South Sea Slavery: Voices from the Dark

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SOUTH SEA SLAVERY - VOICES FROM THE DARK

The oral histories of South Sea Island slaves in last 19th-century Australia and why they are at odds with mainstream histories.

CONFERENCE PAPER

INTRODUCTION

The status of South Sea Island sugar cane labourers in 19th century Queensland has been hotly debated since the very beginning of the labour trade in 1863.

The official historical perspective is that Island labourers were indentured workers, recruited and contracted in their native lands, brought to Australia to work for three years and then returned to their islands. Though acknowledging that kidnappings were common in the early years of the labour trade, historians maintain that the labourers signed contracts and were paid, therefore negating the claims of Islander descendants that they were slaves.

There are many stories passed down by the Islanders through the generations of ancestors kidnapped, sold in chains and worked - sometimes to death - without pay. Some kidnapped Islanders were eventually paid, but often they had no say in their work or living conditions and were unable to withdraw their labour.

The changing nature of the labour trade over the second half of the 19th century, with genuine attempts to improve the lot of workers in a post-slavery British Empire, has lead to a complete denial by historians and politicians of the slavery conditions that did exist in certain years and in certain regions. This paper concerns itself with one particular slave history, written by an islander descendant and examines why that story is seen by historians as contentious.

A SLAVE’S STORY, AS TOLD BY HIS DAUGHTER

South Sea Islander descendant Faith Bandler wrote her father’s biography in 1977. Told as ‘a novel’, many details in Wacvie are fictionalised, which make it problematic as an historical document, but aspects of her story are well supported by other histories. Her
book is an angry testament to her father’s story, a father who died when Bandler herself was only five years old.

In the introduction to Wacvie Bandler writes, ‘[the] slave trade of Australia has never been included in school curricula. I have found that most Australians do not believe that slave labour was used to develop the sugar cane industry. Those who were enslaved did not have the opportunity to tell their story. The story has only been told by historians with a detachment from the thoughts and feelings of the people concerned.

‘This book is an attempt to convey those thoughts and feelings through the story of my father, who helped to break the chains that enslaved his people.... All other characters in this book are composites of real people but the main events are true.’ (Bandler, Wacvie, introduction, 1977, Rigby Limited)

PART 1 - ‘KIDNAPPED’ OR ‘RECRUITED’

13-year-old Wacvie Mussingkon was kidnapped in 1883, ‘from Craig Cove, a village on the coast of Ambrym Island in the New Hebrides’, now Vanuatu. Wacvie and the other islanders had seen other boats come into the cove, because traders had been trawling the islands for years, exchanging exotic items like beche de mer for the knives and axes and beads the islanders coveted. More recently however, their trade had been in men.

‘The last time they had come, [Wacvie] had observed that the strangers had long lengths of rope. After they had lured one of his brothers and other men of Biap towards their boat, they had thrown the rope over their heads and pulling them roughly aboard, had taken them away. Some of the older people were saying it would be for three moons and then his brother would come back. Now, three moons and more had come and gone, but his brother had not returned.’ (Wacvie, p14-5)

The story of men, women and children lured, chased or forced into the hold of the ‘recruiting’ vessels in this way are repeated by many local oral histories, both in the home islands and by labourer descendants in Australia.
Historians don’t deny that there was some kidnapping – called ‘blackbirding’ – in the first decade of the trade from 1865. Historian and Associate Professor of the University of Queensland, Clive Moore states however that ‘kidnapping is not a continuing theme as the recruiting trade progressed into the 1880s, 1890s and early 1900s: recruiting became a voluntary affair.’ (Kanaka, p46)

This would indicate that by the time Wacvie was taken in the early 1880s, this practice would have stopped. He also suggests that islanders would surely not have been naïve enough by the 1880s to have continued allowing themselves to be captured again and again from the same spot for 20 years. ‘Some undoubtedly went unwillingly, under pressure from relatives who coveted the recruiters’ gifts and the goods brought back by labourers from Queensland.’ (Kanaka, p59)

An extensive series of laws and acts began to be introduced from the 1880s, both to protect the South Sea Island labourers from exploitation and restrict their employment and movement during their contracted terms. One of the main reasons for these laws was a determination by the Queensland and later the Australian governments to prevent the workers becoming citizens, either through legal migration or by escaping their employers. By 1880, time-expired labourers were of particular concern because, ‘the Kanaka was not always engaged in employment but preferred to drift round the countryside or congregate in the large towns “making the weekend hideous with his drunken orgies”, as the Member for Maryborough complained.’ (Docker, Blackbirders, p 206-7)

A lot of legislative energy was also spent ensuring that recruitment was done appropriately. The practice of kidnapping South Sea Islanders was well known and plagued the labour trade from the beginning. Journalists, Islander missionaries, anti-Kanaka lobbyists and concerned British politicians all discussed the evils of the illegal acquisition of workers, known as blackbirding.

A Government Agent, appointed by Samuel Griffith to oversee recruitment, produced some startling remarks with regards to one recruitment vessel, the Heath. He had measured the vessel and found that its carrying capacity was ‘nowhere near the licensed 156, but more like about 80.’
On a recruitment voyage in May 1884, less than a year after Wacvie was taken from Vanuatu, 'Duffield reported to the local Immigration Agent that every one of the eighty-seven [recruits on board] had been illegally recruited. They had been induced to sign or put their marks to a form of agreement, he claimed, without the slightest attempt being made to tell them what they were signing and for how long they would be required to serve.' (Docker, Blackbirders, p195-6)

The 1880s were full of court cases in which recruiters were charged with kidnapping and illegal recruiting. Anti-Kanaka politicians and journalists made the most of the adverse publicity these scandalous trials brought, in order to end the labour trade and return the undesirable babourers home.

Commissioners investigating abuses in labour recruitment early in the 1880s felt that although there was little out-and-out kidnapping, they were highly critical of the 'patently dishonest' recruitment methods, like 'the pantomime of gesturing with the fingers to explain the condition of service. Three fingers held up were supposed to denote three yam seasons. But some of the islanders did not grow yams or even know what they were. Again, vague motions by the arms were thought to indicate the cutting or trashng of cane. to the islanders the only suggestion this conveyed was of those cheerful working-bees when groups of them would get together to slash the long grass. Nobody tried to explain to them what the cane-fields were actually like. They certainly did not know it was going to mean work, work, all day, until they were too tired to eat their pannikins of rice in the evening.’ (Docker, Blackbirders, p224)

Recruits were also pressured 'by their own bush chiefs or those professional killers or ramos as they were called, now beginning to flourish in the islands, since almost any man could gain the title simply by ownership of a good rifle. From killing in order to gain blood-money, it was obviously but a short step to blackmail and abduction. … One very sickly recruit explained to the health officer at Townsville how he had come to volunteer for Queensland in the first place: “Big chief blonga island [Malaita] blonga me tellem ‘You sick. You no good me. S’posem you go alonga ship. Me gettem axe. Me gettem ‘bacca. S’posem you no go, me killem you.’ (Docker, Blackbirders, p234)
There are also many stories of islanders, threatened with being 'returned' to a hostile neighbouring island, re-signing on the decks of the recruitment vessels rather than fall into the hands of a hostile neighbour, at a time when cannibalism was still practiced.

Thus there are clearly a number of ways in which a young South Sea Islander might find himself bundled into the hold of a recruitment vessel with little idea of where he was going and what was required of him. His pay, or lack of it, and the conditions he lived under for the next three years were completely and utterly beyond his control.

The Queensland government had decreed that all workers must sign contracts and that Government Agents travel on every recruitment vessel to check that this was done properly. It was not clear whether the terms of the contracts were well understood by the illiterate men and women who signed them. What is also not clear, is whether those who were kidnapped ever signed contracts, or indeed if they were paid for their labour at all.

PART 2 – ‘LABOURERS’ OR ‘SLAVES’

Clearly it would be difficult to argue that the particular brand of slavery practised in Queensland in the years after the 1833 abolition was of the straightforward variety practised in the New World in the preceding decades. It does not however, mean that slavery did not occur at all. Many islanders like Wacvie were kidnapped from their homes, taken in chains to a barely understood destination, sold for between £6 and £10 and forced to work in backbreaking conditions without the right to withdraw their labour. Experiences like these, especially if the Islander died before returning home, would surely be described as those of a slave.

Some descriptions in Wacvie could easily come from any slave account, ‘their bodies became cold. They began to cough and feel pain in their backs and legs. Sometimes their chests would ache. In the very wet season, many died.’ Later, Bandler writes, ‘Those who slackened were whipped. Any who were ill or too tired were beaten much more,’ and they were fed ‘saltless damper and stinking half-cooked meat.’ (Wacvie, pp45-50)
Claims of this sort are amply supported by other contemporary accounts and in the historical accounts of Moore. In January 1886 Assistant Inspector of Pacific Islanders, C.A. Forster, ‘wrote a scathing report on the low standard of food, clothing, health and general treatment, detailing cases of illegal employment and incorrect wage payments on a number of district plantations. The Inspectors and their assistants were at pains to apply the spirit rather than the barren letter of the regulations.’ (Moore, Kanaka, p137)

Moore goes on to quote William Archer, a ‘visitor to one of Mackay’s mills in 1876 who thought the scene reminiscent of hell:

Naked, sweating South Sea Islanders ... stand toiling with long spades and pitchforks in the reeking, sweltering vats up to their ankles in clammy sugar and molasses, like Dante’s demons in Malebolge. (W. Archer, Tourist to the Antipodes: William Archer, Australian Journey 1876-77. Edited by R.Stanley. (Brisbane, 1977), p.60, in Moore, Kanaka p144-5)

In these accounts of harsh conditions in these early years of the trade, there is scant evidence that could prove one way or another whether the kidnapped workers were ever contracted or paid in Australia. Such evidence would also indicate to what degree, if any, these particular labourers were enslaved.

Bandler says, ‘I don’t want historians, and I don’t want anthropologists telling me how my father got here and how he worked, because he told me and that is good enough. So he worked for nothing for years and years and years. It wasn’t indentured labour, he’d signed no papers, he was enslaved.’ (transcript of Faith Bandler, Robin Hughes interview, Australian Biography)

In Wacvie’s case, however, the story is not as straightforward as Bandler or historians would like. Her father Wacvie’s experience and status clearly changed as the labour trade evolved. Though he may not, as Bandler indicates, have been paid ‘for years and years and years’, he was eventually paid.

Moore encapsulates the arguments against Bandler’s view specifically and Islander claims in general.
'The round assertion that Melanesians were bought and sold as slaves is sometimes made today, and has been made from the beginning of the trade. Australian-born descendants of the original recruits support this myth.' (Kanaka pp 154)

Moore points his comments directly at Bandler, an influential Aboriginal and South Sea Islander activist. ‘ Seriously distorted notions about the wages paid to Melanesian labourers in Queensland are current in Australia today, not least among descendants of those Melanesians. Faith Bandler … has published a semi-fictional biography of her father’s life in Australia. Writing about Mackay in the 1880s and 1890s she gives the impression that some were not paid for their labour and those who were, never received more than six pounds a year.’ Moore concedes that, ‘There is no doubt that the stipulated wages were paid: it is also clear that what the law specified as the minimum wage was in reality the actual wage … unchanged for 40 years.’ (Moore, Kanaka, p170-1)

Australian historians are adamant that South Sea Island labourers were not slaves and at least part of the reason is that the majority of workers did receive wages of some sort. The islander descendants do not see the situation in the same way. They see their ancestors as blackbirded workers who, if they received any wages at all, were cheated.

A telling scene in Wacvie shows one of the Islander women, Emcon, who works as a domestic in the plantation owner’s house explaining the relative value of money. She tells how ‘the overseer would spread coins on the ground and tell the men that the bigger the coin, the greater its value. He lies, Emcon told them, explaining how the gold coins were of more value than the brown ones.’ (Wacvie, p36)

Moore notes that one ‘common oral tradition among Islanders in Queensland today is that when the original recruits were first faced with choosing between a paper bank note, a sovereign or a half crown piece they usually chose the half crown because it was biggest. Later they became more canny’. (Moore, Kanaka, p71)

If these stories are true, it would certainly indicate that recruiters and plantation owners were determined at the very least to
get the most out of their workers. It seems that if it included playing cruel tricks on their cultural innocence to get them to work for virtually nothing, so much the better. And yet for historians, this blatant deception still constitutes being paid under contract and is therefore a clear indication that the trade wasn’t slavery.

Many workers were encouraged to grow their own food and were even permitted to hunt. In this way, they cost the plantation owners a lot less in both food and wages. Others were not paid until they left Australia and were then encouraged to spend that money on goods to take home with them. Those that died before such time, and the mortality rates were significant, might truly be called slaves.

 Eventually, the Islanders were paid. In Wacvie, the Islanders’ first wages were greeted with suitable elation. ‘The shrieking whistle and droning bell were also an exchange of greetings between the field people and those of the mill. Over kilometres of tall sugar cane, they were communicating their joy: they had received their first wages!’ (Bandler, Wacvie, p105)

Though the Islanders may no longer technically have been slaves, there is certainly an explanation required as to how it is that Wacvie was receiving his first wages many years after he had first arrived in Queensland in chains.

There are also changes in behaviour of the owners and overseers that indicates a change in status of the workers. ‘Mrs Burns was often heard speaking of whipping, even though her husband’s friends frequently reminded her that ‘the good old days’ had gone. Nowadays when he left the house each morning, Mr Burns checked that all the rifles were loaded, warning his wife of the dangers of being touched by any of the black men. The old whips had been put under the house.’ (Bandler, Wacvie, p117-8)

Now that the workers are clearly being paid, they are able to put pressure on the plantation owners. ‘Russell Cameron had now lost several men to Austin Vale and had already requested Fox by letter to increase wages. Because the season had been a good one and the men’s handling of the new machinery was so successful that to lose more of them now would be disastrous, Fox agreed.’ A Wacvie himself
approaches Cameron and says, ‘It’s time for our people to be paid more money for their work.’ (Bandler, Wacvie, p111)

It seems that only now, somewhat after the bulk of them arrived, that the Islanders are actually being treated as workers. Whips are not used on workers, only on slaves. Wages can only be paid to the employed. Only a contracted labourer can attempt to negotiate higher wages. Clearly, there have been changes.

The Islanders now have choices. Many choose to resign contracts and can negotiate higher wages than new recruits, because of their experience and their ability to communicate. Some even succeed in leaving plantation work altogether. Some of them own stores and were being employed in other types of agriculture - ‘to clear land for dairying and banana farming. It had been said by some of the men from Santo that they were being paid very little money.

‘Wacvie knew that he could not ask for help from a workers’ union because they only protected the whites’ working conditions. ... He would go and see all the island people who were now living in [the Tweed] district and ask them to agree not to work for lower wages than whites.’ (Bandler, Wacvie, p135)

After the apparent success of the series of laws enacted during the 1880s to regulate the recruitment of workers, a new problem presented itself: local workers wanted jobs that 20 years earlier, they had scorned. Not only did unions protect only white workers, they wanted the use of South Sea Islander labour to cease altogether. Improved conditions for labourers, especially with the increase in farm mechanisation lead to one of the most momentous acts of legislation - ending the labour trade and deporting the workers.

Queensland Premier Samuel Griffiths vowed to end Kanaka labour once and for all. ‘The hard work has been done. The land clearing was the hardest work and that has been done. In the last few years there have been enormous technological advances, thanks to the ingenuity of the Queensland cane grower, and much of the work is mechanised. Queenslanders are ready and willing to work, but they rightly feel that they must be paid a decent wage for their labour, not the starvation wages the blacks are willing to work for. It’s time for us to end this slave trade.’ (source?)check Patricia Mercer
William Gray, a missionary on the island of Tanna wrote later of the Polynesian Labourers Act of 1868, ‘However good the traffic might be for Queensland the goodness claimed for it there could not compensate for the evils inseparable from it in the islands, yet I went to Queensland determined to keep my mind open to every possible fact in favour of the traffic. And having been to Queensland I would say now what I would not have said before I went ... namely, that the Kanaka Labour Trade is veiled slavery.’ (William Gray, The Kanaka and How the Queensland Planters etc., (Adelaide, E.S. Wigg and Son, 1895), p.3

Openly calling the labour trade ‘slavery’ was not at all uncommon in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There were many vehement detractors to what was known as ‘blackbirding’. Interestingly, those who most passionately spoke about the evils of the ‘slave trade’ were also anti-Kanaka and wanted the entire, sorry business to go away - meaning that they agitated for the South Sea Islanders to be deported.

The Honourable William Brookes Member, MLA for North Brisbane was even more direct in his criticism, saying that, ‘robbery, pillage, rapine, drunkenness, lust, murder, kidnapping,’ charges he levelled at the labour trade, were exceedingly hard to ‘regulate’, and that there was something dishonourable in even trying to ‘regulate’ such abominations’. (Reverend W. Osborne Lilley, Life of the Hon. William Brookes, in J.P.C. Sheppard, ‘The Pacific Islanders in Queensland 1863-1880’(BA thesis, University of Queensland, 1966), p.47)

Though he had no love for the Islanders, Brookes’ description of their plight is full of feeling and outrage for their treatment. ‘So it came to pass,’ Brookes told the Select Committee, in ______‘that citizens who were religious men; officers of churches; nay, even ministers of religion, saw no shame in availing themselves of the labour of poor helpless savages who had been inveigled from their native homes ... and bought by white men. Our newspapers contained advertisements that these injured helpless creatures could be bought on application to agents. They were carried by our steamers, not as passengers, but as freight, like horses, cattle, and sheep. They had a market price; were quoted at so much per head. Promissory notes were given for them, discountable by the banks. They were, in fact, merchandise.’ (source) same?
However, Moore considers that the missionaries and anti-Kanaka politicians’ use of the word slavery is misleading –

‘There is no doubt that they were not slaves... Statements describing Melanesians in Queensland as slaves, when not merely rhetorical, metaphorical, or simply careless, are based on the tacit assumption that free and slave are a simple dichotomy, with no intermediate terms, so that one not free is a slave. (Moore, Kanaka, p153)

It is interesting that support for the Islander’s claims that they were slaves is supported, not by pro-Kanaka activities and on humanitarian grounds, but by white workers determined to dismantle a system of slave labour they couldn’t hope to compete with. They wanted the competition eliminated.

Unions, with the support of politicians like Griffith, rode a wave of opinion that Australia should have racial unity, and were able to abolish the labour trade completely a mere six years after Federation. The first Prime Minister of Australia, Edmund Barton said simply, ‘if national existence is sacrificed to the working of a few mines and sugar plantations, it is not the Englishman in Australia alone, but the whole civilised world that will be the losers.’ The Bulletin was more explicit: ‘No nigger, no chinaman, no lascar, no kanaka, no purveyor of cheap coloured labour is an Australian.’

In 1901, when the Pacific Island Labourers Act, the first Act of Australian parliament was implemented, Alfred Deakin (acting PM?) insisted that ‘No slave is to be allowed to tread Australian soil at all. The mere suspicion of the taint of slavery is leading to the prohibition of the Pacific Island labourer.’ Paul Kelly, in 100 Years: the Australian Story remarks that ‘Australians would not tolerate cheap coloured labour. Australian society was to be white and based on wage justice. The sugar interests’ who still saw Kanaka labour as essential to their success, ‘were to be subjugated to the national vision.’ (source – Kelly, 100 Years: The Australian Story pp??)

Many Islanders, however, did not want to leave a land they had toiled on for so long. ‘Wacvie surprised himself that he should think of the
islands as home. The call of village life had faded; home was now here. In the solitude of the past he had recalled life on Ambrym, but over recent months his thoughts had been to make life more comfortable in Queensland. A better way of life and to be free of the planters!’ P113

Wacvie walked off the plantation in 1897 in a less-than-dramatic escape – he had become a trusted worker and was permitted to take a horse and sulky into town to run errands for Cameron. One day, he and Emcon stepped into the sulky and didn’t return.

Wacvie settled in Tumbulgum and married Ida, a woman of Scottish/Indian descent in the church they were building. He had become a Christian on the plantation many years before. ‘They built their house at the foot of the hills. Initially he worked cutting cane, but then decided to ‘start a banana farm. Clearing the land was hard work, but even then at the end of a long day, he would ride long distances to visit the men harvesting the sugar cane, making sure that they were eating well and being paid the wages due to them. His work for the people was recognised when the church they had built was dedicated to him. He would preach to them from the pulpit, always warning them of the ever-present danger of being exploited by white men, reminding them of their days in slavery and urging them to protect and preserve their independence.’ 143 He died in 1924.

The Immigration Restriction Bill and the Pacific Island Labourers Bill of 1901 entrenched what has subsequently been referred to as the White Australia Policy. It ended the use of Kanaka labour in the Queensland sugar industry and deported over 7000 of those workers still in Australia in the first decade of the 20th century. The deportations were carried out between 1904 and 1906. One islander was heard to call out as his ship left port, ‘Goodbye Queensland! Goodbye White Australia! Goodbye Christians!’ (source is Patricia Mercer – see high school book)

Today there are around 15 000 descendants of the Kanakas living in Australia.