



# **Beyond Papillon: The French Overseas Penal Colonies, 1854-1952 (France Overseas: Studies in Empire and D)**

*Stephen A. Toth*

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For French criminologists and colonialists of the mid-nineteenth century, the penal colonies of Guiana and New Caledonia seemed to satisfy two needs, namely, to incarcerate a growing number of criminals and to supply manpower for these developing colonies. But were these two goals not contradictory? Was the primary purpose of the penal colonies to punish or to colonize? In the prisons, inmates found means of subversion, guards resisted militaristic discipline, and camp commanders fought physicians for authority. Back in the *metropole*, journalistic exposés catered to the public's fascination with the penal colonies' horror and exoticism.

An understanding of modern France is not complete without an examination of this institution, which existed for more than a century and imprisoned more than one hundred thousand people. Stephen A. Toth invites readers to experience the prisons firsthand. Through a careful analysis of criminal case files, administrative records, and prisoner biographies, Toth reconstructs life in the penal colonies and examines how the social sciences, tropical medicine, and sensational journalism evaluated and exploited the inmates' experiences. In exploring the disjuncture between the real and the imagined, he moves beyond mythic characterizations of the penal colonies to reveal how power, discipline, and punishment were construed and enforced in these prison outposts.

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