

How the labour recruitment process of the ‘slavers’ in Queensland affected the Solomon Islands



Poverty remained: Tulagi Island, north of Guadalcanal. Author photograph, 2016.

The recruitment of Melanesian labour for Queensland’s sugar industry has long been contested within Australian historiography. This essay analyses two key primary sources that illuminate the racial, political, and cultural dynamics underpinning the trade: the Report of the Royal Commission on Recruiting of Natives in the Western Pacific (1885–86) and the Pacific Islanders Protection Act (1872). Together, these

texts expose the contradictions between colonial humanitarian rhetoric and the coercive realities of the labour trade. The Royal Commission Report provides first-hand testimony from Islanders, missionaries, and recruiters, revealing the violence and deception that characterised recruitment encounters. The Protection Act, by contrast, exemplifies the British state's claim to moral oversight while simultaneously legitimising imperial intervention and racial hierarchy. The essay's central argument is that Queensland's labour recruitment system was not a benign form of indenture. It was a racially constructed mechanism of economic exploitation and colonial control. Guided by Pierre van den Berghe's theory of utilitarian racism, the analysis interprets both documents as artefacts of power that sought to rationalise inequality through the language of legality and civilisation. Methodologically, it employs close textual analysis to examine the rhetorical framing and silences within each source, situating them in their historical and political contexts. In doing so, it demonstrates how politics and culture intersected in the late nineteenth century to normalise coercion, justify empire, and redefine sovereignty across the Pacific.

Historiography of Queensland's nineteenth-century labour trade has shifted markedly in recent decades. Earlier accounts, often shaped by planter apologetics or nationalistic narratives, tended to frame the trade as benign indenture, a story of Islanders "voluntarily" crossing the Pacific to labour in sugar fields and returning enriched. Revisionist work, however, has repositioned the trade through South Sea Islander-centred perspectives, foregrounding the violence, coercion, and systemic inequalities embedded in recruitment practices. At the centre of this reassessment lies the recruitment process itself, where consent was manufactured or denied on beaches, aboard schooners, and in encounters between Islanders and recruiters.

Queensland's recruiters, derided as "slavers" in contemporary commentary, produced enduring impacts on the Solomon Islands through their practices of enticement, deception, and coercion. The analysis of this position unfolds in four stages. Primarily, it situates the Queensland sugar frontier and its turn to Melanesia after the 1860s, noting the racialised ideology underpinning the demand for Islander labour. Second, it examines recruitment methods themselves, drawing on evidence from the Royal Commission Report and analyses by historians such as Clive Moore and Tracey Banivanua Mar. Third, it traces the effects of these practices on Solomon Islands societies, including demographic imbalance, political destabilisation, cultural transformations, and the circulation of new goods and diseases. Finally, it analyses how scandals over recruiting practices invited legislative interventions in Queensland and justified the imposition of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate in 1893.

The emergence of Queensland's sugar frontier after the 1860s was the essential driver of Melanesian labour recruitment. European settlers who had established pastoral economies in the Darling Downs and coastal districts soon turned northwards, attracted by a better agricultural climate suitable for sugarcane. However, cane required intensive manual labour at harvest time and labour was scarce in settler society. To achieve this capability, European settlers connected themselves with Melanesians, whether the latter were either kidnapped or arriving voluntarily, as they were the main source of the labour trade.¹ Colonial thinking considered the Melanesians as naturally suited to tropical work, unlike white men, and Queensland's commercial success depended on labour-intensive sugar grown in a climate considered too harsh for Europeans, who were perceived as better

¹ Clive Moore, 'The Misappropriation of Malaitan Labour', *Journal of Pacific History*, vol.42, no.2, 2007, p.218.

suited to cooler work environments. This belief became central to justifying Islander recruitment.² Here, theories of race shine light on how an ideology can change into an urgent social driver. While historians like Andrew Markus frame the development of Australian race relations as being driven by the ideology of white supremacy³, Pierre van den Berghe's concept of 'utilitarian racism' provides a clearer lens for this specific context. By identifying Melanesians as biologically suited to plantation labour, colonial society created a racial ideology that incorporated an inequality that justified coercive labour extraction. This ideological conviction that Islander labour was both necessary and natural shaped the direction of early recruiting efforts.

These early efforts turned to Polynesia, with the infamous *Don Juan* voyage of 1863 recruiting seventy Islanders from Vanuatu.⁴ When Polynesian sources diminished, recruiters expanded to the Solomons, particularly after the 1870s, where young men were considered as plentiful and available. Clive Moore notes that the shift to Melanesia marked a critical stage: whereas Polynesian communities had longer exposure to European traders and missionaries, many Solomon Island groups had little contact before the arrival of recruiters.⁵ This made Islanders more vulnerable to deception and coercion. At this time, The Pacific Islanders Protection Act (1872) was developed, but while written in the language of humanitarian expression, its main function appears to legitimise the labour trade, while still embedding racial hierarchy. Its preamble establishes this stance, stating that its purpose is to address:

² Tracey Banivanua Mar, *Violence and Colonial Dialogue: The Australian–Pacific Indentured Labour Trade*, Honolulu, University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007, p.76.

³ Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations, 1788-1993*, St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1994, pp.1-5.

⁴ Clive Moore, *Kanaka: A History of Melanesian Migration to Queensland, 1863–1906*, Port Moresby: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies; Canberra: Pandanus Books, 1985, p.24

⁵ Moore, 'The Misappropriation of Malaitan Labour', p.215.

"criminal outrages by British subjects upon natives... have of late much prevailed and increased, and it is expedient to make further provision for the prevention and punishment of such outrages" ⁶.

This framing positions the British state as a humanitarian protector, obscuring the reality that such protection primarily served Queensland's economic interests; the British colony that was the primary driver of these outrages. Even so, in summary, the labour policies of the Act:

"had three features: the indenture contract with its punitive clauses; the use of physical violence to compel work on the plantations; and the introduction of Head Tax in 1921–23 on all healthy adult males." ⁷

But clearly, not much of a change from an earlier abusive arrangement. Public debate, as recorded by historians, reflected widespread concern over indentured labour "as a thinly disguised revival of the slave trade or objected to the deliberate importation into a white colony of a black population." ⁸ Such controversies presaged the Royal Commission Report, which took testimony on widespread abuses. This report exposed the demand for cane labour which had created a recruitment regime characterised by racialisation, coercion, and contested legality. The practices by which Islanders were obtained blurred lines between contract and capture. In the early years of the labour trade, recruitment "involved a large amount of kidnapping and deception." ⁹ Once Islanders were lured aboard, anchors were raised, and the men were transported against their will. In other cases, recruiters staged outright raids, firing shots to disperse crowds and seizing individuals by force. "Recruiting in its early stages was primarily by deception and force." ¹⁰ The Royal Commission

⁶ *Pacific Islanders Protection Act 1872*, 35 & 36 Vict., c. 19.

⁷ Ibid. p.223.

⁸ Banivanua Mar, *Violence and Colonial Dialogue*, p.76.

⁹ Clive Moore, *The Misappropriation of Malaitan Labour*, p.218.

¹⁰ Clive Moore, 'Used and Abused: Malaitans in the Queensland Labour Trade', in *Work and Culture Among the Australian Aborigines*, edited by L. R. Hiatt, Canberra, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1979, p.156.

Report recorded extensive testimony with concluding statements in each Part of the report such as:

“On a review of the whole evidence as to recruiting on this voyage of the Lizzie, we are of the opinion that while some of the natives were forcibly kidnapped, all of them were allured on board by false statements; that the nature of the engagements to which they subsequently attached their marks were deliberately misrepresented to them; and that they were coming to Queensland to work on a sugar plantation for three years”¹¹

Such evidence highlights the imbalance of language and power: consent was constructed through mistranslation, coercion, or outright violence, because even when Islanders boarded voluntarily, recruiters manipulated conditions so that consent was neither informed nor free.

Theoretical perspectives such as Pierre van den Berghe’s typology of prejudice describe this situation, defining the paternalistic type of prejudice of a ruling, racial minority leading to a caste system.¹² In Queensland, the subservient caste role of Islanders was confined to a racially segregated labour market, cheap, exploitable, and disposable, while also being excluded from citizenship. Recruitment placed them into a racial order where their existence was justified by planters’ needs; the media also reflected this attitude. *The Queenslander* at that time published advertisements of plantations for sale such as that of the Pandora Sugar Estate inclusive of buildings, machinery, and the engaged labour of 55 Kanakas. Interesting to note here that this engaged labour is “under 3 years’ agreement, as per Queensland regulations, 2 ½ years yet unexpired.” This indicates economic reliance on their labour but also hints at how this scenario presumed legitimately employed

¹¹ *Report of the Royal Commission on Recruiting of Natives in the Western Pacific* (Brisbane: Government Printer, 1885–86), *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 5 May 1885, p.2, accessed via Trove, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article174161955>, [Accessed 19 November 2025].

¹² Pierre L. Van den Berghe, “The Dynamics of Racial Prejudice: An Ideal-Type Dichotomy,” *Social Forces*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1958, p.139.

individuals and normalised them as part of the machinery required for producing Queensland's sugar wealth.¹³ The effects of recruitment were felt throughout the Solomons as recruiters targeted adolescent and young adult men, removing them from village life for three-year periods. In some districts, notably Malaita, entire cohorts of young men were absented, creating gender imbalances. It could be presumed then, as a result, that women bore greater agricultural and domestic burdens, while men's absence left communities militarily weakened. This created a dire situation in regions where inter-tribal warfare was already recurrent.¹⁴ Ironically, one of the reasons some men voluntarily sought employment in Queensland, was to obtain weaponry to give them an edge in the warfare at home that they had, in effect, left more vulnerable by their absence.¹⁵ This already alarming situation was made worse when men returned, sometimes bringing with them more than tools of warfare but also new diseases such as measles and influenza, which spread rapidly through populations with little immunity.¹⁶

The external problems brought home by the returnees compounded existing local tensions, especially the frequent inter-tribal violence in some regions. Missionaries did provide limited assistance in addressing these conflicts and although their primary purpose was to establish their religious faith, whether welcomed or not, they often worked with local chiefs to help manage outbreaks of renewed violence. Another irony is that these imported religious influences coincided with another destabilising factor, the uneven distribution of firearms and iron tools, which

¹³ *The Queenslander* (Brisbane, Qld : 1866–1939), ‘Valuable Sugar Estate’, advertisement for sale of the Pandora Sugar Plantation, 22 November 1884, [Accessed 1 November 2025], available at <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/23976485>, [Accessed 15 November 2025].

¹⁴ Moore, *Kanaka*, pp.7-14.

¹⁵ Clive Moore, ‘The Misappropriation of Malaitan Labour: Historical Origins of the Recent Solomon Islands Crisis’, *The Journal of Pacific History*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2007, pp. 216-217.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.219.

ultimately intensified inter-tribal conflict. Moore describes these cycles of feud and revenge in which, for other actions against Europeans, “provoked naval bombardments or naval shore parties to punish Solomon Islanders for 80 years.”¹⁷ Cultural and religious change also accelerated, with missionaries observing that returning labourers brought not only goods but also new ideas, pidgin English, clothing styles, differing Christian beliefs. Some of the returnees became evangelists, using plantation experiences to reshape village life. Oral histories recall men seeking trade and learning as much as experiencing coercion, indicating that the labour trade was not only destructive and transformative but also producing hybrid identities as described by Moore in reference to Scott’s “postcolonial hybridity”.¹⁸ These opposing scenarios of exploitation and opportunities sought, were bringing greater awareness of the real machinery of islander recruitment, and this fed directly into contemporary political debates. Wider knowledge of recruitment scandals regarding these scenarios now became a problem in Queensland politics. As a result of investigations, in 1880 and 1884, legislation tightened supervision of the trade, requiring government agents to be placed aboard ships and limiting recruiting zones. Even so, abuses persisted, as revealed by continuing prosecutions. Moore notes that despite reforms, “coercion to work” continued.¹⁹ Missionaries and humanitarian reformers publicised these scandals, portraying recruiters as slavers in a British colony that prided itself on liberty. This contradiction between settler ideals and coercive practices became untenable.

¹⁷ Clive Moore, *Making Mala: Malaita in Solomon Islands, 1870s-1930s* (Acton ACT: ANU Press, 2017), p.312.

¹⁸ Moore, *Misappropriation of Malaitan Labour, Journal of Pacific History*, vol.42, no.2, 2007, p.230.

¹⁹ Ibid. p.223.

Imperial response followed in the creation of The Pacific Islanders Protection Act (1872). The policies of protection and assimilation reflected in this Act, emphasised the British state's claim to moral oversight while at the same time, legitimising imperial intervention and racial hierarchy. This Act, while positioned as a measure to prevent criminal outrages and kidnapping, established a licensing system that formally sanctioned the transportation of Pacific Islander labourers.²⁰ This system of licensing lent an appearance of bureaucratic legitimacy to an enterprise that was fundamentally rooted and already well established in exploitation and racial subordination. By showing itself as a civilising force against the illegitimations of certain individual British subjects, the Act also gave the subtle indication of an underlying racial hierarchy. Racial formation theory assists in clarifying this dynamic, indicating how racial constructs were not merely social ideas but state practices.²¹ This positioned Indigenous peoples as subjects to be managed, not as sovereign peoples. By the 1890s, mounting outrage over recruiting contributed to Britain declaring the Solomon Islands Protectorate in 1893.²² Officially, this step was to suppress abuses and regulate labour; in reality, it entrenched colonial control, using the pretext of protecting Islanders while ensuring continued access to their labour.²³ Deportations of Islanders from 1901 to 1908, following Australia's Federation and the White Australia Policy, marked an abrupt end to the trade, but for Solomon Islanders, this legacy remains.²⁴ It disrupted communities, transformed economies, and left sad memories of "stolen men."²⁵ Oral testimony

²⁰ *Pacific Islanders Protection Act 1872* (35 & 36 Vict., c. 19), ss. 3, 5, and Schedule B.

²¹ Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native', *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol.8, no. 4, 2006, p.389.

²² Moore, *Kanaka*, pp.256-280.

²³ 'Pacific Islanders Protection', *Weekly Examiner* (Launceston, Tas.), 21 September 1872, p.6, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article233100771> [Accessed 15 November 2025].

²⁴ Moore, *Kanaka*, pp.256-280.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p.46.

collected in the twentieth century repeatedly emphasises the trauma of recruitment.

It is remembered less as an opportunity than as a considerable loss of freedom.²⁶

The recruitment practices of Queensland's slavers were not peripheral to the sugar industry but were a composite of enticement, deception, coercion, and filling plantations with cheap labour on the one hand, while on the other, exporting violence and disruption to the Solomon Islands. The Pacific Islanders Protection Act (1872) provided the legal and rhetorical framework for this exploitation, legitimising it through the language of humanitarian protection. The fundamental hypocrisy of this system becomes clear when the Act's stated purpose of preventing "criminal outrages... upon natives" is held in direct opposition to the Royal Commission's finding that recruiters "forcibly kidnapped" Islanders and "allured them on board by false statements."²⁷ This obvious contrast reveals the core function of utilitarian racism: to deploy a veneer of legality and protection as a smokescreen for a project of economic exploitation. The Royal Commission Report exposed the violent reality that the law was designed to obscure.

²⁶ Clive Moore, 'Australian South Sea Islanders' Narratives of Belonging', in *Narrative and Identity Construction in the Pacific Islands*, ed. by Farzana Gounder, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2015, pp. 160-162.

²⁷ *Pacific Islanders Protection Act 1872*, Preamble; and *Report of the Royal Commission on Recruiting of Natives in the Western Pacific*, Brisbane: Government Printer, 1885-86, *The Telegraph*, Brisbane, 5 May 1885, p. 2. accessed via Trove, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article174161955>, [Accessed 19 November 2025].

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