

*Discovery of the Pacific Isles . . .***"BLACKBIRDING" AND THE DECLINE OF ISLAND CULTURES**

BY ROLAND W. FORCE

CURATOR OF OCEANIC ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOLOGY

Part V

THE FORTUITOUS OCCURRENCE of a mere bit of flora disturbed a number of Pacific island communities in the early 19th century. China, in particular, was anxious to secure sandalwood (*Santalum album*), which was discovered first in Fiji in 1804. New Caledonia and the New Hebrides proved to be wonderful sources for this tree. Sandalwood had been much in demand by the Chinese from about 500 B.C. The oil was used for perfume. The wood was carved into fans and boxes, and was used by Buddhists in funeral rites. Brahmins wanted it for caste marks. It also was used as a remedy for various pains and aches. Prior to its discovery in the Pacific, India had been the only source and prices were high indeed.

In 1828, whalers discovered sandalwood grew in the New Hebrides and after that these islands were never the same. Here is a missionary's account of one of the early excursions for sandalwood. "Three ships stole 250 pigs from Efate. Crew shot 26 natives; women and children were trapped in a cave, wood was piled in the mouth and the whole made into a savory roast so that totally 130 natives were killed." On one island in the New Hebrides the native population responded in kind and in one two-year span 12 foreigners were eaten and 30 more killed without the occurrence of cannibalism. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* tells us that "The loss of life in this [sandalwood] trade was at one time even greater than in that of whaling. . . ." Anyone with an old ship, a stout heart, and plenty of gunpowder could go into the business. An average profit has been estimated to have been in the nature of \$3,000 per voyage.

The price of sandalwood varied from £12 to £100 per ton and the supply was rapidly exhausted. The natives placed no value on the wood. In 1830 they were trading a whole dinghy full of sandalwood for one piece of hoop iron. Some buyers used tobacco exclusively. Goats brought a ton apiece, while cats were in demand once the hardy ship's rats had been introduced to island shores.

There was very little of what we might call "team spirit" among the sandalwood traders. Each one was out to beat his competition. One of the best ways to make it unhealthy for those who might follow you was to shoot a few natives after you had made your haul.

Then, too, introducing diseases was popular. The brig *Edward* from California inadvertently brought smallpox to one of the islands of Melanesia in 1853. But in 1861, another ship deliberately took from one is-

land natives who had measles (a particularly virulent disease to islanders who had had no opportunity to develop selective immunity) and landed them on another island. The result—one third of the population promptly died. Islanders who refused to sell sandalwood were either fired upon, or a hostage was taken until they did. The wood became the ransom for the chief taken hostage. Sandalwood supplies were pretty nearly gone by 1860 and fortunes could no longer be made in this venture.

SLAVES BECOME TRADE "ITEMS"

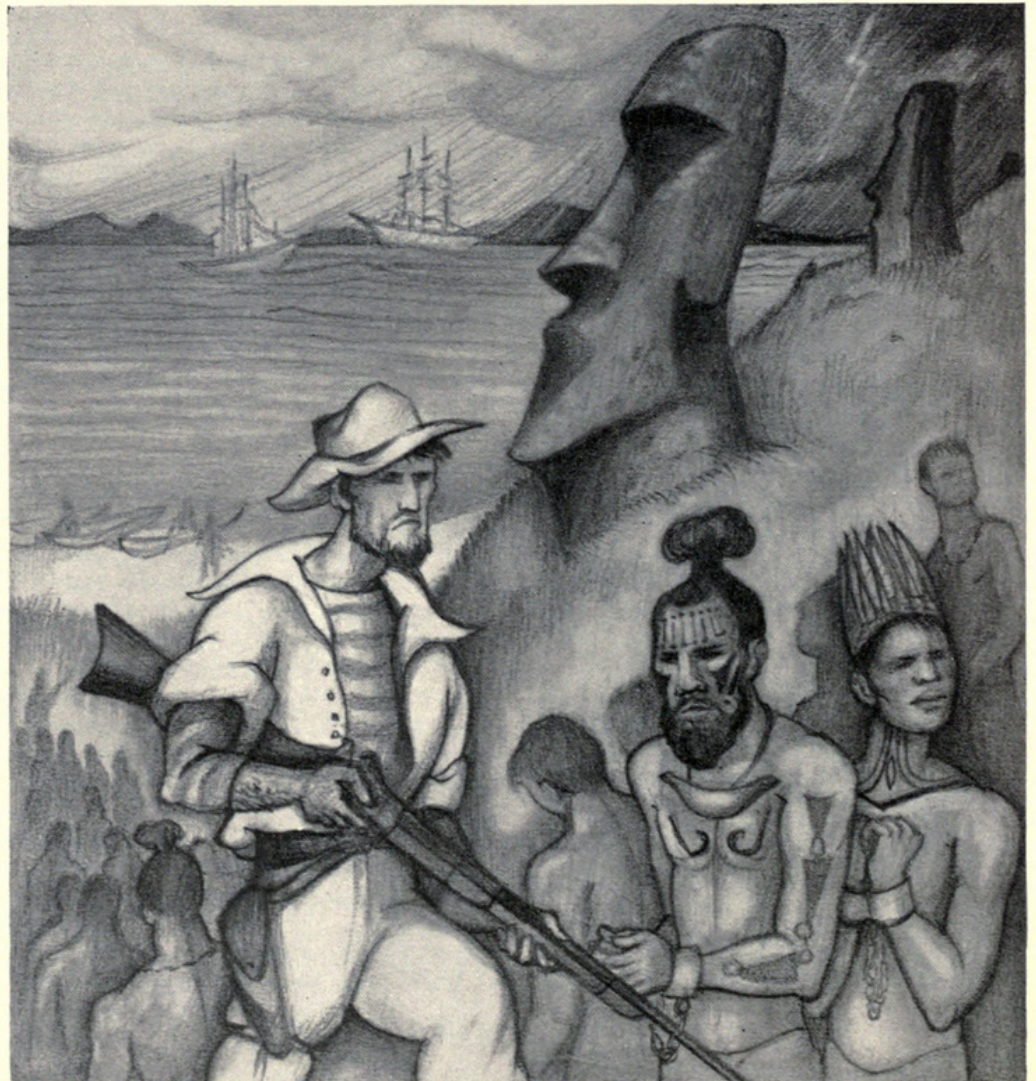
As the sandalwood supplies became exhausted by over-exploitation, the ships and men employed in that trade sought new methods of money-making. They turned to traffic in humans. Labor was urgently needed to work newly established plantations and mines. At first labor recruitment was accomplished by bribe (largely iron and trinkets) and promises of more goods later on. Later when reluctant natives declined invitations to leave their homes for slavery

on a strange island away from family, friends, and familiar scenes, the captains of the economic navy took them by force.

Fiji planters in particular could not recruit enough labor at home so they commissioned various ship's captains to secure it from other islands. Between 1864 and 1868, 1,649 natives were imported from the New Hebrides and from the Gilberts. Missionaries began to notice the decimation of their flocks and became alarmed. Over an 18-month span as many ships arrived on one New Hebrides island and made off with 250 natives. Several other small islands were literally stripped of all their males. The story was the same in many parts of the Pacific.

In the late 1850's, for example, the exploitation of the guano deposits on islands off the Peruvian coast was seen as a profitable business, but workers were needed and the recruiting of labor became a flourishing business. As early as 1859 or 1860 a few Easter Islanders were "kidnapped" from their island and sold as slaves, but in 1862

By Staff Illustrator Marion Pahl



a real war expedition was planned against the island. During December of that year eight ships set sail for Easter Island for the purpose of "recruiting" workers. A force of 80 men went ashore and failing to persuade the natives to accompany them, took them by force instead. A group of 500 were assembled and in the process several were shot while resisting the aliens. The others took to their heels, and after the smoke of battle had cleared, 200 Easter Islanders lay securely trussed up. The natives who escaped dove into the sea or ran for elevations or caves. Another means used on other occasions on Easter Island was to throw trinkets on the ground and while the natives were on their knees scrambling for them, they were bound up and rendered helpless. The raids quickly disheartened the natives and to escape from future slave raids they took refuge in the caves of the island where they lived in great discomfort and constant anxiety and neglected the care of their crops. The guano slaves never returned, but died on the barren, foreign islands.

WITH SLAVE TRADE—CRUELTY

Finally, in 1868 a Polynesian Laborers Act was put through Parliament in England and wages were fixed at not less than the stupendous sum of £6 a year (about \$17 today). The Act could not be enforced,

IN MEMORIAM

Mr. Joshua Daston, 66, an assistant in the department of botany since 1934, died suddenly April 19. Mr. Daston was born in Coosa Station, Alabama, but was educated in Italy. He received his bachelor of science degree after attending Collegio Mario Pagani, Bologna's University, and Firenze's University. In his botanical career he participated in a number of collecting expeditions including expeditions for the Italian Royal Botanical Gardens, the La Mortonal Gardens in Italy, and the F. A. Haage of Germany.

Two Museum guards also died last month. They are Samuel Colovos, with the Museum since 1955, and Clarence Chambers, a guard since 1958.

Longer Museum Hours Begin in May

Beginning May 1 the Museum's doors will remain open to the public from 9 A.M. to 6 P.M. seven days a week. These longer hours will remain in effect throughout the coming summer months and through Labor Day. On Memorial Day, May 30, and on July 4 the Museum will observe its regular hours of 9 to 6 P.M. Admission to the Museum is free on Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Children, students, and teachers are always admitted free.

of course, so the traffic in humans continued. Atrocities became even more common. One account tells of a group of Melanesian natives who were cut off from the shore by a blackbirding boat and were dragged aboard—the chief by means of a boat-hook through his cheek. They were jammed into a musty and airless hold where before long they began to suffocate. They clamored and tried to escape their prison, whereupon the crew fired at them through some small holes in the bulkhead. Three were killed and ultimately thrown overboard. The old chief was not quite dead so he was dispatched with an ax. Later on when this atrocity was discovered, the culprits were brought to trial in Australia, but native evidence was disallowed on the grounds that there were no oaths binding over such people. Finally, one Christianized native was allowed to testify. Most perpetrators, however, escaped punishment. This was partly so because non-British ships and British ships under other national flags were not accountable to British law.

Trickery was also used to lure labor recruits. One captain had a glass eye, another a wooden leg, and another wore a Ku Klux Klan type of garment with a large bag underneath; then he drank quantities of sea water to show his magic. Young men could be bought sometimes from chiefs if gifts amounted to enough. Typical were gifts of guns with the going rate, one firearm for one man. An especially liberal gift was considered ten fathoms of calico, a pipe, and some tobacco.

One of the chief effects of blackbirding was depopulation. In 1886 for example there were over a thousand Melanesian labor recruits in Queensland, Australia. High death rates existed among recruits. If they lasted out the voyage to their destination in old ships which were leaky and overcrowded as well as dirty, they still didn't fare too well. Poor diet, lack of medical attention, and overwork were the most potent factors in maintaining a high death rate. Plantation work hours were from 10 to 14 hours per day with an hour off for a meal. Contracts were usually for a three-year period.

The native could only lose. Punitive expeditions were sent by governments whose subjects had been arrested while trying to steal laborers, and little by little the old cultures decayed.

One of the most potent stimuli for change in the islands was the return of the in-

dentured laborers to their island homes. Most often returns were delayed or prevented by bright lights, flesh pots of the cities of the day, or death. But those who did return brought with them new ideas and different customs. As late as 1913 the British anthropologist W. H. Rivers had this to say about the situation:

At the present moment there exists in Melanesia an influence far more likely to produce disintegration of native institutions than the work of missionaries. I refer to the repatriation of laborers from Queensland which has been the result of the movement for a white Australia. Large numbers have recently returned to nearly every island. Some have been many years in Queensland, and have quite forgotten all they knew of their native institutions, some even have that contempt for these institutions that often accompanies a smattering of "civilization."

The end result of the sandalwood and slaves period in the Pacific was tremendous depopulation and Europeanized heathenism—another unhappy chapter in Pacific island contact history.

SCHWEITZER DISCUSSION

HERE SATURDAY, MAY 14

Four Nobel Peace Prize Winners will be featured at an 85th Anniversary Tribute to Albert Schweitzer to be held at the Museum May 14 at 8:30 P.M.

The Nobel Prize winners are the Rt. Hon. Philip Noel-Baker, R. F. Georges Dominique Pire, Sir Norman Angell, and Lord John Boyd Orr. They will participate in a panel discussion on the topic, "Albert Schweitzer's Blueprint For Peace." The discussion is a part of a symposium to be held that week on the subject, "The Wisdom of Albert Schweitzer."

The May 14 program will be held in the James Simpson Theatre and is sponsored by the Albert Schweitzer Education Foundation. Tickets for the evening are available upon request by writing the foundation at 55 E. Washington St., or calling RA 6-3140.

Life Member Wins Prize in Game Competition

A trophy of big horn sheep shot by Mr. William D. Cox, a life member of the Museum, won third prize in the 1958-1959 North American big game competition sponsored by the Boone and Crockett Club. Mr. Cox bagged his sheep last summer at the head of the Ghost River in Alberta, Canada. The trophy was measured by Chicago Natural History Museum prior to its submission to the Boone and Crockett Club Big Game Competition.

The Art Institute conducts classes in this Museum, deriving motifs from exhibits.

Studies North Borneo Fishes

Chin Phui Kong, fisheries officer with the department of agriculture of North Borneo in Jesselton, is visiting the Museum on a National Science Foundation grant. He will be working for approximately six months with Dr. R. F. Inger, Curator of Reptiles and Amphibians, on fresh water fishes of North Borneo.



Force, Roland W. 1960. "'Blackbirding' and the Decline of Island Cultures." *Bulletin* 31(5), 4-5.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/25694>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/371398>

Holding Institution

University Library, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign

Sponsored by

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the Chicago Field Museum.
For information contact dcc@library.uiuc.edu.

Rights Holder: Field Museum of Natural History

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.