



Paul Mason

[Follow](#)

Author: Postcapitalism—A Guide to Our Future | Producer: #ThisIsACoup documentary | Writer & Broadcas...

Feb 15 · 19 min read



Numbo, Ducos peninsular, New Caledonia. Ile Nou is seen across the bay

Tracing Louise Michel in the Pacific

Researching the women communards on New Caledonia

“On dark nights the niaoulis give off a phosphorescence, and in the light of the full moon their branches rise up weeping like the arms of giants crying over the enslavement of the earth...” (Red Virgin: Memoirs of Louise Michel)

I travelled to New Caledonia in January 2017 research **Divine Chaos of Starry Things**, a play about the female combatants of the 1871 Paris Commune who were deported there between 1873 and 1880.

If you are studying the work of Louise Michel, or the memoirs of other *bagnards*, its hard to make sense of their accounts unless you can see the geography in which they are set. A valuable resource was Bernard Brou's locally-published pamphlet "Historical Sites of Ducos-Nouvelle" 1981.

If you find what follows interesting, please donate (and Gift Aid) to the production funding for the show, co-produced by the White Bear Theatre, Watch Your Head and Stepping Out.

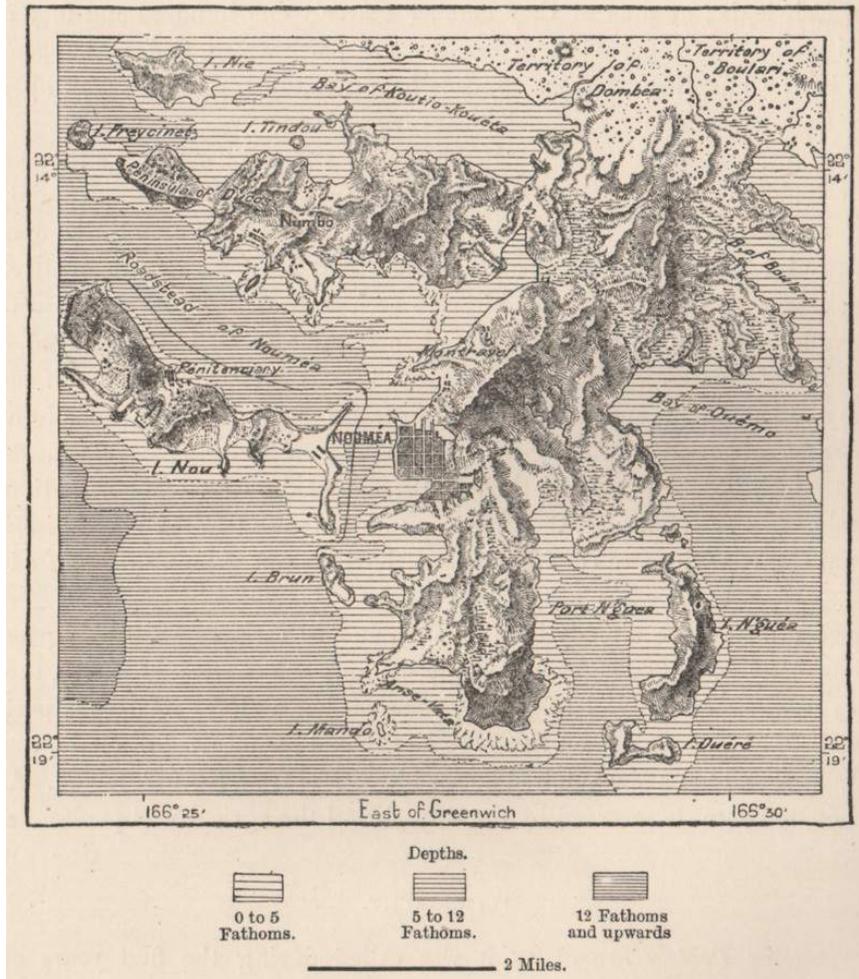
Three grades of punishment

There were three gradations of punishment for participants in the 1871 Paris Commune: simple deportation, deportation to a fortified camp and transportation with hard labour. The impact of these becomes much more obvious once you can see the three locations in which these punishments were applied.

A total of 3015 "simple deportees" were sent to ILE DES PINS, a coral-reefed island south of the main land mass. Some 903 "fortified place" deportees went to the DUCOS peninsular; the 325 transported with hard labour went to a penitentiary on NOU ISLAND. Ducos and Nou are shown in the 1885 map below:

Fig. 149.—NOUMEA.

Scale 1 : 120,000.



1885 map of Noumea: Numbo and Penitentiary on Ile Nou marked. Baie des Dames under word "of" left of Numbo

Topography of Ducos, then and now

The Ducos peninsular is—and was—one of the most barren places on New Caledonia. Even from the rarely seen 1876 panorama [about which more below]—it's clear there was just scrub on the hillsides, a few palms at the coast and mangroves at the water's edge. There was no underground water source, leaving the 900+ deportees entirely reliant on the authorities plus rainwater and delivered rations. They were free to move around by day, but subject to a curfew and under constant surveillance.

The topography of the DUCOS was importantly different to now.

[a] There's a massive nickel processing plant been built out into the bay south of it, almost to its shoreline at the eastern end.

[b] the cliffs at the eastern end would have given way to a mangrove swamp, making it impossible to escape. According to Brou's drawing, there was just one path through this swamp, secured by a guard post. That explains how they could let the communards wander freely without fear of escape

Less than 2km south of the Ducos, across the bay, is where the penitentiary was. Here 325 communards were among 4–7,000 transportees serving extreme hard labour.

This was at the time Ile Nou (Nou Island), but is now joined to the mainland by a road, which cuts off the sea passage from the strait between Nou and Ducos into Noumea harbour.

But at the time of the bagne, ships would—and did—sail between the deportee settlement and the convict prison into the main port of Noumea (formerly called Port de France). Hence it's marked on the 1885 map (above) as the “Roadstead of Noumea”.

Brou locates the deportee cemeteries, on Nou and Ducos, both of which have been bulldozed, with bodies underground, to make way for roads or car parks. These are marked on a map overlay (below). The only intact communard cemetery is on Ile des Pins, of which more below.

A rarely-seen panorama of Numbo

The main settlement of the deportees on Ducos was at **Numbo**. This is now a ramshackle breakers' yard and harbor, with intense industrial activity around it.

However, both at the National Archives, and via a private collector, I was able to see, and make copies of a unique panorama photograph, taken in 1877 by the a deportee named Fougeret. By this time Louise and the other women had been moved to a separate settlement, but she makes numerous references to Numbo in the memoirs, some of which are clarified from the photographs.

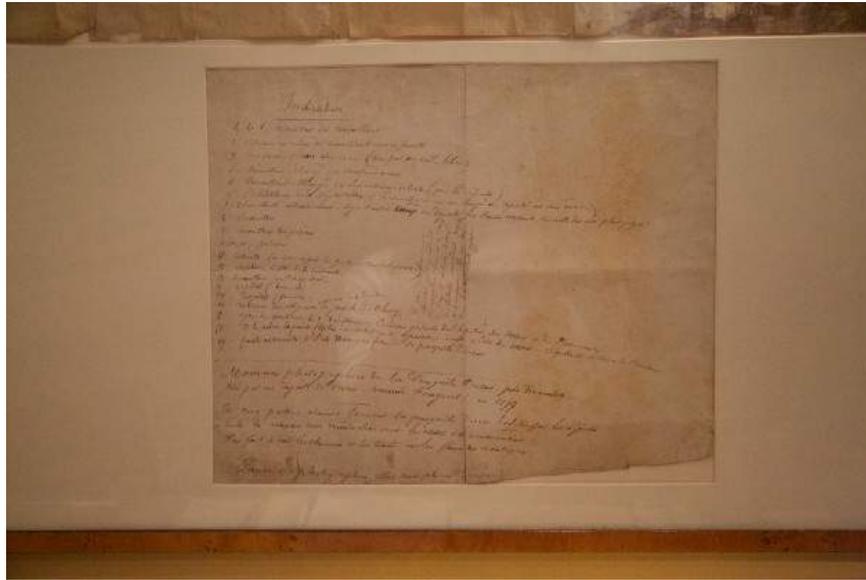
Unless I am mistaken, this is the first online publication and annotation of this photograph!



1877 panorama of Numbo, by Fougeret © Ismet Kurtovitch

The pictures reveal quite a large settlement by 1876: there are three prison cell blocks, for punishing misbehaviour. There are brick-built infirmaries, one for men and one for women. The official buildings highlighted as for the military and administration appear to be stone. The rest are shacks,—some with corrugated iron roofs, some brick or mud with grass roofs, some mud plus grass circular Kanak style huts. This settlement would have been home to around 900 communards, with about 70 Algerian rebels coming later.

There is less palm-type vegetation than now—in fact the hillside is substantially deforested of scrub. Today there are bananas, and a lot of naoulis acting as scrub.



1877 Fougeret panorama, legend

The legend of the panorama is reproduced left. A rough summary reveals:

- the white buildings in foreground right are prisons, marked (10) and the prison guard house (9)
- next to them (4) is a guard in charge of correspondence and an octagonal refectory (2) for the guards
- at the kink in the road (3) is a shop owned by a freed colonist
- to the far right are the houses of the guards (1,1,1)
- in the centre, set back one behind the other (14,15) are the men's and women's infirmaries, with (13) the hospital guard hut to their left; (17) the hospital kitchen; and behind (16) the homes for priests from the St Joseph de Cluny order; to the right, behind some trees (18) is a chapel for the nuns of the order
- On the horizon to the right of the photo (7, 8) are guards and sentinels, as mentioned by Louise in her memoirs (they had to call to each other by night)
- Just below the horizon are the guard in charge provisions (5) and the deportees' library (6)

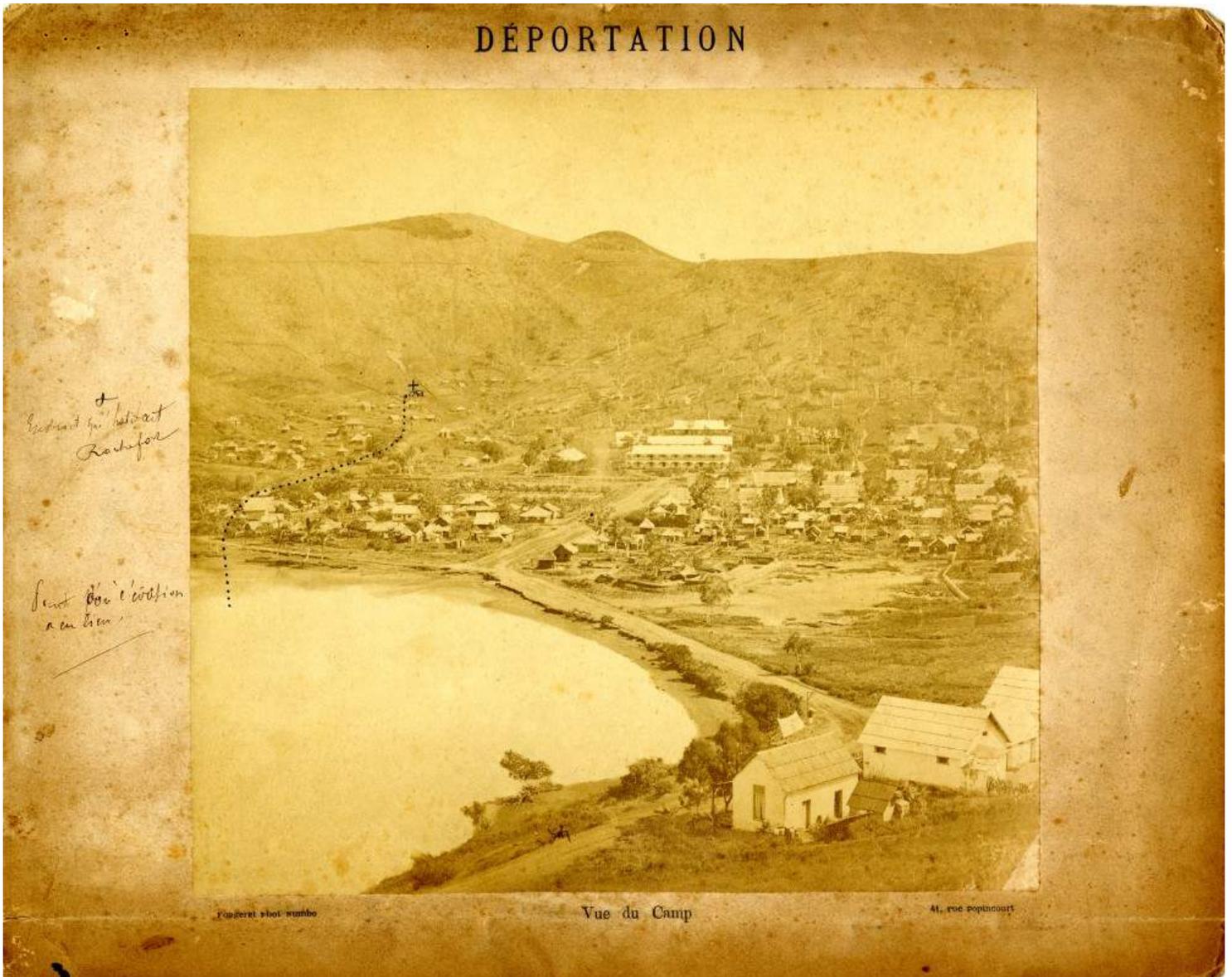
- At the far left of the photograph, marked (19) is the tip of Nou Island. Just around the headland to the right of that is where Louise Michel and the female deportees lived (see below). The path over the headland where she describes walking is clearly visible.

All buildings not marked, says the legend, are the houses of deportees. There appear to be three types: the traditional circular Kanak-style hut, with mud-brick walls and grass roof; rectangular huts with windows, which may have either grass or corrugated iron roofs; and more formal buildings below right of the hospital, with shingle roofs.

So which one did Louise Michel live in before getting moved? In her memoirs she describes living in a hut “below the infirmary” and tearing down an outhouse to turn it into a greenhouse.

The panorama is made up of five separate prints. Some of these correspond to prints by Fougeret held by the National Archives, which are reproduced below.

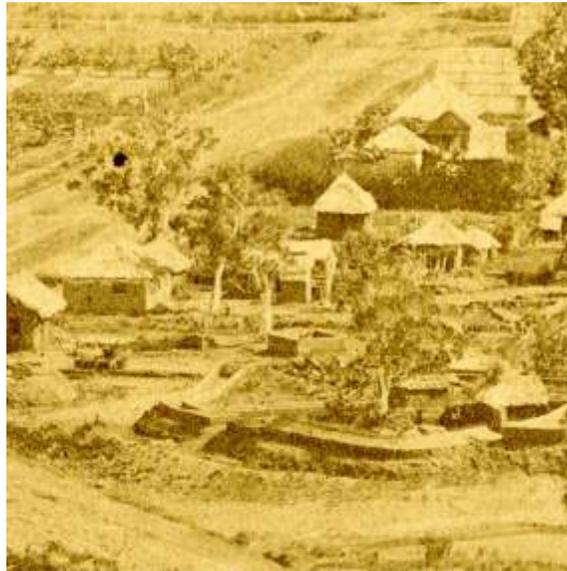
DÉPORTATION



Fougeret's view of the Numbo camp, with inscription describing Rochefort's path to his escape

On the above photograph the beach Henri Rochefort swam from during his escape (see below) is marked; his house is marked, together with the route he took to the sea.

However, to the right of the road leading to the sea there is an unusual building with a strange-shaped roof. That is the best candidate for a greenhouse and is "below the infirmary". If so, I think I may have identified where Louise attempted her ill-fated secret experiment to vaccinate papayas. Here's a close up:



Louise Michel's greenhouse?

Here are some more of the Fougeret shots from the National Archive.
A clearer image of the guard camp on the eastern side of Numbo...

DÉPORTATION

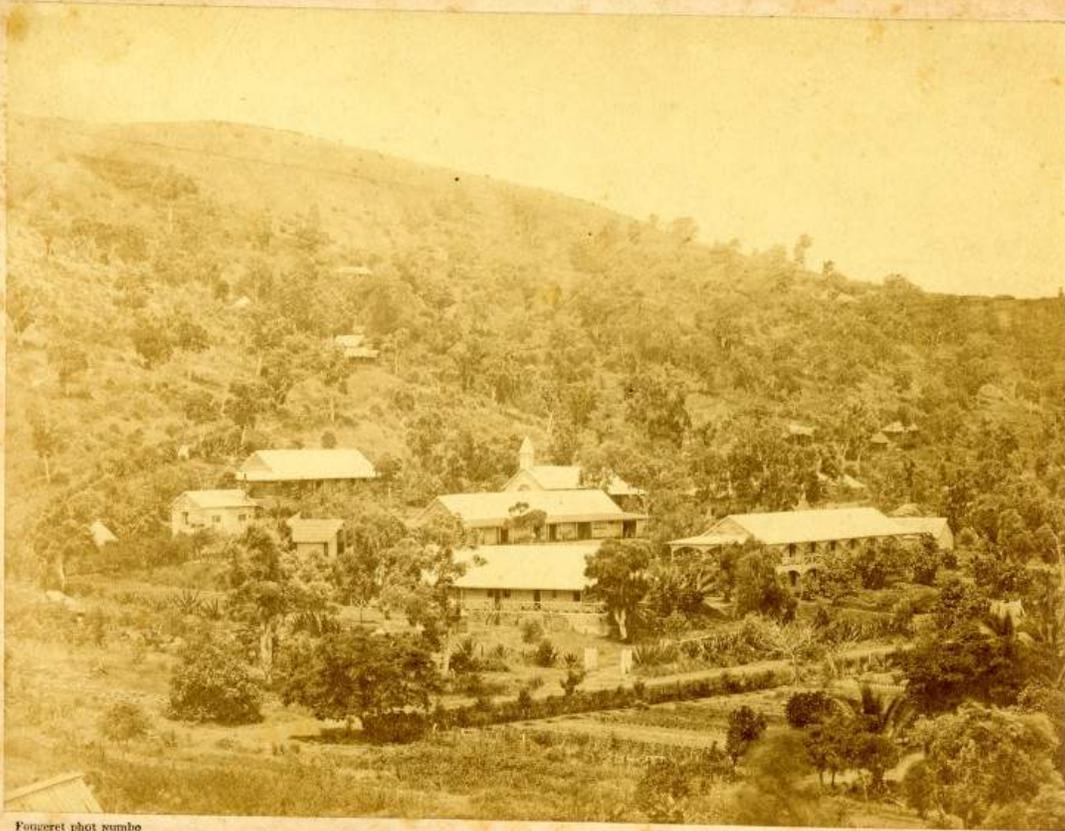


Fouge ed & Numbert, Rue Popincourt

Vue du Camp

And a view of the hospitals, convent and related buildings seen from the west, looking east...

DÉPORTATION



Fuzgeret phot numbo

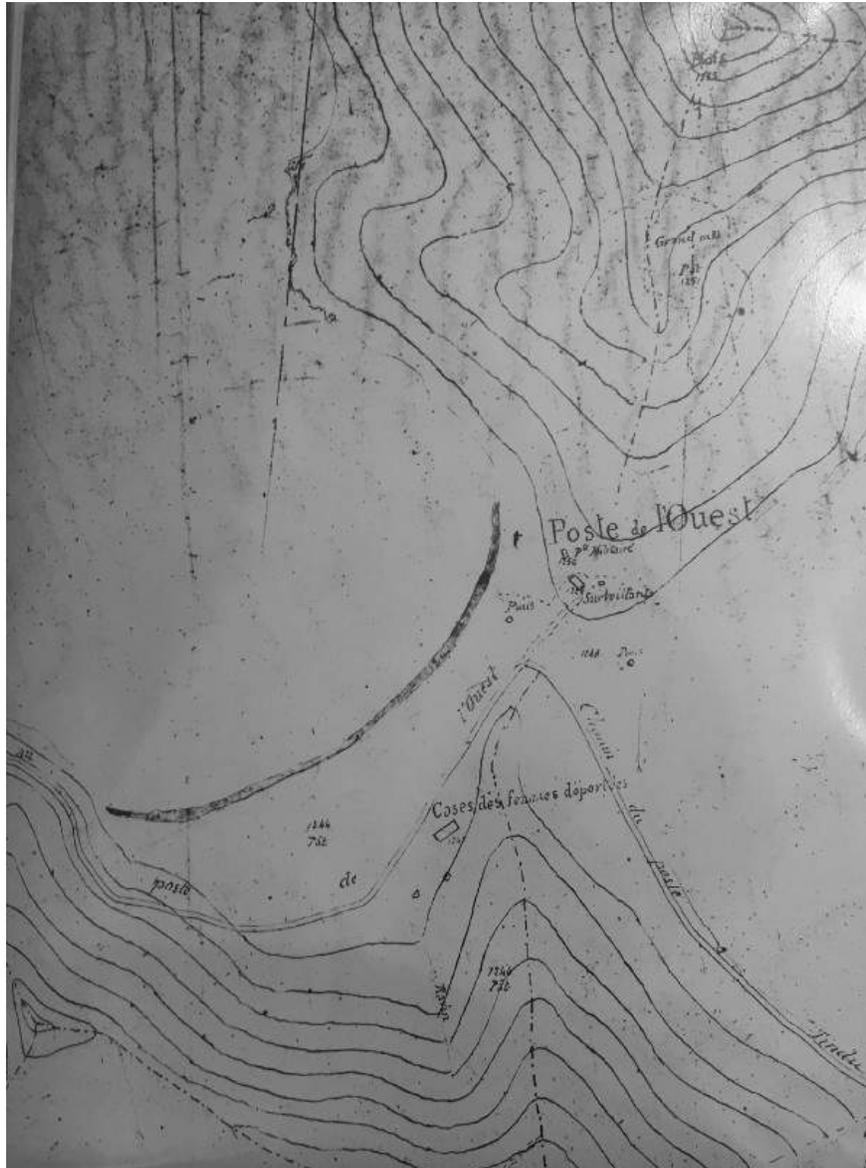
Vue du Camp

41. rue porineourt

The Baie des Dames and the “western forest”

In 1875, in the crackdown following Rochefort’s escape, all the single women were moved, under protest, to huts in the “Bay of the West”.

This is the next bay—a 15 minute walk from Numbo itself, and now called Baie des Dames. It is not simply a bay but an isthmus. It’s a very narrow strip of sandy grass between two hills, with the only cultivated trees on this end of the peninsular (some kind of small cedar) and with sea both sides.



1876 topographic map (photocopy) showing “Cotes des femmes deportees” and beach. North is -> See picture for modern situation now

An 1876 topo map (left), available in the Noumea archives, shows exactly where the women lived. Unfortunately the whole place now is a petroleum depot for Total (see photo below)—though you can get down to the beach where Louise and the others walked (she kept a pet sea snake in a pool), by negotiating the perimeter fence of the depot.

At night, Kanaks fish and swim from here, but the beach—like much of Ducos shoreline—is polluted by rubbish. There is also a fair bit of WW2 debris and a broken concrete pier from earlier industrialisation.

Louise and the others had huts low on the col rising to the east; their wardens and some soldiers had a place on the other hill where the Total depot is now. A security guy at the depot showed me a raised artificial earth mound where he said Louise was put in a separate house: I doubt it—it looks more like a gun emplacement from WW2 and there's no mention of her moving up into the forest in the letters.

All the hillside and the scrub leading to the beach is covered with naoulis. Louise romanticised naoulis. They are basically small, white-barked bushes with rustling fine leaves and they do waft like hair or wheat in the wind, or as she often writes “twist”. It amazes me that such a basic thing haunted her imagination, especially afterwards, when every time she writes about Ducos she is talking about naoulis twisting in the wind.

My play is mostly set here and the real scenery is even more theatrical than I had imagined...



Baie des Dames (Bay of the West): The women's huts were on the rising ground to the right, where the cedar trees/levelled ground is

West from the Baie des Dames is the hilltop Louise called the Western Forest. It is scrub now—no sign of the two massive trees she writes about in the memoirs, though the topo map may have one marked. I could not get up there by foot on this trip because the fenceline of the Total depot goes right up to the trees: but at the shoreline of this near

circular headland there are white sand beaches she could have got to. The scrub seems to be a more diverse mixture of plants—naoulis but also ash-like gnarled trees.

She claims to have inscribed a Hugo poem on a rock somewhere here. It's worth somebody looking for one day. She also described and drew “menhirs”—standing stones by the waterside. I could not see any.

Louise spent a lot of time “exploring” that forest, or sitting there reading letters from her mother or her friend Marie Ferré. What is tragic is that, drive an hour north, and you've got a unique, diverse biosphere of banana, pine, kauri, palm, giant fern, all kinds of tropical flora, birdsong etc. The birdsong on Ducos is pretty basic, which given it's now a series of squats and an oil refinery is not surprising.



Passadouet, journalist and Commune member. Died in 1876 on Ducos

What struck me about the Bay of the West is how it formed a small natural amphitheatre. The sunset I observed from the headland between there and Numbo was superb. It called to mind her story about the old communard Passadouet quoting Proudhon, grabbing her arm as they watched the sun set red over the Ile Nou prison.

I could not get up to the summit of the peninsular above Numbo, from where she drew a landscape of Numbo. Nor could I get up to the top of the hills above Tindu, though I went to the harbour there, which

was where—for some reason—the supplies were landed (it is on the wrong side from Noumea).

We also went to the smaller eastern bays, now called n'Du and m'Bi, but could not get to the 1892 prison cell block or the wrongly named stone “Rochefort House”. These are just around the eastern corner of Numbo bay but fenced off by an industrial unit.

There are no markings or commemorative plaques whatsoever on the Ducos peninsular. It is a mixture squats, some social housing near Tindu, plus a massive industrial park where the mangrove swamp was; there's a breaker's yard in Numbo and an oil depot where Louise, Nathalie and the rest lived.

This is in contrast to the heavy commemoration of the bagne and tourism on Ile Des Pins, and to the maintenance of key prison buildings on Ile Nou (the warder's house, the bakery and the prison hospital in the back bay). This could easily be remedied and as Brou points out, it's a tourism opportunity and a chance to commemorate a remarkable political community in French history.

The thought occurs to me that the only way Louise and the women communards, leaders of the first all-female military formation in modern history, are going to get a memorial, or a “reconstruction”, is after the carbon age ends. I find this thought very reassuring because the carbon age will end, the refinery will close and one day Louise will get a statue here, preferably depicted sitting on a rock in the western forest reading a letter from her mother.

Insights into women communards' experience

Louise Michel would have been confronted for six years with the reality of a much harsher prison regime just across the water: since this was the Guantanamo of the 19th century, it is not hard to imagine how she felt. Here's a contemporary photograph of prisoners lining up in the “Boulevard du Crime”.



Boulevard du Crime © Archives of New Caledonia

She mentions it repeatedly in the memoirs but could have had no direct contact with the prisoners there until they were, towards the end of the punishment, transferred to Ducos.

The climate is hot and humid on both Ducos and Nou, with wind to cool you down. The faces of the men in the penitentiary photo are almost black—the result of relentless sunshine. I burned easily while filming, despite factor 15+ sunblock.

Travel and escape were impossible from Ducos. Thus, in her entire time on New Caledonia Louise must have seen only Ducos, the mangrove swamp, the sea, the mountains in the distance (which are lush green and spectacular) and then in 1879–80 Noumea.



Prisoners at Ile Nou penitentiary 1876. Note the heavily tanned faces.

Louise's house/school in Noumea

Her house and school from 1879–80 was at 27 Avenue Foch (then Wagram) which is just one block south of the main square of the city (Place des Cocotiers), one block from the harbour. And one block north of the courthouse.

Ile des Pins

We went to the Ile des Pins by ferry—a big catamaran. It takes 2 ½ hours each way so a day trip is not ideal. You can camp if you stay longer. The ruins of the deportation settlement are impressive here. This is where most of the deportees were sent—3,015 communards including families. You can see the prison block, with individual holding cells—where people were put in solitary confinement for breaking the rules. Also there's a bigger holding cell, a water tank, the remains of the water-course the communards dug and then the cemetery.



Solitary confinement cells at the Ile des Pins prison

The cemetery here is the famous one with the pyramid and a column, and around 100 unnamed graves (not enough for the 325 who actually died there), which are small rectangles of brown lava.

Kuto, where you land on the Ile des Pins is a classical tropical beach resort—though the hotel there looked pretty scrappy and had no working toilets due to a water shortage. The landing jetty where the catamaran docks is exactly where the communards would have landed.

The Ile des Pins is so far away from Noumea that it is clear there could have been no contact other than by letters, messages and newspapers, between the different groups of communards.

In the evening, it was a Saturday, groups of Kanaks set up stalls and barbecues with food for sale, and there was a band. Some are the descendants of Atai's tribe, displaced there after the 1878 rising, and I am sorry I didn't have time to meet them properly and talk to local politicians

However, one salient fact sticks out: the French dumped 3000+ skilled people here. They built serious infrastructure, workshops and the like, which are all now ruins. Today the Kanak population is just 2,500, and enjoy very little by way of modern infrastructure. Even the luxury hotels here are less well built than the infrastructure the bagnards built.

The entire colonial enterprise, for which thousands of people suffered was an expensive mistake.

The national archives

I have held in my hands several of Louise Michel's manuscripts. Despite the modern cult of Louise, and the renewed interest in the female communards, there is almost no interest in her in New Caledonia, and very few public references to her (there's a school named after her in Bourail).



Paul Mason with manuscript of Louise Michel's novella *La fille d'un fusillée*

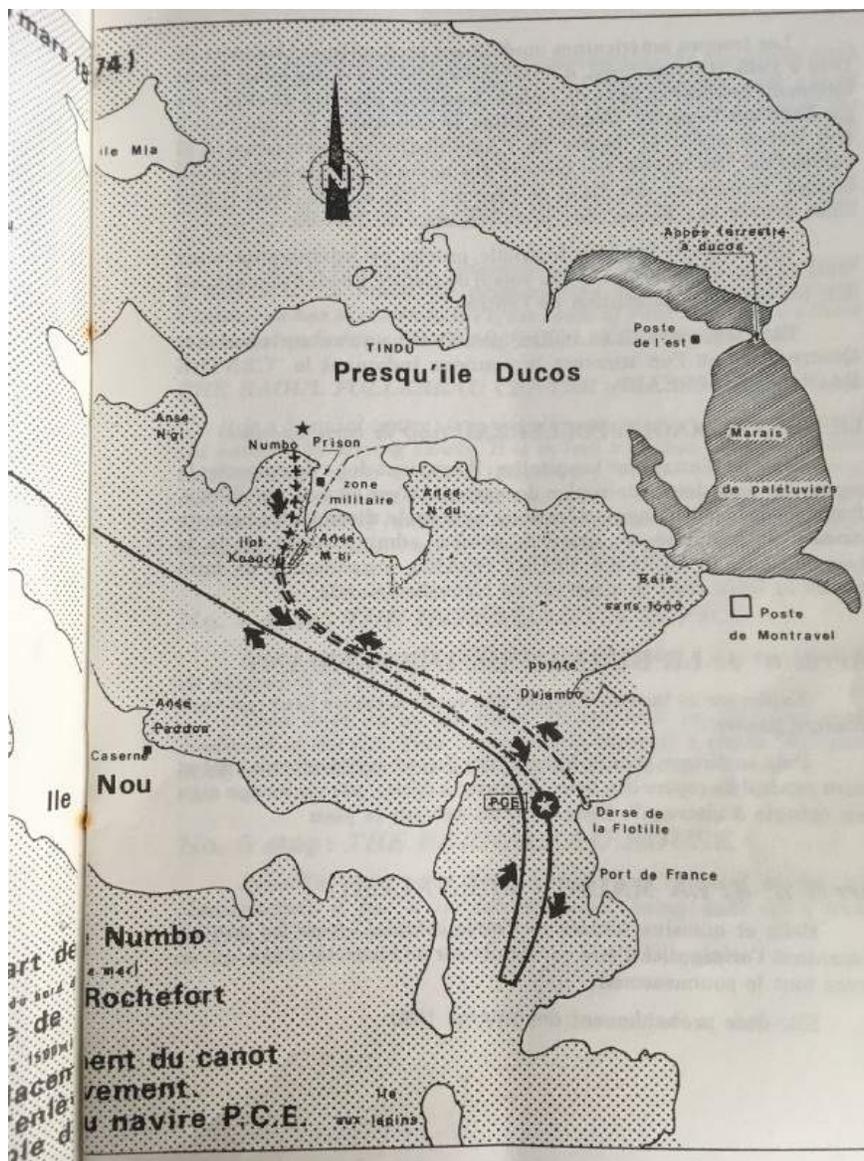
I've seen the manuscript of her novella "The Daughter of the Man who Was Shot", held letters and a small poster she made to protest against having no income due to a cyclone disrupting the deportees work.

Also there is an album, with two original photos of herself, sent from Sydenham, London to someone in France, with a purported short biography of herself.

I was excited to read these in an airconditioned room just across the bay, with a clear view of where they were written in a hut in the Bay of the West.

The Louise Michel archive here is significant, as it was bought from a Parisian collector in Amsterdam in the 1970s. Anybody studying Louise should spend more time than I did there. I will try to publish an English translation of anything I've discovered that has not already been transcribed.

Two escapes mapped



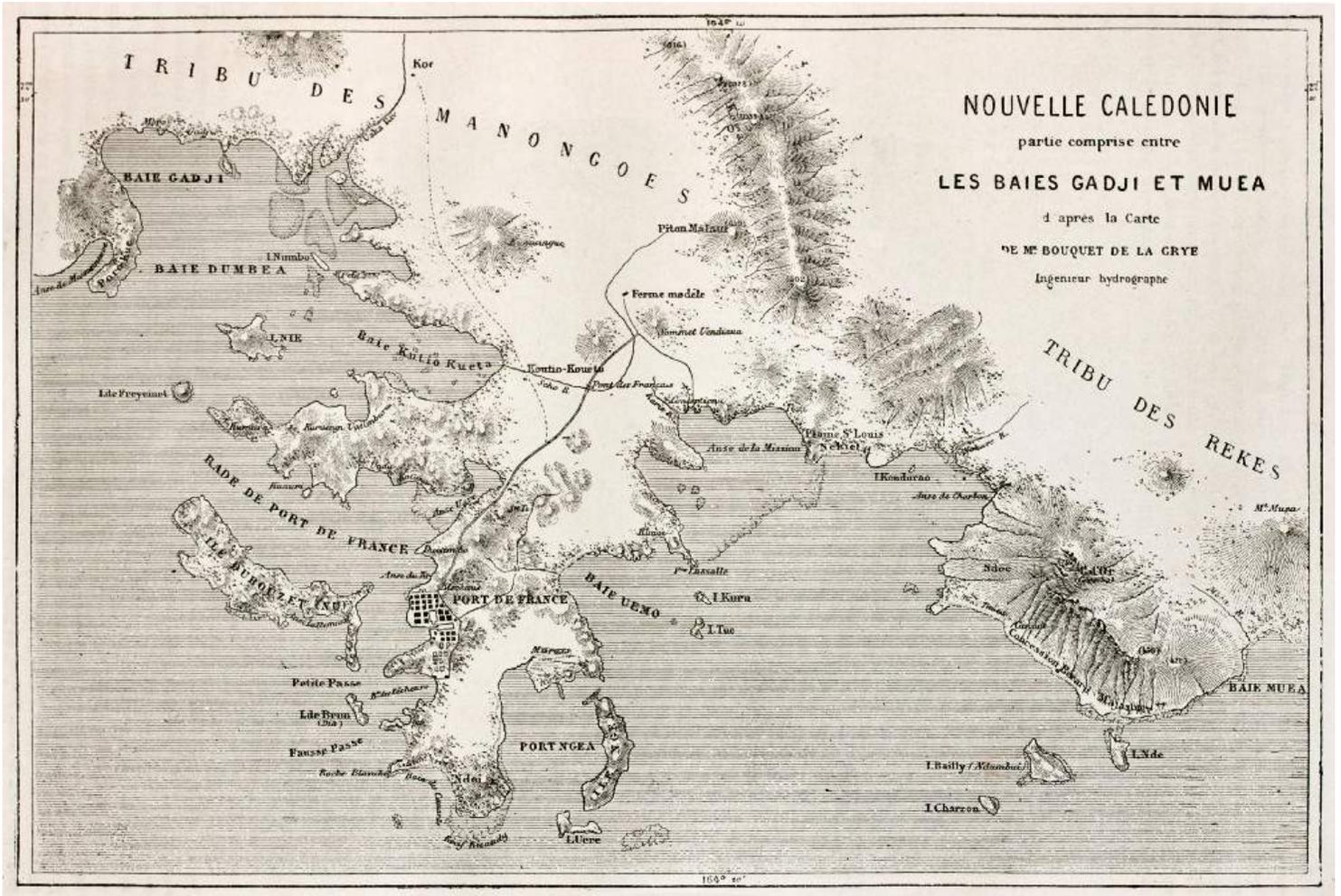
Rochefort's escape route from Numbo, via rowing boat to the British ship

Seeing the geography allows you to make sense of Henri Rochefort's escape on 19 March 1874, together with five other prisoners, three of whom were leading communards. Brou's map (left) was not some long-distance swim beyond a reef: they swam out a maximum of 200m and were picked up by a rowing boat and then that rowed out to the SS Peace Comfort & Ease, a merchantman which took them on board. Rochefort's account of the rest of the journey is here, though he does not explain how he got off the island.

In Michel's memoirs she describes a failed attempt to repeat the venture, travelling through the "northern forest" and heading by road and a cemetery to Noumea, where she hoped to stowaway on a merchant ship. The plan was discovered, and without ceremony all the women were moved to the Bay of the West.

You can work out Louise's planned escape route from the 1867 map below, drawn before the penitentiary and the settlement, but also showing the tribal lands of two neighbouring Kanak tribes. She was aiming to hit the northeasterly road out of Noumea.

The map also shows that her claim that two Kanaks "swam the bay" from the Baie des Dames to join the 1878 uprising, after she gave them her red scarf preserved from the Commune, is **entirely plausible**. They would have been Manongoes however, and that tribe did not take part in the rising. They would have had to swim north from the isthmus to the island marked L'Nie and then across Dumbea Bay.



1869 map of Noumea (Port de France)

The need for commemoration

In Brou's pamphlet, written in the 1980s, he calls for a museum of the deportation to be established, named after the poet Gustave Maroteau who died in the Nou penitentiary. I can only repeat that call here. Teremba, near La Foa, has a good basic display of the deportation, but it is off the beaten track and also has some horrendously inaccurate video re-enactments of the 1878 uprising.

Incidentally, Teremba was an extremely small fort—probably smaller and than Rorke's Drift and with no embrasures for cannon/mitrailleuse to fire through. Atai's forces failed to capture it, which shows you how weakly armed the 1878 Kanak rebellion was (the fort was relieved by marines and a naval gunship). The cells at

Teremba are the best preserved of any I saw, but are cluttered by a reconstruction.

DÉPORTATION



Fougered & Numbo

41, RUE Popincourt

Cimetière des Déportés

Cemetery of the deportees at Tindu, Ducos peninsular, seen in 1877. It was levelled in 1970 with the bodies still interred.

I spoke to a Kanak oral historian who points out that the Kanak view of the deportees is more or less negative, since they joined in the suppression of the 1878 rising. Louise Michel's support for it is all the more remarkable given this.

He pointed out that the oral history of the Kanaks and the written history of the French is completely different. In pursuit of writing this oral history, the Kanak researchers are—even now—finding it hard to get onto their own ancestral lands. They know where it is—even though farmers are, they allege, right now, still ripping down the important tribal markers (single pines are the most obvious).

I would add that the autobiographical history of the bagné—from Michel, Gaston da Costa, Rochefort etc—also constitutes a third, hidden history of New Caledonia, which needs to be understood alongside the other two.

Finally nothing in the landscape, even the small cells, high windows and desolate environment of Ducos, can convey the atmosphere of menace on which the deportation/ transportation regime was based.

There was the constant threat of flogging with cat of nine tails; all punishments were administered in front of the assembled group, including the death by guillotine; there was constant threat of being locked in the cells on reduced rations; constant sunstroke and thirst, and the authorities ability to deprive you of shelter, water etc.



Fort Termeba, near La Foa, with reconstructed guillotine (it cuts bricks in half)

Bizarrely they spent a lot of money on hospitals: there was one on Ducos, a big one attached to the Nou Island prison and another on Ile

des Pins: to keep people alive so they could suffer.

And remember, this unhuman punishment of transportation, torture and isolation was not meted out in the early capitalist period, as the British did with the Australian convicts from 1788 to 1840—but in the 1870s, in a world of steam boats and gas light. And by a republic, not a monarchy.

For all its beauty, I now understand better why New Caledonia lowered over the memories, and the psyche, of the amnestied deportees. Their ultimate punishment was deprivation of contact with the very society they were trying to reform.

[] *I was aided in the research by Ismet Kurtovitch at the National Archives in Nouville: by Karin Speedy, Associate Professor at Macquarie University, Sydney: and by a distinguished private collector.*

Arrivals and deaths

- *Sentenced to a “fortified place”—Ducos Peninsular: 903 arrived, 82 died (9%)*
- *Sentenced to hard labour—Nou Island Prison: 325 arrived, 51 died (16%)*
- *Sentenced to simple deportation—Ile des Pins: 3,015 arrived, 260 died (9%)*

Women prisoners on Ducos 1873–1880

I’ve reproduced the list of 16 women deportees on Ducos which Brou extracted from the official archives. It gives family name, first name, name of spouse, occupation and age on arrival. I’ve added, with page references (in brackets), brief details taken from Edith Thomas’ book The Women Incendiaries.

The following were sentenced to exile on Ducos:

Brann Marie, wife of Testot, lacemaker, 39 (a.k.a. Braun) “well behaved” (Thomas p222)



Marie Cailleux

Cailleux Marie, wife of Place, day labourer 21; “passable behavior and bad opinions”—(p222); Tavern waitress, implicated in Rue Haxo execution of prisoners, “fired her rifle”. Married Henri Place in Ducos. (p196)

Deguy Elizabeth, wife of Langlais (Langlois), prostitute, 40; Club speaker St Eustache early May. Fought on barricades (99)

Desfosses Louise (Adele), wife of Viard, widow of Boulant, seamstress 40; Cantiniere 238th Battalion National Guard, fought at Issy. Looted stuffed otter & birds, dressing case etc from the Couvent des Oiseaux (232) “often drunk and had disgusting morals” (222)



Nathalie Lemel (Duval)

Duval Perrine (Nathalie) wife of Lemel, bookbinder, 45; Bookbinder, member of International, effective leader of women's battalion and signatory to various proclamations.

Germain Anne, wife of Cheron, laundress 37; No mention in Thomas

Herbelin Sidonie, widow of Letteron said to be wife of Laines, no profession 53; Club de l'Eglise de la Villette "Leading a battalion of women". (237)



Louise Michel, prison photo 1872

Michel Louise, teacher, 35* [she was actually 43]

Schmitt Marie, wife of Gaspard, no profession, 35; “dubious morals, lived with male deportee”; 101st Battalion National Guard, uniformed, carried rifle, former prostitute (p232) Said at her trial: “I am sorry I did not do everything I was accused of”. Fought at Butte Aux Cailles.

The next two were sentenced to hard labour but allowed to live on Ducos...

Gaboriaud Marie-Augustine, hosiery worker, 37; 20 years hard labour for building barricade. Companion of National Guard commander Jules Chiffon, 121st Federal Battalion. “Sashed in red, armed with a revolver she led him to the barricades at Pont d’Austerlitz and Bvd Mazas, organized an ambulance squad and let the troops into a house to defend the barricade at Ave Daumesnil” (p154)

Rogissard Marie, seamstress, 37; Flag bearer of women’s battalion. (p236) Club Saint Eloi speaker. Urged men to fight. Wore armband and took part in the women’s battalion (p 237)

The following were sentenced to simple deportation on the Ile des Pins but allowed to live on Ducos...

Bertranine Jeanne, wife of Taillefer, housewife 40; Cantiniere, 118th battalion



Victorine Gorget

Gorget Victorine, wife of Levefre, laundress, 29; Spoke at Club Saint-Michel des Batignolles. Advocated arming women (p240)

Mayan, Joceline, widow of Coudereau, seamstress, 36; No mention in Thomas