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**Stephen A. Toth**, *Beyond Papillon: The French Overseas Penal Colonies, 1854-1952*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. xx + 213 pp. Maps, photographs, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35:00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 13-978-0-8032-4449-8.

Review by Robert Aldrich, University of Sydney.

Over an eighty-year period after 1852, France transported more than 100,000 individuals to penal colonies in French Guiana and New Caledonia, the most famous of them Alfred Dreyfus and Henri Charrière, whose novel *Papillon* provides Stephen Toth with both his own title and a point of departure. While investigating the representation of the penal settlements, especially that in Guiana, as both tropical hells and as agreeable sites for the transformation of criminals into honest pioneers, Toth's aim is to go beyond the well known images to look at the ideas of criminologists and penologists that underlay the establishment of these centres, and to study the lives of prisoners, their wardens and their doctors. Based largely on sources at the Archives d'Outre-Mer and on the numerous published accounts of penal life in contemporary newspapers, books and exposés, he succeeds in providing a readable, balanced and thoughtful account of the system of the bagne and the debates it provoked.

Toth's book pays more attention to the longer-lived penal colony in Guiana than to that in New Caledonia, where convicts were sent only from the mid-1860s to the mid-1890s. He does give the basic outline of the history of the South Pacific colony, highlighting the brutal conditions inflicted on prisoners—corporal punishment was common, and the guards were said to use thumbscrews to torture them, in violations of regulations—but also the romantic visions of a tropical paradise and utopian hopes that convicts could form the basis of a prosperous settler colony. It would have been interesting, however, to elucidate some of the comparisons between these two experiments in rehabilitation and colonisation, as the cases varied considerably. France made Guiana into a penal colony partly to find a use for a possession that had failed to attract migrants and enjoyed only faltering economic development. One of the stated reasons for France's taking possession of New Caledonia in 1854—which Toth does not point out—was, by contrast, to acquire a location for a penal colony that, it was hoped, would prove more successful than the one in South America.

The French appraisal of the British convict settlements in Australia, and their intention to 'perfect' that system (which has been interestingly studied by Colin Forster [1]), gets lost in the retelling as well. Although a few political prisoners, such as Dreyfus, were shipped to Guiana, large numbers of Communards and North African rebels were transported to New Caledonia. Relations with the indigenous populations—the Amerindians in South America and the Kanaks in the South Pacific—were dissimilar; the prisoners' attitudes towards the "natives" and their underlying loyalty to France was dramatically shown during the 1878 Melanesian rebellion in New Caledonia, which has no parallels in Guiana. The effects of the prisoners on the local population was far less in Guiana than in New Caledonia, where many of the freed convicts became itinerants, purveyors of alcohol to Kanaks, the fathers of *métis* children and the ancestors of the Caldoche population (who remained largely in denial of their convict genealogy).

The geopolitics of transport also differed. France's colonial neighbours seemed little concerned about the penal colony in the Americas, while Australian colonists railed against the presence of what they saw as hardened criminals, revolutionaries, and other miscreants in Oceania (and the occasional escape of one of them to Australian shores). Colonial officials in New Caledonia themselves asked that the

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“dirty tapwater” of transportation be turned off there at the end of the nineteenth century, whereas for Guiana, as Toth suggests, it was largely the campaigns of writers such as Albert Londres that led to the end of transportation. The authorities in Paris wanted to keep transport going in Guiana partly to get settlers for an unattractive colony, while officials in New Caledonia wanted to end transportation to make the island an attractive destination for free migrants. Toth unfortunately does not directly discuss the comparisons and contrasts between the two penal establishments and their long-term results in the formation of colonial societies in two countries that today remain integral parts of the French republic.

Toth provides a fascinating portrait of life in the penal colonies—illness and degradation, the corruption of guards and the manoeuvres of prisoners to gain even the slightest relief in the conditions of their life (including infecting themselves with disease to win release from work). In such situations, a veritable prison culture emerged characterized by alcohol, tattooing, gaming, and other types of sociability, including the homosexual contacts that proliferated. (Grim humour was displayed when a prisoner tattooed a line around his neck, with the inscription “cut on the dotted line” [p.55].) More might be said on the way some prisoners managed to undertake various leisure activities. A fine exhibition on Guiana held at the Paris police museum in 2003 included numerous artefacts of colonial life, such as the sheet music for *Le Bagnard*, drawings and diaries, and coconut and tortoise shells decorated by prisoners, even a model guillotine constructed by one of the convicts, further evidence of the resistance of the prisoners to the dehumanisation of the *bagne* and of their ingenuity in finding outlets for their creativity. Similarly in New Caledonia, convicts avidly pursued diverse interests, especially the Communards who organised theatrical performances or, in the case of Louise Michel, collected Kanak folk tales and taught informal classes to local Melanesians. [2]

The life of prison wardens and other administrators was often as bad as that of the convicts under their supervisions; they were also, in a sense, victims of the colonial penal projects. Toth has a very good chapter on “Tropical Medicine in the *Bagne*”, highlighting the challenges faced by medical personnel confronted with limited supplies, endemic illness and the feeling among some officials that prisoners ought to suffer in expiation for their sins—in return for increasing the water ration of a sick prisoner, in contravention to administrative regulations, and then complaining about officials meddling in strictly medical matters, a Dr. Ricard was sentenced to nine days in jail. The doctors, Toth states, regarded transportation itself and the penal system in place in Guiana, rather than the climate, as the root of the convict illness (pp. 90-91).

Toth’s book, perhaps because of faulty copy-editing, has quite a few if relatively minor errors. The final accent on *relégués* is almost always omitted (but an accent is added to the first “e”), and other accent marks occasionally go astray. Sometimes one wonders about the accuracy of a translation—Toth quotes a reference to “violence, trafficking, and sexual deprivation,” but, as there was “no efficient supervision” of the men, it seems to me that “sexual deprivation” be “sexual depravity” (p. 2), and would not “two sets of drapes” be “sheets” if the original is draps (p. 103)? “Free reign” is once or twice used when “free rein” is intended. Saint-Joseph of Cluny is a Catholic “order” or “congregation”, not a “sect” (p. 17). Bourail is said to be on the Ile Nou on p. 18, though the map on the opposite page shows it (rightly) to be on the Grande Terre of New Caledonia. Undoubtedly Toth has confused words when referring to Gustave Le Bon as the ‘greatest bowdlerizer of “crowd psychology”’ (p. 30). The name of one governor in Nouméa was Pallu de la Barrière and not Pallu du Barrière (p. 78 and elsewhere). The Rue Solférino in Nouméa is wrongly given as the Rue Solferieno (p. 112). Twice (on p. 57 and p. 128), he says that prisoners in French Guiana trying to escape would head “northeast” to Surinam, which would be a circuitous route to freedom since Dutch Guiana lies to the west of the French colony.

*Beyond Papillon* convincingly argues that the penal projects were, in the long range, doomed. The French were never sure whether the main purpose of the *bagne* was to deter wrong-doers, punish prisoners or to rehabilitate wayward citizens. The ruralist ideal of settler colonies in Guiana and New Caledonia—“nostalgic faith in the power of the land to rejuvenate the denizens of a corrupt urban

society” (p. 34)--was almost impossible to realise, especially with a vision based on the metamorphosis of prisoners, often of urban background, into a yeoman peasantry. In Toth’s neat phrase: “It is obvious that the penal colonies failed in their dual mission of reforming the man by colonizing the land” (p. 149). By the 1920s, thanks to Londres and a host of other writers, including memoir-writing former convicts and journalists for metropolitan dailies in Paris and New York, the image of Devil’s Island tarnished France’s international reputation. France mounted a counter-offensive, and Toth reveals how the government recruited sympathetic reporters (perhaps even with payments to them) to write favourable articles; the *New York Times* published a front-page piece by one sponsored visitor to Guiana with the fabulous title “Convicts in French Guiana Build New Riviera.” Toth concludes that the *bagne* is really two things: the material prisons and the life of prisoners and guards, on the one hand, and the contested representations of them circulated in newspapers, the press, parliamentary debates and other venues, on the other.

The ruins of the penal colonies, overrun by tropical vegetations, have become tourist attractions in New Caledonia and Guiana, the subject, too, of Patrick Chamoiseau’s meditation on the meaning of transportation in the history of France in the Americas in *Guyane--Traces-mémoires du bagne*.<sup>[3]</sup> No visitor to these sites, or to comparable places, such as the eerie Port Arthur in Tasmania, can depart without being moved at this heritage. Transportation of prisoners--by the French to these two outposts, by the British to the Australian colonies, by Russians to Siberia--has been a major feature both in the history of penology and in the history of colonialism, and there could be interesting comparative studies by future historians in these areas. Though penal transportation has largely come to an end in the Western world, the legacies of these misguided if somewhat utopian experiments, and the violence that accompanied these projects, have left a deep sedimentation in the contemporary societies that emerged. Toth’s book makes a useful contribution to a part of French colonial history that is familiar in its general outlines to many readers but that also benefits from his detailed consideration.

## NOTES

[1] Colin Forster, *France and Botany Bay: The Lure of a Penal Colony* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996)

[2] See Bullitt Lowry and Elizabeth Ellington Gunter, eds., *The Red Virgin: Memoirs of Louise Michel* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003) and Louise Michel, *Légendes et chansons de gestes canaques*, ed. François Bogiolo (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2006).

[3] Patrick Chamoiseau, *Guyane--Trance mémoires du bagnes* (Paris: Caisse nationale des monuments historiques, 1994).

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See also Stephen A. Toth’s response to this review.

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