

Chapter 3: Naturalists Ashore

When the naturalists disembarked and commenced exploration it proved a welcome relief. 'It is difficult to express the sensations we felt,' Labillardière exclaimed romantically, 'at finding ourselves at length sheltered in this solitary harbour at the extremity of the globe.'¹ His English contemporary, William Wordsworth, would have been in sympathy: 'On Man, on Nature and on Human Life, Musing in Solitude.'

Although French orders were to deal humanely with indigenous peoples, at their initial landing nobody knew what reception they might receive from the unknown and unseen inhabitants. Consequently, each naturalist entered the peninsula's forest warily and well armed. They were relieved at first to meet neither foe nor friend. Soon, however, they wished for some contact, because they were intrigued by the sight of distant smokes, and the huts, fireplaces and artefacts they commonly encountered throughout their journeys. Obviously they were being watched by invisible but peaceful Tasmanians, and so it remained during their 1792 visitation. Labillardière reported somewhat ruefully: 'though a great number of men from both vessels had penetrated very far into the country, they had not met with a single inhabitant'.²

Riche became lost during his first foray at Recherche Bay and spent a fearful night in the forest, which he imagined was populated with 'savages'. He suffered nothing but discomfort. Riche obviously was a keen fieldworker lacking a sense of direction. During the following year, while the expedition was surveying the Recherche Archipelago, Western Australia, he again became lost and only returned to the anxious officers on the third day. By this time, d'Entrecasteaux had decided to sail, leaving behind some rations and a musket for the castaway. Labillardière challenged his decision, no doubt providing a humane defence, which included the example of James Cook who waited for a lost sailor.³ Fortunately, an exhausted Riche returned before the final departure resulted. This foolish incident angered d'Entrecasteaux, who deplored the foolhardiness of Riche going ashore alone. To cover himself, he wrote a full account in his journal, because he had more than enough of gentlemen naturalists who did not observe prudent rules. 'The advantage of using persons employed in the navy for these kinds of expedition cannot be stressed enough,' he wrote in exasperation, 'since persons (being more aware of what is permitted in such circumstances) would not make impossible demands and would be less disposed to attribute ill-will.'⁴

In relating Riche's adventure at Recherche Bay, du Portail provided Zélie with an amusing but unsympathetic pen portrait of a typical savant, for whom he

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felt no affinity, in common with most of his fellow officers. Riche may have been an imprudent loner, but for du Portail he typified the 'naturalist' species.

You have read Robinson Crusoe haven't you? You can picture him on his island with his ludicrous accoutrement, can you not! So there! It is more or less the same as the case of our naturalist! He wears a baggy duck jacket with a pocket on the front and at the back. A big portfolio is used as a game bag and stays on his loins, a mineralogist's hammer hangs below it, and a piece of card over the opposite shoulder is used to hang some forceps padded with linen, these to catch insects and butterflies. A pad covered with long pins is tied to his buttonhole and, lastly, a sword or broad bladed knife hangs at his side. To be in keeping with the umbrella, he wears a broad-brimmed leather hat to ensure some shadow for his head and some leather gaiters as a protection against all that could harm him and, of course, the usual gun is there to complete this mass of equipment.⁵

Rather than a cartoon character, du Portail describes a well-equipped fieldworker, competent to deal with any component of the natural world he stumbled upon, while his clothing and hat sensibly met variable weather conditions. Kermadec described Riche as 'a very zealous naturalist'.⁶ Certainly he was burdened. However, Riche had a servant who should have shared the load of the natural world's harvest.

This servant found, however, that at Recherche Bay he served two masters. He had been ill and was treated by naval surgeon Denis Joannet, who was making his own collection of birds in rivalry with Riche. When this servant shot some birds for Riche, Joannet demanded them as his right because the man was his patient. When the servant refused and remained loyal to Riche, the doctor warned him of retribution. This came in the form of a purgative which Joannet forced upon his patient, with predictable dire consequences. Labillardière, who recorded this ridiculous episode, reflected that 'melancholy experience' showed that Joannet must be obeyed.⁷ In this situation Riche's servant's assistance was problematic.

Although the naturalists made exciting and important discoveries, they encountered indifference or hostility from the naval personnel. The fact that most naturalists were republicans (and Labillardière accorded them the title of 'citizen' in his book) ensured tensions and rivalries with the royalist officers. Some officers seemed totally indifferent to scientific discoveries, of whom d'Auribeau was a representative. 'The naturalists,' he wrote, 'have made their investigations with zeal ... and it seems to me they have made an extensive collection. I do not doubt they have found objects which are both new and extremely unusual.'⁸ He neither questioned what they had found, or what it implied for learning.

It was their freedom from naval regulations and their egalitarian civilian attitudes that concerned d'Entrecasteaux, who found their requirements unreasonable, as his journal entry concerning the Riche incident made clear. The naturalists did have a case, however, because they were subjected to petty discrimination by some officers. Some examples follow.

When naturalists went ashore they received a ration of ship's biscuit, cheese, brandy and sometimes salted bacon. Fresh fruit or other provisions were not allowed, following a decision by the officers which was adhered to strictly. Upon returning to the shore from excursions, naturalists encountered delays with boats coming to pick them up, while officers took precedence when space was limited.⁹

It was the restricted rations when a party stayed on shore overnight which rankled most with the savants. It should be remembered that they knew nothing about the availability of 'bush tucker' and, except for Labillardière, were not tempted to experiment. Sometimes they found fish or shellfish, even shooting two birds on one occasion. Louis Ventenat was not satisfied with the issue of 'some cheese, some biscuit filled with grubs and a little bit of bad wine'.¹⁰ Labillardière's version added salty bacon to the ration, but he complained that they were entitled to fresh provisions.¹¹ Eating one of these unpalatable meals one night in the forest, he remarked ruefully, that 'such a supper as this certainly required a good appetite'.

Equally grievous was d'Entrecasteaux's failure to supply Labillardière with a servant who could assist him in preparing and storing botanical specimens. This proved a time-consuming task aboard, requiring one or two days, so losing botanical time ashore. Judging from his book, he spent almost eight days, one quarter of their stay, arranging his collection. In his frustration, he claimed that 'he had every right to expect' such aid.¹² That his hundreds of specimens survive today is testimony to the care he took in their drying and packing, despite his impatience to be ashore.

Labillardière was a senior scientist with a stubborn, rumbustious, bourgeois character, so he tried the patience of the well-known Admiral. He stirred a confrontation during their first week at Recherche Bay when he and Ventenat returned weary and hungry to the beach at nightfall. They waited two hours for a boat, so Labillardière vented his displeasure on the dinghy's coxwain. His complaints were conveyed to d'Entrecasteaux.

The commander, according to Ventenat, 'got into a sudden temper and in his cabin treated the naturalist in a manner so indecent that the master of a school would have blushed at it, exclaiming in a loud voice "that one was in no way allowed to disturb the supper of the crew" ... He brushed aside our replies,

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saying that the supreme power with which he had been invested permitted him to do ... just as he wished'.¹³

Another cause of disagreement concerned Labillardière's use of the great cabin. His tiny cabin soon became overcrowded with specimens as botanical collecting boomed. He required space to dry and press all plants. Consequently he shifted his operations into the great cabin, an area used by all officers. Objections from d'Auribeau were soon forthcoming, as he ordered the plant presses out. Upon their removal they were deposited in an area exposed to rain. The space underneath the large table also was a convenient place to store two boxes containing completed specimens, pressed between large sheets of paper. Spare and precious paper, of which 22 reams had been brought aboard after much trouble in locating sheets large enough, also was stored in these boxes. They were unceremoniously removed. An angry and stubborn Labillardière appealed to d'Entrecasteaux, who reasonably ruled that the botanists might continue to use the cabin facilities. Presumably this agitation further strained relations between officers and naturalists.¹⁴

Ventenat, a fellow botanist, felt equally put upon by these inconveniences and by the theft of some of the valuable paper. In accounting for these actions, he observed that d'Entrecasteaux 'is an honest man and well disposed, of a pleasing appearance, intrepid, but of too easygoing a character, even too good: the serious illness of his second-in-command [d'Auribeau] gives him cause for concern and he can refuse him nothing. As for the rest he fears to attract the odium of the senior officers'.¹⁵

Regardless of tensions — political, social and intellectual — as discussed later, this expedition at Recherche Bay achieved eminence in the scientific fields of botany, geomagnetism, surveying and cartography, anthropology and race relations. It endowed this harbour and precinct with international significance.

Unfortunately, these French achievements do not accord with Australian national sentiment, as promulgated by the Howard government, which accords iconic status to British navigators. Tasmanian waters, in particular, were sailed by heroes Cook, Bligh, Flinders and Bass. Had Recherche Bay been discovered and explored by any of those popular captains, the future of the area might have been more secure. Even today, a review of the National Museum of Australia in Canberra recommended that the Captain Cook saga should be a priority, although a visitor might expect such a promotion to be displayed at the National Maritime Museum in Sydney.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 94. Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, preface.
- ² Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 104.
- ³ Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 266-73; Horner, *Looking for La Pérouse*, 1995: 120.
- ⁴ Duyker and Duyker (eds and trans), *Bruny d'Entrecasteaux: voyage to Australia and the Pacific*, 2001: 127.
- ⁵ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 331 – du Portail.
- ⁶ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 118 – Kermadec.
- ⁷ Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 97-8
- ⁸ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 111 – d'Auribeau.
- ⁹ Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 106, 126, 98.
- ¹⁰ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 352 – Ventenat.
- ¹¹ Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 104.
- ¹² Duyker, *Citizen Labillardière*, 2003: 103.
- ¹³ Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 98; Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 354 – Ventenat.
- ¹⁴ Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 22, 109; Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 352-3 – Ventenat.
- ¹⁵ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 353.