Investigation 8
Slavery in Australia: Pacific Island labourers

It is not only a traffic in living flesh and blood, but in human life. The death rate of kanakas in Qld... is still very high. It is estimated that up to the end of 1894, about 50 500 kanakas had been imported into Queensland, and that of this number some say 11 000 had died. What awful tribute is this!...

[Since the 1860s, sugar planters in Queensland had been importing labourers from the Pacific islands to clear, cut and plant the cane fields. There is no doubt that the exploited labour of the kanakas laid the foundations of the Queensland sugar industry. Many Europeans actually believed that Whites were not suited to working in the tropical climate, so that the use of coloured labour was a necessity. One settler said,]... 'I have been in northern Queensland for seventeen years...'

The climate is good, but I cannot do the same amount of work that I could do in the south, and the men I employ cannot. Even the horses cannot do the same amount of work.

[Another settler remarked]... 'It seems to me... that the hotter the weather the better the kanaka can work.' Toiling in the maize and cane fields from dawn to dusk, and fed on a monotonous diet of cheap starchy food, the... [Pacific island] labourers of north Queensland were surely the hardest-worked people in Australia in 1888.

As early as 1870, stories of mistreatment of kanakas had aroused opposition from missionaries, town dwellers, and even the British government. There was evidence that illiterate islanders signed contracts to work in Queensland without knowing what was involved. The trade in Pacific islanders seemed little more than kidnapping since, in some cases, force was used or island chiefs sold the kanakas to white traders. Stories are told of islanders encouraged to come to the recruiting vessel to trade who, once on deck, were overtaken and the hatches closed to stop them from escaping. Sometimes their canoes would be run down, and as many as possible of the struggling islanders picked up and imprisoned below deck.

Blackbirders, as those engaged in the labour trade were called, lied to the natives. Often the people did not understand that they were being taken to work on the cane fields for three years. Some Blackbirders impersonated missionaries and enticed people onto their boats by promising gifts.

The kanakas were subjected to inhuman conditions on the transport ship, but on arrival at the sugar plantations, their plight was often worse. They were killed by overwork, insufficient or improper food, bad water, poor housing, lack of medical care and general neglect.

Many white Queenslanders believed that they were superior to the Pacific islanders. The patronising comments of Archibald Forbes reflect a common attitude in this period.

The Polynesian seems to me by nature a cheerful, bright sort of fellow. If he is not so in his island home he soon takes on this complexion when he comes to Queensland. When you look at him he grins responsively; when you speak to him he smiles all over his head. He is a likeable fellow, and has an instinctive politeness and cordiality. He will run of his own accord to open a gate for you, or to hold your horse. He seems, and is spoken of, as a willing workman; he does his work with a light heart, and takes a manifest interest in it... There is a good deal in him of the feudal instinct. He becomes exceedingly attached to his master, if the latter is a considerate master, with a kind word for his henchman and a genuine solicitude for his welfare.
By 1885, the Queensland government had passed laws to protect islanders from harsh treatment, and appointed government agents to supervise recruiting, adequate accommodation on the voyage, humane treatment in Queensland and certainly of return. But still the injustices continued. When Australia became a nation in 1901, steps were taken immediately to put an end to the system of Pacific Island labour.

Kanaka sugar cane workers. In 1888, there were about 8000 kanaka labourers in Queensland. Fewer than 300 were women.
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### Thinking, talking, writing

1. What evidence is there in the extracts to suggest that the use of Pacific Island labourers in Queensland was like ‘slavery’?

2. Why did sugar planters use Pacific Island labourers?

3. What were 'Blackbirders' and what tactics did they use to entice labourers to Queensland?

4. Why was there a high death rate among kanakas?

5. Look at the picture of the kanaka sugar cane workers (above):
   a. How would you describe their dress and appearance?
   b. How is the European man portrayed?
   c. What type of work do they do?
   d. List all the difficulties you can think of associated with this work in Queensland.

6. What do you think of Archibald Forbes' attitude to kanakas?

7. The Pacific Island labourers came from the the Bismarck Archipelago, the New Hebrides and the Solomon, Loyalty, Torres, Banks and Santa Cruz Islands.
   a. Locate these Islands in an atlas and draw a sketch map of them and their relationship to the Australian coastline.
   b. Use the scale on the atlas map to calculate the distance the recruiting ships travelled from Australia to the islands and back in their quest for labourers.
   c. What do you think the experience of this trip would be like for the islanders?