

the New Hebrides question. But the great bulk of the people of New South Wales are in full sympathy with their brethren in the other colonies, and are firmly of opinion that in this instance a provincial gain would be equivalent to a great national loss.

6. The opposition of the Australians to the French annexation of the New Hebrides is far from being grounded on the low motive that is here described as the "real" one. That motive, in point of fact, does not operate in the least, and it is a purely gratuitous assumption on the writer's part. The sugar plantations of tropical Queensland are the only portions of Australian territory on which Pacific islanders have been employed; and is it reasonable to suppose that, for the sake of this small area, all the Australian Colonies would combine at this time of day to support a system of slavery in disguise? Such a statement carries its refutation on its face. No; all interested in this question may rest assured that Australians in general, and Australian natives in particular, strenuously oppose the French designs on the New Hebrides because they are supremely anxious to rid themselves of two great and pressing evils—French felony on their shores and foreign aggression in their waters.

I am, &c.,

30th August.

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WHILE the international question relating to the New Hebrides remains unsettled, any information is welcome which throws light on the real nature of the French colonies in the neighbourhood of those islands. Such information is provided in the letter which a correspondent sends us from Noumea, in New Caledonia. It is not every one who has been to Noumea, and those who have made themselves fully acquainted with the state of the convict settlements there and in the neighbourhood are very few indeed. Our correspondent is one of these, and his account of the state of the islands, especially of the *Île des Pins*, will be read with interest in proportion to its novelty. That island itself, a volcanic rock with a small extent of land capable of cultivation, is to the south-east of the Island of New Caledonia, and is situated just within the Tropic of Capricorn. New Caledonia itself is 240 miles long, and is, in fact, of greater extent than any other Pacific island except, of course, New Zealand. It is singularly diversified in structure and landscape, with rocks and mountains, rivers and woods; it is healthy and, on the whole, fertile, and it possesses no inconsiderable mineral wealth. It is to this place that the French for the last thirty years have been sending a certain number of their convicts, and are now despatching the *récidivistes*, or persons convicted of repeated offences. The latter are at present chiefly quartered in the *Île des Pins*, where, after 1871, the greater number of the Communiard prisoners were settled; and the system adopted for them will be much the same as that which was tried for the latter. The Communiards, as our correspondent describes them, were established in conditions which, if they could have but banished ennui, were not disagreeable; and, for persons of their type, it would be difficult to suggest a better system. Away from the exciting atmosphere of Paris, many of the *déportés* of the Commune were harmless enough; workmen who had been carried away by agitators or dreamy enthusiasts, or clerks out of work who had rashly taken service under the rebel authority. The dangerous men, and the men who burnt Paris and killed the hostages, had been shot; those who were sent to Noumea were, with a few noteworthy exceptions, the rank and file of the insurrection. As our correspondent remarks, when they reached the *Île des Pins* they found an ideal Commune, though a very dull one. They lived in little villages, connected by roads made by the labour of the more energetic prisoners; and the majority, being under no compulsion, did absolutely nothing. A small Government allowance, supplemented by gifts from friends at home, kept them alive. In 1879 came the amnesty, and the *Île des Pins* knew them no more. They returned to France, some to starve, a few to prosper, and the many to creep back into some kind of employment in which their past was as far possible forgotten.

Very different from the almost idyllic life of these political *déportés* is that of the criminals transported to New Caledonia. These men are real criminals—"deep-dyed ruffians" for the most part—men of the same type as the occupants of Dartmoor and Portland, or as those inhabitants of Norfolk Island whose existence, according to a celebrated parliamentary report of fifty years ago, was such a scandal and a danger. According to our correspondent, these men have a fairly easy life, their work not being continuous, and the discipline not over-severe. They work at road-making and other occupations; they rest during the great heat of the day; and at night they sleep in batches of fifty in the prison-houses. They have the appearance and manner of convicts all the world over; demoralised, brutal, and despairing, they seem like men past reformation. Of course it is chiefly through their associating together that the better among them get contaminated. A luckless wretch who has yielded to the temptation of the moment and robbed his employer's cash-box is sent to herd with professional burglars, with murderers on whom a susceptible jury has had pity, and with men who have lived by forgery. The result is the inevitable one: the better nature becomes more or less assimilated to the worse. It seems impossible to do anything with the convicts when once the convict-taint has really affected them. They may "reform"—that is, they may conform to rules and conciliate their masters, and may thus obtain grants of land and become members of the *pénitenciers agricoles*. But the lives of men and women who have done this, and who have been married under the auspices of the officials, are rarely satisfactory, and the reputation of those *pénitenciers* is as bad as it could be. Yet it would not do, according to that universal French theory which forbids the abuses of the administration to be exposed, to let the French public know that the penal colonies are a failure. As our correspondent remarks, a Government who made such an announcement would be censured; and, in point of fact, even the attempts of the local superintendents to put a forcible stop to the abominations of Bourail, the chief convict settlement, have been repressed by the Governor as *trop de zèle*. There is a widespread idea in France, a mixture of patriotic optimism and of a misunderstanding of history, that the French penal colonies will in no long time develop into flourishing and reputable communities, like the British colonies which, in