

A FURTHER NOTE ON "BEACH-LA-MAR"

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Three pieces of evidence which turned up very shortly after the publication of my earlier paper (Clark 1977) are, I think, interesting enough to justify a short postscript. I take them in chronological order.

The first is from Julian Thomas's *Cannibals and Convicts* (1886), and provides the earliest published example, in English, of the association of the term for trepang with a type of pidgin. The author is describing a voyage from the New Hebrides to Queensland in a labour vessel in 1883.

In this strange *bêche-de-mer* dialect, which the natives all learn, "man a bush" is a term of reproach or derision. (Thomas 1886:358)

(The phrase in question is a familiar one in the modern Melanesian pidgins. Camden (1977:62), for example, defines Bislama *man bus* as "a person from the bush, with the connotation of an ignorant or backward person".)

The second quotation is from Robert Louis Stevenson's *In the South Seas*:

The languages of Polynesia are easy to smatter, though hard to speak with elegance.... And again, not only is Polynesian easy to smatter, but interpreters abound. Missionaries, traders, and broken white folk living on the bounty of the natives, are to be found almost every isle and hamlet; and even where these are unserviceable, the natives themselves have often scraped up a little English, and in the French zone (though far less commonly), a little French-English, or an efficient pidgin, what is called to the westward 'Beach-la-Mar', comes easy to the

Polynesian.... (Stevenson 1900:8-9)

This use antedates those of Churchill and London by about a decade.¹ It is a reminder of human fallibility that a passage in one of the most widely read authors in the English language should have escaped the notice of the readers and editors of two successive OED Supplements. More important to our purpose is that Stevenson has this usage localized "to the westward" [*sc.* of Polynesia], i.e. in Melanesia, and perhaps also "in the French zone", i.e. New Caledonia and the New Hebrides. Stevenson had paid a brief visit to Noumea in 1890, and it may have been there that he became aware of the term. In any case, his statement provides some confirmation of what I had concluded from negative evidence - that 19th century usage of "Beach-la-Mar" was restricted to southern Melanesia.

The final piece of evidence helps to confirm what had been tentatively suggested in my earlier paper - that the "bêche-de-mer" term may have been current in the southeast Solomons, at least in the early 20th century. The recently published log of J.E. Philp's recruiting voyage of 1912-13 aboard the *Makira*, in addition to a good deal of pidgin dialogue, includes a reference to one of his crew "talking *bêche-de-mer* English" (Herr 1978:87). Philp does not appear to have visited any islands other than the Solomons, which suggests strongly that he is following local usage.

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NOTES

- ¹ In fact probably by two decades. The book originally appeared as a series of "Letters" in the *New York Sun* in 1891. I have not been able to check either this version or the American edition of 1896 to see whether the passage occurs there. However, in a private letter written in September 1891, Stevenson refers to "trader's talk, which is a strange conglomerate of literary expressions and English and American slang, and Beach de Mar, or native English" (Stevenson 1926:318). The form "Beach-de-Mar" is also used in Stevenson 1900: 286.