

**Georges Baudoux's *Jean M'Barai: The Trepang Fisherman*, translated and with a critical introduction by Karin Speedy (Sydney: UTS Press, 2015)**

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Georges Baudoux's 1919 novella *Jean M'Barai: The Trepang Fisherman* is an extraordinary account of life in and around New Caledonia in the late-nineteenth century. Written by the son of French settlers, it nevertheless shows that its author was well acquainted with the range of lives possible in the colony beyond just those of settlers. His account of the life of a mixed-race and hence ultimately displaced man is generally sympathetic, even if he employs racist language and stereotypes to tell it. Framed by first person narration (is it Baudoux's voice?), we follow Jean, who is presented to us by his friend the narrator, as 'a certain type of character – characters who are quite widespread in the islands of Oceania but are nonetheless not well known' (50). This notion of typology is typical of its time, especially in reference to the colonised, but the novella mostly transcends this potential narrowness by presenting a distinctive portrait. Jean's life is indeed full of adventures, but the most extreme of them are not of his own choosing; in showing how the workings of colonial enterprise play out on the body and life of this individual character, Baudoux provides a critique of the power structures of his day.

Karin Speedy is well equipped to translate such a tale. She has previously written about New Caledonian creole, aspects of the French labour trade, and on other writings by Baudoux. Not only has Speedy translated a text which presents very particular challenges, but she has also provided a wealth of critical and contextual information on the author, the historical setting, and the languages employed within it. There are preceding chapters on the life of Baudoux, his literary career, and the choices made in translation. The original text includes the colloquial speech bichelamar, the New Caledonian version of a creole spoken through much of the Pacific by islanders working with Europeans and Americans, and this form of speech is reproduced here, being largely understandable to an Anglophone reader. This language is depicted as being spoken on New Caledonia, the New Hebrides (Vanuatu) and in the Queensland cane fields of Australia.

Of the various stages of M'Barai's life, one of the most disturbing is the time he spends in enforced labour in the cane fields. The novella shows very clearly that the 'labour' trade which provided the work force for the Australian sugar industry, was in fact a form of slavery, maintained by deceit, cruelty and violence. Despite laws passed to regulate it, recruitment was often sustained by kidnapping or at the very least by trickery and misrepresentation. Those who returned to their home islands often had little to show for their years of work, as 'expenses' were deducted in ways that could keep labourers working for years longer than they had contracted to do. Baudoux had a good understanding of conditions in Queensland, as many of his mining workforce had previously been in the cane fields.

Speedy notes Baudoux's interest in hereditary characteristics. The narrator often attributes M'Barai's actions and responses to his heritage. When he is plucky or persistent, it is because of his father's Breton heritage; when he succumbs to despair, drunkenness or shows no restraint, it is his Kanak blood that is the cause. An unusual phase of M'Barai's life concerns his

time spent as a prisoner in the New Hebrides, where, after being knifed and then shot, he is carefully restored to health in order to ultimately play a role as a kind of breeding bull, impregnating a succession of wives who are rotated through his prison compound. No explanation is given for this episode, but it seems to suggest that the racial heritage available through a mixed-race man will enhance the local 'stock' in the eyes of the locals. This is the most bizarre and potentially disturbing instance of racialised thinking in the text, which uses the racist language of its time throughout. This is especially so when it describes the labour trade, but this is not, in the end, a univocal text. Baudoux shows the reader a very clear-eyed picture of the exploitative practices involved in sugar production, from its highly dubious recruiting methods to life on the plantations, which is depicted as very like life in the American South under slavery. Speedy claims that Baudoux 'has left us with a multivocal text that both supports and subverts the binaries of savagery and civilisation' (40). In showing the material conditions of colonialism, the text goes some way toward condemning them, even if the narrator uses the language of racial science to describe his non-white characters at the same time.

As for the literary merit of the novella, it varies, and is difficult to judge in translation. At times the style is quite clunky, a characteristic enhanced by the ongoing use of short sentences. Despite this, it is still well worth reading. The more Anglophone and Francophone readers can gain access to each other's literary sources, the better will be our understanding of the whole Pacific region. Pacific Studies, and the wider field of transnational literatures, can only benefit from such cross-fertilisations. The hard work of translation is what makes this possible, and it is to be hoped that Speedy will be able to continue with more of this important work.

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