The houses far from home in this book are dwelling places of memory entangled with a shifting present. They are in the New Hebrides, a chain of islands between Fiji and Australia in the southwest Pacific. France and Britain jointly administered this archipelago as the Condominium of the New Hebrides from 1906 until 1980, when the islands became the Republic of Vanuatu.* Some were homes away from home to British colonial servants. They were decorated with “one’s things,” an accumulation of possessions that might range from Aynsley china to zebra skins, carried between overseas posts. One’s things made each house a home, linking remembered places as a family followed the course of a man’s British Colonial Service career, for it was never a woman’s in the New Hebrides. Most colonial servants retired to live at Home, as England was always known, even in official correspondence. For them, the dwellings in their photo albums from the New Hebrides are mnemonic of those houses far from home that now blur together in memory: Was that photo in the New Hebrides? Oh, no, that was Montserrat.

* The terms “Vanuatu” and “New Hebrides” appear to be, but are not quite, interchangeable in this book. Both refer to the same place but not the same time. Vanuatu is used with reference to the postindependence period. Melanesian citizens of Vanuatu are called “ni-Vanuatu” (both singular and plural); they were called New Hebrideans in colonial times.
Other houses became home to people, again mostly men, who came from somewhere else, never to live there again. They were self-made people for whom “home” was a product of experience. Often, it was something they built for themselves. Many came from other out-of-the-way islands such as Réunion, Pitcairn, Corsica, Norfolk, New Guinea, or New Caledonia, but others also came from Australia, France, or the better-known islands of England and Ireland. Those who stayed made homes in the islands; many had no other place to call home. After as many as four or five generations there, settlers are now caught up in conflicts over citizenship, race, and the relationship of land to identity in postcolonial Vanuatu. For many settler families who left the New Hebrides, the places where they now live in Australia, France, or elsewhere are just houses far from home; and home, both bitter and sweet in memory, is still in the islands.

This book explores connections among such ideas as distance, exile, travel, and rootedness through the notion of houses far from home. Rather than disdainful such metaphors as “home” and “away,” I intend here to unravel their edges and the threads that bind one idea to another. The notion of houses far from home can link many places in a life, on the one hand, and many lives to a place, on the other. The book metaphorically considers housing as if it were both a verb and a noun. Housing as a verb is “to house” or housing as a process. As a noun a house is an object of study. The Establishments Office of the British government in the New Hebrides made grammatical sentences out of housing, so to speak. It was concerned with housing as a verb and a noun, with both the process of housing British personnel and with the housing stock in which they were accommodated. I examine such “sentences” and pose questions: How did people who were positioned differently in a particular colonial history at once create, see, and respond to the New Hebrides? How did they recreate, regard, and respond to Home? How can home, homes away from home, and houses far from home be understood within a framework that expands “home” from the domestic to the public sphere, a framework that is one of the “hallmarks of Euro-American feminist practice”? 

Nostalgia, a longing for a place as much as a time, figures in all that follows here, as do some people’s desires to distance themselves from painful pasts in the islands. But the charged space between romantic nostalgia for life in the South Seas and recollection of the same place with a shudder is what sparks my interest. Imperialist nostalgia, the yearning for what one has helped (intentionally or otherwise) to destroy, seems an apt term to describe what I heard from some participants in this project. But simply tearing down the house of colonialism is another kind of imperialism, a conquest that makes it harder to find among the rubble the meanings that were colonialism’s posts, beams, shingles, and trim,
much less its occupants. Here I prefer to scrutinize the colonial house as an artifact while also puzzling over its literal and metaphorical architecture.

Houses, their complex meanings as homes and as colonial products and processes, provide the framework for this endeavor. They relate, in various ways, to other colonial lived spaces as well as to plans, designs, and discussions of other places that were never built. The houses in this book are a way of understanding the social history of particular colonial spaces. I use the term “colonial space” to include spatial practice (the process, the verb), form (the buildings, the noun), and meaning (the sentences). At the broadest level, I take “colonial space” to mean the built forms of official and unofficial expatriate settlement and their usage. Colonial space is also a way of looking at the world, a mind-set that the built forms and discourses about them represent and reinforce, making it common sense for participants to see the world in colonial terms. The core colonial spaces in this study are official ones. The British Residency and the British Pad- dock are key, but officers’ housing, district agencies, boats, and prisons are equally revealing. All suggest the variations and tensions, as well as the uniformity, of the British colonial project in the New Hebrides over time and from the perspectives of people (men, women, and children) situated differently with regard to that project.

Memories of houses speak of tensions between promise and poignancy. Like all memories, these allow people to enrich and shape their present lives and to understand past experiences. Recounted memories convey the sense of possibility as well as the sense of loss that comes with movement between and within places. Archival materials carry the past into the present differently than oral remembrances do with both material immediacy and the distance of time past. They connect to the present through reading, not through listening. On delicate paper tied with faded red tape, handwritten jottings in minutes and on margins of typescript construct and comment on the exclusive and inclusive spaces of colonialism. The book tacks between oral memories and archival documents, between different islands and actors, and sails across time to link spaces in an analytical framework that critically accepts the power of romantic ideas as well as political realities to shape people and what they do to places. James Clifford, in developing an idea of traveling theory has prioritized a research agenda that would include such questions as “How do different populations, classes, and genders travel? What kinds of knowledges, stories, and theories do they produce?” I ask these questions not in general but in the particulars of multiple locations and multiple voices in the New Hebrides.

This is what George Marcus would call a “multi-sited ethnography,” an approach to which I have contributed in earlier research. Such an approach
should “try to represent multiple, blindly interdependent locales, each explored ethnographically and mutually linked by the intended and unintended consequences of activities within them.”

This study also considers some locales that are not “blindly” but quite explicitly interdependent, such as the Colonial Office in London and Port Vila in the New Hebrides. Another anthropologist, Mary Des Chene, has suggested that the multi-sited form of ethnography might be “well suited to research whose central focus is a historically linked group of people or an institution that has, over time, caused many people, from diverse locales, to traverse similar circuits.” It is hard to imagine a more suitable case for multi-sited treatment than British colonial servants in the New Hebrides.

In doing the multi-sited research for this book, I visited many people in their homes in the United Kingdom and in Australia, as well as a few in France. Although their current houses told me a lot about these people, the houses and other buildings that are the subject of this book are all in the New Hebrides, albeit widely scattered. I use these buildings as windows through which to glimpse and puzzle over some of the variety of the colonial project that was the New Hebrides, which itself was one small room in the house of empire. Each chapter has at its heart a building the reader enters, exploring from there particular dimensions of race, space, gender, and power in terms of the social history of the New Hebrides.

Woven Worlds

The house at the heart of this opening chapter is my own. My own home away from home in the New Hebrides, and the feelings it evokes in memory, led me into this project. My mind’s eye kept returning to this small bamboo house on the edge of a South Pacific village where I lived in 1978–1979, 1982, and 1985. As I tried to find the doorway for starting this book I kept remembering how the house glowed at night. It glowed like a loosely woven basket sheltering a candle, for indeed the house was made like a basket, with walls woven out of split and softened bamboo. Even the floor was woven. When I stepped outside at night, pale golden light from kerosene lanterns inside the house twinkled through the warp and weft of the woven walls. The glowing house was mesmerizing, beautiful and tame compared to the dazzling sky full of stars a thousand miles from the interference of city light. I wanted to “write space” so that the houses in this book would glow like that, shedding light on political spaces through domestic ones.

I remember that bamboo house with nostalgia for a place where my family lived simply and peacefully, for a time when my son and daughter were children. (Sean went on all field trips from 1978 on. My daughter, Channing, came on each
House of Bamboo

field trip beginning in 1982 when she was two.) I speak of that house as comfortable despite the stench of mildew everywhere and the discomfort of always sitting on floors, benches, stones, or mats, never able to lean back against anything except the occasional tree. Sleeping was much more comfortable; with hot, humid afternoons and cool nights, we did a lot of it. In 1978, six-year-old Sean slept on a mat on the springy bamboo floor, as did our black-and-white puppy, Riki. Captain Cat slept draped over a rafter. My husband, Bill, and I shared a simple and comfortable bed—a raised wooden platform with a foam mattress. From the window we could glimpse the sea far down the slopes of coconut palms; pictures of horses from a Minolta calendar decorated the bamboo bedroom walls.

Our house was, and is, on the edge of Waileni Village in the Longana district of Ambae Island, although it is no longer the same house in quite the same place. In 1978, the house was new. It was about twenty-five feet square, with a front room and two small sleeping areas at the back. We enjoyed the fact that the house did not stand out, except for having more windows than was usual in village houses. The windows marked it as more than a sleeping place; it looked a bit like an office. It was, in fact, both of these. We were proud that we did not have to occupy housing intended for visitors to the village, as we had on our first field trip to the New Hebrides in 1970. Then, we had lived in the back of a cement meeting house in another village on the coast. It was hot and buggy, and although the building materials were permanent, living there made us feel transient. We struggled to overcome the villagers’ categorization of us anthropologists as just another kind of expatriate who passed through from time to time, such as the British or French district agent, the cooperatives officer, or the head of the Boy Scouts. We struggled, too, with the terms of the colonial equation of which, although we did not like it, we were a part. We tried with limited success to make a home out of the meeting house and with somewhat more success to make a place for ourselves in the area.

The house where we lived in 1978 was a great improvement in terms of comfort, the image of our place in the community, and our own construction of identity. We designed it, paid for the materials and labor, arranged for a local carpenter to build it, and, later, donated it to the community as a rest house when we left. As the piles of bamboo stacked on the building site became a house, a refrain echoed in my mind: “Bamboo roof, bamboo walls, it’s even got a bamboo floor, house of bamboooo.” Actually, our house of bamboo had a corrugated galvanized iron roof and guttering to catch enough rainwater to fill a two-hundred-gallon steel tank. This was our only source of water. An unprecedented drought was under way when we moved in, and the tank took a month to fill. We learned that two adults and a child could get by on two five-gallon buckets of
Figure 1. Map of Vanuatu. Annotated original. Carol Randall, Cartographic Office, Department of Geography, York University.
water a day, for washing, cooking, drinking, and bathing. This was only enough
water to flush the average toilet twice, but we had no toilet. Instead, we had an
outhouse with two footprints to indicate where one squatted over the hole in the
cement slab and a couple of huge, yellow-backed, harmless spiders that bounced
entertainingly when their webs were tweaked.

The kitchen was a separate building with a coral floor and thatched roof.
Separate kitchens were common in villages and mission stations and on planta-
tions because of concerns about fire and because rats prefer kitchens with food
to houses in which there are only sleeping people. We created a bathing area in
a back corner of the kitchen, curtained with a blue-and-white calico of hibiscus
flowers suitable for a Hawaiian shirt. Most houses did not have a washing area
in the kitchen as we did, but all had a private area outside the house that adults
used for personal cleanliness under cover of darkness. All the children went to
“swim” at twilight, none in the sea. The squalls of soapy toddlers being rinsed
with cold water was a familiar evening sound. For us, including our children,
bucket baths in a big aluminum washtub, with water heated on the propane
burner, were as soothing as the best hot bath in Canada.

While easily romanticized, my memories of living in the islands, like those of
most of the people with whom I spoke for this book, are mixed. The place evokes
poignant contrasts between the opportunities my children enjoy in Canada and the
limited futures of their island playmates in terms of travel, education, and income.
These contrasts emphasize global inequalities in very personal ways that cannot be
overcome by the occasional check for a child’s school fees, the rare meeting of an
islander in Canada, and increasingly frequent email in the lingua franca, Bislama.

For anthropologists, “the field” is both a methodological ideal and a concrete
place: “The field is a home away from home, a place of dwelling.”13 Anthropolo-
gists have typically located themselves ethnographically through descriptions such
as the one I have just given of our glowing house. Except for stories of the anthro-
pologist’s arrival, “the field” has tended to be constructed as spatially static and
timeless. It is a place that rarely includes nonresident outsiders other than them-
selves. Anthropologists, myself included, have seldom paid much attention in their
writing to the comings and goings of other outsiders such as missionaries, traders,
or government officials. Yet these people were passing through another way of life
as much as we were, albeit with different goals and strategies. They were also
dwelling “in the field” in ways similar to ours. As James Clifford argues, “Why not
focus on any culture’s farthest range of travel while also looking at its centers, its
villages, its intensive field sites? . . . How is one group’s core another’s periph-
ery?”14 This view requires new representational strategies, one of which I develop
here. The culture in question is British; its farthest range, the New Hebrides; its
centers, villages, and intensive field sites, the British Residency, British Paddock, and British and French District Agencies. Here I examine the culture of British colonialism, a project that evokes salvage ethnography documenting a dying breed. I take up Clifford’s call to investigate the intercultural figure of the traveler. I do so through a concern with transitory and permanent practices of dwelling, exploring both movement and rootedness through houses far from home.

Colonial Assistance

Writing about memory, home, loss, and possibility is made more poignant by the death of the complicated, at times infuriating, yet always helpful scholar who made much of it possible. Will Stober, an ex–colonial officer who lived in Birmingham after leaving the New Hebrides, arranged interviews for me with about fifty people who had worked in the New Hebrides. In July 1994, and again in the spring of 1995, he drove me at a breakneck pace all over England in his aging red Citroen. We went from Northumberland to the south coast, from Norfolk to Herefordshire, and even to Fishguard in Wales. He found people willing to talk to me whose experiences in the islands ranged from assignments for Volunteers in Service Overseas to resident commissioners who held the highest British office. Some whom we were unable to interview contacted me at Will’s prompting, making written submissions that included detailed drawings of their “houses far from home.” One of the most artistic, submitted by the senior geologist with the British Residency in Vila from 1967 to 1974, is reproduced here (figure 2).

Will Stober threaded our way through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office bureaucracy which, along with the Government of Vanuatu, finally granted us permission to work in archives that no researcher on Vanuatu had seen for more than fifteen years. I enjoyed working in the archives with Will not only because of the wealth of information we uncovered there but also because he so clearly thrived on this kind of sleuthing and his enthusiasm for it was contagious. Anything Will did not remember about the colonial period in the New Hebrides he could usually find in his large collection of books and papers, piled neatly in stacks that nearly covered the floor of the study in his small flat.

His handwritten letters to me often filled ten pages, with twenty or more numbered enclosures that might include current film reviews or a photo from the early colonial period. My letters to Will were usually a laundry list of detailed historical queries, posed with the confidence that he knew, or could find, the answers. His obsession with the time and place of the colonial New Hebrides was useful for me, but it probably hindered his ability to live in the present and
Figure 2. D. J. Mallick's drawing of his house in Port Vila.
deal with his life in England in the 1990s. He died tragically as the New Year began in 1997. I have felt Will’s absence in more than the unanswered questions piling up on my desk. His presence is evident in almost every British interview and archival document. His loss is one that all researchers on the history of Vanuatu share, and one that those of us who worked closely with him feel most keenly. This is certainly not the book Will would have written. His would have been much longer, more detailed, and would have had even more endnotes. But I hope it is one that he would respect and, insofar as he could, enjoy.

Will Stober and I amiably argued some of the finer points of the colonial history of the New Hebrides, between ourselves and in discussions with other contributors to the project. This book is dialogic in this and other ways. One ex-colonial officer whom I interviewed had prepared a long list of questions to pose to me in response to questions I had circulated to potential participants. For example, I had asked if their housing was designed or modified in any way to respond to indigenous housing styles. He let me know that this question made him laugh. There were no considerations other than budgetary ones, he claimed, and the predominant style was “southwest Pacific corrugated Edwardian.” Keith Woodward, who served in Port Vila from 1953 until 1978, was a major contributor to this project. Encumbered with a serious visual impairment even while in the islands, he had honed his memory, remarkable for remembering the sequence and detail not only of events in the New Hebrides but of the British contribution to and interpretation of those events. He was willing to give up considerable time to my project. He listened to and commented on a taped reading of the first draft of this book and related publications. In Australia, Violet Bowhay, daughter of a third-generation settler in the New Hebrides, commented on chapter 7. The cross-talk, critique, and commentary that all of these exchanges generated made me continually check my facts and be willing to question every one of them. One person’s situated knowledge bounced off against the others’, and I have enjoyed letting the contradictions as well as the confirmations play out in this book.

My personal experiences having lived in Vanuatu gave me something in common with the people I interviewed. Among the British, I had credibility as one who had served my time and knew the basics, although many felt the need to set me straight about the rest. I knew the social significance of whether one belonged to the yacht club or the BESA (pronounced “beeza”). I knew enough to ask the wives of former British colonial officers how they felt about employing a house girl. Did their children swim at Pango Point? I could picture the scene. With former district agents I could compare experiences of living through droughts and hurricanes in outer islands. We could all exchange views on Jimmy Stephens, the leader of the Santo Rebellion at the time of independence in
1980. I found myself comparing notes on the French with the English, on the English with the French, and on politics with everybody.

With all the participants in the project, I was a white insider but always an outsider too. I could never join any of their tribes—colonial officer, wife, or child. I was always on the border, part and not part of experiences that I could identify with but not share. Most anthropologists would not be surprised to read this. Anthropologists work on the edge. I constructed and lived on some boundaries that I had the privilege of choosing, including borders between home and away. I walked some lines and watched the people I worked with walk others, teetering at times between belonging and renunciation, desire and loss, or even life and death. I crossed borders that could be peaceful or tense—between administrators, settlers, or islanders, for example. I write about these border crossings in this book and intend to write more in research I am beginning, in an effort to improve communication among groups of people who have not understood each other very well.

The research for this project was conducted over a series of summers, tucked in between my obligations as a teacher and as director of our graduate program in social anthropology at York University in Toronto. The research began with an exploratory trip back to Vanuatu in 1993 funded by the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. I had been away for eight years while the country had been closed to researchers. I received three years of funding for the project, beginning in April 1994, from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The summer of 1994 was spent conducting interviews in Britain and France and in archival research at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the Midlands. In April and May 1995, I conducted more British interviews and more research in the archives with Will Stober.

Initially, I had intended to do an equivalent amount of research on the French side of the colonial equation, but I have had to save that for another occasion. I had no idea when I began how many people in Britain were keen to talk about the New Hebrides. Nor did I know that the archives would prove to be such a treasure trove. I ran out of time and money to do research on the French administration of the New Hebrides.

In June 1995, I went back to Vanuatu, where my family joined me a month later. There I conducted about twenty-five interviews with settlers and islanders, visited six islands, and listed 117 historic sites for the Vanuatu Cultural and Historic Sites Survey. This last project was my contribution to the country in exchange for being given a research visa. The summers of 1996 and 1997 were spent trying to organize the archival and other textual material, transcribe tapes in Bislama (the creolized pidgin of Vanuatu), label some five hundred slides, and index everything else: seven hundred minutes of videotape, a few French inter-
views transcribed by my friend Jane Philibert, and the large number of interviews in English that student assistants had transcribed.19

Houses on the Move

To return to 1978 and our bamboo house in Vanuatu: We had asked the local carpenter, Joel Mera, who built the house, to put in lots of windows. We did not want windows with glass panes or louvers, just large openings in the walls. He thought we were compromising our privacy: he worried that people could look in. In more conventional bamboo homes it is perfectly possible, as he knew, to peer out through the gaps in the woven bamboo and observe the passing scene without being observed; but we wanted a breeze as well as a broader view. Joel Mera warned that we were inviting storm damage, but he cut the window openings anyway—two large ones and three smaller ones. When we first moved in, we propped the shutters open with three-foot poles in the daytime. As Joel had predicted, children clung to the window ledges and peered through the two open doors. Adults chatted with us through the windows if they were uneasy about actually coming inside. They did not cross the boundaries into each other’s houses, much less enter houses of visiting North Americans, unless they were close kin or very close friends. Most socializing took place in the domestic space.
outside houses, shady packed-earth clearings that filled many of the purposes of Western living rooms.

When it finally rained and the shutters were closed, to everyone’s relief the windows did not leak. There were no screens. We burned mosquito coils when the bugs were bad, but at night there were no mosquitoes this high in the hills. There was malaria, although drug-resistant malaria was not the major problem in 1978 that it later became for islanders, and for me. Resistant malaria nearly killed me in 1985. I was sick again in 1996, more than a year after leaving Vanuatu, with ordinary Vivax malaria.

Like the British colonial families I interviewed, we were pleased by the view from our bamboo house. We could and did set aside our anthropological awareness of the power of such gazes and of the primacy of the visual in our own tradition of constructing landscape. On one side, the windows of our bamboo house overlooked the distant sea, a fifteen-minute walk through coconut plantations and food gardens below us. From the front, we looked out at a Tahitian chestnut tree. Its gnarled roots provided benches for Chief Mathias Taruidu, our mentor and Bill’s adoptive father, who visited daily. His stories and explanations filled our notebooks and raised new questions for me about customary land tenure, the subject of my dissertation research. Some of these questions could be answered only by walking along trails to plantations and gardens, which I did with Mathias and others.

From all the windows of our house we could see other houses more or less like ours. They had fewer openings in the walls because the houses were used mainly as containers for possessions and sleeping people. Most had dirt floors, a few were concrete, but none of the other floors in this village were bamboo, which was considered pleasant under foot but high maintenance. In 1978, there were seventy-two people in the village, all ni-Vanuatu. I mapped the village, and on subsequent visits in 1982, 1985, 1993, and 1995, I could trace the patterns that “moving houses” made. I found that some houses had moved slightly between my visits, while others had moved quite a lot. Very few had stayed exactly where they were according to the earlier map. These movements reflected, among other things, passage through the life cycle, feuds, friendships, migration, storm damage, and changing fortunes.20

Houses of bamboo do not last long in the best of circumstances, often no more than ten years. The necessity of periodic repair and reconstruction provides frequent opportunities for change. Domestic cycles place demands on housing in Vanuatu, as anywhere. But bamboo houses, more than houses made of masonry or wood, can change easily in response to changing household needs. Instead of moving house when family size changes, or building an addition, as people do in North
America and Europe, ni-Vanuatu can construct an additional house—for example, for teenage boys—using natural materials that are freely available or inexpensive. Frequent hurricanes speed the process of destruction, and rebuilding after a storm is an all-too-frequent chore. In 1985, for example, 90 percent of the housing on Ambae was destroyed in a single storm. Thatched roofs and bamboo walls are constructed in prefabricated panels; in most cases, some panels from walls and roofs that had blown off could be salvaged. Often they did not end up on the original house, which might be rebuilt in situ, moved slightly, moved a lot, or rebuilt as a smaller dwelling, or a kitchen. Social relationships in the village could be read out of the built form by noting such things as whose walls ended up on whose house, which way the houses faced, and who lived in them at various times.

Figure 4. Mathias Tariudu and Channing Rodman under the Tahitian chestnut tree, 1982. Author’s photo.
Figure 5. Waileni Village. From M. Rodman 1995. With permission from Cambridge University Press.
In the end, our house moved, too. When we visited in 1985, the floor and walls had been repaired, but the house posts were weak. The house was remarkably well built, and it lasted, with further repairs, until 1992. When we received word that our house had finally fallen down in a hurricane, we sent money to have it rebuilt. We knew that a widow and her daughters had been living in the house and that they would make room for us if we returned. When we arrived in August 1993, we found that part of the old walls had made their way down to Mathias’ son’s place while other bits were used to build a dwelling to our west, where the widow and daughters were sleeping. To local people, our house was still our house, complete with our Canadian flag (but no longer the Minolta calendar photos). As I began the research for this book on houses, it was disorienting to find that our own house in Vanuatu, while familiar, was in some ways not the same at all. The house was not even where we left it. It had moved about ten meters, its orientation had changed from north to east, and the layout had changed completely.21

Some expatriates who lived in Vanuatu also had moving houses. One missionary’s house started life on Norfolk Island. It was a teacher’s house, a modest structure, but its movement traces the history of the Anglican missionary enterprise in the New Hebrides. Mavis Salt told me about it when Bill, Channing, and I had tea at her British flat in August 1994. After nearly twenty years in the islands, from 1955 to 1976, she had retired to a modest flat near Cheltenham. We had known her as the headmistress of a girls’ school near Lolowai, an iridescent harbor formed from a volcanic crater that had long ago opened to the sea. Lolowai, at the eastern tip of Ambae, was the headquarters of the Melanesian mission of the Anglican church. Bill and I remembered Mavis Salt’s talent for making wine from tropical fruits. We had greatly enjoyed visits to her home at the school in the 1970s. Mavis Salt told me that her elderly bishop in the islands referred to the teacher’s house in letters home to England as

a “work-box of a house,” you know, the old-fashioned needlework boxes with the different compartments? That was the house he was talking about, that we finally lived in. And the story is that in the earlier days, as you know, the missionaries wouldn’t live in the islands. There weren’t antimalarial tablets or anything, and they didn’t know how to cope with malaria, so they lived on Norfolk Island, which was a bit cooler. They went up to the New Hebrides in the cool season and lived amongst the people in the cool months, then brought them back to school when it was hottest in the islands. There was quite a big settlement on Norfolk Island. Well, they finally [had antimalarial tablets] and realized they could live all the year round in islands without dying; I mean some of them did at first, but they were safe in the end.
Then the house was transported bit by bit. I imagine it was on stilts in Norfolk Island, but it was eventually on stilts [in the New Hebrides] anyhow. But they took it to the Banks Islands where the work flourished best in the early days. You know, Mota was the cradle really of the Christian, Anglican missionaries. They had a school for boys and a school for girls, and it was there for quite some years, and then one of the bishops got tired of waiting down at Lolowai in the hurricane seasons and having to hang about and not being able to get up and visit the schools. He sort of said in exasperation, “We’ll move the whole school down here.” So boys and girls, in fact, the two separate institutions were moved down, and this particular house came to be the head teacher’s house for the girls’ school.

Mavis Salt’s story shows how fears of malaria in the New Hebrides encouraged missionaries to maintain a colonial nomadic cycle. They made seasonal forays out from Norfolk Island, which seemed more hospitable because it was more temperate and familiar. Early missionized colonial spaces were tentative and temporary, without permanent or “proper” housing. Progress in medicine, success in converting and educating New Hebrideans, and the seemingly wasted time involved in continuing to follow the seasonal migration to Norfolk Island led to better-appointed mission stations. Precut timber houses, ordered from Australian companies such as Burns, Philp, facilitated the kind of mobility that
Mavis Salt describes. Not only villagers’ dwellings, anthropologists’ houses, and missionaries’ buildings moved. Houses were traded among, and sometimes physically moved between, the Condominium, French, and British governments, as well as private citizens.

Framing the View

The house Mavis Salt described, like all the houses far from home in this book, frame colonial views. The view was explicitly important to expatriates whose cultural background included a landscape tradition. Islanders had no such tradition, no formal framing of “nature” with a foreground and middle distance and a backdrop of trees, hills, or the sea. The category of “colonial landscape” is produced, it has been argued, to map “desire” or the goals of colonialism. Desire in this case included dimensions of domination and surveillance but also education, salvation, and medicine. It involved visual enjoyment of the sight of the sea and the land, wild or ordered by colonialism, and of the land’s seemingly “disappearing” people.

The importance of the view, and of siting houses to command a view, recalls Michel de Certeau’s theory that any subject with will and power soon tries to create its own place, differentiated from the more general environment. As subjects, he has in mind businesses, armies, or scientific institutions, but the British effort to establish an official presence in the New Hebrides fits his description perfectly. Theirs was certainly “an effort to delimit one’s own place in a world bewitched by the invisible powers of the Other.” The Other for British colonial officers included seemingly uncivilized settlers as well as islanders. (For settlers and islanders, of course, the British officials were equally “Other.”)

For example, a lack of what the British called “suitable” housing, and what de Certeau would call a “proper” place, was a continuing problem in the New Hebrides for various reasons. As we shall see in the next chapter, high-ranking officials were concerned that improper accommodation would send a message of weakness. Colonial statements of power made through buildings were clearest at the top. Both the French and British resident commissioners’ homes were perched on hills overlooking Port Vila harbor, and each other. The British even situated their Residency on the highest point of an islet in the harbor.

Views were consciously important to the participants in this research, but many were less aware of the cultural lenses through which they looked out the window. They gave me abundant examples of gendered and racialized spaces, while rarely identifying them as such. Much was taken for granted, perhaps, be-
cause all the British colonial officers in the New Hebrides were male, and, until the final years of empire, all were white. “Hmm, I just don’t remember where the kitchen was in that house,” mused one retired colonial officer. His wife, however, had clear memories not only of where the kitchen was but of lying on the floor to fix the temperamental kerosene refrigerator.

Colonial families had no monopoly on gendered spaces. Indigenous spaces also were strongly gendered. No women were allowed in a traditionally male space of the na gamal, which in the north is a building and in the south of the archipelago is a clearing. Menstruating women spent their periods in a “small house” built for that purpose. While nowadays these practices are not so strictly observed everywhere in the islands, spatial boundaries between men and women are still evident in daily life. For example, women sit with women and men with men at church and other social gatherings.

Racial boundaries are also evident in ni-Vanuatu spaces. Chairs brought out in a village clearing for white visitors to sit on could be both a sign of respect and a statement about the transience of visitors and their physical weakness. By far the strongest racial boundaries, however, demarcated colonial spaces. These boundaries, while constantly changing, characterize the entire colonial and post-colonial period. A regulation made in 1907 restricted the movement of natives at night in town. Over a period of many years, archival files described particular houses as suitable for Melanesian (especially New Hebridean) “natives,” other “races” (such as Fijian or Chinese), or “whites.” New Hebrideans always had their place and were expected to know it. Even in the 1990s, I saw a white woman berate a ni-Vanuatu gardener for stepping across the threshold into the main house to call for her. House girls, of course, were expected to be in the house, and it was accepted that they knew many intimate details about the lives of the people for whom they worked. Perhaps this is one reason why participants in the research so often spoke of their house girls as “really almost members of the family.” I have never heard a house girl say the same about an employer.

There were other boundaries that no servant should cross: bureau drawers were off limits, although petty theft and trying on the mistress’ clothes were common transgressions that many colonial wives told me about. Masters could and did cross intimate boundaries. Occasionally, a colonial officer’s affair with a house girl became general knowledge, but this was probably the tip of a rather large iceberg. Ironically, employers rarely if ever entered their servants’ homes, even if there were domestics’ quarters adjacent to the main house. In this sense, house girls had more private space, albeit with a much lower standard of living, than their masters and mistresses.
Dialogue about Houses and Homes

With few exceptions, the people I interviewed were candid about their housing and their domestic lives. The exceptions did not surprise me. People who had had bad experiences with the press or with other researchers and one or two who were writing their own books on the islands were understandably reticent.

Most participants found the project uncontroversial. My questions, they said, seemed innocuous. If I had done a study of politics leading up to independence, I have no doubt that retired colonial officers would have been more guarded in their dealings with me. Most of the wives would have said little or nothing. Yet discussions of housing and lifestyle revealed many aspects of colonial politics and culture. Some were bemused by my interest in their New Hebridean houses. Why not study colonial homes in Kenya, which had some style and grace? It is true that there was nothing architecturally remarkable about colonial housing in the New Hebrides. It lacked the charm conveyed in such books as *The Romance of British Colonial Style.* Mostly prefabricated or owner-built, housing in the New Hebrides, for colonial officers, missionaries, and settlers alike, was relatively inexpensive and primarily functional. Two notable exceptions were some of the French housing throughout the colonial period, which expressed a preference for a southern French villa style, and the buildings constructed in the earliest days of the Anglo-French Condominium, which figure in chapters 2 and 3. Even these were not grand in comparison to colonial edifices in India, Fiji, or almost anywhere else in the British empire.

My fascination with absolutely unremarkable, ordinary houses of ordinary people living in seemingly insignificant islands baffled people I interviewed. “Mais ce n’est pas très interessant!” a ninety-year-old French woman exclaimed as she let me photograph the museumlike interior of her old wooden home in Santo. My landlady, an indomitable character from a settler family who told her life story to my tape recorder in the fastest French I have ever heard, corrected her friend. She knew what I was about. “Si! C’est très interessant—pour elle.” I write in the conviction, or at least the hope, that what follows is interesting for more than me. The subject is an anthropological history of British administration through its colonial spaces in a unique world at the geographical and temporal end of empire. It is a critical exploration of how such spaces and places both expressed and shaped a colonial process. These buildings are doorways that ask the reader to enter into a new understanding of ways that the people experienced, remembered, and wrote about their houses far from home.