

Booklet

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PIONEERING IN PARADISE
EARLY ADVENTISM IN NEW CALEDONIA

By Milton Hook



Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series

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SDA Heritage Series: Entry into the Australian Colonies
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Milton Hook is the author of "Flames Over Battle Creek", a brief history of the early days at the Review and Herald Publishing Association as seen through the eyes of George Amadon, printer's foreman at the institution. Dr Hook's doctoral dissertation researched the pioneering years of the Avondale School, 1894 to 1900, and he has published some of these findings.

He spent three years as a mission director in Papua New Guinea. His teaching years include primary, secondary and college level experience, especially in Bible subjects, in Australia, New Zealand and America. He is an ordained minister, married and the father of two sons.

He would welcome any information which may enhance the content of this series.

New Caledonia lies between the Queensland coast and Vanuatu. Its native inhabitants are Melanesians, akin to the Papuans, and once cannibalistic. The French commandeered the island as a penal colony in a similar manner to the British use of Sydney Cove, Hobart-Town, and Norfolk Island.

Friction between the French colonials and the Melanesians has been a running sore. One notable eruption occurred in 1878. Another was an uprising in 1917 by a slippery Melanesian bushman called Noel whose band raided coastal colonists, killed some, and then secreted themselves in a mountain hideaway. The French promised a reward of two thousand francs for his head. An Arab lured Noel to his coastal home, gave him a meal, shook hands, then fired four shots from a revolver into his back as he was leaving. Noel spun, grappled with his host, and would have strangled him except another Arab pulled a sword and decapitated him. The Arabs duly claimed the reward and trouble subsided. Incidents like this illustrate the smouldering tensions which have persisted.

The elongated island is characterised by razor-back mountains over its entire length. Numerous rivers flow to the coastal plains. The friable soil in the highlands is scarred by the torrential rains, leaving them quite barren. The valleys are a haven for the Kauri pine. The coast is rimmed with coconut palms, and the prevailing vegetation is a small drab shrub, called the niaouli, similar to the Australian eucalyptus tree. Off-shore to the north-east lie the Loyalty Islands - Uvea, Lifou, and Mare - which are idyllic Pacific utopias. The entire group is virtually malaria-free.

Almost as soon as Pastor Edward Gates settled at the Avondale School in 1899, after sailing on the final voyage of the PITCAIRN, he received an invitation from New Caledonian officials to establish a medical institution on the island. The government offered to give land if Gates would respond by building something similar to the Samoan Sanitarium. At no time had the PITCAIRN touched on New Caledonian shores, so the knowledge of Seventh-day Adventists and their work must have been carried by some other means. However, Gates could not respond to the invitation. Australia was having problems with its homeland Sanitarium and venturing into an overseas enterprise was unthinkable. This was tragic. If the opportunity could have been seized in 1899 the foundation of good will may have been laid, melting the barriers experienced later.

The island group remained untouched by Seventh-day Adventists for years. Only occasionally there seemed to be some hope of advance. In 1906 Pastor Calvin Parker happened to call in at Noumea en route from Sydney to Fiji. While in port he gathered a few names of European colonials and determined to send them some Adventist literature from time to time. But this did not herald a major break-through. It was simply good intentions or, at best, seed-sowing.

Something more promising occurred in 1918. Arthur Ferris met a French woman on Norfolk Island who had become a Seventh-day Adventist. She had originally come from New Caledonia and offered to return with Ferris and his wife if they decided to pioneer her homeland. Ferris wrote to headquarters in Sydney but the reply was disheartening. Numerous calls from other island groups, church leaders said, prevented them considering entrance into a new field just at that time. This was despite the fact that a native chief, visiting Sydney, became acquainted with Adventists and invited teachers to be sent among his people.

When Pastor Griffiths Jones and his wife, Marion, returned from New Guinea early in 1924 they yearned for an assignment in a non-malarial spot. It seemed opportune for them to pioneer New

Caledonia. Church administrators agreed and Jones made preparations to sail for Noumea. Marion remained behind in Western Australia with some English relatives and waited for her husband to discover whether or not he would be allowed to make his home in the island group. He embarked from Sydney for Noumea on May 25, 1924.

On arrival Jones was immediately struck with the degree of French influence which permeated every aspect of the society. "This group," he wrote, "is much more French than the Society Islands". Roman Catholicism was prominent. Jones felt a closer kinship with the occasional Javanese he met than he did with the French even though he could speak a little of both languages. No encouragement was given to him right from the start. He admitted, "I have already been told several times by influential Frenchmen that there is little hope for us to get in with our work, especially into the Loyalties".

The odds were heaped against success but Jones was a dogged little Welshman and accustomed to tough assignments. He hired a hotel room and for more than two months tried to negotiate with the French authorities but they were suspicious of small Protestant mission groups. Jones was told he would have to make his requests to the colonial head office in Paris. It appeared to be a classic example of bureaucratic red-tape. Disappointed, Jones returned to Australia in August 1924 determined to try again. Pastor Gordon Turner, Secretary of the Australasian Division, promised to apply to Paris immediately.

Twelve months later Jones made a second attempt, apparently after gaining some implied government approval on paper which later proved to be inadequate. During the October 1925 voyage Jones and his wife were told by fellow passengers familiar with Noumea that it would be impossible to find suitable accommodation. Their prediction had substance. Nevertheless, within a week Jones finally ferreted out a small suburban cottage to rent from a shop assistant who was returning to Sydney. The home was only ten minutes walk from down-town Noumea.

Jones began cautiously by giving out French tracts and becoming acquainted with the people. He visited along the east coast and among the Loyalty Islands commuting on the coastal vessel, ST. ANTOINE. On all fronts he met with prejudice. The Calvinists or French Protestants, he said, were openly called "heretics" by the Roman Catholics. In addition, he rapidly learned there were deep anti-British emotions in Noumea. (Those of English origin were, generally speaking, clustered in the northern end of the island). He cited one example of an Englishman being refused permission to ship four cases of kerosene on the inter-island steamer even though there was plenty of space available.

Jones was also told of the example of a namesake and fellow-countryman, Mr Jones, who had earlier established a strong Protestant mission on Maré. Its success was its undoing, for false reports were brought against him and he was given two hours to quit his mission forever. Broken-hearted, he later died in Samoa with the word "Mare" on his lips.

"It is not difficult to see", Pastor Jones predicted, "that before long, if we become aggressive in our work in these islands, we shall be forbidden a passage on the boat". He no doubt wished to be independent and have his own ketch. Later, British friends at Pouvoua loaned him a small boat called AURORE, meaning "Sunrise". This he used for some of his coastal visiting.

Late in 1926 Jones reported, "I believe that a real French worker - I do not mean one who could merely speak French, but a native-born French person, would, with literature, find this a good field to work". He obviously sensed his limitations and concluded his work could only be the entering wedge.

It was providential that at the time a French woman, Cecile Guiot, had become a Seventh-day Adventist after receiving treatments for chronic rheumatism at the Sydney Sanitarium. Nurses Myrtle and Pearl Speck were largely instrumental in persuading her to accept Adventism. Guiot did not meet all the qualifications which Jones had

in mind but she proved to be a loyal stalwart. Born in Paris in 1898, she had emigrated to Australia in 1923. In June 1926 she was baptised at Wahroonga, fifteen months after her first contact with the Sydney Sanitarium nurses.

Guiot was invited to go to Noumea, live with the Joneses, perfect her French, and train for mission service. She sailed from Sydney on November 26, 1926, and spent the next twenty-five years sharing her convictions among the nationals and French colonials.

During an early visit to Uvea, Jones learned there was no white Protestant missionary on the island. There were, however, a number of national pastors and he thought he may arouse some interest among these men who were conversant with Bible teachings. He wanted to distribute his literature among them and stir some thought-provoking discussion. While the boat was in port for a few hours he hired a horse to visit these pastors, but his steed was in no hurry to go anywhere. Jones worked himself into a lather of perspiration trying to coax the horse to move at more than an amble.

A woman came by and said if he would call at her house he could borrow a saddle. The horse never reached the house. Instead, it refused to go any further than a wayside church. However, the pastors whom Jones wanted to visit had pre-arranged to meet for evening worship at that very church. He conducted their meeting, gave out tracts, and also sent some to the lady who offered the saddle. Months later he accidentally met her again. She was suffering recurring illness so the Joneses persuaded her to go to the Sydney Sanitarium. There she gained healing, studied Adventism, and was baptised on May 18, 1927 at Wahroonga. Her name was Emilie Penticost, a part-Melanesian originally from Mare Island. Her daughter married into the Chitty family.

When Jones visited Mare Island he hired another horse. This animal fairly flew. Sixty-two-year-old "Jonesie", as he was affectionately called, struggled to hang on and feared he would never get back alive. He arrived at the village he was seeking only to find most

people had left to dig yams, but the two elderly women who had been receiving tracts from Jones were at home. He could only stay twenty minutes so he talked, read scripture, prayed, and left more literature, then mounted his steed again and sped back to the waiting ship. These two women began to keep the Saturday Sabbath. One who was seriously ill died soon after. The other, Sarah Mahe, who was the eldest in the chief's family, went to stay with the Joneses for a few months and was baptised in mid-1927. She met with a flood of opposition on returning to her people.

By November 1927 Jones claimed there were twenty-five or more keeping Sabbath in the island group and ten of these, he -said, were baptised. Among them was Ada Peyras whose mother was a Melanesian and her father an English sea-captain. She had been reared by her father in Sydney but then returned to Mar& Furthermore, Peyras was related to Penticost. Her fluency in English did, of course, make it easier for the Joneses to befriend her. Another early convert was Rose Williams, who later married her English cousin by the same surname. Rose had been baptised with Sarah Mahe and two others among the secluded mangroves of Mouac Island, off the coast of Poum in the northern tip of the island.

In mid-November Jones telegraphed an urgent message to Australia asking for his tract order to be cancelled. He had to withdraw. Opposition to his baptisms had attracted alarm in the French Protestant camp, especially on Mare. Their leading pastor had returned from France to discover that the Seventh-day Adventist Church was not properly registered as a mission in New Caledonia. He immediately lodged a complaint and the government secretariat kindly told Jones that even to speak to a person on the street could be interpreted as illegal evangelism.

Jones gained the impression that the government was prepared to cast a blind eye on his activities, but to prolong his stay any further may have only meant more complaints from the two established missions and an embarrassed secretariat. He opted to leave

graciously and preserve the goodwill generated with the governor and his officials.

Guiot stayed on and supported herself by nursing in the hospital at Noumea. She first lived on Nou Island, the former penal colony just off-shore from the capital. Each month she would sell two hundred "Life and Health" magazines and the scattered believers looked upon her as their spiritual leader. Whenever she could she visited these Adventists and supplied them with Sabbath School picture rolls and lesson-study pamphlets. Travel was often arduous. She spoke on one occasion of slogging through mud and constant rain to see two isolated members. Her visits to Poum involved several days on a small crowded coastal steamer and finally bumping along in a bus crammed with livestock as well as people.

Church reports invariably referred to Guiot as "our lone missionary in New Caledonia" but her status was strictly unofficial. She could never be granted any missionary licence lest she be banished in the same manner as Jones. The occasional baptismal candidate had to wait for a visiting minister. In 1935 Guiot wrote, "We pray that something may be done for this field at the coming General Conference, that the way may be opened and liberty and authority be granted for a French missionary family to work here". She had to wait decades for the answer.

In 1936 Guiot moved from her Nou Island home to a spot on the mainland overlooking the harbour. Her letters reflect some of her privations:

This house is much nearer the town than my former abode, and I now have the luxury of being able to 'get into' a bath. It is the first time that I have had this convenience since coming to the mission field ten years ago My 'bath' is three-quarters of a wine barrel, still retaining a rather vinegary odour in spite of frequent soakings and scrubblings. Later I

hope to add a bath-heater instead of heating the water in a kerosene tin in the back yard....

.... I am growing watercress, and this helps the Investment Fund. I sell# to myself, as no-one else would buy it in such small quantities. I carry on the business by eating all I can and putting the value into the mission fund. My landlady, though an agnostic, gives me twenty franks every month off the rent for missions.

In 1942 Adventist American soldiers stationed in New Caledonia rented a Protestant church to hold Sabbath School in it. They started with about twelve men but advertised in the local newspapers and tripled their audience when local inhabitants responded. This group met regularly on Sabbaths until the servicemen returned to America in 1945.

When Guiot returned to Australia in November 1950 there was still only about ten baptised members in the entire island group. Some original ones had passed away and a few new names had replaced them.

The handful of members naturally looked to their French-speaking counterparts in Tahiti. The Tahiti Mission made some effort to nurture Adventism from their distant base. The Voice of Hope radio programme went to air in New Caledonia twice each week, beginning in 1952. This initiative was largely the work of Paul Nouan, President of the Tahiti Mission, who made an occasional visit to New Caledonia.

Nouan became captivated with the charm of New Caledonia so he requested transfer. He and his wife, Jeanne, settled in during 1953/54. They were accompanied by another Frenchman, Marcel Bornert and his wife, Lucienne. This marked the beginning of better

things for New Caledonia. The mission was officially organised in 1954 with Nouan as President and Bomert as Secretary.

Nouan was a sophisticated speaker. He conducted evangelistic meetings in the hired cinema at Noumea, drawing crowds of up to one hundred or more. Many listeners received Bible studies in their homes. He and his wife also canvassed Adventist books from home to home with some success. They also published a monthly mission paper called "Espoirs et Certitudes" (Hopes and Certainties). Some 450 copies of each issue were distributed to his evangelistic contacts. Fresh converts were gradually won and baptised as a result of their tireless efforts.

Members in Noumea purchased a site in Faubourg Blanchot, a suburb of the capital, and met there in a garage for some years until a suitable church building was erected and dedicated in 1967. The following year another attractive church was opened at Poum, at the northern tip of the island. A few more churches and companies were organised later, including groups on Mare and Lifou Islands. Membership totals rose sharply to over four hundred in the late 1960's and included a proportion of Vanuatuans working in New Caledonia.

Church members in New Caledonia think highly of the ones who first brought Adventism to their shores. The Joneses and Guiot are respected for the witness they bore against great odds. Many souls in this Pacific paradise will no doubt inherit the real Paradise because of their genuine commitment to Christ.

Major sources for this booklet are the "Australasian Record" and the author's personal collection of pioneer data.

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