

Church and Commerce in New Caledonia

*Ballande and the Bishops, 1885-1935**

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IN 1921, T. D. DUNLOP, THE BRITISH CONSUL IN NOUMEA, WROTE:

The most imposing building in the town is the Roman Catholic Cathedral, a fine stone building constructed by convict labour, a significant indication of the influence of the Church in the affairs of the island, an influence only rivalled by the firm of Ballande & fils, whose Manager in Noumea (M. Laroque) is familiarly called the Governor of New Caledonia.¹

He was right about the large influence of both the Church and the House of Ballande on the course of New Caledonian affairs throughout the history of the colony, but had he known that Ballande had subsidised the construction of the building and continued to equip and maintain it, the symbolism of the towering cathedral would have been even more significant to him. The nature of the connection between the Church and this large firm has always been shadowy. Contemporary anti-clerical literature abounded with innuendo that their unholy alliance was purely mercenary, but these polemics were always long on passion and short on evidence.

Indeed evidence of this nature is hard to come by. For a hundred years or more, critics of colonialism have seen the Church and capitalism as allies; others have argued that the Church has played a role in mitigating the harsh social effects that followed colonial development. Lack of evidence documenting the precise connections often prevents the debate going any further than such generalisations. Mission memoirs abound, but they generally do not speak of their dealings with business houses, whereas the latter have been slow to release their papers to the scrutiny of historians. While the Ballande papers have not yet been made available to scholars, we fortunately now have access to the records of the Catholic Church in Noumea which include a frank and detailed correspondence from André Ballande, head of the business house for 55 years, to the bishop of New Caledonia.² Although, with the exception of about 20 letters, only the merchant's side of the correspondence is present in the Church collection, it

* This is a preliminary study of the subject which the authors hope to expand into a monograph. We wish to thank Dr S. Henningham, Dr J.B. Shineberg, and the editorial board of *The Journal of Pacific History* for comments on the draft which helped to improve this article.

¹ T.D. Dunlop, British Consul in Noumea, report to the Foreign Office, 1921, Great Britain, Foreign Office, General Correspondence, Political, F.O. 371/6996/6729.

² The correspondence, and other relevant material, is at Noumea, in the Archives of the Archdiocese (hereinafter AAN). Outward letters are drafts or copies. All quotations are translated from the French by D.S.

reveals a good deal about the relationship between them and the influence they both enjoyed. When read in conjunction with other material available (official records, contemporary newspapers, memoirs and the like), it provides an extremely valuable insight into a crucial period of New Caledonian history. This paper argues that, at least in relation to the house of Ballande, the case for co-operation between Church and commerce is well supported, but the material also brings to light important differences between them. These differences were sometimes based on a divergence of interest at a structural level, but were affected by moral and personal factors as well. On the other hand, the position that the Church exercised a restraining influence would, on the basis of this material, be more difficult to sustain.

The Pacific connection of the house of Ballande, a firm of Bordeaux wine merchants, was established by Armand-Louis Ballande in the middle of the 19th century.³ As he gradually became more interested in his shipping business, the Pacific trade became his particular preoccupation, especially after the French colonisation of the Marquesas, Tahiti and New Caledonia in the 1840s and 50s. This interest was inherited, in 1882, by his son André who passionately shared his father's enthusiasm for shipping. Imbued with intense religious and patriotic fervour, the young Ballande felt that his shipping interest providentially placed him in a position to spread both the gospel and the glory of France in the new world of the Pacific Islands. Soon he was also to become involved in mining and agricultural interests in the colony of New Caledonia, in the copra trade of Vanuatu (then the New Hebrides), in labour trading from Melanesia, Vietnam, and Indonesia and, most visibly, in the large chain of retail outlets in all the territories under French influence in Oceania. New Caledonia became, and remained, his headquarters for a vast commercial empire in the Pacific. To this day, Ballande Establishments is a significant presence in the three French territories and Vanuatu.

André Ballande visited New Caledonia for the first time in 1884, at the age of 26. There he met Bishop Fraysse, who made a profound impression upon him. A strong friendship sprang up from this encounter resulting in an animated correspondence between them when Ballande returned to France. After the death of Fraysse in 1905, Ballande continued to write to his successor, Bishop Chanrion, albeit on a less personal note, for his business and Church affairs were now inseparable.

There was firm ground on which to base a coalition of interests. To André Ballande, a close bond with the bishop held attractions at every level. He recognised that Fraysse was a father figure to him, even worrying about whether the

³ Patrick O'Reilly, *Calédoniens*, 2nd edn (Paris 1980), 17.

affection he felt for him was compatible with the religious duty he owed him.⁴ He referred to the bishop as 'my mentor',⁵ seeking his advice on every aspect of his life. His religious faith was profound, but so was his business sense: the intimate correspondence with the bishop enabled the absentee merchant to tap into a disinterested source of local information. One knows less about the personal feelings of the bishop towards Ballande, but in a practical sense the mission also gained from the association. In the first place, Ballande gave generously to the Church. Not only did large gifts of his money arrive from time to time for masses to be said for his family and to support particular good works, but a levy on his profits from specific ventures was regularly paid to the bishop's account. Even in difficult times he was conscientious about his 'tithes' for as long as he was able to be.⁶ It was his ships that transported missionaries and their supplies and, as mentioned before, it was his secret largesse that had helped to build and maintain the cathedral.⁷ He was, of course, not the only capitalist who donated money to the Church. John Higginson, for example, also gave money for the cathedral, and the Church records also show that the Société Le Nickel gave money to help erect a church at Thio, the main sphere of its operations. But Ballande was by far the greatest and most regular contributor to the mission coffers. He took on, as well, the role of the mission's lobbyist in France, a voice particularly needed around the turn of the century at a time of militant anti-clericalism.⁸

The evidence is so abundant for a close co-operation between the two parties on a wide range of issues that it would be impossible to cover all of it, even superficially, within the scope of this paper. In order to document the argument outlined above, we will briefly refer to some areas where Ballande and the bishops worked together without problem, as well as to some matters of difference between them. Finally we will treat in more detail the question of the trade in cheap foreign labour, partly because it was considered by André Ballande himself to be the backbone of his business and partly because it bears on the argument concerning the Church's role as a moderating influence in social affairs.

An important service rendered by each party to the other was the supply of useful information and support from the opposite side of the globe. In New

⁴ André Ballande to Mgr Hilarion Fraysse, 1 Aug. 1894, AAN. He speaks of the consolation of Fraysse's personal friendship for him 'deprived of a mother at 9 years and a father at 24' — *ibid.*

⁵ Ballande to Fraysse, 4 Aug. 1902, AAN.

⁶ Throughout the correspondence there are continual references to cheques, special gifts and tithes from Ballande to be paid into the episcopal account, sometimes specifying the amount and sometimes not. Letters between Apr. and Oct. 1930 speak of his distress at not being able to continue to finance good works for the Church, but he resumed his payments with a large cheque in Apr. 1931.

⁷ Ballande to Fraysse, 9 Apr. 1885, 21 Mar. 1889, AAN.

⁸ Alain Saussol, 'La Mission Mariste et la colonisation européenne en Nouvelle-Calédonie', *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 25(1969), 118. T. Zeldin, *France 1848-1945* (Oxford, 1977), II: 3, ch. 20.

Caledonia, what Ballande spoke of to Fraysse as 'your knowledge of the country and the people'⁹ was a precious business commodity from an uncompetitive source. In a place where the transience of the population was notorious, the continuity of the mission personnel was unusual. During the 50 years spanned by this correspondence (1885–1935) there were only two episcopates in New Caledonia, that of Bishop Fraysse (1880–1905) and Bishop Chanrion (1905–1937). Moreover both men had spent several years in the colony before succeeding to this office. Fraysse, and after him Chanrion, were to become Ballande's eyes and ears in the colony, sending him reports on the behaviour of his agents (and even their wives!). In turn the agents were instructed not to appoint anyone without first consulting the bishop.¹⁰ Ballande relied on Fraysse and Chanrion, as well, to point out opportunities and dangers in various commercial enterprises. In 1894 he proposed that Fraysse should get his own man on to the Board of the company so that he might warn the bishop of any impending measures likely to be disastrous to Ballande Establishments. He pointed out:

It mustn't be forgotten that with the powers they possess, my agents hold all my fortune, more than my fortune, in their hands; should they get together, for example, to sell up to Australians, discount the bills given in payment and clear off to America to share up the loot, all I could do would be to beat my breast.¹¹

For his part, Ballande agreed to stand for the Chamber of Deputies in Paris, the better to promote the viewpoint of the mission,¹² then (1901) involved in bitter conflict with the colonial administration in New Caledonia, while in addition its property was being endangered by proposed measures in France to disestablish the Church. Ballande was duly elected for one of the circumscriptions of Bordeaux, joining the Chamber at the high point of hostility to the established Church under the government of Combes, which was to complete the separation of Church and state in 1905. He held his seat until 1924. To the bishop he referred to himself as 'your deputy'.¹³ Yet while stoutly defending mission and Church interests in the Chamber, he displayed moderation and pragmatism by refusing to take the line of anti-republicanism preached by the new pope, Pius X, in spite of Fraysse's advice that he should follow it obediently.¹⁴

On the local political scene in the colony there was a close collaboration between merchant and bishop. Ballande had begun by wishing to keep out of New Caledonian politics, but when his business began to depend more and more

⁹ Ballande to Fraysse, 25 Sept. 1890, AAN.

¹⁰ Ballande to Fraysse, 29 Apr. 1892, 28 Apr. 1894, 25 Sept. 1890, AAN.

¹¹ Ballande to Fraysse, 2 Apr. 1894, AAN.

¹² Ballande to Fraysse, 29 Dec. 1901, 20 June 1902, 4 Aug. 1902, AAN.

¹³ Ballande to Fraysse, 4 Aug. 1902, AAN.

¹⁴ Ballande believed (along with the previous pope, Leo XIII) that the Church had to come to terms with the realities of French national politics, and that it would simply lose all influence if it adopted an *ultra* stance. After tactfully expounding his position to Fraysse in several letters, he finally exclaimed 'Count the number of electors who go to Mass!': Ballande to Fraysse, 3 Sept. 1904, AAN.

on government decisions he saw the need for some political protection, if not pressure. As he said, a voice in the local assembly, the Council-General, was important because 'There are always concessions and compensations that are not granted to absentees or outsiders'.¹⁵ 'Their' candidate in the Council-General was eventually agreed upon between them by coded telegram.¹⁶ They put up Gabriel Laroque, Ballande's principal manager and a conforming Catholic. He was elected and continually re-elected until 1925, when he declined to stand on the grounds that his business interests now required too many voyages away from the colony.¹⁷ For nearly 30 years he faithfully defended the interests of both the House of Ballande and the Catholic mission in the local assembly, earning the reputation for heading the forces of conservatism that is implied in the remark of the British consul quoted at the beginning.¹⁸ Gabriel Laroque was followed into the Council-General by several other Ballande/Church representatives, the British consul noting in 1922 that they formed 'an ample majority'¹⁹ in the assembly.

A scheme to control a local newspaper to serve their interests fell through, but it is worth a brief mention for the light it throws on the co-operation of Church and company. This time the move was initiated by Fraysse. The bishop asked Ballande to acquire a controlling interest in *La Calédonie*, at the time outrageously anti-clerical and supportive of his arch-enemy, Governor Feillet.²⁰ His plan was to use the services of a local functionary, Léon Gauharou, who had risen to become the Director of the Interior but had been demoted by Feillet on charges of corruption. After much correspondence, a double plot was hatched not only to make Gauharou the editor of *La Calédonie* but also to stand him as an 'independent' candidate for the Council-General. Ballande played with the proposal for some time, musing that 'with a newspaper one can appoint councillors-general',²¹ but finally pulled out, partly for reasons of excessive cost in relation to perceived benefit and partly because he had a fair idea that Gauharou was not just a victimised Catholic as the bishop had imagined, but indeed a corrupt official as the Governor maintained.²²

¹⁵ Ballande to Fraysse, 29 July 1896, AAN.

¹⁶ Ballande to Fraysse, 8 Oct. 1896, AAN.

¹⁷ *Bulletin du Commerce* (Noumea), 21 Jan. 1925.

¹⁸ This reputation, minus the religious component, was inherited by his son Roger, Mayor of Noumea 1956-85, along with the directorship of Ballande Establishments, and kept to his death in 1985.

¹⁹ Report of the British Consul, Noumea, to the British Ambassador, Paris, 30 Jan. 1922: copy in typescript, Dept of External Affairs, Correspondence Files, Alphabetical Series, 1901-1943, New Caledonia, Canberra, Australian Archives, CRS A981 Item, New Caledonia 1921-1926, part 1.

²⁰ The bishop's side of this correspondence is not extant; his request is implied in the following replies from Ballande: Ballande to Fraysse, 5 June 1896, 20 June 1896, 18 July 1896, 29 July 1896, AAN.

²¹ Ballande to Fraysse, 29 July 1896, AAN.

²² Ballande to Fraysse, 25 Oct. 1896, 16 Dec. 1896, AAN. After much tactful comment, Ballande revealed that the story of Gauharou being on the payroll of Higginson and Hanckar accorded with his own information: Ballande to Fraysse, 18 Feb. 1897, AAN. One must make the wry comment here that Ballande had been considering putting him on his *own* payroll, not it is true while he was Director of the Interior, but while he was a putative 'independent' general councillor.

The interests of Ballande and the Church coalesced quite naturally in the expansion of the Church and commerce in the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu). The mission to the New Hebrides had already received the strong support of John Higginson, founder of the Caledonian Company of the New Hebrides (C.C.N.H.), who was not a Catholic, in the hope that the establishment of French missionaries there would bring French annexation in its wake. Ballande earnestly hoped that Catholic Christianity would be extended in the archipelago at the expense of Protestantism, but not only for religious reasons. He believed without question the complaints of the French settlers, transmitted via Laroque, that British Protestant missionaries and teachers in the islands were agents of British influence and were preventing the native population from signing on to work for French employers there or in New Caledonia. All of Ballande's strongest impulses were served by the extension of French control over the archipelago; his ardour for the spread of the true faith and the extirpation of Protestant heresy, his patriotism, in the struggle to diminish British influence and to preempt what were believed to be British plans to annex the group, and, of course, the business imperative to expand his commercial empire. Laroque was active in establishing the Ballande network in the New Hebrides, buying out the land holdings of an English settler in the Banks and Torres Islands,²³ and eventually setting up a network of trading stations throughout the group. Ballande was a natural ally in the new campaign of Catholic missionising in the group. One of the services he rendered was to lobby the Minister in Paris to subsidise the New Hebrides missionary venture, and he was able to report success in 1900, when the government offered 12,000 francs a year for the installation of six new missionaries there.²⁴ One letter on this subject reveals that Ballande hoped that the shipping service to the group would be entrusted to his company, 'to the advantage of everyone'.²⁵

But on a few issues Ballande and the bishops were sharply divided. The most important of these was the 'native question', which in fact revolved around the imposition by the colonial government of a head tax to be paid by the indigenous population. As elsewhere in the colonial world, the tax had the double purpose of producing revenue and forcing the people to work for Europeans in order to acquire the necessary cash. Ballande espoused the bourgeois orthodoxy of his day that the native population had to be forced to work for its own good, for

²³ As creditor for the Compagnie Calédonienne des Nouvelles-Hébrides (CCNH) and for the English settler Ford, Ballande succeeded to 4,800 hectares in the Banks and Torres Islands, two parcels in Ureparapara, one in Vanua Lava and one in Gaua. — Report of Chauillac, commander of the French warship *Le Scouff*, to Minister of Navy, 22 Aug. 1893, Aix-en-Provence, Archives Nationales, Section Outre-Mer, New Hebrides A1(2).

²⁴ Ballande to Fraysse, 21 Mar. 1900, AAN. His news in the next year was more equivocal, but it seemed that the payment at least for the missionaries was to be maintained. Ballande to Fraysse, 29 Nov. 1901, AAN.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

without acquiring good habits of labour the race would degenerate and die out.²⁶

The episcopal view was that while regular work was indeed a virtue, the kanaks should be encouraged to work on their own reserves, under the paternal eye of their missionaries, as in the Gambier Islands and in Wallis and Futuna.²⁷ Although the discussion was expressed, politely, in the appropriate ideological terms, there was little possibility of a resolution since the issue partly reflected a structural division of interests: as commonly seen elsewhere in the colonial world, Church and commerce were to some degree in competition for the limited pool of cheap local labour. The mission had a number of other concerns, but the fact remained that an exodus from the villages of the able-bodied men, on whom it depended for building, surplus food production and the supply of future catechists, severely diminished its resources and influence.²⁸

On the question of the head tax, the Church had an opportunity to influence the course of events by championing the cause of kanaks oppressed by the tax. Indeed, it was accused of inciting local chiefs to refuse to pay, a claim which it denied.²⁹ Bishop Chanrion, however, diligently memorialised the government on the 'native question' through the medium of Ballande, who faithfully conveyed the documents but with diminishing degrees of enthusiasm. He agreed with the view of the mission when it criticised the administration for abuses in the collection of the tax and in the employment of indigenous labour; his sense of fairness revolted against the application of the tax exclusively to those least able to pay, the Melanesians. He went so far as to alert the Natives' Defence Committee³⁰ that the colonial administration hoped to balance the budget for 1899 by means of a 15% surcharge levied on Melanesians alone; 10 years later he brought the matter of the surcharge to the attention of the Minister in Paris.³¹ But from the beginning he made plain his own view that the kanaks should

²⁶ Beginning with the popular neo-Darwinian theory that 'primitive' populations were doomed to extinction upon coming into contact with 'more advanced' societies, by the law of the survival of the fittest, colonial capitalists produced the curious rider that hard work (in the employ of Europeans) could somehow save them from this fate. Ballande expressed this sentiment several times (see, e.g., Ballande to Chanrion, 22 Oct. 1928). He also added a theological justification — that the Creator intended the development of his creation, in which task, so far, the Melanesians were failing: Ballande to Chanrion, 1 Aug. 1928, AAN.

²⁷ Ballande to Chanrion 1 Aug. 1928, 25 Apr. 1928, AAN. Space does not permit an analysis of the long and interesting argument conducted on this question in the correspondence. The 'native question' had been raised with Fraysse as early as 1899, but it is in the correspondence between Ballande and Chanrion between 1925 and 1929 that it is fully aired.

²⁸ A point often made by their opponents; viz, *Commission d'Enquête nommée à l'occasion des troubles de Wagap, Ina et Tiéti* (Noumea 1900), passim: see, e.g., p 23 and p 36; on this point see also A. Saussol, *Héritage* (Paris 1979), 276.

²⁹ *Commission d'Enquête . . . Wagap*, 18–20, 27, 33. However, it would seem that the position of some of the missionaries in the field supported passive resistance in the case of Melanesians who had not themselves been paid for their work for settlers and the Administration: *ibid.*, passim.

³⁰ 'Comité de défense des indigènes' — roughly equivalent to the British Aborigines' Protection Society.

³¹ Ballande to 'Mon révérend père' (recipient unknown), 7 Feb. 1899, Ballande to Chanrion, 13 Dec. 1909, AAN.

nevertheless be made to work under European control; left to themselves, they would just 'vegetate' and probably fade away.³² Neither party gave an inch in the letters expounding these arguments. By 1928, Ballande was still agreeing, somewhat reluctantly, to put the mission case in Paris, writing: 'This done, are you under the impression that the kanaks are sufficiently obedient to the law of work to which the Whites are subject?'³³ Nearly two years on, he more or less politely refused even to pass on the dossiers he was sent on this matter.³⁴ Without the support of the affluent Catholic laity and unable to form common cause with the humanitarian movement which, in France, by contrast with England, was led by anti-clerical forces, mission opposition to the head tax was unsuccessful.

Ballande's most distressing difference with Fraysse concerned the bishop's personal clash with Governor Feillet, the apostle of 'free colonisation', in the last years of the 19th century. The merchant's role here was essentially one of conciliator. At stake was, on the one hand, the extreme dependence of his business on the favour of the administration in a time of economic depression, and, on the other, not only his sympathy for the bishop, but also a real threat that Feillet might succeed in having Fraysse replaced. The feud between Governor and bishop seems not to have been based on a divergence of interest. Although Feillet saw the hand of the Church behind kanak resistance to the appropriation of their lands, on the authority of Fraysse himself his difference with Feillet over land alienation was a question of means rather than ends, consultation with himself, in his view, being one of the most important prerequisites to government action. He was not opposed to the kanaks giving up land to the new settlers introduced by Feillet. As he explained, at the end of 1896, he was in favour of 'free colonisation':

I even think that one could take considerable areas from the native reserves. If M. Feillet had held to the agreement reached with me . . . to interfere with the mission natives only after consulting me, he would have achieved his ends even in this regard without a hitch. All you have to do is to respect the large native villages and a few parcels of land they hold in special regard. With a little condescension one might have also obtained concessions of this sort from the pagans.³⁵

To the great relief of Ballande, the Governor was unable to effect the removal of Fraysse, although he did succeed in installing the Protestant mission on the mainland by way of revenge. The feud between the bishop and the Governor ended only with the ill-health and death of the latter in 1903. For all the genuine con-

³² Ballande to Chanrion, 22 Oct. 1928, 6 Aug. 1928, AAN.

³³ Ballande to Chanrion, 10 Jan. 1928, AAN.

³⁴ 'Unfortunately I do not see, for the moment, to what use I can put your documentation' — Ballande to Chanrion, 4 Nov. 1929, AAN.

³⁵ Fraysse to Ballande, 24 Dec. 1896; see also Fraysse to Ballande, 28 Aug. 1897, AAN.

cern to save his friend from futile trouble, Ballande also had his own interest in Feillet's colonisation policy to defend. As he pointed out to Fraysse, given the depression in mining in the second half of the 1890s, 'Since I can no longer count on the mines I can see nothing but the peopling of the country [*le peuplement*] by way of compensation'.³⁶ Having invested a fortune in ships, he had to keep them in profitable employment. As Robert Towns and Burns Philp had found, contracted passengers, like contracted mail runs, gave some security to the expensive business of equipping ships, and a base from which speculation on more risky but more profitable cargoes could be attempted. Bringing in settlers and, of course, the supplies they needed, promised to be all the more important in New Caledonia after the decline of business that was bound to follow the cessation of penal transportation in 1897.

Ballande's important traffic in the movement of people extended throughout the whole of the 50 years of his correspondence with the mission. As well as free settlers, he imported various kinds of indentured labour: Melanesians, from Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, 'Tonkinese' and 'Annamites' (Vietnamese), 'Javanese' (Indonesians), and Japanese. The people trade became a mainstay of his commercial network, with interlocking benefits. Contracted passengers secured his shipping capital, and the labour trade also enabled him to become a broker in cheap labour to employers in the colony as well as ensuring a labour supply for his own enterprises. All emigrants, free or indentured, became consumers of his imported food, wines and other goods. Rice sold to employers for their workers came from Saigon on the same ships as the workers themselves, along with clothing, 'annamite hats', 'annamite pipes', tobacco and other goods for issue by employers or for sale in trade stores.³⁷ As a business, '*le peuplement*' had cumulative as well as stabilising benefits for his affairs. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that although he confessed to qualms of conscience over his labour trade, he never wavered from pursuing it with all the considerable energy of which he was capable. To ensure its success he enlisted the help of the Governor, the bishop, and his favourite saint, St Antony of Padua. As we shall see, all of them co-operated admirably to overcome the obstacles.

The mission's independent interest in the importation and conditions of foreign workers was not so clear. Bishop Fraysse's Christian concerns seemed to have run along fairly narrow lines and to have been confined to the Catholics among the Vietnamese imported labourers. He wanted them to be placed near churches, where possible, and he wanted a clause in their contracts which freed them from work on Sundays to allow them to attend mass.³⁸ Ballande readily

³⁶ Ballande to Fraysse, 7 July 1897, AAN.

³⁷ Cargo manifests of his coolie ships published in local newspapers; see, e.g., that of the *St Francois Xavier*, bringing 'annamite coolies' to New Caledonia and Tahiti. *Bulletin du Commerce* (Noumea), 20 Oct. 1925.

³⁸ Fraysse to Ballande, 22 July 1895, AAN.

complied with these requests:³⁹ he was delighted to have Fraysse's approval at so little cost: 'I approve whole-heartedly of the conditions to be introduced into the contract of Catholic Tonkinese.⁴⁰ He agreed as well to have his agent at Haiphong recruit Catholics for preference, with the above provisos in the contract to encourage religious observance.⁴¹ But the Church also became involved in the financial benefits of both the importation and employment of cheap indentured labour, as we shall see.

Ballande began, like other labour traders, with the import of New Hebrideans (ni-Vanuatu) as indentured labourers to New Caledonia. In 1884, a Ballande ship, the *Ferdinand de Lesseps*, was the subject of a 'kidnapping' inquiry, the same year as a Burns Philp vessel in the Queensland labour trade. James Burns, perhaps influenced by the views of his influential customer, the Presbyterian mission, decided that the profits were not worth the scandal, and retired from the 'kanaka' trade. Less close to the scene, Ballande withstood the press attacks on him as a 'trader in human flesh': he continued his trade in cheap, servile labour, the most sought-after commodity in New Caledonia, in spite of having more bad reports on his recruiting ship, the *Marie*, in 1889 and 1890.⁴²

In 1890-1, he pioneered the introduction of Vietnamese⁴³ indentured labourers in concert with a settler, Evenor de Greslan, who had conceived the notion of bringing prisoners from French Indo-China to serve their terms of hard labour as *engagés* in New Caledonia. The proposal was put to Ballande who agreed to carry out the venture. When his steamer arrived in Haiphong, the ship's recruiter was offered his choice of the inmates of Poulo Condore Island jail,⁴⁴ so there were virtually no recruiting costs. In March 1891 the ship arrived in Noumea with a sad cargo of 750 prisoners, with terms of up to 20 years to work off, plus 41 'free' recruits, which number included 20 women who engaged in order to be able to accompany their prisoner husbands.⁴⁵

The experiment was very profitable and seemed to offer a solution to the colony's chronic shortage of labour. Ballande therefore decided to continue to

³⁹ Ballande to Fraysse, 2 Sept. 1895, AAN. His 1895 contract had stated that labourers would work on Sundays till nine in the morning — 'Specimen livret' for 'Tonkinese' indentured to Ballande, Great Britain, Western Pacific High Commission, Inwards Correspondence (hereinafter WPHC), 1897/221. Domestic and farm workers could, as stipulated in the *arrêté* of 26 Mar. 1874, be asked to do more if their labour were deemed indispensable on Sunday.

⁴⁰ Ballande to Fraysse, 2 Sept. 1895, AAN.

⁴¹ Ballande to Fraysse, 6 Sept. 1895, AAN.

⁴² Cf Bigant (*La Saône*) to Ct Division Navale, 12 Oct. 1889, Bigant to Ministre de la Marine, 15 Sept. 1890, Bigant to Ministre de la Marine, 14 Nov. 1890 — BB4/1896, Paris, Archives de la Marine; Capt. Davies to Commander-in-chief, 6 Nov. 1890, WPHC 359/90, Case 49, Records of the Royal Navy Australia Station, 102/92.

⁴³ Various called 'Annamites' and 'Tonkinese', regardless, it seems, of the region from which they came. For this reason they will be referred to in the text as 'Vietnamese', since present-day Vietnam covers the regions of French Indo-China from which they were drawn. There were no Cambodians or Laotians among the migrant workers as far as is known.

⁴⁴ *France Australe* (Noumea), 8 Nov. 1890; P. O'Reilly, 'Evenor de Greslan', *Calédoniens*, 2nd edn (Paris 1980).

⁴⁵ *L'Avenir* (Noumea), 14 Mar. 1891.

recruit labour among free Vietnamese, but that proved to be quite difficult at first. Powerful settler interests in Indo-China opposed the diminution of their pool of cheap labour,⁴⁶ and he could not, for some time, even get a hearing from the Minister on the matter. So he did what he so often did in such circumstances; he prayed to St Antony, promising him two fine 'lamps' for his seat in Noumea if he would intervene to help overcome the difficulty.⁴⁷ But in April 1895, his labour steamer the *St Louis* arrived in Saigon before he had yet obtained official permission to recruit, and he faced a serious loss if it had to return with no cargo. He raised the stakes with St Antony. He wrote to Fraysse: 'The power of St Antony is put to a capital test, I have promised him a piastre (at par) for each migrant.'⁴⁸ The saint passed the test, for soon after, the authorities at Haiphong responded (significantly as Ballande believed, on Holy Saturday) with the telegram 'authorisation obtained'.⁴⁹ St Antony's piastre was translated into 10 francs a head, to be paid to the mission and used at the bishop's discretion.⁵⁰ Before getting his recruits, Ballande had still to contend with a campaign against him in one of the Indo-Chinese newspapers. Ballande lamented: 'It remains to be seen if I will find any, if the local press which treats me as a trader in human flesh doesn't once more block my path'.⁵¹ He had, in the end, no further difficulty; indeed he had to limit the number of recruits to 150, having been advised by his representatives in Noumea that, given the current depression in the colony, no more could be placed. The contingent arrived at the end of June 1895⁵² and in the event there was no trouble in finding them employers. Fraysse advised him that all the coolies had been placed within three weeks, noting that there were 15 Catholics among them.⁵³

The settler lobby in Indo-China won the next round: authorisation for another cargo of Vietnamese in 1895 was refused. Ballande called upon the help of Feillet, who gave his energetic support, but the Governor of Indo-China could not be prevailed upon to change his decision.⁵⁴ A setback in his commercial affairs usually caused Ballande to examine his spiritual standing. Was he being

⁴⁶ The Chamber of Agriculture in Indo-China continued to oppose the emigration of Vietnamese workers to New Caledonia even into the 1920s, but was overruled by the colonial administration: article by 'Sipière' in *Bulletin de la Chambre d'Agriculture de la Cochinchine*, 29 Oct. 1924, reproduced in *Bulletin du Commerce* (N.C.), 28 Nov. 1925; see also address of 'colonial delegate' Archimbaud, *Bulletin du Commerce*, 20, 23 May 1925; Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *The French Pacific Islands* (Berkeley 1971), 449.

⁴⁷ Ballande to Fraysse, 23 Mar. 1895, AAN. These 'lamps' would have been elaborate, decorative devices wherein the faithful could leave their offerings of a lighted candle, thus providing (as Ballande pointed out) a source of revenue to the Church.

⁴⁸ Ballande to Fraysse, 6 Apr. 1895, AAN.

⁴⁹ Ballande to Fraysse, 20 Apr. 1895, AAN.

⁵⁰ Ballande to Fraysse, 14 June 1895, AAN. On this occasion it was worth 1500 francs to the mission. This 'piastre' was still being paid in 1926 by which time very large numbers of Indo-Chinese workers had been introduced, so the revenue must have been of considerable value to the mission. It was still being paid at the rate of 10 francs to the piastre, although the relative value of the piastre had risen.

⁵¹ Ballande to Fraysse, 20 Apr. 1895, AAN.

⁵² *La Calédonie*, 29 June 1895, AAN.

⁵³ Fraysse to Ballande, 22 July 1895, AAN.

⁵⁴ Ballande to Fraysse, 30 Aug. 1895, 1 Oct. 1895, AAN.

punished for his secret vainglory in wanting to maintain his position as a shipowner instead of being content to be a 'grocer'?⁵⁵ He had only a day to enjoy sackcloth and ashes. The next morning brought him an official telegram from Noumea informing him that he could probably have a convoy of Javanese labourers instead. Joyfully he told himself that St Antony had not deserted him: he had, after all, never specified to the saint the *nationality* of the 'emigrants' he had requested! He wrote: 'What a solace at such times to be a believer and able to adore humbly!'⁵⁶

The convoy of 185 Javanese duly arrived at Noumea in the middle of February 1896.⁵⁷ But if Ballande thought it was all the same to St Antony, the importation of Muslim Javanese was less pleasing to Fraysse. Ballande had to write him an appeasing letter. He would stop the intake of Javanese if the bishop insisted (an unlikely event, as he must have known), but other traders would only take his place if he did.⁵⁸ Moreover, he used the bishop's objection to the Muslims to ask for his help in getting more Vietnamese. Could Fraysse not write to the clergy in Indo-China to enlist their moral support? After all, there was no doubt that emigration was a boon to the Vietnamese 'as it always was for over-dense populations'. He realised that his proposal was a delicate matter: 'I submit the idea to you without making a request'. However, he urged, it would be a proof that the bishop was not second to Feillet in the task of developing the country, and the proposal had the merit of substituting 'French natives', either converted or convertible to Catholicism, for Feillet's Muslims.⁵⁹ It was a cunning ploy: unfortunately we do not yet know whether it worked.

Soon after his first rebuff in Haiphong in 1895, in fact, Ballande had been busy trying to overturn the decision and to arrange a new cargo of Vietnamese. There was a depression in New Caledonia but he believed that he could use the surplus himself, if they could not be placed, on his own New Caledonian properties where they could raise agricultural products for his ships to export.⁶⁰ He succeeded beyond his dreams when, as a result of famine in Indo-China in 1896, the local administration was happy to let him have as many people as he wished.⁶¹ By 1899, with economic conditions in New Caledonia just emerging from four years of depression, Ballande was recruiting workers for his own enterprises from a variety of sources, and asking his representatives to increase the flow.⁶²

⁵⁵ Ballande to Fraysse, 1 Oct. 1895, AAN.

⁵⁶ Ballande to Fraysse 2 Oct. 1895, AAN.

⁵⁷ *La Calédonie*, 13 Feb. 1896.

⁵⁸ Ballande to Fraysse, 6 Oct 1897, AAN.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*; the idea had come from the government agent of his labour steamer: Ch. Ziegler to Ballande, 27 Aug. 1897 (encl. to above), AAN.

⁶⁰ Ballande to Fraysse, 5 June 1896, AAN.

⁶¹ Ballande to Fraysse, 20 June 1896, AAN.

⁶² Ballande to Fraysse, 19 May 1899, AAN.

He now employed New Hebridean (ni-Vanuatu), Solomon Islander, Vietnamese and Javanese workers.

Soon Ballande was to add convoys of Japanese to his labour importations. In 1912 he wrote to Bishop Chanrion that he had heard they were easier to convert than the Javanese. He undertook to find catechists to accompany his next convoy of Japanese; he believed the best solution would be to send a Marist who spoke Japanese, asking Chanrion to contact the Japanese clergy to discuss the matter.⁶³

The Asian labour trade was a financial success and seemed justified by the colony's severe shortage of labour. Ballande believed that it was in the interest of the Asian 'emigrants' themselves⁶⁴ as well as indispensable to the development of the territory. Both material and ideological considerations encouraged him to continue the traffic, and he remained the chief importer of Asian labour right through the period under review, as well as continuing a small import of Oceanians until the 1920s.

By colonial standards, he was himself a good employer of indentured labour. He gave thought to the improvement of the material conditions and moral state of the *engagés*: by having their food, rest and recreation well supervised, by building them a compound of their own, divided according to ethnicity to try to avoid gang fights. He ear-marked a grant to the mission for the work of converting and 'civilising' them. To diminish the appalling rate of drunkenness and brawling general among indentured labourers on Sundays (with arrests of dozens regularly reported in Monday's newspapers) he thought of giving them the means of going fishing after Mass, and proposed paying for Sunday festivities, free of alcohol, within their barracks.⁶⁵ To the knowledge of the writers, he was the only employer to try to give his workers some leisure activities — a refreshing change — for although there were continual complaints by the settlers about the Sunday brawling, the usual remedy suggested (and implemented) was stiffer punishment.

From the beginning, however, the business presented him with moral difficulties. He was acutely sensitive to attacks from the press which cast him in the role of slave trader, and, in the end as we shall see, to criticism from within the mission, although never from the top. In characteristic fashion, he did his best to satisfy his critics on particular points and to calm his own conscience without yielding the slightest ground on the major issue.

⁶³ Ballande to Chanrion, 28 Sept. 1912, AAN.

⁶⁴ Ballande to Fraysse, 6 Oct. 1897, Ballande to Chanrion, 22 Oct 1928, AAN.

⁶⁵ Ballande to Fraysse, 19 May 1899, AAN. These good intentions had an unfortunate outcome: the barracks became a ghetto, notorious for its insanitary conditions, and the home of the outbreak of bubonic plague in Noumea in 1899-1900.

The Catholics among his Vietnamese 'immigrants' caused him particular concern: he tried hard to reconcile their moral welfare and his material interest. He appealed to Bishop Chanrion to care for their souls.

I am profoundly grateful for what you can do for the Catholic Tonkinese. While favouring this exodus, so truly indispensable to French Oceania [they were now going to Vanuatu as well, and to Tahiti by 1925] I would not want to do anything to hinder the evangelisation of the Tonkinese.⁶⁶

Told that a mission to the 'Tonkinese' presented linguistic difficulties, he characteristically bent his energies to meet the objection, without in the least changing his basic intention. He undertook to pay for a chaplain who spoke the 'Indo-Chinese' language to visit and care for the spiritual welfare of the workers both in New Caledonia and Vanuatu. The clergy in French Indo-China found him a missionary, the Rev. Fr Emile Raynaud, who had already had experience as a chaplain with Vietnamese troops during the first World War.⁶⁷ In gratitude Ballande sent their missions a cheque for 5,000 francs; in the next year he was to send another for 2,500 francs.⁶⁸

The appointment of Raynaud, as it happened, was to intensify his moral problem rather than solve it. It seems that the chaplain did not limit himself to the spiritual care of his new flock but felt bound 'in spite of myself'⁶⁹ to report their material grievances. How could he, he wrote, as a priest or 'even an honest man', remain oblivious to 'the physical and moral sufferings of more than five thousand wretched exiles abandoned virtually defenceless to near slavery in the New Hebrides, to numerous injustices and countless cruelties in New Caledonia'.⁷⁰ He wrote reports critical of the labourers' conditions; excerpts of his letters to fellow priests in Indo-China and Hong Kong, describing maltreatment of Vietnamese workers, lack of provision for the religious needs of Catholics and the non-observance of contracts by employers, found their way into the arena of public debate. He complained to the representatives of Ballande Establishments in New Caledonia, suggesting remedies to them. He sent a catalogue of labourers' grievances to his Superior in Paris.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Ballande to Chanrion, 22 Oct. 1923, AAN.

⁶⁷ Bishop Gendreau (Bishop of West Tonkin) to Chanrion, 3 Sept. 1924, AAN.

⁶⁸ Ballande to Chanrion, 20 Aug. 1924, 9 Apr. 1925, Monseigneur Marcou (Bishop of Maritime Tonkin) to Chanrion, 8 May 1925, Gendreau to Marcou, 21 May 1925, AAN.

⁶⁹ E. Raynaud, 'Visite de M. Delamarre en Nlle. Calédonie', n.d., AAN: an extract of a report from Raynaud, perhaps to a third party, copied and sent to the bishop of New Caledonia. In it he describes his encounter with Inspector Delamarre at Voh (about the beginning of 2 Aug. 1925), and states that he said to him: 'Inspector, I came here to look after the spiritual needs of the Tonkinese and it is very much in spite of myself that I have been obliged to receive complaints of a different nature'.

⁷⁰ Raynaud to 'Mon révérend père' [probably Joseph Jourda, who seemed to have been given the job of reasoning with Raynaud], 2 Sept. 1925, AAN. This letter, like several others, also included 'organised prostitution' of the indentured women among the list of grievances.

⁷¹ Raynaud, 'Visite de M. Delamarre'; Raynaud to 'Monseigneur' (Chanrion?), Houailou, 2 June 1925, Gendreau to Chanrion, 10 Dec. 1925, Chanrion to Gendreau, 7 July 1926, Raynaud, Report addressed to 'Monseigneur', 26 Nov. 1925 (Mgr Guébriant, Father Superior at the mission headquarters in Paris — see letter of Guébriant, Superior, Société des Missions Etrangères, Paris, to Chanrion 25 Mar. 1926, which included a typed copy of 11 pages of the report): AAN. Guébriant was inclined to believe Raynaud, but would not interfere.

This turn of events produced an unprecedented quandary for Ballande. Hitherto he had seen himself as a humble contributor to the extension of God's kingdom on earth through the proper conduct of his business:⁷² he now found himself portrayed as a grinder of the faces of the poor, and not by an anti-clerical newspaper but by a representative of the Church itself! But Ballande no longer suffered the spiritual anguish that such a moral dilemma would have caused him 20 years before. At age 68, devastated by the death in the first World War of his adored son and heir Louis, disillusioned with papal politics in Europe, he had lost his zeal to find the spiritual answer. He was now content to delegate the problem to his appropriate representatives in New Caledonia: the moral aspect to the Church authorities on the one hand, the material to the administration and his paid agents on the other.

Bishop Chanrion seems to have sent unfavourable reports of Raynaud's mission to Bishop Gendreau, the bishop of West Tonkin, within less than three months of the chaplain's arrival in New Caledonia. Gendreau explained Raynaud's behaviour by reference to his fondness for the Vietnamese, 'which leads him to exaggerate their qualities and accept too trustingly their tales and complaints'.⁷³ Soon Raynaud had acquired the reputation of being something of an agitator. His presence at any of the mining centres dependent on Ballande's smelting-works was resented and resisted by the mine managers,⁷⁴ the Secretary-General of the colonial administration forbade him to visit the inmates of the Native Hospital⁷⁵ and Bishop Doucéré refused him permission to re-enter his diocese of the New Hebrides.⁷⁶

The question of Fr Raynaud's mission was brought to a head by a strike by Vietnamese labourers at Ballande's nickel mines at Voh, on the west coast of New Caledonia. The incident so alarmed the authorities that troops were sent to the mining centre in case of an outbreak of violence, and the Governor called a press conference apparently to allay the fears of the public of a general 'bolchevist' revolt.⁷⁷ Ballande representatives held Raynaud responsible for the 'effervescence' of the labourers that followed his visit: Chanrion himself believed that the chaplain had unwittingly 'fallen into step' with a 'bolchevist' leader of the Vietnamese workers,⁷⁸ so it was perhaps not surprising that M. Rougy, the manager of Ballande's coal-mining works at Moindou, forbade Raynaud to set foot on the premises. This action at first provoked resistance from Ballande himself, but the intervention of Chanrion in support of the manager's position

⁷² Ballande to Fraysse, 8 Apr. 1895, Ballande to Chanrion, 28 Dec. 1912, AAN.

⁷³ Gendreau to Chanrion, 8 May 1925, replying to Chanrion's letter of 3 Mar. 1925. Raynaud had arrived in Noumea on 20 Jan. 1925.

⁷⁴ Rev. Fr J. Jourda to Raynaud, 3 Sept. 1925, AAN.

⁷⁵ B. . . (illeg., Bussy?) to 'Mon révérend père' (Jourda?), 20 Aug. 1925, AAN.

⁷⁶ Ballande to Chanrion, 2 Jan. 1926, AAN.

⁷⁷ *France Australe*, 21 Aug. 1925; *Bulletin du Commerce*, 22 Aug. 1925. In spite of the Governor's action, *France Australe* had to respond to the requests of many alarmed readers by reassuring them that the 'mutiny' of Voh had been quelled: *France Australe*, 25 Aug. 1925.

⁷⁸ Chanrion to Gendreau, 7 July 1926, AAN.

proved decisive.⁷⁹ Ballande bowed to his superior wisdom. He wrote to the bishop:

You know the situation, I can not but be revolted by the idea that access to our works at Moindou should be forbidden to the missionary whom I requested and whose arrival I assisted! But if the latter is not a paragon of his kind, can I impose him on my Director, at the risk of provoking an outbreak and thereby taking the responsibility for serious consequences . . . when Mgr Doucéré sets me the example of refusing entry to his territory to the person in question?

I'm sorry, I wish to keep my conscience clear. I mean to give you, on the spot, complete power to transmit through M. Milliard [his agent], *in my name*, to M. Rougy any conclusions you feel bound to express.⁸⁰

After receiving Chanrion's support, Laroque advised Ballande that 'all that's wanted now is the prompt departure of the Father', which was thereupon arranged between the company and the clergy.⁸¹ Raynaud was to be replaced by a Vietnamese priest 'thoroughly worded up [*châpitré*] in advance on the role that he is supposed to fulfil'. Far from objecting to this arrangement Chanrion worried only that a Vietnamese priest might be too partial to his compatriots! Laroque assured the bishop that his chief would insist on a Vietnamese priest if that turned out to be the only means of finding someone to minister to the Vietnamese Catholic labourers, but that his behaviour in New Caledonia 'should be absolutely in the hands of the Bishop of Noumea who can send him back to Tonkin if he doesn't suit'. He undertook, on behalf of Ballande Establishments, to pay the return fares, and to keep on trying if they did not get the right person the first time.⁸²

At the Indo-Chinese end, Gendreau also co-operated fully with the company's desire to put a speedy end to Raynaud's stay in New Caledonia. As he said:

These difficulties of the Rev. Fr with the Ballande company seem so much the more regrettable since M. Ballande has shown himself so generous vis à vis our missions, to which he has sent two sums of several thousands of francs.⁸³

Chanrion's intervention in favour of the exclusion of Raynaud from the Moindou coal works seems extraordinary, and the question must be asked whether he was influenced by the financial interest the mission held not only in the continued importation of Vietnamese workers⁸⁴ but also in its revenue from Bal-

⁷⁹ Laroque to Ballande, 16 May 1926, copy to Chanrion, AAN.

⁸⁰ Ballande to Chanrion, 2 Jan. 1926, AAN.

⁸¹ Laroque to Ballande, copy to Chanrion, 16 May 1926, AAN. The clergy in Indo-China arranged a new posting for him, the company agreed to pay his fare. Raynaud proved to be more difficult to move than was expected; he first resisted the offer of an appointment caring for Vietnamese in France until the opportunity passed, but finally was sent back to Tonkin in July 1926.

⁸² Laroque to Ballande, 16 May 1926, copy to Chanrion, AAN. At the French Indo-China end, the clergy laid down directions for the new appointee, which included warning him against being deceived by trouble-makers, and reminding the workers that their moral and material interest would be best served by good conduct and being willing workers, rather than rebelling.

⁸³ Gendreau to Chanrion, 10 Dec. 1925, AAN.

⁸⁴ Still at the rate of 10 francs per coolie, this had brought the mission the sum of 9,160 francs in the four months Oct. 1925 to Feb. 1926: Henry Milliard & Maurice Berge, on behalf of the Cie Navale de l'Océanie, to Chanrion, 30 Mar. 1926, AAN.

lande's venture into coal-mining. In 1923, Ballande had been very excited about the discovery of high quality coal on one of his properties near Moindou, on the west coast, especially attractive at a time when the nickel market was depressed. He expected to sell New Caledonian coal profitably and to use it in his own mineral smelting works, thus reducing or even eliminating his import of coal from Australia.⁸⁵ Under the influence of these glittering hopes, he had given the Church a financial stake in his new coal business: the mission was to receive one franc for every tonne of coal extracted and a further one franc per tonne of coal used at the smelting works.⁸⁶ Bishop Chanrion shared his enthusiasm, promising to pray for the success of the venture but pointing out the need for discretion:

If we have to maintain complete discretion vis à vis the public regarding the generosity of your company, we have also decided to organise prayers of gratitude on behalf of the beneficiaries of your largesse. I myself intend to celebrate on Sunday 4 May the first mass in honour of the benefactors and their enterprise.⁸⁷

He evidently put some store by this source of revenue since he later complained to the company when there were arrears in the payment of the coal money.⁸⁸

The only aspect of Vietnamese indentured labour which appeared to trouble Chanrion was the report of the prostitution of the women. In his reply to this complaint Ballande made his usual assertion — now sounding somewhat hollow — that he would give up the labour trade if it compromised his ethical principles, while also making it clear that he had accepted the worldly advice of Laroque on the matter. The response was indeed a somewhat startling one from a devout Catholic, now showing little of the idealistic fervour of his youth.

M. Laroque, concerned as I am myself with the question 'as a matter of conscience', protests against the interference of any settler in the successive 'loans' of the women; he explains that the latter, wished on us [*imposées*] by the administration, are, because of the lack of regular families willing to emigrate, recruited from the lowest class and are only continuing their old trade; he wonders whether some of your informants are well-disposed to the movement and entirely sure of what they are talking about.⁸⁹

That he and his manager might be *so* well disposed to the 'movement' that *they* were badly informed on the facts, or inclined to misrepresent them, seemed no longer of much concern to him.

Ballande's main preoccupation was that his own conscience should be clear: the introduction of Asians would, after all, continue whether or not he partici-

⁸⁵ Ballande to Chanrion, 21 Sept. 1923, 28 Sept. 1923, 21 Feb. 1924, AAN. *Océanie Française*, Paris, jan.-fév. 1923, p. 13.

⁸⁶ Extrait du Procès-Verbal de la 116ème séance du Conseil d'Administration des Hauts-Fourneaux de Nouméa, held 5 Apr. 1924, AAN.

⁸⁷ Chanrion to Laroque, 24 Apr. 1924, AAN.

⁸⁸ Chanrion to M. Maurice Berge, Etablissements Ballande, 14 June 1927, AAN.

⁸⁹ Ballande to Chanrion, 19 Aug. 1925, AAN.

pated in it. 'If my efforts to resolve, at the same time, the religious problem prove futile they will pacify my conscience, under the control of your authority.'⁹⁰ Several times he thanked Chanrion for helping to ease his conscience about the matter.⁹¹ If the mission were to conclude that Catholic Vietnamese were better off staying in their own country than going to New Caledonia, 'I will do nothing to recruit Catholics, and with the pagans there's nothing to lose!'⁹² In his letter pointing out that if Catholic Vietnamese stopped coming, pagans would only take their places, there is even a note of irony: 'You'll have to convert the "yellow" pagans just like the others'.⁹³

How does one see the gift of profits from the labour trade to the mission? At a conscious level, Ballande was thereby simply expressing gratitude for divine help in making the project prosper, while at the same time easing his conscience by having the blessing of the Church in pursuing it. It could hardly be said that he was buying their silence, since he himself saw nothing but benefits for the workers he brought in under the scheme. Yet the 'tithes' did, in the end, have the effect of reducing potential opposition on humanitarian grounds from within the mission. And judging from the number of times he thanked the bishops for easing his conscience over the matter, in spite of his rational convictions, Ballande himself still suffered doubts.

It seems, then, too simple to see Ballande's largesse as merely an attempt to buy the services of the New Caledonian clergy. The friendship with Fraysse and the blessing of the Church performed a non-material but most important function for André Ballande — namely, providing balm for his troublesome conscience. Like his Protestant counterparts in the Pacific, he believed that commerce was a proper Christian activity so long as it was conducted with propriety and justice, and the profits made to work for the greater glory of God,⁹⁴ but unlike them he did not believe it to be a calling equal in the sight of God to any other, but rather one which was fraught with great spiritual dangers. He certainly believed the practice of commerce to be morally inferior to the vocation of the holy men⁹⁵ and seems to have felt the need of a sort of absolution for a whole profession which, in the Catholic tradition, appeared somewhat tainted. One of his reasons, for example, for wanting to found a contemplative monastery was to compensate for the excessive preoccupation with the 'material order' involved in his activities.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Ballande to Chanrion, 31 May 1925, AAN.

⁹¹ E.g., Ballande to Chanrion, 28 Dec. 1912, 19 Aug. 1925 (AAN), but it is a theme constantly reiterated.

⁹² Ballande to Chanrion, 31 May 1925, AAN.

⁹³ Ballande to Chanrion 1 Dec. 1925, AAN.

⁹⁴ Ballande to Fraysse, 8 Apr. 1895, Ballande to Chanrion, 28 Sept. 1912, AAN.

⁹⁵ Ballande to Fraysse, 8 Apr. 1895, AAN.

⁹⁶ Ballande to Chanrion, 19 Aug. 1925, AAN. He was persuaded that the money could be put to better use in founding a home for the destitute.

Ballande's devotion to the work of the Catholic mission and his personal devotion to Bishop Fraysse are beyond doubt, but as a businessman he saw himself as forced to operate on a different — and inferior — level in a world of political and economic realities that bishops could afford to condemn. The bishops served him as he served them, and the Church gave him solace that was beyond price. It would seem that, paradoxically, Ballande's gifts to the Church made it more difficult for it to perform the role of moral guidance that the merchant expected of it.

Neither the bishops nor Ballande had any problem with their collusion on a variety of temporal matters, and were content to respect differences on others. But both parties were aware that their collaboration was open to criticism. Ballande did not believe that he was doing wrong by involving the Church in his business affairs, but he knew very well that others would see the matter differently. His gifts to the Church were covert by mutual agreement and he sometimes advised the bishop on ways of masking their joint involvement in certain strategies.⁹⁷ Pseudonyms and coded messages were used in their correspondence as a precaution against prying eyes. Ballande requested that his correspondence with the mission be destroyed.⁹⁸ It seems an unkindness on the part of those to whom he was so generous that this wish was not respected. The omission has, however, enabled the historian to take a rare peek behind the rhetoric of social affairs in the New Caledonia of this period.

In fact, the material does the memory of André Ballande no harm. It depicts him as a more sympathetic figure than his enemies would have allowed — gravely limited by his interests and the prejudices of his day and class, but nonetheless a warm personality with a sense of justice, and a loyal friend. One can only hope that his business papers will ultimately be released to fill out the picture.

⁹⁷ See, e.g. Ballande to Fraysse, 21 Mar. 1889, 28 Apr. 1894, Chanrion to Laroque, 24 Apr. 1924, AAN.

⁹⁸ Ballande to Chanrion, 29 Nov, 1905, AAN.

Reprinted from
The Journal of Pacific History

E6 JAN 1994

O.R.S.T.O.M. Fonds Documentaire
N° : 38758
Cote : B

The Journal of Pacific History

VOLUME XXV: 1 JUNE 1990

CONTENTS

ARTICLES

- | | | |
|---|--|----|
| <i>Church and commerce in New Caledonia: Ballande and the bishops</i> | DOROTHY SHINEBERG,
AND
JEAN-MARIE KOHLER | 3 |
| <i>'Almost constantly at war'? An ethnographic perspective on fighting in New Caledonia</i> | BRONWEN DOUGLAS | 22 |
| <i>Doctor administrators in Wallis and Futuna</i> | NANCY POLLOCK | 47 |
| <i>Making a mandate: the formation of Australia's New Guinea policies 1919-1925</i> | ROGER C. THOMPSON | 68 |
| <i>German labour policy and the partition of the Western Pacific: the view from Samoa</i> | DOUG MUNRO AND
STEWART FIRTH | 85 |

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

- | | | |
|---|----------------|-----|
| <i>Thirty years ago: a view of the Fijian political scene. Confidential Report to the British Colonial Office, September 1959</i> | O. H. K. SPATE | 103 |
|---|----------------|-----|

BOOK REVIEWS

- 125
- The Making of Modern Samoa*, Malama Meleisea; *Oceania: The Native Cultures of Australia and the Pacific Islands*, Douglas Oliver; *The Pacific Islands*, Douglas Oliver; *Ples Blong Iumi. Solomon Islands*, Hugh Laracy (ed.); *Pacific Prelude*, Margery Perham; *Torres Strait Islanders*, Jeremy Beckett; *Atlas des Iles et Etats du Pacifique Sud*, B. Antheaume and J. Bonnemaïson; *History's Anthropology*, Greg Denning.