



Information Sheet 10: Benjamin Boyd and the Importation of South Sea Islanders into New South Wales in 1847.

Clive Moore

The University of Queensland

April 2013

Benjamin Boyd (1801-1851) was a rich entrepreneur and adventurer who arrived in New South Wales in 1842 and proceeded to buy up 381,000 acres of pastoral land in New South Wales. He died on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands in 1851.

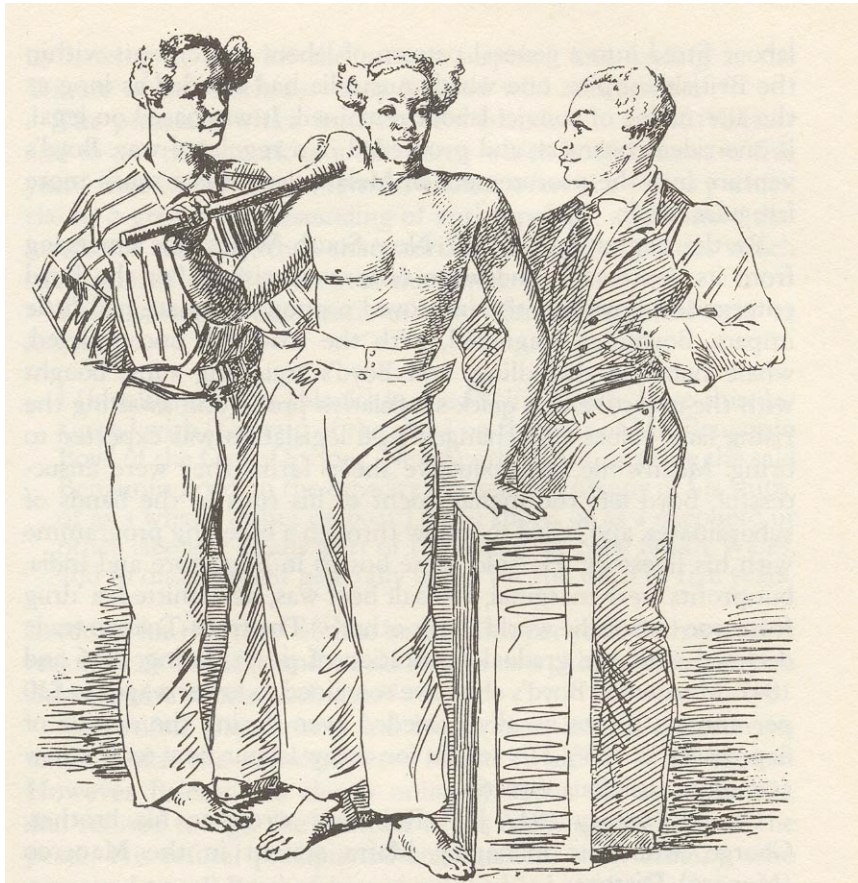
Boyd had already used Aboriginal, Maori and Pacific Islands labourers in his whaling industry ventures, and, worried about not having sufficient labour for his pastoral properties, he decided to experiment with bringing in a Pacific Islanders workforce, without waiting for government permission. In 1847 he brought the first 65 Islanders to Australia from Lifu in the Loyalty Islands (now part of New Caledonia) and from Tanna and Aneityum in the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu). They landed at Eden where his whaling venture was based. The clerk of the local bench of magistrates described them this way: “none of the natives could speak English, and all were naked..”. “[T]hey all crowded around us looking at us with the utmost surprize, and feeling at the Texture of our clothes...they seemed wild and restless.” (Diamond 1988, 128-129). They had all put their mark on contracts that bound them to work for five years and to be paid 26 shillings a year, plus rations of 10 lbs of meat a week, and two pairs of trousers, two shirts and a kilmarnock cap. Although onwards from the 1840s Loyalty Islanders were great travellers of ships throughout the southwest Pacific, clearly they had no idea of what they were doing in Australia, and the local magistrate refused to counter-sign the documents. Regardless, some of Boyd’s employees began to take the party inland on foot. Some of them bolted and made their way back to Eden. The first one died on 2 May and as winter approached more became ill. Sixteen Lifu Islanders refused to work and began to try to walk back to Lifu along the coast. Some managed to reach Sydney and seven or eight entered a shop from the rear and began to help themselves to food. Those that remained at work were shepherds on far off Boyd stations on the Edward and Murray Rivers.

Boyd refused to admit that the trial shipment was a failure, sending for more Islanders. By this time colonial society was beginning to realise what he had done and was feeling uneasy. The Legislative Council amended the *Masters and Servants Act* to ban importation of “the Natives of any Savage or uncivilized tribe inhabiting any Island or Country in the Pacific”. When Boyd’s next group of 54 men and 3 women arrived in Sydney on 17 October, they could not be indentured and once Boyd found this out he refused to take any further responsibility. The same conditions also applied to Boyd’s Islander labourers from the first trip and they left the stations and set off to walk to Sydney to find alternative work and to find a way home to the islands. The foreman tried to stop them but the local magistrate ruled that no one had the right to detain them. Their progress from the Riverina was followed by the press as they began their long march to Sydney. The press described them as cannibals on their way to eat Boyd, and the issue as depicted in the media was extremely racist.

The whole matter was raised again in the Legislative Council and Boyd showed no remorse or sense of responsibility. Boyd justified himself with reference to the African slave trade and there was much discussion in the colony about the issue to introducing slaves from the Pacific Islands. The recruiters were accused of kidnapping, a charge with they denied.

The Islanders remained around Sydney harbour, begging for transport back to their islands. Some of them found alternative work in Sydney and dropped out of the record. Most of the others finally embarked on a French ship returning to the islands, although it is unlikely that many of them ever reached their home islands.

For his part, Boyd overextended himself financially and went bankrupt. He left Australia for California and then the Pacific Islands on his luxury yacht *The Wanderer*. In the process of claiming to set up a colony went ashore on Guadalcanal and was killed.



“Panyella, Etoidsi and Sabbathahoo”, three Islanders recruited by Ben Boyd (Diamond, 1988, p. 127)

Sources:

<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/boyd-benjamin-ben-1815>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin_Boyd

Ron Adams, *In the Land of Strangers: A century of European Contact with Tanna, 1774-1874*, Pacific Research Monograph No.9, Canberra: Australian National University, 1984, p. 37.

K.R. Howe, *The Loyalty Islands: A History of Culture Contacts, 1840-1900*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1977, pp. 88-90.

Marion Diamond, *The Sea Horse and the Wanderer: Ben Boyd in Australia*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1988, pp. 126-140.

Sincerely,



Emelda Davis – President

Australian South Sea Islanders (Port Jackson) Limited

PO Box 117 Pyrmont Sydney NSW 2009 Email: assi.pj@gmail.com Mobile: 0416300946

<http://www.facebook.com/groups/assipj/?fref=ts>