9. W.J. Watriama (c. 1880–1925): Pretender and patriot, (or ‘a blackman’s defence of White Australia’)

According to W.M. Hughes, Australia’s prime minister during World War I, Australia entered that conflict to ensure its national security and ‘to maintain those ideals which we have nailed to the very topmost of our flag-poles—White Australia, and those other aspirations of this young democracy’. Given the one aspiration which Hughes chose to specify in that comment, and although the White Australia policy was mainly concerned with the exclusion of Asians, there is some irony in the fact that when White Australians went to war in 1914, black Australians went too. Admittedly, their number was small and their contribution to the fighting nowhere decisive, although several were decorated. Still, their presence on the battlefields, and the price they paid for it was sufficient to ensure that, in so far as an abiding sense of Australian nationhood was created in 1914–1918, this was not the exclusive achievement of white Australians.

Although the army was at first reluctant to recruit Indigenous Australians, about 300 of them eventually served in the First Australian Imperial Force, and about one-third of them were killed or wounded. Not all the dark-skinned members of the First AIF, however, were Indigenous. American-born Jack Dunne, of New South Wales, was black. Another, William Jacob Watriama, was a Melanesian from the Loyalty Islands of French-ruled New Caledonia.

Little seems to be recorded about the reasons why Indigenous Australians enlisted, although there is no reason to assume that their motives were greatly different from those of most other Australian recruits. Hughes and White Australia notwithstanding, and allowing for personal motives, it is likely that they responded to the then generally accepted belief that, in time of war, Australian patriotic duty implied support for Britain. Certainly, by all accounts, this was so in Watriama’s case. By 1914 he had lived in Sydney for almost 25 years. He had already proved himself as a patriot by serving in the Boer War and, since 1911, had gained considerable publicity through agitating for the extension of British imperial responsibilities in the Pacific. Indeed, through a well-reported claim to being the exiled ‘king’ of the Loyalty Islands, a group for which he sought British protection, he had also acquired a reputation as a ‘character’, one of those people whose idiosyncrasy brought a leavening touch of theatricality.

1 Quoted in Manning Clark, Sources of Australian History, Melbourne, 1977, p. 567.
to the life of the city. Even so, he was well respected. His death in 1925 was extensively reported in the newspapers, which paid unstinting tribute to his patriotism while remaining affectionately and sympathetically noncommittal about his claim to the throne of the Loyalty Islands. The National Association of New South Wales, an organisation that favoured a socially conservative type of Australianism, similar to that espoused by D.H. Lawrence’s ‘Kangaroo’, described Watriama in its monthly journal as an ‘earnest and active Nationalist, and a popular member of the Association’. It applauded him for being ‘in every way a good citizen’ and respectfully noted his claim to have been kept out of his kingdom ‘because of his loyalty to Britain and his hostility to French rule’.  

Hughes, who attended his funeral, expressed similarly approving sentiments in a speech at the graveside. After commenting on Watriama’s military record and his ‘aristocratic’ blood, Hughes described him as ‘a fine man and an old friend whose life’s ambition was to see the Union Jack fly over his native Islands’.

White Australia, then, had clearly found room for Watriama and, indeed, it was in warning of a threat to White Australia that he had first come to public prominence. Shortly before his death in June 1907 his father, Yiewene, had written designating him his heir as ‘Chief and King of the Loyalty Islands’ and enjoining him to seek British rule for the group; but Watriama was slow to advertise this patrimony. It seems that it was not until 1910 that he first approached the Australian Government, urging the transfer of the Loyalty Islands from French to British control, and that he was referred to the British foreign office. At any rate, in January 1911 he directed such a request to the foreign office, signing himself ‘king of the Loyalty Islands’. Earlier, in 1910, in a gesture that suggests a burgeoning but incomplete sense of royal self-assurance, he had written to Atlee Hunt, the secretary of Department of External Affairs, congratulating him on the award of a CMG, but on that occasion he had only signed himself ‘W.J. Watriama, Loyalty Islands’. Then, in February 1911, prompted by the importation of Japanese labourers into New Caledonia, he took both his cause and his claim fully into the public domain. On 28 February the Sydney Morning Herald reported at length an interview with him in which he claimed that the Japanese (of whom 1,015 had entered New Caledonia in 1910) were spies rather than miners and that they represented ‘a danger not only to his people, but to Australia’ for they aimed ‘to establish strong bases [in New Caledonia], and bide their time for further aggression’. If Watriama was sincere, and there is

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4 *SMH*, 8 Jan. 1925.
5 Yiewene to Watriama, 19 April 1907; Watriama to [British Govt.?], 30 July 1907, copies in my possession by courtesy of Edna Watriama (Sydney, 1984).
6 *SMH*, 28 Feb. 1911.
7 Watriama to Sir Edward Grey (Foreign Secretary), 17 Jan. 1911, in British Consulate, Noumea, General Correspondence 1914–1920, on microfilm WP 162, National Library of Australia (NLA).
8 Watriama to Hunt, 29 June 1910, NLA, Atlee Hunt papers, MSS 52/2331.
no reason to believe otherwise, and besides, other Herald contributors agreed with him about the Japanese threat; it was an act becoming of an Australian patriot for him to offer his 'Kingdom' to Britain in order to impede the advance of Japan.9 The Herald report also dealt with Watriama personally. It described him as ‘a coloured gentleman of independent means’, who had come to Sydney 21 years before. ‘He is now a well-set young man of 32 years, decidedly good-looking, cultured and well-educated’ and, it went on, he had travelled, knew a number of languages, was intensely religious, and ‘had figured prominently as an honorary official during … the recent Chapman-Alexander [revivalist] mission in Sydney.’10

It also recounted Watriama’s own story of his life. According to this, he was the son and heir of Yiewene Dokucas Naisiline, who he claimed had recently died, leaving him a considerable fortune. Meanwhile the administration of his ‘kingdom’ was said to be in the hands of the regent, his alleged brother, Henry Naisiline who, assisted by Watriama’s agent in the Loyalty Islands, regularly forwarded despatches to him in Sydney. As for his being in Australia, Watriama claimed that it was due to a quarrel he had had with his alleged father. He said that in 1890, at the age of 11, he had disagreed with Yiewene’s decision to allow France to establish a protectorate over the Loyaltys, and had gone into exile rather than submit to the new regime. Arrived in Sydney, he had become a gardener at Paddington and later a coachman, his income being supplemented by gifts from his mother. He further averred that during the Paris Exhibition of 1900 he had visited France, at the invitation of President Emile Loubet, to discuss French rule in the Loyaltys and that he had refused to soften his opposition to that regime.11

Honest, hardworking, hopeful in adversity, resolutely principled, Watriama was, by his own account, the very model of the storybook prince down on his luck. But that account, like most romances, unfortunately, contains little that is true, apart from the fact that he had come from the Loyaltys to Australia at an early age. For instance, Watriama had his dates badly wrong. It was not in 1890 but in 1880, 27 years since France had annexed the Loyaltys, and when Watriama was no more than one-year old, that Yiewene Naisiline had agreed to cooperate with the French administration. Again, far from being recently dead in 1911, Yiewene did not die until 1916. As for Yiewene’s position, he was not ‘king’ of the Loyaltys. No such office had ever existed. Rather, in 1880 he had succeeded

11 SMH, 28 Feb. 1911. For a similar report see the Melbourne Argus, 14 Aug. 1912.
his father, Nidoish, as principal chief of the Si Gwahma people of Mare. Even so, the Si Gwahma were but one of the Mare tribes (although, admittedly, the dominant one since the 1870s), while Mare was but one of the three islands in the Loyalty group. Yiewene was succeeded as chief of Si Gwahma in 1916 by his son Henry Naisiline I.\textsuperscript{12}

Also fictitious were Watriama’s claims to have visited France and to have met the president. So, too, was his claim to be a member of the Naisiline family, let alone Yiewene’s heir. Nevertheless, the British and Australian governments and the Australian press never felt sufficiently concerned about Watriama’s claims to bother investigating them with seriousness.\textsuperscript{13} Not so their French counterparts. French records contain detailed information, gathered in 1911, on Watriama’s pedigree while the New Caledonia press gave considerable space to exposing him as an impostor and never spoke of him except to revile him. As in the 1980s, any challenge to the legitimacy of French rule in New Caledonia was not to be taken lightly. According to French records, the chief among which is a letter from Henry Naisiline, Watriama came from a family who were servants of the Naisilines. This is supported by a genealogy prepared by a Catholic missionary, Francois Beaulieu, who had been on Mare since 1866. The story told in these writings is that Watriama’s grandfather, Heutr, had shifted to Mare from Anarewedr on the island of Lifou with his two young sons in the 1840s, and had attached himself to the Naisiline chief Yiewene Zeiwewhatr, who died in 1848. Yiewene’s mother, Thanaket, had come from Anarewedr. Through her, with the approval of Bula, the chief of the village, other Anarewedr were drawn from Lifu to Mare. There they became, and remained, retainers to the Naisilines, but were not accepted as being members of the Si Gwahma tribe.\textsuperscript{14} Henry Naisiline also denounced Watriama in a letter published in the New Caledonia journal \textit{La France Australe}:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} In 1914, reporting Watriama’s first deportation from New Caledonia, the \textit{SMH} printed a brief factual report from Noumea denying Watriama’s claim to royal blood. Even so, the Australian press never showed any subsequent inclination to dispute his claim:

On arrival [in Noumea] he was interrogated by Governor Brunet as to his identity. He said he was born at Ete, Mare Island, 35 years ago. His parents came from Lifou as vassals to Jeuvene, and old king of Mare. His parents were not of royal blood, and he was employed as a domestic to the Italian consul here. He left for Sydney 25 years ago. He was not invited by the President of the Republic as a guest at the French exhibition in 1903. The accounts about him in the Australian press were all inventions he said. \textit{SMH}, 2 May 1914.

In fact, the Paris exhibition was in 1900.
\item \textsuperscript{14} When Heutr left Lifu another man, named Leduwhatr, also shifted from Anarewedre to Mare. According to Fr Beaulieu, their subservient status on Mare was indicated by the name \textit{la-kodraru} (literally ‘the way of the food’) applied to the gift of food they made on occasion to Yiewene to acknowledge his authority. \textit{La-kodraru} was given by outsiders, those who were not in any way members of Yiewene’s ‘family’. Information contained in personal letter from Fr M.J. Dubois SM, 5 June 1984.
\end{itemize}
This person, far from being the issue of the loins of Jupiter and of royal race is descended from people who were servants to my family, and even in that social situation they did not perform higher tasks.

The family, originally from Lifu, was given to my grandfather by the grandfather [and namesake] of chief Bula and, according to well-informed people, belonged to our household staff.

Far, then, from being the Regent or charge d’affaires of Watriama, I consider myself to be not only his chief, as recognised by the French government, but as his master in every meaning of the word.\footnote{15 La France Australe, 21 April 1911.}

Of Heutr’s two sons, one, Sio, became teacher for the London Missionary Society (LMS) and died of leprosy at Pede on Mare about 1910. The other, Waupo, married a Mare woman named Wakanude. They lived at Tuo, near the main Si Gwahma village of Netche, and had three children: a son, Gortcho (who was to die in Australia, possibly as a labourer in Queensland), a daughter, Wanate (who died about 1909), and Watriama.\footnote{16 H. Naisiline to Delegue de l’Administration, 13 April 1911, Archives Nationales, Section Outre-Mer, Corton 180 (I am grateful to Kerry Howe for this material); F. Beaulieu, ‘Le Roi des Loyalty, Watriama’. Fr Dubois gave me a copy of Fr Beaulieu’s notes. It is material he had used in his own work. M.J. Dubois, ‘Geographic mythique et traditionelle de Mare’, Memoire pour le Diploma de l’EPHE 5e section Paris, 1968, pp. 310–311; M-J Dubois, ‘Les Chefferies de Mare’, These de Doctorat d’Etat en lettres, Paris 1971–1972, p. 729.}

By his own account Watriama was born in 1879 or 1880, but in the estimation of Henry Naisiline he was born about five years earlier.\footnote{17 While no document exists that states the exact year of his birth, Watriama was consistent on the point. Calculations based on statements about his age in newspapers, on military enlistment papers and on his marriage and death certificates all indicate a birth date of 1879 or 1880. Within his family his birthday was celebrated on 31 Aug. Personal letter from Edna Watriama, 30 Jan. 1984.}

In the absence of any clear evidence it is impossible to resolve the question but the earlier date does have the advantage of not leaving one to puzzle over how an 11-year-old child from the Pacific islands managed to survive in Sydney. On the other hand, it is possible that, however young Watriama was when he arrived in Sydney, he would have been looked after by Rev. John Jones of the LMS. After being expelled from Mare in 1887 for encouraging his Protestant flock, who were mostly members of Si Gwahma, to oppose the French regime, Jones had settled in Sydney. Moreover, in 1890 he had corresponded with his former colleague, Stephen Creagh, who was still on Mare, about the possibility of getting a Mare boy to come and live with him and his wife in Sydney.\footnote{18 Creagh to Jones, 5 Nov. 1890, Mitchell Library, Rev. John Jones Papers, A401, p. 257. For an account of Jones’s involvement in affairs on Mare, see Howe, Loyalty Islands, pp. 75–78.} Whether he ever obtained one is, again, unknown, but it may be assumed that he would have been available to assist Watriama if asked to do so.
Henry Naisiline’s unpublished letter, which is much fuller than the published one, also contains details on Watriama’s personal history. Watriama, he says, left Mare about 1886 or 1887 to go to Noumea. There he worked for a time as a household servant for the Italian consul, Lackerstein, before joining the crew of the Societe le Nickel vessel *Heros*, from which he deserted at Sydney in 1891.\(^\text{19}\) Naisiline met him there in 1900. On that occasion Watriama came aboard his ship, the *Armand Behic*, and, as he did with other Loyalty Islands sailors, invited him ashore to discuss plans for bringing the Loyaltys under British control. Dutifully, Naisiline declined to oblige him.\(^\text{20}\)

Whether over the next decade Watriama maintained an interest in Loyalty Islands affairs or had any further contact with the group is unknown. If he did, no record of it has yet been found. Then, in February 1911 he propelled himself suddenly into prominence, setting out on a campaign he was to wage for the next ten years. Provoked by the threat to Australian security which he saw in the Japanese influx into New Caledonia, and wishing to impede their movement further afield, he began to campaign for the British annexation of the one part of that country that he could presume to represent, namely the Loyalty Islands. Presumably to add authority to his advocacy and to attract the attention of the press and the public to his cause, he also began styling himself the ‘King of the Loyaltys’. In 1911, he wrote once to the British foreign office and twice to the Australian prime minister, Andrew Fisher (1908–1913), about transferring the Loyaltys to British control.\(^\text{21}\)

Despite his self-conferred title, it is not clear if Watriama ever received replies to these letters. Yet, it is unlikely that they were dismissed out of hand, as the work of a mere crank, for Watriama’s concern accorded with a distrust of Japanese militarism that had been gathering strength and respectability in Australia since Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905. This distrust may conveniently be illustrated from the *Lone Hand*, an offshoot of the Sydney *Bulletin* and, like its parent, an avowed organ of Australian nationalism. Beginning monthly publication in 1907, *Lone Hand* was a literary journal that also gave considerable space to discussions of the presumed need for under-populated Australia to defend itself against the crowding hordes of Asia.\(^\text{22}\)

The Chinese, *Lone Hand* writers agree, could be kept out by strict immigration regulations, but the more aggressive Japanese were the real problem and would have to be stopped by force of arms. In 1908 *Lone Hand* published a

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\(^\text{19}\) There is no mention of Watriama in the published list of reported ships deserters. Jim Melton, *Ships’ Deserter*, 1852–1900, Sydney, 1986.

\(^\text{20}\) Naisiline to Delegue, 13 April 1911, Archives Nationales, section Outre-Mer, Carton 180.

\(^\text{21}\) See ref 6; index of correspondence regarding petition for annexation of Loyalty Islands, National Archives of Australia (NAA), CRS A 70/2.

\(^\text{22}\) Kit Taylor, *A History with Indexes of the Lone Hand, the Australian monthly*, [Sydney], 1977. The only run of this serial, listed as complete in the NLA, lacks the issues for Dec. 1917 and Feb. 1918.
four-part article titled ‘The Asiatic Menace’ on that theme and also began serial publication, in 11 parts, of a novel about Australia’s need and duty to resist the expansion of Asia. ‘For Australia’, the novel concludes, ‘is the precious front buckle in the white girdle of power and progress encircling the globe’. In 1910 Lone Hand fiction sounded a more urgent note with a short story about an attempted Japanese invasion of Australia and, in 1911, there were five stories on that topic. In most of these stories the invasion is repelled by dashing deeds of Australian bravery but in one, ‘The Dead Finish’, the seriousness of the Japanese threat is underlined by the defeat of a party of Australian defenders. It concludes:

The last stand of Captain Barnes’ squadron was ended. Rude hands tore down the flag, raising in its stead a small ensign whose red emblem mocked the newly risen sun. Japan’s sun had triumphed again. But the world’s sun looking down on Australia saw only still, white faces, triumphant in defeat, unconquerable in life or death.

In the absence of an observed Japanese movement towards Australia, defence commentators, however, had to discuss the threat in more general terms than did the fiction writers. Even if real, the threat was still remote. Thus, in December 1910, in an article titled ‘The Pacific—a Japanese pond’, and pointing to the Japanese presence in Hawai’i, Lone Hand could offer no more precise a warning than the following:

Ours may be a white Australia, all right, but it is set in a remarkably brown Pacific. And the touch of pitch will defile the whitest Australia ever reared on a base that neglects the means of national self-preservation—Defence, Defence and more Defence—while there is yet time.

It was Watriama’s achievement in 1911 to introduce a new note of immediacy to discussions of the presumed threat, and to make such warnings seem even more pertinent than they might have been before. Following the interview with him in February, the Sydney Morning Herald, although conceding that ‘it does seem
as if the Australians were a bit hysterical about [the Japanese threat], published a further report on the Japanese influx into New Caledonia and its possible implications for Australia.  

But *Lone Hand* took up the matter more emphatically. In March 1911 the Sydney *Sun* had published a seven-part report warning of the Japanese danger by a recent visitor to New Caledonia. In June *Lone Hand* republished this as a single article titled ‘New Caledonia: a menace to white Australia’. And, in July, it published a survey titled ‘White, Yellow and Brown: the present situation of White Australia in a Pacific that is rapidly becoming browner’, and in which France was accused of acting irresponsibly:

> France in New Caledonia is not playing the white man’s game — importing thousands of Japanese and so making New Caledonia a Japanese outpost from which to conquer the French colony first, and probably give it a jumping off place for an Australian invasion afterwards.  

Later in the year the issue was also raised in the federal parliament, twice. In November, in the Senate, a questioner was assured that the government would keep the matter of the Japanese in New Caledonia ‘under notice’. But that did not satisfy E.S. Carr MHR. In a speech in December he maintained that New Caledonia had a place on a Japanese scheme to dominate Australia and the Pacific. Accordingly, he urged the government to

> See whether, through diplomatic channels, Great Britain and France cannot arrange to bring New Caledonia, and all the New Hebrides, under the purview of the Commonwealth, and thus enable us to thwart what is undoubtedly the intention of that power which, of all powers, is likely to be the enemy of Australia in the future.  

Given the expansionist inclinations of the government of the day, that was not an unreasonable suggestion, but, given the difficulties that constantly confounded Australia’s standing bid for Vanuatu, it was scarcely a practicable one.

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27 *SMH*, 8 Mar. 1911.
In 1912 Watriama continued his campaign. He not only called on Fisher when the prime minister was visiting Sydney, but also travelled to Melbourne to call on the minister of foreign affairs, Josiah Thomas, and the minister of defence, George Pearce, to discuss with each of them the possibility of Australia taking over the Loyaltys. He seems to have received sympathetic hearings. Fisher, he reported as saying that ‘the Commonwealth would like to hold all the islands from Fiji down’. Following his Melbourne visit, the possibility of Australian annexation of the Loyaltys was also discussed in the federal parliament. In reply to a question, Thomas stated that

The Loyalty Islands are of comparatively small importance, but the island of New Caledonia is large and valuable. There can be no doubt that its inclusion in the British Empire would be in many ways to the advantage of Australia. [Therefore] the Government will give the matter every consideration should a favourable opportunity present itself.

While not discouraging, such a reply was, however, from Watriama’s point of view, so circumspect as to suggest indifference. He measured the importance of the Loyaltys in the urgent, immediately pressing terms of national security. They would be a valuable advanced defence post against, as he told the Melbourne Argus, an impending Japanese threat to the security of Australia:

These Japanese … are not only workers, they are trained soldiers [veterans of the Russo-Japanese war] and … they look beyond New Caledonia to Australia. At all events, New Caledonia is overrun with them.

If Australia is not going to take my country … then I am sorry to say that my country will be in the hands of the Japanese, and it will not be very long either. And my feeling is not only to my own country and my own people, but also to Australia. I would like to warn Australians that the danger is greater and nearer than they imagine.\[31\]

And some Australians did heed the warning. In September 1913 a deputation from the Australian Native’s Association recalled Watriama’s plea when it, too, petitioned the minister of external affairs, by then P.M. Glynn, for British annexation of New Caledonia. But, again to little avail. The question of New Caledonia, Glynn indicated, was subordinate to the longer running and, from the Australian point of view, ostensibly more winnable argument about control of Vanuatu. It would be discussed should Britain and France enter into

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\[31\] SMH, 13 Aug. 1912; Argus, 14 Aug., 7 (quoted), 12 Nov. 1912; Commonwealth of Australia, Parliamentary Debates, 19 Nov. 1912, p. 5, 598; Thompson, Australian Imperialism, p. 194.
negotiations over their respective claims to Vanuatu. But, as it happened, that contest for exclusive control was never to be resolved in favour of one power or the other. New Caledonia remained overshadowed by Vanuatu as an object of Australian Government concern.

Still, Watriama persisted. Although in Australia he had succeeded in arousing a modest but temporary interest in New Caledonia, but had won no support for the cause of Loyalty Islands annexation, and little enough for that of New Caledonia, he was not deterred from trying his luck further afield when the chance arose. In October 1916, and again in August 1917, as a soldier on leave in England, he visited the Colonial Office to plead for direct British, if not Australian, annexation of the Loyaltys. Predictably, he again received polite and blandly encouraging audiences, but nothing more.

In contrast, French responses to Watriama’s campaign were no less predictable but certainly more clear-cut, especially when, on two occasions, he attempted to return to his homeland. In April 1914, with a companion named Watt, he sailed from Sydney aboard the steamer Dumbea. On arriving in Noumea he was treated like a dangerous enemy. The French authorities, said the British consul, feared that he might incite a rebellion. Accordingly, although he was allowed ashore he was kept under police surveillance. He was forbidden to proceed to the Loyaltys and he was prevented from having any contacts with Kanaks in Noumea. Finally, he was expelled, being ordered by the governor to leave on the Dumbea when it returned to Sydney. The newspaper La France Australe rejoiced at these measures. In 1911 it had been strenuously critical of Watriama, seeing him as representing a recrudescence of the anti-French spirit fanned by Jones on Mare in the 1880s. Now, it magnified the seriousness of his campaign by presenting him to its readers as the agent of an even more powerful anti-French conspiracy. This, it claimed, was organised by the Presbyterians of Australia, who were already firmly established as irritants of French settler sensibilities.

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32 Argus, 11 Sept. 1913; SMH, 11 Sept. 1913. The Argus recalled that ‘last year Watriama, King of the Loyalty Islands, visited Australia’. The SMH, also referring to his 1912 visit to Melbourne, commented that King Watriama also drew attention to the number of Japanese in the islands. They were ostensibly working in the nickel mines. He got his son to work as a mess boy in one of their camps. This boy who could speak English, French and the native tongue, had a smattering of Japanese. He stated that every evening after meals the Japanese would sit around a table and bring out plans of the eastern part of Australia which they had prepared.

As if to suggest that fears of invasion were not fanciful, the Argus of 31 Oct. 1913 reported that at Easter 1913 a party of Japanese had been found surveying at Prospect near Sydney.

33 Unidentified newspaper clipping, copy in my possession by courtesy of Miss Edna Watriama; resume of letter from Watriama to W.M. Hughes, 15 Aug. 1917, NAA, CRS A 70/2.
through their persistent criticisms of French activity in neighbouring Vanuatu. Indeed, ‘Presbyterian’ had become a term of abuse indiscriminately applied to British Protestants and their followers.34

Besides being reviled as a Presbyterian agent in 1914—and in 1980 in a speech given to the Noumea Rotary Club, and in 1985 in an article in the local historical journal—Watriama was also so labelled in 1920, when he made a second attempt to return home. On this occasion he travelled in the *Noorebar*, which he had encouraged a Sydney businessman named Cowlishaw to charter by offering him the prospect of obtaining a cargo of copra from the Loyalties. In fact the Loyalties produced little copra and it is extremely unlikely that the *Noorebar* would have been able to obtain cargo there. But the matter was never put to the test for, although the governor received Cowlishaw and the captain of the vessel cordially when they arrived at Noumea, his mood changed abruptly when he learned that Watriama was aboard the vessel. He then retracted the permission he had given for the *Noorebar* to go to the Loyalties. Irrespective of Cowlishaw’s intentions, the governor informed the British consul that he believed Watriama planned on ‘stirring up the natives of the Loyalty Islands to a “rising” against the French Government’. And that was something he was not prepared to risk, especially as 78 kanaks had recently been tried for a revolt in another part of the colony. As for Watriama, he was threatened with arrest if he dared step ashore, and once again expelled from New Caledonia. He was aboard the *Noorebar* when it sailed for Sydney to the accompaniment of venomous abuse in the local press. Under the heading of ‘A Black Pretender’, *La Messager de la Nouvelle Caledonie* denounced Watriama as ‘This grimy example of Australian civilisation indoctrinated by ignorant Presbyterians [who], from hearing himself called king of the Islands has perhaps finished by believing it’. As for his companions on the *Noorebar*, they were, it continued, blackguards and filibusters engaged in a kind of Jameson raid, ‘because the real object of the voyage … was to take possession of the Loyalty Islands in the name of the figurehead Watriama’.

We hope [it continued] that our administration will show these buccaneers that France still counts a little in the world and [that] it will not fail to make the necessary representations to the Government of Australia, where Watriama and his accomplices have evidently found support and encouragement.35

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34 *La France Australe*, 27 April 1914, 28 April 1914; SMH, 2 May 1914; T. Johnston to Governor General, 1 April 1920, NAA, CRS A1, item 20/8469; Numa Daly, ‘L’Aventure extraordinaire de Watriama, Roi des Iles Loyalty’, *Société d’Etudes Historiques de la Nouvelle Caledonie*, no. 64 (1985), pp. 17–33.
35 Johnston to Governor General, 1 April 1920, enclosing report from *La Messager de la Nouvelle Caledonie*, 31 Mar. 1920; Lew Priday, ‘Watriama, the Man who Wanted Britain to Take Over the Loyalties’, *Pacific Islands Monthly*, Sept. 1966, p. 86.
What might have been evident to a hostile commentator in New Caledonia is, however, not verified by the information available on Watriama’s Australian career. Rather, it appears that he had no accomplices (Cowlishaw was a commercial adventurer) and that he was given no firm support by politicians, by the press or by any of the Protestant churches. If Watriama received encouragement in Australia it was from the generous publicity his claims received in newspaper reports and the polite hearing he was given by a few dignitaries. Expressions of approval from these sources were directed to him personally, as a citizen, and to the broadly patriotic nature of his aims rather than to the details of his demands. His claim to the Loyalty Islands, for instance, tended to be overshadowed by the larger issue of New Caledonia. But in either case, what he sought, or encouraged Australia to seek, was at least consonant with the expansionist inclination of the Australian Government which, under Fisher, looked covetously to the Pacific, particularly Vanuatu. Indeed, if there was difference between Australian policy and what Watriama wanted it was less one of principle than of degree, detail and timing. Thus, the Sydney Daily Telegraph summed up the position with regard to New Caledonia in 1913, printing that, although it would be desirable for Australia to acquire New Caledonia, it was not necessary to do so for ‘so long as France remains in possession we … [know] a friendly and white nation is our neighbour.’

As for Watriama’s standing as a citizen, this was established, as the press noted, by his record as a soldier. He was already a member of the St George’s Rifles, a civilian volunteer unit, when he enlisted for service in South Africa. He embarked from Sydney in March 1901 with the 2nd New South Wales Mounted Rifles and returned in June 1902. No details of his war service are available, but he apparently considered it to have been unbecomingly prosaic for a king for, in talking of it to the Sydney Morning Herald reporter in 1911, he found it necessary to improve upon the truth, albeit modestly. Thus, he did not, as he claimed, attain the rank of corporal and there is no evidence that his valour earned him the personal congratulations of Lord Methuen. Nevertheless, Watriama’s experience in South Africa was to stand him in good stead when Australians next went to war in 1914. Watriama, who at that time gave his occupation as gardener and whose address since about 1907 had been the Methodist Mission

36 Thompson, Australian Imperialism, p. 194.
37 Quoted in Thompson, Australian Imperialism, p. 201.
38 Sun, 6 Jan. 1925.
39 P.L. Murray, Records of Australian Contingents to the War in South Africa, 1899–1902, Melbourne, 1911, p. 121. Watriama’s military number was 2955.
40 SMH, 28 Feb. 1911.
headquarters in Castlereigh St, Sydney, was among the first to enlist.\(^{41}\) In August he left with the Expeditionary Force to occupy German New Guinea, and soon found himself in the role of instructor. As the *Sun* explained:

> It was imperative that [the] force should get away quickly, and so it happened that many of the volunteers in it knew little of the business of a soldier. As Colonel Heritage could tell you if he wished to, some of them hardly knew one end of their rifle from the other. They had to be taught as the *Berrima*, the troopship, was taking them to their destination. Watriama was no new chum soldier. He had already fought in the Boer war. So his services were valuable. That they were given voluntarily was all the more to his credit. It was a strange sight to see this black man surrounded by perhaps half a dozen eager Australians while he demonstrated to them the use of a rifle, how to use it, how to take it to pieces, how to put it together again, and how to sight it.\(^{42}\)

A participant history of the occupation described him as being ‘a favourite with all members of the expedition.’ It also records that at Namatanai on New Ireland it was he who captured Dr Braunert, the leader of a party of Germans who had administered a notable thrashing to William Cox, the head of the Methodist mission. Later he took part in the occupation of Bougainville.\(^{43}\)

Then, in March 1915, with New Guinea secure, Watriama came back to Sydney and in December he enlisted in the First Australian Imperial Force. In March 1916 he married Ethel May Tipping, the daughter of a grocer, at Wesley Church in Melbourne, and in June sailed for Europe.\(^{44}\) Again his colour, and his claim, attracted favourable attention. Describing the embarkation parade one newspaper reported under the heading ‘A King in Exile’:

> ‘Look at the black man’, said somebody pointing to one of the soldiers marching with the machine guns. The dark face was that of a king in exile, the ex-monarch, in fact, of the Loyalty Islands, a little well-named group somewhere in the waste of the Pacific. Formerly a soldier in South Africa, and recently returned from sharing in the conquest of German New Guinea, he was on his way to enter the vast struggle in Europe on behalf of a civilisation removed by thousands of years from his own.\(^{45}\)

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41 Governor General to Colonial Secretary, 26 May 1911, copy in British Consulate, Noumea, General Correspondence 1914–1920, on microfilm WP 162, NLA; Nominal Roll Australian Imperial Force, 18 Infantry Battalion, 1st to 18th reinforcement, p. 104, Australian War Memorial.

42 *Sun*, 25 Mar. 1917; *Lone Hand*, Jan. 1918, p. 67. Watriama’s military number was 671.


44 Personal communication from Chris Cunneen, Australian Dictionary of Biography; nominal roll, as for reference 39.

45 Unidentified newspaper clipping, copy in my possession by courtesy of Miss E. Watriama.
A member of the 13th reinforcement of the 18th Infantry Battalion, he reached Europe in time for the battle of the Somme and was wounded at Pozieres.\(^{46}\) He was again wounded in 1917, as the *Sun* duly reported (‘“King” Watriama Wounded in France’) and, on returning to Australia at the end of the year, began helping, as the *Bulletin* noted, ‘in recruiting work’.\(^{47}\)

With such a record (supplemented by his dignified bearing and his church associations) it is, then, scarcely to be wondered at that Watriama should attain a social position that would ensure tolerance of and even sympathy for, his foibles.\(^{48}\) Thus, in reporting his wounding in 1917, the *Sun* commented

> As to whether his claim to the sovereignty of the Loyalty Islands was a good one or not no one seemed to know. It is doubtful if anyone cared.\(^{49}\)

That this was, indeed, the case, at least as far as the Sydney newspapers were concerned, is suggested by the assessments they published following his death in 1925. In these his claim to the ‘kingship’ of the Loyaltys was merely noted, but his military service was summarised and his possession of strong pro-British ideals was affirmed, and it was agreed that the action for which he would be most remembered involved a demonstration of patriotism that occurred during the Anzac Day Commemoration in Sydney in 1921.\(^{50}\)

This incident arose as a response to a presumed ‘anti-returned soldier policy at the Town Hall’, where the municipal council was lead by the allegedly ‘socialist’ lord mayor, Alderman W.H. Lambert, who was also president of the Australian Labor Party.\(^{51}\) Suspicions that there was such a policy had been aroused among members of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia (of which Watriama was a founder of the Northbridge branch) by council decisions regarding the use of the Town Hall. In February 1921 the council had declined to hire the hall to the League for ‘a meeting to devise the means for the housing and exhibition of war trophies captured by the A.I.F.’ It had also declined, until it obtained legal opinion on its obligations under the *Returned Soldiers and Sailors Act*, to grant the League free use of the Town Hall for a memorial service on the approaching Anzac Day. Such permission was in fact given on 10 March,
but not before patriotic sensibilities had been bruised in many quarters.\textsuperscript{52} They were further bruised a few weeks later when the Union Jack was trampled on in Melbourne by trade unionists protesting at the recent killing of railway men by British soldiers at Mallow in Ireland. The anti-British tone of the protest was denounced in the \textit{Sydney Morning Herald} of 24 April as an expression of ‘disloyalty’ and of a ‘bogus Australianism’, that needed to be curbed.\textsuperscript{53} Many of the people coming to the Town Hall the next day for the Anzac service were said to be inclined to agree when they found the outside of the hall bereft of flags. ‘Wherever the eye turned it looked on bare flagpoles’, reported the \textit{Herald}. But, it continued,

\begin{quote}
When the service was over thousands of eyes turned to the clock tower. There a lonely Union Jack, diminutive enough, but looking even smaller from that pinnacle of the chief civic hall, fluttered and coiled itself into picturesque folds in the sunshine and the breeze. One of the diggers had climbed up the stairs into the tower and placed it there.
\end{quote}

Shortly before the service began, S. Henley of the Diggers Vigilance Society had stepped onto the platform inside the hall with a small Union Jack in his hand and had won the cheers of the crowd by announcing that ‘we intend to fly this flag, no matter how’. But, he added, they were having trouble in getting the flag to the top of the building. Then

\begin{quote}
Out of the black mass in the gallery on the right rose a khaki figure. He volunteered to host the Empire symbol. Again the crowd cheered.
\end{quote}

Then, another Digger, an elderly man, stepped forward

‘I think it is a disgrace,’ he said in a stentorian voice, ‘to our dead boys who were as true [trade] unionists as ever lived. They have fought for their country and today they are lying in honoured graves. I say emphatically that we will have the flag up.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Proceedings of the Municipal Council of the City of Sydney, during the year 1921}, pp. 71, 82, 103; Town Clerk to RSSIL, 10 Mar. 1921, and associated documents in Town Clerk’s Department, Registered Papers no 470/21.
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Age}, 4 April 1921; \textit{Evening News}, 25 April 1921; \textit{SMH}, 24 April 1921; Patrick O’Farrell, \textit{Catholic Church and Community; an Australian history}, Sydney, 1985, p. 344. There had also been a ‘flag incident’ in Martin Place a few months before. \textit{Evening News}, 19 Dec. 1917. Among some nationalities of Labor or ‘socialist’ sympathies, there was a strong preference for displaying the Australian flag instead of the Union Jack. Dispute about what should be regarded as the proper flag of Australia was fostered by the fact that no particular flag was officially held to be the national flag until the commonwealth Blue Ensign was adopted as such in 1951. Department of the Special Minister of State, \textit{The Australian Flag}, Canberra, 1982.
\end{footnotesize}
Then to the accompaniment of more cheers, ‘with the flag in his hand, and with a heavy support of protesting Diggers,’ Henley left the platform and raced for the tower to carry out the plan. Later, other ex-servicemen hoisted both the Union Jack and the Australian flag on the poles flanking the tower.\textsuperscript{54}

According to his obituarists, Watriama figured prominently in these proceedings. Indeed, they credit him with having climbed the flagpole in the tower and put the flag in place, although the \textit{Herald} obituary erroneously has him replacing the Australian flag with the Union Jack.\textsuperscript{55} There is, however, a serious weakness in the evidence regarding the incident. The \textit{Evening News}, on the very day of the event, reported that it was an ex-sergeant, R.K. (‘Dick’) Watkins, who had hoisted the flag.\textsuperscript{56} In the absence of further details, Watriama’s exact role in the affair must, therefore, be open to conjecture. Possibly it was less conspicuous than that with which he was posthumously credited and, if he did climb a flagpole, the external design of the Town Hall makes it more likely that he had climbed one of the sides rather than the one atop the tower. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that he was closely involved with that dramatic outburst of vexillolatry in 1921.

As for the omission that prompted the outburst, it seems likely that it was the result of oversight rather than a socialist-inspired disloyalty to the British Empire. The inside of the hall had been appropriately decorated and, according to a report from the town clerk, the absence of flags on the outside had been ‘entirely due to forgetfulness on the part of the officer accustomed to put them up.’

Nevertheless, the action of Henley, Watkins and Watriama, and their comrades, was sufficient to induce the council to ensure that such a lapse would not occur again. In May it resolved that both the Union Jack and the Commonwealth flag would, thenceforth, be flown daily at the Town Hall and that, on Anzac Day, the hall would be ‘be flagged in gala style’.\textsuperscript{57} Indeed, if the tributes paid to Watriama in 1925 are any indication, it would have been imprudent for the council to have resolved otherwise.

Following the war Watriama settled down to family life and to working as a house painter. With the aid of a war service loan he bought a house in the Sydney suburb of Northbridge, where he was a founder of the local branch of

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{SMH}, 26 April 1921.
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Evening News}, 25 April 1921; \textit{Sun}, 25 April 1921; \textit{The Daily Telegraph} account of the incident (26 April 1921) is much more dramatic than that of the \textit{SMH}.
\textsuperscript{57} Proceedings of the Municipal Council of the City of Sydney during the year 1921, pp. 167, 182–183; \textit{Daily Telegraph}, 27, 28 April 1921.
the RSSIL.\(^5^8\) Apart from his abortive visit to Noumea in 1920, he did not pursue his Loyalty Islands campaign with his former vigour. Yet, he did not abandon his claim and he continued quietly to proclaim his interest in the group by naming his house ‘Netche’ after the chiefly village on Mare.\(^5^9\) Meanwhile he was making but a modest living and, towards the end of 1925, at the onset of his final illness, the RSSIL organised a benefit function for him. As a mark of respect for him the Northbridge Methodists trustees, albeit almost reluctantly, allowed this to be held in the church hall, on condition that the permission was not taken as a precedent and provided that ‘screaming farce’ was prohibited.\(^6^0\) Later, ‘in view of her present circumstances’, the RSSIL granted his widow £5 from the Widows Relief Account.\(^6^1\)

Watriama died of cancer on 5 January 1925, leaving his wife to bring up their two children. Both children, a son and a daughter, later served in the Australian forces in World War II.\(^6^2\) Although they were following a strong precedent in so doing it is worthy of note that they were serving a country to which their father had never formally belonged. For Watriama had never been naturalised.\(^6^3\) Why this was so is not known. It is, however, consistent with the possibility that he retained a sense of prior allegiance to the Loyaltys. If so, it was a disposition that was entirely proper for one who claimed to be king of the group. Whether he ever truly believed his claim to be valid, however, cannot be known. What is clearer is that he was moved to promulgate it by what he saw as a threat to Australia—to White Australia—and that Australia respected him despite his claim, if not for it.

Watriama was not an important figure in the affairs of his time. The paucity of his achievements, such as they were, and despite the publicity he attracted, precludes the attribution of any such status. Nowhere did he exercise a decisive influence. Nevertheless, in hindsight, he is not without significance as an historical ‘marker’ or reference point, for his career can be related to important

\(^5^8\) Death certificate, by courtesy Australian Dictionary of Biography; Ethel Watriama to W.M. Hughes, 2 Sept. 1925. Hughes papers, NLA, MS 1538/30/136; obituaries, reference 54.
\(^5^9\) The house still stands at 4 Namoi Road. D.H.Lawrence, who was in Australia from May to Aug. 1922, commented extensively on the practice of naming houses in his novel *Kangaroo*. Watriama’s signature, with the note ‘King of the Loyalty Islands, June 28, 1918’ is written on a section of a toast held in the Mitchell Library, ML Doc 2244.
\(^6^0\) Northbridge trust minutes, trustee meeting 22 Oct. 1924. Held by Uniting Church of Australia, Church Records and Historical Society, Sydney.
\(^6^1\) *The Australian Home*, 26 Jan. 1925. This journal, which already incorporated *The Property Owner*, also incorporated from this issue *The Soldier*, ‘the official journal of the RSSIL and kindred associations.
\(^6^2\) The daughter, Edna, was ten when her father died and the son, Merlyn, was seven. Edna studied singing at the Conservatorium of Music in Sydney. During the war she was an A.C.W. in the W.A.A.F. (no. 106775). Merlyn (NX 4144) served in the Middle East with the 2/1 Battalion, A.I.F., and was taken prisoner-of-war in Crete. Merlyn’s son, Mervyn, became a professional golfer in northern New South Wales. W.J. Watriama’s wife, Ethel, died in Sydney on 28 Feb. 1962. Personal communication from Edna and Merlyn Watriama; Edna Watriama to W.M. Hughes, 5 Jan. 1948, Hughes Papers, NLA, MS 1538/1/9398-401.
\(^6^3\) Ethel M. Watriama to W.M. Hughes, 2 Sept. 1925, Hughes Papers, NLA, MS 1538/30/136.
issues in the development of Australian society and to perceptions of Australia’s place in the world. Thus, in the history of an Australia that has become an ethnic and cultural melting pot, he is notable in being probably the first black man who can be shown to have attained an apparently thorough and unequivocal degree of acceptance in white Australian society.64 Besides that, Watriama also had meaning for an Australia that was being increasingly affronted by the continued presence and oppressive policies of France in the Pacific, although the latter have lessened somewhat since the 1980s.65 Personal, quixotic and unsuccessful though he was in his efforts to reduce France’s holdings in the Pacific, he was contributing to a tradition that has had fitful expression in Australia—and among France’s Pacific island subjects—for more than a century. If he is to be remembered for telling lies for the sake of his cause it should be conceded that they were, at least, ‘white’ ones. Yet, since the issue of France’s place in the Pacific was being fought more strenuously and for higher stakes in the later twentieth century than ever before, and since the political status of New Caledonia (‘Kanaky’) is still under review in the twenty-first century, it may be that Watriama deserves to be seen not merely as a pretender or as a patriot or as a prevaricator but as a prophet, albeit a minor one. Certainly, ‘prophet’ is a title that becomes him better than ‘king’.66

66 The preliminary version of this essay was published in French in 1996 in Mwa Vee: revue culturelle kanak, no.14, pp.12-33.