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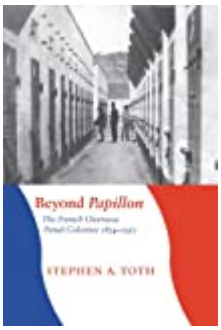

Stephen A. Toth. *Beyond Papillon: The French Overseas Penal Colonies, 1854-1952.* Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. xvii + 213 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-4449-8.

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French Guiana and New Caledonia: How Much of the Myth Was Reality?

The first thought that comes to mind upon reading this fascinating study of the penal settlements of French Guiana and New Caledonia (a narrower subject than the book title suggests) and of French official intentions in creating such settlements, is that the author must have been powerfully jolted, first by a viewing of the 1973 Franklin J. Schaffner film, *Papillon* (based on a 1970 book of the same title by escaped convict Henri Charriere) and second by a reading of Michel Foucault's *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (1975). The two experiences (one that was visual and emotional, and the other, intellectually provocative–particularly Foucault's argument that in the nineteenth century punishment in advanced societies shifted from the body to the mind, contradicted by the realities of the *bagne* in French Guiana and New Caledonia) seem to have pushed the author (currently an Assistant Professor at Arizona State University, West Campus) into writing his Indiana University Ph.D. dissertation on French overseas penal settlements with a very strong and possibly unwitting emphasis on French Guiana.

The result falls into a well-known genre, the myth-versus-reality study of a controversial subject. But this book is more multi-dimensional than that, for, in seven chapters, it evokes topically and chronologically a multiplicity of inter-related, complementary, and contradictory myths and realities via "a multilayered social and cultural analysis that focuses on the will of civil society and the will of those who actually lived and worked in the *bagne*" (p. xvi).

Stephen A. Toth's focus is clearly on French Guiana, where the penitentiaries operated from 1852 to 1952 (the last convicts arriving from France in 1937) and received around two-thirds of all French transportees (*forcats* and *relegues*), and secondarily on New Caledonia that received transportees for only thirty-three years. Other destinations, like Algeria (to which in 1849 some of the 12,000 June Day insurgents were exiled), are mentioned only in passing.

Although French Guiana was first claimed by France in 1604, as a possible staging point for an expedition to occupy "Eldorado, the mythical city of the Incas" (p. 10), its torrid climate and the prevalence of yellow fever made it unattractive as a settler colony. One reason for its se-

lection in 1852 as a site for penal settlements was the hope that this new role would stimulate its development. The decision may also have been influenced by the previous use of Guiana, between 1794 and 1805, as a place of political exile (something that Toth does not mention). When the French government declared New Caledonia a French possession in 1853, it was with the express intention of using it as a site for penal settlement, like those that existed (but were being phased out) in nearby Australia. Yet, the first prisoners did not arrive in New Caledonia until 1864.

The first chapter of the book, with its enigmatic title "Back to the Future: France and Penal Colonization," traces the origins of the decision taken by the French Second Empire to close the *galeres*Â¬ and *bagnes* that had existed in French ports since the Old Regime and to replace them with overseas penal establishments. Toth cites a provision of the Napoleonic Code of 1810 calling for overseas deportation for "political offenses" and mentions that Louisiana had been a destination for dissidents "during the revolution" (p. 1)–this is doubtful because Louisiana had been under Spanish *de jure* and, then, *de facto* rule between 1763 and 1803, before being sold to the United States. The author says nothing about the *transportes* sent to Canada before 1763.

In a rapidly sketched history of incarceration in France after 1815, Toth stresses the tension that would arise, and that still exists today, between the desire to punish and the desire to reform and to re-socialize criminals so as to reinsert them into civil society. Out of this unresolved dichotomy evolved provisions for the transportation of certain categories of criminals to French Guiana in 1852 (two years before an 1854 law officially created the *bagne* in this colony) and then to New Caledonia. Although the intention was to punish the criminals, it was also assumed that they would be regenerated by life and work in a far-off rural environment, and that their work would contribute strongly to the development of the two colonies.

The second chapter, "The Desire to Deport: The Recidivist of *Fin de SiÃ¨cle France*," explains how an increase in criminality in France at the end of the nineteenth century attributed to rapid industrialization, urbanization, and the expansion of the railway network gave rise to a mindset on the part of French criminologists and politicians leading them to believe that criminality was innate in certain classes of individuals. Thus, in order to protect society, these classes (identified in some cases as a specific race prone to criminality) were to be banished to peripheral areas. Again, the argument of regeneration through exposure to a rural environment was trundled out, along with the hope that "the recidivist would be an agent in the service of France's larger colonial project" (p. 34), even though incarceration abroad was also expected to serve as a punishment and deterrent to crime. Thus, the French parliament passed the 1885 Relegation Law whereby petty recidivists would be exiled as *relegues* to Guiana or to New Caledonia after serving their prison terms in France. In these colonies, they would occupy an intermediary position between the few free colonists in both places and the condemned criminals (*forcats*).

The discussion of the contradictions of theory and practice that predominates in this chapter dovetails into a description in chapter 3 of "Life in the Penal Colony: The View from Above and Below." Here Toth gives a description of daily life in the penitentiaries of Guiana, in particular, but also of New Caledonia, viewed from the vantage points of both guards and prisoners. Although Toth disparages the accuracy of the film, *Papillon*, the descriptions he provides in this chapter evoke scenes from it of an uncaring administration; sadistic guards; the brutalization of prisoners; the high prisoner death-rate, particularly in French Guiana; and prisoner adaptation and resistance, including the fashioning and use of the so-called "plan." This object was a metal tube about the size of a cigar case, used for storing such valuables as money and documents in one's anus. Apparently, the possession of such a device was essential for survival (p. 56). Foucault's theories notwithstanding, Toth concludes that "physical violence and punishment of the body was ever present" (p. 153) in the French penal establishments of Guiana and New Caledonia.

Although Toth gives a full description of the homosexuality that came to characterize much of the interaction among prisoners in both colonies, he leaves unanswered an intriguing question of whether the prison authorities ever provided prostitutes for any of the categories of prisoners and *relegues* in either colony. In Algeria, by contrast, the *compagnies disciplinaires* of the French Armee d'Afrique were permitted access to the *bordels militaries de campagne* (*BMC*) (military houses of prostitution).

Moving from an examination of the prisoners, the fourth chapter ("The Lords of Discipline: The French Penal Colony Service") examines the situation of the guards before and after an 1867 decree formed them into a kind of corps of overseas prison guards, to be recruited predominantly from former non-commissioned army and

navy personnel. Even after the constitution of the corps, the guards continued to be poorly trained, to have very limited career prospects, to be badly paid and housed, and, in some ways, to be hardly better off materially than the prisoners they guarded. Toth, indeed, concludes that the guards were never effectively professionalized (p. 150). And there seemed to be constant misunderstandings between the prison administrations and the specifically colonial administrations of both colonies.

The lack of cooperation among segments of the colonial bureaucracy and the prison administration is particularly illustrated in the fifth chapter, "The Battle over the *Bagnard*: Tropical Medicine in the *Bagne*," referring to the misunderstandings and conflicts that arose between the prison guards and the prison administration, on one hand, and the medical staffs of the prisons, on the other. Although in some cases, as Toth shows, the doctors might stand up to the prison administrators out of a wish to protect the health of prisoners, in other cases the struggles and quarrels were really over turf, the well-being of prisoners being of secondary importance even to the doctors. Then too, the prisoners learned how to exploit the doctors for their own benefit in order to obtain better food rations, less arduous work assignments, and the like. Toth's conclusion is negative: "The tropical environment of the *bagne* was not administered, managed, and controlled through the intervention of modern medicine; instead, it served as an institutional site of death and disease for those unfortunate enough to be within its confines" (p. 100).

Ironically, however, back in the metropole, as chapter 6 ("The Not-so-Fatal Shore: The Criminological Conception of the *Fin de SiÃ¨cle Bagne*") makes clear, while prisoners were being very badly treated, suffering greatly, and subject to a horrendous death rate, certain politicians, administrators, and criminologists began to complain that they were living comfortably in a tropical paradise and that neither French Guiana nor New Caledonia were fulfilling their roles as places of punishment and means of crime deterrence. The seemingly light duties and comfortable living arrangements available to certain prisoners, who managed to have themselves assigned as personal servants to local officials and well-off residents of both colonies, were highlighted. Also, the practice of assigning plots of agricultural land to certain prisoners, particularly in New Caledonia (even before their terms of imprisonment had ended, with the hope that these prisoners would be re-socialized by becoming successful farmers) caused bitterness among the promoters of free colonization, particularly when prisoner-settlers were granted subsidies and other forms of assistance that were more generous than what was granted to free colonists. The resulting controversies once again brought into sharp focus the contradictions between the ideal of rehabilitation and the perceived need to deter and to punish. It also revealed a destructive mindset: the envy syndrome of the Prodigal Son's elder brother. As the result of an 1888 inspection mission to New Caledonia, led by General Gustave Borgnis-Desbordes (Inspector-General of the Naval Artillery), and of another mission led in 1889-91 by Paul Dislere (a former Director of Colonies in the Ministry of the Navy), the French government promulgated decrees in 1889 and 1891 increasing the severity of the punitive regimes in both colonies, ending the practice of granting land concessions in New Caledonia to prisoners before their terms had been fully served, and vastly reducing the benefits provided to ex-convicts who might be granted land.

Chapter 7 (titled "The Bagne Obscura: Representational Crisis and the Twentieth Century"), however, informs the reader that although this get-tough stance would be favored in France at the start of the twentieth century by such popular press reporters as Jacques Dhur of *Le Journal*, a younger generation of investigative reporters writing for the same popular press would begin to report on the horrors of the *bagne*, albeit increasingly restricted to that of French Guiana. In the case of New Caledonia, the *bagne* was shut down between 1897 (the year transportation to this destination ended) and 1929, when the last prison guards were withdrawn. Stories circulating internationally that sensationalized the cases of prisoners who had been falsely accused and wrongfully convicted would touch sensitive nerves. In particular, the anti-establishment journalist, Albert Londres (of *Le Petit Parisien*) would paint French Guiana in the darkest of hues in a series of articles he wrote in 1923 and 1924. He described the waste of human life and money resulting from the attempt to construct a road suitable for motor traffic, *Route Coloniale* No. 1, intended to link Cayenne (the colonial capital) with St. Laurent du Maroni (the administrative center of the prison establishment).

In a later series of articles in 1927, Londres took up the case of Eugene Dieudonne, a falsely accused and condemned prisoner, who, after several attempts, managed to escape to Brazil. An earlier case that had already contributed to the blackening of the reputation of French Guiana was that of Captain Albert Dreyfus, falsely accused of espionage, who was confined for five years (1894-99) on Devil's Island. However, as Toth makes clear, Dreyfus lived in relative comfort in a small house as

the first *detenu* on this island that had initially served as a leper colony. "Dreyfus's suffering was one of complete and utter isolation" (p. 131).

Bad publicity from the Dreyfus, Dieudonne, and other cases contributed to the decision of the French government to end the practice of imprisoning metropolitan French citizens overseas. However, the exiling of high profile colonial dissidents to colonies other than their home colonies–like Abdel Krim of the Moroccan Rif, sent to Reunion Island (1926-47), and Sultan Mohammed I of Morocco, sent to Corsica and Madagascar (1953-55)–would continue.

Bad publicity notwithstanding, it was probably the desire to develop these two colonies rapidly and rationally, more than any consideration for the criminals themselves, that led to the demise of the *bagnes*, for it was obvious that prisoner labor had been very expensive, very inefficient, and a failure as a means of economic development. Moreover, as both colonies developed institutions of local government, their spokesmen increasingly called for the closure of the prisons. Such was the position taken by the Guyanese deputy, Gaston Monerville, as early as the 1930s. As Toth reiterates, the French government and the prison administrations never resolved the contradiction between the desire to rehabilitate the *bagnards* and to give them a new start in life and the desire to punish. But this contradiction continues to be prevalent in the criminal justice systems of many countries, particularly the United States.

Altogether, Professor Toth has achieved his aim of teasing out the layered contradictions of the components of civil society that were linked to the *bagne*. It seems to this reviewer that he has been so intent on developing intellectual constructs in a "mentalities" paradigm that he sometimes loses track of his empirical data. Toth jumps around from time period to time period, and back and forth (from colony to colony and from both to metropolitan France), sometimes confusing his reader. He devotes more attention to French Guiana than to New Caledonia, the latter sometimes appearing to be tagging along in a book that is really inspired by the former. But he also makes clear that New Caledonia was in no way intended or reserved for political prisoners (p. xii) or that French Guiana was reserved for hardened criminals and petty recidivists. Nevertheless, Toth must contend with the fact that the image of New Caledonia was strongly influenced by the presence of two very well-known groups of basically political prisoners: condemned former *Communards* (like Louise Michel) and Kabyle insurgents who had taken part in the 1871 Kabyle Rebellion in Algeria.

Probably because New Caledonia had a healthier climate than French Guiana and offered a pleasanter general environment for Europeans (and a correspondingly lower death rate), it had the better reputation of the two colonies (even though it would be much criticized by its Australian neighbors). Yet the majority of the prisoners in New Caledonia were common law *forcats* (p. xii), not political exiles, even though the distinction between the two categories of transportees (particularly in the cases of the former Communards and the Kabyle rebels) could be very fuzzy. By 1885, there were 9,997 prisoners (*forcats* and *relegues*) in New Caledonia, not counting the remaining *Communards* and Kabyles (p. 18).

In an apparent effort to avoid writing anecdotal history (possibly as a reaction to the sensationalism that characterized French Guiana resulting from the writings of Albert Londres and the enduring boost in the direction of sensationalism provided by the *Papillon* film), Toth apparently did not seize the chance (when doing the research for this study) to really check out the accuracy (that he nevertheless doubts) of the film, specifically the role of Papillon (Henri Charriere) himself, both as recounted in the book and portrayed in the film. Surely the "daily reports, internal memoranda, and administrative correspondence" that Toth consulted at the Centre des Archives d'Outre Mer in Aix-en-Provence would have permitted him to learn, at least, the official side of Charriere's story. Nevertheless, Toth corroborates many of the harsh details of daily life in the *bagne* as they were represented in the film and the book.

Professor Toth has left a number of questions unanswered. For instance, if, as he reports, the Dutch in Surinam "did not have a strict extradition policy" regarding escaped prisoners, why did the French authorities place their main prison administration center at St. Laurent du Maroni, on the river serving as the border between Dutch Surinam and French Guiana (p. 57)? One would think that such close proximity to what appears to have been an obvious escape venue would be an invitation to escape. Or was the Maroni River filled with piranhas and the tropical forest on the Dutch side impenetrable? One can ask a similar question about the placing of the prison centers of Montagne d'Argent and St. Georges d'Oyapock on the Oyapock River, opposite Brazil. Toth offers few explanations. Indeed, his knowledge of the geography of French Guiana is a bit vague.

Also unclear in regard to escapes from French Guiana is the question of the direct correspondence, that Toth

evokes, between the French prison authorities in Guiana and diplomatic officials in Brazil, Surinam, the Netherlands, and Venezuela about escaped prisoners. Toth suggests that the usual diplomatic protocols requiring that such correspondence be routed through the respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs in the metropolitan capitals to the local officials via their respective ministries were ignored. Did special diplomatic conventions hold sway in regard to correspondence about escapees from French overseas prisons?

The knowledge one gains of the French carceral project in Guiana and New Caledonia from reading this book evokes in the mind of this reviewer the words of the poet, Robert Burns: "The best laid schemes o' mice and men Gang aft a-gley."[1] The same could be said of the book itself. One hopes, however, that Professor Toth will stick with the subject of French overseas incarceration, developing it into the sort of comprehensive study that used to go by the name, *doctorat d'etat*, in French universities, that is, the book in the field that leaves no stone unturned. The subject merits such treatment.

Note

[1]. Lines 39 and 40 of Robert Burns, "To a Mouse: On Turning Her up in Her Nest with the Plow, November 1785", in *Elements of Literature: Literature of Britain* (New York: Holt, Rinehart , and Winston, Inc., 1989), 615.