

THE TIMES, Tuesday, September 28, 1886

THE NEW HEBRIDES

We have received from Sir Graham Berry, Agent-General for Victoria, copies of letters addressed to Mr. Gillies, Premier of Victoria, by the Rev. J.G. Paton, for some years a missionary in the islands. From Mr. Paton's first letter, dated August 6, we take the following passages:-

"The French had no settlement on the New Hebrides, and the French New Hebrides Company had only a house and store in Havannah Harbour, Efaté, on land it bought from Captain M'Leod, a British subject, who became its manager on the islands, and a small plantation for Indian corn, wrought by Frenchmen, in Fillé Harbour, Efaté, and one copra collector on Kakula, off Efaté, and another at Port Sandwich, Malicolo, and perhaps one or two elsewhere on the group, but neither the French Government nor company had anything worthy of the name of a settlement on it till after their 250 soldiers were landed and their two military stations formed on Efaté and on Malicolo; nor have they any further settlement on the group yet, except what is connected with their soldiers. Most of the settlers and copra makers on the New Hebrides were British subjects, from whom, it appears, that if the French company can purchase any island produce they call them *employés* of the company. The copra and island produce collectors are not really settlers, but degraded sailors and others living with native women here – now in a native hut, and soon away, no one knows where. This is their general character on our islands; they are wrecks of humanity.

"The whole population of the New Hebrides were nude cannibals when we began our work among them 37 years ago. Now, by teaching of our British missionaries and the civilizing power of the Gospel, about 9,000 are professed Christians, and above 20,000 are so civilized by it as to wear less or more clothing, and give up their grosser heathen practices, and to enjoy the same blessings; every island on the group now pleads for the British missionary to teach them the better way.

"The whole population of the New Hebrides fear and hate the French, and are very decidedly opposed to the French annexation for fear of oppression, war and destruction following, as on New Caledonia, Tahiti, Madagascar, and indeed wherever the French settle among such races. When the French soldiers were landed on Efaté, the natives saw that

opposition was useless, so they retired and fled to a distance. But if the soldiers are continued, opposition and war are likely soon to be forced on the defenceless islanders, to make an excuse for further occupation.

“I know of British subjects who have bought, and got proper title deeds for, and now claim over 92,000 acres of land on the New Hebrides, and I know other British subjects have bought land there, but to what extent at present I do not know. The French company have repurchased some of it from the natives. One informed me that he had a properly-attested title deed of purchase from the natives of a large block of land, dated four years previous to the date of its being bought avowedly by the French company.

“Besides the above, our British and British Colonial Presbyterian churches have now over £170,000 expended in their churches, schools, stations, missions, vessels, boats, and work on the New Hebrides, and to keep it going they are now expending over £7,000 annually. Victoria has now £10,000, chiefly collected in Britain, at interest here, to build a new steam mission vessel and get more missionaries for the group.

“Our British missionaries, their wives and families, now form a considerable party of settlers in the New Hebrides. We have 24 adults now actively engaged in the work, other four are in Melbourne and two in Sydney on their way to the islands, and another four are expected next year, making 34 adults and 36 children; to whom, if we add the captain and company of our mission ship, kept exclusively for the work of our mission, we have 44 adults, and with the children, in all 80.

“France has expended nothing in doing good on the islands. She had expended nothing, and had no just claim to the New Hebrides, but looked on, covering them, till, by the power of the blessed Gospel, we had rendered life and property safe by turning the cannibals into civilized Christians, when, in her grasping disposition, she steps in to reap the profit of it all. Surely Australia and Britain cannot honourably allow this and submit to her taking the New Hebrides by the deception by which she took and keeps possession of Raitea; for this undoubtedly is her present determination. In violation of her agreement with Britain that neither would annex, France has virtually annexed, boasts how cleverly she had done it, and by her military stations she means to keep possession. She said she would send no more convicts to the South Seas. I was informed by one of her highest authorities that 348 – the first party of a large number to follow – are now on their way. She has 10,000 con-

victs, and 4,500 expires, and a large body of soldiers now on New Caledonia, the Loyalties, &c. They say they will not interfere with our mission stations; but if, as elsewhere, they veto and upset our spiritual work among the natives, what care we for our stations? Deception in every particular to gain her purpose appears to be France's present policy. Will Britain and Australia submit? Apart from the islanders, in the best interests of Australia, I hope such a calamity will not be allowed.

"If Britain annexes, the islands will become gardens of tropical wealth to her and Australasia for ages to come. If France is allowed to annex, they will be useless for aught but a great convict reservoir – a source of trouble and unspeakable danger to Australasia; and for what else does France want the group?"

In his second letter to Mr. Gillies, dated August 11, Mr. Paton discusses the ostensible object of the French occupation of the islands, and the circumstances in which the French flag was hoisted there and saluted; and he repeats the hope that the British Government may yet avert the danger of a French annexation.