

Introduction: Ben Boyd in Australian history

Ben Boyd, a stockbroker and banker in the City of London, arrived in Sydney in July 1842 to establish branches of the Royal Bank of Australia in New South Wales, South Australia and Van Diemen's Land. On finding colonial banks in a 'general state of insolvency', he abandoned plans for conventional banking. He borrowed, in his own name and that of the Australian Wool Company, around £416 000 from the Royal Bank raised in the United Kingdom by selling debentures. Boyd established a whaling station and boiling down works at Twofold Bay. He founded a coastal shipping line, began building Boydtown at Twofold Bay, and bought squatting leases on Crown and totalling around three million acres.

Four years later Boyd was being crushed by substantial losses in his commercial ventures and interest accumulating on his loans from the Royal Bank. Profits from his squatting runs offered his only prospect of remaining solvent but he needed cheap labour if growing wool on vast squatting runs was to yield greater profits. With no prospect of obtaining convicts or assisted emigrants from the United Kingdom or convict exiles from Van Diemen's Land Boyd turned to indentured Indian and Chinese coolies. With none readily available, Boyd recruited 192 Kanakas from Melanesia and Micronesia in 1847 as a last resort. From the outset the Kanakas refused to work and from July 1847 the colony's Master and Servant Act was amended to exempted 'any native of any savage or uncivilized tribe inhabiting any Island or Country in the Pacific Islands or elsewhere' from its jurisdiction. The Kanakas could not be coerced except for gaoling them for up to three months. By 1848 Boyd could no longer pay the wages of his employees. The board of the Royal Bank in London elected Boyd's cousin, William Sprott Boyd, as chairman and sent him to Sydney to wind up the bank. Ben Boyd sailed to the Californian goldfields in 1849 but had no luck. On returning to New South Wales in 1851, he went ashore on Guadalcanal and was killed and eaten by the natives.

Memorials to Ben Boyd are to be found in Ben Boyd National Park, a popular tourist destination in south-eastern New South Wales, Ben Boyd Dam, Ben Boyd Parade, Boydtown Park Road, Ben Boyd Tower and Ben Boyd Service Station in Eden. Ben Boyd Road runs through Neutral Bay, a suburb on Sydney's lower north shore. The Royal Australian Historical Society erected a plaque at the corner of Ben Boyd Road and Kurraba Road in November 1931 with engravings of Boyd and his yacht the *Wanderer*. Will Lawson published a novel in 1939 'based on the facts of Ben Boyd's life' titled *In Ben Boyd's Day*. Francis Webb's five hundred-line epic poem, *A Drum for Ben Boyd* illustrated by Norman Lindsay, was published in 1948. The Mitchell Library's catalogue lists more than eighty newspaper and magazine articles, pamphlets and collections of press clippings on Boyd and eleven on Boyd Town.¹

Many of the articles and the few books on Ben Boyd could not be described as scholarly. H. G. Turner's article, 'A Notorious Australian Banker', in *Austral Light* (1893) is a pioneering account of the rise and fall of Boyd's commercial and squatting empire, followed by the liquidation of the Royal Bank and the bankruptcy of its 83 shareholders in the mid-1850s. James Henry Watson, on retiring from the commercial world in 1901, became an amateur historian and joined the Royal Australian Historical Society in 1904. He published an article in two parts on Ben Boyd's career as a 'Merchant, Adventurer and Pioneer' in New South Wales in the *Journal of the Royal Historical Society* in 1910 and 1912. Watson consulted the available newspaper articles and public records but, following the scholarly conventions of the day, he did not cite or list his sources. Watson never mentioned Boyd's labour problems leading to his importation of Kanakas or the liquidation of the Royal Bank in London in the 1850s. However, he covered Boyd's 'mysterious' disappearance on Guadalcanal in 1851 in detail. Watson concluded that Boyd was a man of a generous and warm hearted disposition who entertained 'nobly'. He

¹ Mitchell Library, Dictionary catalogue of printed books, I, 73-87.

was welcomed in colonial society but his life was full of ‘contraries’ and came to a ‘disappointing’ end on Guadalcanal. The *Wanderer* was wrecked a few weeks later at the entrance to Port Macquarie.

H. P. Wellings, an accountant, shipping agent and photographer at Eden stimulated popular interest among motoring tourists with his articles and pamphlets in the 1930s on the Twofold Bay district and Ben Boyd. His 48-page pamphlet, *Benjamin Boyd in Australia, 1842-1849* (1936), went through several editions. Wellings’ journal article, ‘Ben Boyd’s labour supplies’ (1934), traced Boyd’s efforts find labour for his vast squatting runs. Unable to attract ‘old hands’ (ex-convicts) or British emigrants willing to work for the low wages offered, Boyd turned to time-expired convicts languishing in Van Diemen’s Land. When that came to nothing, he explored the British government’s proposal in 1846 to send ticket-of-leave convict ‘exiles’ to New South Wales. When the arrival of ‘exiles’ was postponed (until 1849), Boyd turned to the Pacific Islands as a last resort. Wellings devoted four pages to the recruiting and the employment of the Kanakas but concluded that a comprehensive examination of the subject would be too long for one article.

Thomas Dunbabin took a Bachelor and Master of Arts at the University of Tasmania and won a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford in 1906. On returning to Australia he worked as a journalist in Hobart and Melbourne. He went to London in 1930 to manage a cable service for Australian newspapers. On returning to Australia in 1932 he wrote *Slavers of the South Seas* (1935). The book begins in the sixteenth century with Spaniards kidnapping the natives of the Pacific for labour in their empire and concludes with the abolition of ‘blackbirding’ to Queensland in 1904. Chapter XIV, ‘Ben Boyd’s Kanakas’, covers for the first time Ben Boyd’s recruiting of Kanakas in 1847. Had Dunbabin cited his sources, and included a bibliography and index, his book might have been described as ‘scholarly’. Unlike most recent ‘popular’ and ‘scholarly’ historians, Dunbabin was the first historian to consult the three Colonial Office inquiries into the ‘affray’ on Rotuma in August 1847 between the natives and the crews on Boyd’s two recruiting ships. Dunbabin

explained that the Kanakas were recruited by the captains of Boyd's ships giving presents to their chiefs. Dunbabin concluded that evil wrought by Boyd lived after him but did little harm by the blackbirding he set on foot.

Tom Mead worked for 50 years as a newspaper journalist and was member of the New South Wales parliament for 11 years. He spent six years researching and writing *Empire of Straw* (1994), the longest of the 'popular' biographies of Ben Boyd running to 286 pages. A bibliography lists books, newspapers and magazine articles and government and private papers but does not cite these sources in the text. The book has no index. Mead never mentioned Diamond's *The Sea Horse and the Wanderer* published six years earlier. Mead said nothing about how the Kanakas were recruited or how they fared in New South Wales. He devotes five pages (205-9) to the politics of Kanaka labour based mostly on the Legislative Council's debates on the Kanakas in October 1847.

Bob Lawrence, a journalist, published a well-written 27-page pamphlet, *Benjamin Boyd* (1993), but devoted only two pages to the Kanakas. Twenty-four years later he published a substantial and well-illustrated booklet titled *From Eden to Windsor: the amazing life of Sir Oswald Brierly* (2017) who came to New South Wales with Boyd and managed his whaling depot at East Boyd.

The first 'scholarly' article on Boyd was B. H. Molesworth's 'Kanaka labour in Queensland' (1917). He began with Boyd's employment of Kanakas as shepherds on his runs in the Murrumbidgee squatting district in southern New South Wales. Exposed to the winter cold and isolated from any semblance of civilised society, the Kanakas walked to Sydney and Melbourne to find a ship to take them home. An amendment in July 1847 to the New South Wales Master and Servant Act exempted Kanakas from its jurisdiction, thereby ending prospects of any more Pacific Islanders being brought to the colony.

British 'imperial' historians of the Pacific in the two decades after World War Two mentioned Boyd's recruitment of Kanakas briefly. J. M. Ward's *British Policy in the South Pacific* (1948) identified 'the famous Benjamin Boyd' as the first British subject to employ

native labour in the Pacific on a significant scale. Boyd's conversations with sandalwood traders on employing South Seas Islanders as deck hands on their ships convinced him that they might be willing to work as shepherds in New South Wales. Colonial Office records revealed that the British and New South Wales governments had investigated rumours of Pacific Islanders being taken against their will but three official inquiries eventually cleared Boyd of anything illegal. Ward did not explain why the employment of Pacific Islanders failed.

W. P. Morrell's *Britain and the Pacific Islands* (1960) argued that Boyd's Kanakas were a warning of abuses in the labour trade in the face of British government support for Christian missions as a 'civilising agency' in the Pacific Islands. O. W. Parnaby's *Britain and the Labor Trade in the Southwest Pacific* (1964) was the first and is still the only general history on the subject. Parnaby relied on official documents, mainly Colonial Office records and printed parliamentary papers, to explain how British and Queensland governments managed the Kanaka trade to Queensland and Fiji. Colonial Office records revealed that Boyd's ships called at Rotuma for supplies in July 1847. Kanakas recruited at Uvea in the Loyalty Islands had jumped ship and swam ashore to seek refuge with a local chief. An attempt by the crew to 'rescue' the Uveans ended in an 'affray, with shots being fired leaving two three dead and a few wounded. The Colonial Office asked the governors of New Zealand and New South Wales to investigate how the natives had been recruited and why the Rotuma affray occurred against Her Majesty's Government's wish to prevent British subjects ill-treating Pacific Islanders.

Manning Clark's third volume (1973) of *A History of Australia* dramatised Boyd's adventures in New South Wales for a new generation of readers. Clark characterised Boyd as 'an adventurer and cloud-topper' exuding 'extravagance and recklessness' who dreamt of building a kingdom in the Antipodes with cheap convict labour. He had 'the appearance of one of those god-like men in the paintings of Reuben's, and an appetite for glory to match the garments of display with which he decked his body'. Labour shortages impeded

Boyd's plans for a great commercial and pastoral empire. When unemployed men in Sydney refused to accept the low wages to work as shepherds, Boyd turned to the 'barbarous islands of Polynesia'. Clark did not cover the recruitment of the Kanakas or how they fared in the colony. 'Massa Boyd', on returning from California in October 1851, Clark concluded, went ashore alone on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands to be killed and eaten by the same people he had once recruited.

K. R. Howe's article 'Sailors and labourers' (1978) begins in the 1820s with the whalers—who left few records—followed by sandalwood traders in the early 1830s. Word limits confined the recruiting of Boyd's Kanakas to three pages which did not allow enough space even to outline the voyages and conditions on the recruiting ships. However, Howe consulted the transcripts of inquiries conducted by Captain Maxwell and the New South Wales attorney general held in the Colonial Office records relating to the 'affray' on Rotuma. Howe also consulted a book, written in French, on the repatriation of about 30 Kanakas from Rotuma on the *Arche d'Alliance*, a French missionary ship.

Alan Dwight based his article, 'South Sea Islanders in New South Wales' (1983), on contemporary printed sources, particularly newspapers, but did not consult the Colonial Office records. He described Boyd's 'little-remembered' experiment with Melanesian labour as significant for the 'intensely bitter controversy' it generated but did not give any examples. He concluded that 'curiosity' explained why South Sea Islanders went willingly to New South Wales.

Marion Diamond's *The Sea Horse and the Wanderer: Ben Boyd in Australia*, first published 1988 and reprinted as *Ben Boyd of Boydtown* in 1995, is the only full-length scholarly book on Boyd. Diamond was the first and only Australian historian to consult the uncatalogued and unmicrofilmed bankruptcy records of the Royal Bank's liquidation in the National Archives in London. The book fills a large gap in Boyd's commercial ventures financed with money borrowed from the Royal Bank; tracing his personal loans from Royal Bank; and explaining the collapse of his commercial empire in New South

Wales. Diamond's chapter seven, 'Labour problems', does not cover the recruiting voyages or how the Kanakas fared in New South Wales, and does not go far into the political and humanitarian opposition to Kanaka labour in New South Wales, England and among the missionaries in the Pacific Islands.

Mark McKenna's 'cultural' history of south-eastern New South Wales (2002) argues that Boyd dominated the memory of whaling at Twofold Bay. A visitor from Sydney to Twofold Bay in 1856 described the ruins of Boyd Town as 'a very early monument in so new a country'. With the advent of motorised tourism in the 1930s, the ruins of Boydtown and the lighthouse at East Boyd, set in pristine bushland and coastline around Twofold Bay, became a popular tourist destination. 'Remembering Boyd', McKenna concluded, was not just 'remembering failure but the spirit of the entrepreneur 'who made things happen'.²

Popular and scholarly books and articles on Ben Boyd have not much to say on Ben Boyd's Kanakas for two reasons. First, interest among white colonists in the 192 Kanakas landed in New South Wales from April to October 1847 was intermittent and largely forgotten by 1851 but revived briefly in 1854. Second, the primary sources relating to Boyd's Kanakas are sparse, fragmentary and scattered. Interest in Boyd revived in 1854 with rumours that he was still alive of Guadalcanal.

'As we have pre-historic events, the Reformers before the Reformation', John Inglis wrote in 1887, 'so we have a prehistoric as well as a historic labour traffic'.³ He was referring Ben Boyd's 192 Kanakas recruited in 1847 but historians have since extended the 'prehistory' of white Australia to include the 244 Indians, 205 Eurasians and 3606 Chinese brought to Australia from 1835 and 1854. The numbers were relatively small but opposition from the colonists and the Colonial Office to non-European immigration laid the foundations for the White Australia Policy at the beginning of the 20th century,

² McKenna, *Looking for Blackfellas' Point*, 91-2, 136.

³ Inglis, *In the New Hebrides*, 198.

described by Australia's first prime minister in 1901 as 'a legislative declaration of our racial identity'.⁴

The first known use of the word *Kanaka* in its Australian context can be found in James O'Connell's *Residence of Eleven Years in New Holland and the Caroline Islands* (1831). O'Connell came New South Wales as a cabin boy on a female convict transport. He joined the *Cape Packet*, a whaler based at Port Macquarie, as a deck hand in 1820. Seven of the crew of 16 were Kanakas.⁵

The word *Kanaka* is more precise than *South Sea Islander* or *Pacific Islander*. The colonial press coined vague and imaginative names for Boyd's South Sea Islanders: 'Boyd's cannibals', 'these savages', 'the fegeemen from the cannibals islands', 'cannibal islanders', 'Boyd's blacks', 'cannibal labour', 'New Hebrideans', 'Boyd's savages', 'Tana islanders', 'Fegeins', 'self-devouring savages', 'degraded and barbarous savages', 'New Hebrides natives', 'immigration from Polynesia', 'imported savages', 'Mr Boyd's slaves', 'pagan labourers', 'savages from the coral Islands', and the classical Greek word 'Anthropophagi'. The only newspaper to use the Hawaiian word *Kanaka* in 1847 was the *Australian*.⁶

The *Australian National Dictionary* (2016) defines *Kanaka* as a 'Pacific Islander, esp. one brought to Australia to work as an indentured labour in the sugar and cotton industries of Queensland'.⁷ The *Macquarie Dictionary's* (2017) definition of *Kanaka* is; '1. a Pacific Islander, especially one brought forcibly to Australia during the nineteenth

⁴ Barton Papers, Untitled speech on Federation 1900, MS 51/5/977, NLA.

⁵ O'Connell, *A Residence of Eleven Years in New Holland and the Caroline Islands*, 75-9.

⁶ *Australian*, 2 November 1847.

⁷ *Australian National Dictionary* (2016), I, 824.

century as a labourer'; '2. (derogatory) (racist) a Pacific Islander; 3. An indigenous Hawaiian'. *Kanaka* was extended to include the Pacific Islanders, most recruited in Melanesia, brought to New South Wales in 1847 and to Queensland from 1863 to 1904.⁸ The word *Kanaka* is used throughout this book solely in its nineteenth century context.

⁸ *Macquarie Dictionary* (2017), 643.