

La Nouvelle-Calédonie: colonie pénitentiaire (1863-1931) –  
transportation déportation relégation

(0.8- 0.21sec) 9th of may 1864, the frigate *l'Iphegenie* arrives in harbor at Port-de-France, after navigating 123 days from Toulon. On board, behind bars are 248 convicts...

(0.57-1min25) Yesterday, a boat anchored itself on the coast of " l'île Nou", opposite Port-De-France. None of the cargoes were unloaded. Since this morning, we can only observe the rocking of the boat. At 10am, close to 250 men, wait under the sun for the governor, Charles Guillain...

1min30- Men and sorrows

New Caledonia the penitentiary colony

1min41- A great page of the colonial history of New Caledonia starts that day with the arrival of the *Iphegenie* and its 248 convicts. They form the first convoy of condemned convicts transported by the distant metropole (France). In Oceania, as forerunner, England had already sent its convicts to Australia.

2min20. What are these men doing here? It has already been 10 years, now, that New Caledonia is a French colony. And Port-de-France, the chief town, is only a small village with a population of a few hundred. With its houses, its military base and its harbor.

2min54. New Caledonia was chosen as a penal colony by Parisian palaces. The second French Empire opted for a more rigorous treatment in dealing with delinquency and criminality. After some trouble, on top of forced labor already executed in the penal colonies of France, the 1854 law allowed the government to get rid of convicts that were judged to be dangerous or disturbing. We then transported them to Guyana. However, the climate and death toll were terrible over there. The imperial government, by the 1863 decree, chose a new penal colony. It will be as we know it now, New Caledonia.

4min33: Between 1864 and 1897, 75 boats arrived in New Caledonia, they carried between 145 and 617 convicts each, rounding off to be 22 000 convicts in total. The settlers and the convicts form from the start, two distant worlds. The settlers don't hear the sounds of chains or the governor Guillain addressing the convicts: "Transportation laborers, you are here in New Caledonia to participate in the important work to do in this penal colony. I have been impatiently waiting as auxiliaries of this work."

5min36: In the boats' main body, 6 months worth of materials to live off of and to construct what will be the penitentiary depositary of the Caledonian penal colony.

6min03: "For us, transporting is the opposite, we see, we hear and understand what will be our new life. We are no longer men but numbers, deprived of freedom we are condemned to exile, imprisonment and labored work. Assassins, thieves, incendiaries, money launderers, all criminals to the eyes of the law. All condemned to labored work. We become for a long time the workers of the Transportation," dedicated to the enhancement of what is to become a penal colony.

7min15: "Here, our destiny is to become repression, expiation, rehabilitation. Here, a unique hope, once we have served our sentence and if we survive, is to stay on this land and become a settler. For most of us, returning home is not an option, exile is part of our sentence. Sentences of less than 8 years are doubled by a stay equal to the sentence. Beyond that, we are to reside a life-long sentence on this land."

8min25. The penitentiary administration develops and functions independently. The penitentiary of "l'Île Nou" becomes a small city. A bakery, a workshop, a church, a station, surveillants' quarters, a commandant's house, a hospital, a cellular building and between the condemners' dormitories, the crime boulevard, with the guillotine...

9min14. The prison is a structured machine that is hierarchical, specialized with the convicts distributed by class. The first class is for the amended convicts that can obtain a land concession or be placed in individuals' houses. The last class is for the incorrigibles. And between the illusion of paradise and hell, the other classes. We suffer a discipline of iron aggravated by certain surveillants. In the form of punishment, pleads, crapaudine, ....., ..... whips. An outlet for some evasions, or at least, tentatives of escape, strictly reprimanded.

10min20: At Montravel, the convicts become workers for roads, bridges, quays, and waterways. We strive for the young community of Noumea.

10min50: The penal colonies that specialize in agriculture, open their doors in the scrubland.

11min08: At the Pines Island, other convicts build military infrastructures. The condemnations of a new day are announced. Deported from 1872, relegated from 1887. The third republic uses the New Caledonian affectation as a penitentiary colony to exile other types of convicts. The deported are convicts who are politicians, the insurgents of the Parisian community.

12min30. In detention in Pines Island, or at the fortified enclosure in Ducos, they will know a temporary exile until their amnesty. Rebellious Algerians will also be deported .... Relegants, as

far as they're concerned, are repeat offenders, they will be exiled and the harsh prison regulations. But the majority of the misplaced destinies are the transporters....

13min42, Slowly, roads are drawn. Slowly, fields distant themselves from the capital. The prison, with its mobile camps, draws the big axis of this land. The labor, the misfortune, and the lack of surveillance lead to evasions. Indigenous police officers are tasked to bring back the evaders.

14min40: The prison colony is also a way to populate New Caledonia. The forced exile supplies men to penal colonies on the land attributed to the penitentiary administration; a part is designed to contain the transporters from the class 1 to plots of land. "Les chapeaux de paille", assigned to house arrest populated the New Caledonian shrubland. The first condemned were placed in Bourail in 1867. In 1870, the region of "Fonwhary" - "la Foa" was marked out. 11 years later, its "Diahot" turn .... And finally 1883, "Pouembout".

16min15: "The penal colonization became for us a reality, labor work on plots of land, the family unit are the pillars. Missing are the essential elements .... The women .... In 1872, the first convoy full of women embarked on board the "*Virginie*". Women recruited in central prisons in France, for the quality of housekeeping and their condemned celibacy statuses. It is true that not many women agree to join their husbands who've been transported and rarely those who are unmarried. In total, several hundred women are transported with their destinies already written: To get married and create a family. Marriages, births... our kids are placed in boarding schools, the boys in "Bourail" and the girls in "Fonwhary". They are educated by the religious, to the life of settlers.

18min40: At the end of the 1870s, the agricultural politics of the penitentiary administration, land consumer, provokes the discontentment of the Indigenous population, the Kanak. 17 000 Europeans live on lands that have been confiscated from 40 000 Melanesians. The delimitation of land is one of the main factors in the Kanak uprising, triggered in 1878 by "Atai" in the region of "La Foa". The rebellion reaches the region of "Boulouparis" and "Bourail", after one year of combat, everyone counts their dead, 200 Europeans and close to 1 000 Kanak. 1 500 Kanak are transported to "Belep" or in the Pines Island.

20min05: On its side, the penitentiary administration continues its work.... It abuses this criminal, *corvéable* and inexpensive labor force. A bargain, because the next is a land of exploration. Geologists and industries are interested in its underground. It contains gold, chromium, cobalt, copper and nickel. It's the start of the mining adventures. Higginson with mines in "Ballade" et "Pilou", north of the island. Or the young SLN (Société Le Nickel) in "Thio" accepts the fortune and convicts are sent to the mines.

22min16: The use of criminal labor for industrial profit will be denounced by the press, the public opinion, as a contract of “human flesh”.

“ All of the manpower and resources available from the transportation will be redirected to road construction” 600 transporters will be redirected to different road sections between “Paita” and “Boulouparis”. The Interior management will receive tomorrow [...]” Faced with the excesses of the penitentiary administration, Pallu therefore intends to enforce the 1884 law on the execution of forced labor but he turns to the penitentiary administration. A true state within the state, they prefer to use the convicts for their own needs. Pallu de la Barrière is recalled by the third republic.

24min15. At the same time, the evasions form mobile camps and the complaints from the settlers lead to disciplinary measures. The penitentiary administration set up the terrible “Camp Brun”.

25min15. At the end of the 1880s, the penitentiary administration was at its peak. Its domain extends over 110 000 hectares and the manager has become the most powerful character on the island. In 1886, 7 600 condemned and 2 900 liberated were supervised by 700 agents of the administration. The golden year of the Transportation ends with the arrival of the governor “Feillet” who wants to close the “dirty tap water” and encourages “free colonization”.

26min18 “The “Camp Brun” is legalized and evacuated and the disciplinary suburb is transferred to “ l’Ile Nou”. We stopped employing convicts for labored work in the commune of Noumea. In 1897, we were 10 500 free, there were 15 200 criminals, the 75th and last convoy of transporters arrived in NC. The last transporter was executed in 1902 and in 1908, the penitentiary centers were freed. Five years later, the penitentiary services were regrouped in “ l’ile Nou”. Lands and buildings of the penitentiary administration in Noumea are closed down. The buildings are destroyed or their functions change. “ L’ile Nou” became Nouville in 1928, we enter a new page of History, one of oblivion.

In 1931, there are only 623 condemned and there are more than 29 000 “free settlers”, a decree of the third republic decommissioning New Caledonia as a penal colony.

28min58. In New Caledonia, the liberated experienced difficult and uncertain paths towards social integration, despite aids to move in. For generations, we will have carried the burden of wrong doings, the burden of irrevocable judgments of a hierarchical colonial society. What will remain of us .....

29min56: The tide of history has gathered on this earth, condemned and surveilled. The testimonies, the drawings, writings, and the pearly engraved wood sold for a few pennies confirm the lives of the convicts in the penal colony of New Caledonia.

Their work is still set up as useful and fundamental: infrastructures, monuments sometimes still classified as heritage; towns of farmers and artisans. Alive and rooted are their descendants, a vital part of the New Caledonian “mosaic”.

31min02 In New Caledonia, around 2 700 condemned became distributors when gaining their freedom. A large group of them will be stripped of what they gained. More than 1 000 people join a condemned parent.

31m25: “The convicts had to be used to work in the hardest fields of the penal colony. This “birthed” penal colony in New Caledonia needed these people. Well these condemned, they were from different backgrounds, coming from France. Don’t believe they were all assassins, some of them were, there were some repeat offenders, but in “Thio”, we had a lot of former thieves, people who had stolen. We noticed that under the ruling of Napoleon the third, a lot of people stole, we were under the impression it was about food. We also saw women steal for their kids. It was perhaps a hard regime, the regime of Napoleon the third, but we notice that people stole.”

32min17: 1864, the Governor Guillaumin welcomes the first convoy of transportees to “l’île Nou”.

32min25: “So, the first convoy arrived in 1864, it was welcomed by the Governor Guillaumin with a speech where he addressed them with this term: “Transport worker”

“ When we speak l’île Nou”, we always have a negative vision on this location of suppression. And indeed we cannot deny that people were imprisoned here, there were cells, at night, the detained from class 4 were chained to the “bar of justice”, etc so there were difficult aspects. We cannot forget that there were 70 executions on site. But what we are trying to show is the second aspect, in other words, a site of amendment by labor. The convicts who arrived here in “l’île Nou” were selected from prisons in France, for their skills and their work. Therefore, for some, it was people who specialized in carpentry, others in woodworking, some in bricklaying, others were blacksmiths, wheelwrights, or even coopers, etc. etc. So there were a host of trades on the island, and the skills of these people were put to good use so that life within this penitentiary center of the island was led in total self-sufficiency. It was necessary to produce everything that was necessary for self-sufficiency on the island.”

34min16: 1866 Port-de-France becomes Noumea. The condemned built the capital city.

34min30: “Almost everything done in the 19th century since it was a labor that cost nothing that we could use and abuse. So they participated in a spatial way in the evolution of this city, that is

to say that they leveled hills like the Conneau hill which was near the harbor; they filled in the ponds on which, afterwards, neighborhoods were established. They subsequently also participated in the construction of buildings and where, what remains of these buildings from the 19th century, are the work of convicts. Whether the buildings are linked to the penitentiary administration or barracks and also the cathedral, this place of worship is quite important in our municipal heritage.”

35min23: 1866, In Prony, the condemned exploited the necessary wood to build Noumea.

“It was a small village, the small creek separated the two teams that were on site. On the right bank, you had the convicts and it was at the start of the “transported” and after the “relegates” took over but on the left bank, there were the supervisors. And after, of course, we can notice the set up for woodworking and the installment of big storage buildings to store the exploited wood. It was imperative to build the capital of Port-de-France and a heresy to bring wood locally since the south lends itself to this intense need.”

36min40 1872 The first political deported arrive in New Caledonia.

36min50: “The deportation, it was for those condemned for philosophical and political conception. They had not committed any crimes against common rights, except for those of course who had and they were deported to a fortified enclosure. But otherwise, the deportees were exiles, they were not convicts of common rights.”

37min20 “ In 1872, the governor Gaultier de la Richerie, came to inspect the Pines Island as it was welcoming the deportees of the Parisian commune, condemned to a simple deportation. So it was the first group from 1872 until 1880, the date of total amnesty for the communities. However, Pines island also welcomed Kabylia deportees also from 1872 to 1881 on the island before being repatriated on the main island, “la Grande Terre”. The deportees had the right to move around, they were free since their sentence was a simple exile.”

38min17 1867: Bourail 1872: Uarai The first center of penal colonization opened.

“ Out of “l’île Nou” which was in some sort its main suburb, the penitentiary administration will be very quickly, holder of an important domain of the interior of the colony which is what will be called the penitentiary domain which will reach the surface area of several 110 000 hectares thanks to the presidential decree of 1884. So an important land which will be used as the agricultural penitentiary of the Bourail, la Foa or Uarai regions as well as a main center in Pouembout. So in these penitentiary centers of Bourail or La Foa, the penitentiary domain puts

together, rural concessions of 6 to 7 hectares and urban concessions of small towns which will become Pouembout, La Foa or Bourail.

40min25: 1879 The first “contract of human flesh” The penal labor was employed in the mines.

“Mr Higginson already had convicts in the copper mines in *Ballade*, he already had 300 convicts and he will have 500 in Vanuatu where had business. Mr Hanckar and Mr Higginson, in other words, it was the time in *Thio* in 1887 where all the fields were occupied by convicts.”

41min: 1883- The penal colonization center of Pouembout was created, The governor Pallu de la Barriere gave way to the larger road works.

41min12 “Pouembout also called the “Pallu center” as it was created by Pallu de la Barrière. Pallu had at the time a great project idea for New Caledonia, just like governor Guillaïn. Pallu who had these great ideas for New Caledonia wanted to develop the roads and the roadside infrastructures. He also wanted the penal colonization to be an advanced base for the “free colonization”, In other words, the penal colonization had to be of service to the “free colonization”.

42min01: 1887 Illegal opening of the disciplinary camp: the “Camp Brun”

The existential conditions at the “Camp Brun” are very, very hard, you could even say inhumane, for the convicts assigned there. Of course, it’s only the 4th category; in other words, it is a disciplinary camp for convicts who are “incorrigible”, intransigent. The conditions are so hard and atrocious that some convicts choose to kill themselves at the hands of their cellmates or even to self-mutilate to escape from these inhumane conditions, in the “Camp Brun”.

43min03: 1894-Governor Feillet wants to “close the dirty tap water”

43min10 “Let’s just say that Mr Feillet arrived in July 1894 on the anniversary of the penal colony. He said this famous phrase “I want to close the dirty tap water, I am body and soul to the opening of clean tap water.” In other words, Mr Feillet wanted to develop a “free colonization” in the penal colony. He is opposed to transportee convoys from 1894. These will not cease until 1897. In this logic of contesting the penal colony, Mr Feillet will pay attention to rumors getting bigger and bigger regarding the “Camp Brun”. Following a campaign in the newspapers of Noumea, he would order a commission of inquiry in 1895 to the “Camp Brown”; this commission investigation will effectively result in the closure of the “Camp Brun”.

44min20: "This implementation of Mr. Feillet, came from the Minister in France which considered after reflection that the "Camp Brun" did not greatly serve the purposes that had been assigned to it at the start, so it was all of these elements which gradually made France consider that it was better to consolidate this penal activities to Guyana."

44min53: 1897-The Arrival of the last convoy of transportees. The penal colony progressively closes.

45min05: The last convoy that departed France was in 1896 and it arrived in 1897. It was, how can we say, it wasn't because it was the last convoy that the penal colony would come to an end. Why is that? Well, because, these people had been sentenced to 10 years of laboured work which meant they had to serve their full sentence. Hence why the framework that were necessary to their sentences were kept. So this progressive closure was led by the closure of the diverse centers in *Brousse* and then progressively and justly to the diminution of the activity that lead to where we are right now.

45min52: 1931- Several decrees decommission New Caledonia as the site for transportation, deportation and relegation.

46min02: "And we have to wait until 1931 for New Caledonia to be decommissioned as a penal colony. At that time, the last, older convicts who were left were to be regrouped to the older hospital of the penal colony which is now known as the "Serge Chess".

46min25 – Yesterday ..... Destroy the patrimony to forget History

"When the penal colony closed, some buildings had already been sold. The people did not see this as patrimony, they saw this in some way as pain and in other ways simply as a way to recuperate materials and build elsewhere."

47min12 " For generations, for a very long time, we tried to erase the footprints of the prison times until the generations of our parents and grandparents especially, we absolutely had to burn the archives, eliminate the footprints of these painful pages belonging to the History of New Caledonia. We are the first generation that accepts and tries to highlight this time in history."

47min38- Today, renewing the roots and value the patrimony of the penal colony.



47min45: “And so, we have tried to highlight in this building in the South Province, the aspects not necessarily negative or the punishments, the bodily abuse or anything related to the prison. On the contrary, the activities, the daily lives of these people and especially the realization, a lot of the buildings, most of the roads and harbors were built by these convicts.”

48min25: The areas where there were real highlights of the time which are Bourail, la Foa and Pouembout, stay now as a strong point of the New Caledonian shrubland, mainly around truck farming. The penal colonization helped set up agriculture which is important but we cannot forget the role in which the penal colonization played in terms of constructing buildings in Noumea. We are aware that most buildings in the capital city were built by the penitentiary administration, but there are a lot of infrastructures in the shrubland as a result of the convicts’ work.”

49min10: “I think that for the New Caledonians, it’s important to keep the footprints of this period of time, a little like what has been happening in Australia for several years where we are very proud to be descendants of the convicts of that time. I think that today, we as New Caledonians, we owe each other to rehabilitate and promote this somewhat painful and dark page of New Caledonia.

Translated by Alice Vittot