blue Books, and Statistics (annual) *Polynesian Immigration and Emigration*, *QVP* and *QPP*. For a list of Smith's voyages, see table IV. For a descriptive account of his voyages, see Edmondson, *Government Agent* Chpts. 3-15.

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27. *The Pacific Island Labourers Act* No. 16 of 1901, a Commonwealth enactment, provided for the progressive reduction of the number of Pacific Islanders introduced until 31 March 1904, when the trade would cease; with few exceptions all Pacific Islanders still in the country on 31 December 1906 were to be deported.
28. QVP and QPP: refer fn. 25.
29. Frederick Marryat (1792-1848) naval officer and writer, then well known for his sea stories, especially *Mr Midshipman Easy* (1836). I have been unable to trace this quotation: others in the trade use it: see for example John Gaggin, *Among the Man-Eaters*, London, 1900, p.171. This quote derives from an autobiographical sketch in Smith's handwriting: it was written about 1930 and spans his life; he entitled it "An Australian Seaman". *Mercer Smith Papers*, private possession, Brisbane.
30. A.L.S. Immigration Agent, Department of Immigration, Pacific Island Labour Branch to Smith, Brisbane, 13 August 1907.
31. For information about the A.U.S.N. Co., see J.P.S. Bach, *A Maritime History of Australia*, Sydney, 1976, *passim*.
32. A fresh licence was issued at the beginning of each new voyage.
33. *Diary of the "Roderick Dhu"*, 1902.
34. *Diary of the "Roderick Dhu"*, 28 February 1895. In regulations, "passage" meant the precise place on the seacoast from which he had to be returned: in the recruiters' jargon, it was used to describe points known from experience to be profitable recruiting centres. See Corris, *Passage*, p.36.
35. Statistics; Report (annual) Pacific Island Immigration, QVP and QPP. *Reports, Q.S.A.*
36. Price and Baker, "Origins"; see Edmondson, table I.
37. Refer table VIII.
38. Average : 1892-1903 = 27.5%  
Highest : 35.5%  
Lowest : 22.3%  
These figures are percentages of the annual total numbers of recruits introduced to Queensland.  
Corris, *Passage*, p.49.

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39. Shlomowitz's estimates for this period are more in line with Smith's: he calculated that 22% were old hands while 6% had been previously employed elsewhere outside their Island homes. Shlomowitz, "Markets" p.70. Smith's corresponding figures for the latter is 5%: See table VIII.
40. Queensland regulations forbade recruiting females unaccompanied by their husbands and without the consent of their chiefs. Proof of "marriage" in a non-literate society was often dubious. Moreover, "chiefs" simply did not exist in many parts of the Islands, especially the New Hebrides. This virtually excluded women, who customarily married older men beyond the normal age limit of recruits.
41. Corris, *Passage*, p.46.
42. *Diary of the "Sybil"*, 4 January 1897.
43. Clive R. Moore, *Kanaka Maratta: A History of Melanesian Mackay*, Ph.D. thesis, History Department, J.C.U.N.Q. 1981.
44. Saunders, *Uncertain Bondage*.
45. Moore, *Kanaka Maratta*, App. 2.
46. Edmondson, *Government Agent*, Chpt. 15, p.461.
47. *Diary of the "Ariel"*, 21 March 1894.
48. Scarr, "Recruits", p.62.
49. *Diary of the "Helena"*, 17 October 1893.
50. Edmondson, *Government Agent*, Chpt. 15, p.461.
51. For a detailed account, see Corris, *Passage*, Chpt. 4.
52. Scarr, *Fragments*, p.143.
53. For biographical details, see Peter Corris, "Kwaisulia of Ada Gege: a strongman in the Solomon Islands", in Davidson & Scarr (eds) *Pacific Islands Portraits*, Canberra 1973, pp.253-267.
54. For example, see Giles, *Cruise*, p.17, and "The True Story of a Recruiting Voyage" by 'a Government Agent', originally published in the *Queensland Patriot*, reproduced with review in the *Queenslander*. 26 January 1878, p.13. It was written by Arthur Nixon, Government Agent, *Bobtail Nag*.
55. The Under Colonial Secretary, Queensland, to The Secretary to the Commodore, Colonial Secretary's Office, Brisbane, 9 August, 1883. Royal Navy Australian Station Records, Vol. 16, p.61.



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56. A ship's carrying capacity was calculated by a formula clearly laid down in the 1868 Act. For details, see Edmondson, Government Agent, Chpt. 2.
57. *Ibid.* Chpt. 15.
58. See table III.
59. Reports *QSA*.
60. *Ibid.*
61. *Ibid.*
62. *Diary of the "Helena"*, 18 October 1893; *Diary of the "Helena"*, 10 February 1893.
63. Statistics, *QVP* and *QPP*. Smith sailed mostly in the smaller vessels, around 120 tons.
64. i.e. the *Fearless*.
65. *Diary of the "Ariel"*, 12 February 1894. For discussion of the wreck see Edmondson, Government Agent, Chpt. 5, especially pp. 150-3.
66. *Diary of the "Sybil"*, 5 November 1898.
67. Statistics, *QVP* and *QPP*.
68. Rev. John G. Paton, Presbyterian missionary, was notorious for his furious ill-founded remarks about labour traders. Scarr, *Fragments*, p.165; David Hilliard, *God's Gentlemen: A History of the Melanesian Mission, 1849-1942*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1978, p.64.
69. Reports, *QSA*.
70. Agesilaus Tornaros. *Diary of the "Helena"*, 18 December 1893.
71. See f.n. 14.
72. Reports, *QSA*.
73. *Ibid.*
74. *Ibid.*
75. Melvin, *Cruise*, p.111.
76. Montgomery, father of the Field-Marshal, had an impeccable reputation. The letter was subsequently published in the *Queenslander*. 10 December 1892.
77. *Ibid.*