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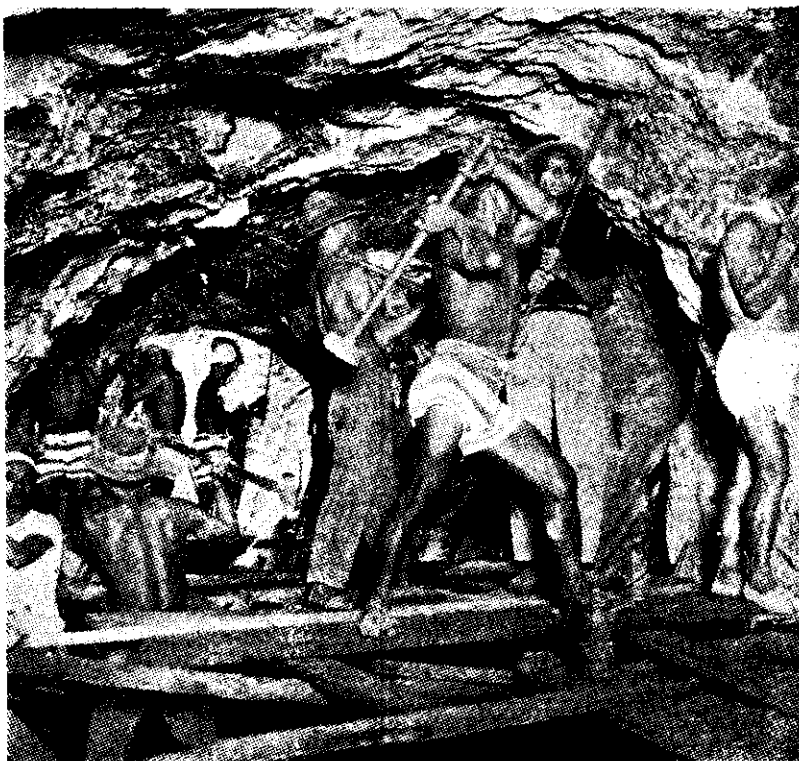
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NEW CALEDONIA

Neither Stern Nor Wild

(Written for "The Listener" by A.M.R.)



Nickel and chromite are the real wealth of New Caledonia, especially so in wartime. A scene in a chromite mine

SO many of my friends are now turning to New Caledonia as a sort of second home in the Pacific that I wangled an unofficial interview the other night with my Fighting French friend René. René was born and bred in the island, and despite our talking mainly in the interstices of Resuscitation Practice, had plenty of information to give. Here is the picture I gained.

New Caledonia (said he) despite Cook's name, is neither stern nor wild. Despite its latitude it is not tropical. Despite its Melanesian aborigines it is not "native." And despite its geography it is not a "tropic island"—not in the romantic sense, that is, of a palm-fringed, reef-ringed, lotus paradise where it is always full-moon.

"Authentically Pacific"

Indeed New Caledonia is much more like the American Wild West—in spots—and in other spots like some place in the East. Though it is coral-ringed (there is a barrier reef nearly all round it at one to ten miles distance), its western coast of real North-Auckland mangrove swamps, its absence of indigeneous beasts and noxious vermin, its gullies of giant tree-ferns, and its fuzzy-headed Kanakas (so called) are all authentically Pacific. It is not a small island by any means—250 miles long by about 30 wide—and its backbone of mountains often rises into the clouds. Like our own South Island of similar form but greater bulk it has accordingly a dry side and a wet side—though

New Caledonia's steep wet side is on the East. Two-thirds of the total surface is rock, crystalline, serpentine rock, with the result that the only vegetation over most of the area is gnarled, deep-rooted trees and wiry shrubs. When the wind blows a fine red dust blows with it.

"A 'desert island' then?" I said to René. "And this is what the Minister of Defence, announcing the stationing of our men there, is pleased to call 'a healthy, pleasant climate!'" René spang to the defence of his birth-land. "Your Minister is right," he expostulated. "And the proof?" "Fifty-three thousand inhabitants, a third of them white, and a real town of twelve thousand or so in little Nouméa. May to December is really cool and pleasant. And even in the cyclone season—that is your summer, Christmas to Easter—the average temperature is only 72 degrees by your thermometer, the fahrenheit. It is just 65 degrees in winter." In short, said René, New Caledonia was "White Man's Country—as you say it." In the grassy mountain areas there were great cattle stations—"like in Australia." And in fertile lowland areas corn, coffee, and copra were grown, and lemons, run wild, had become a pest. "Give every French family a Javanese servant—and where would you find a better life?"

Javanese and Japanese

I misheard him and said "Japanese?" in some surprise. No, said René, there were about a thousand Japanese (he

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