

Chapter 6: Seeking the Tasmanians

For all Australians the expedition's most significant consequence involved their contact with Tasmanian people. Although this was delayed until 1793, it represented the longest and most intensive racial contact until that time. Previous British meetings at Adventure Bay on Bruny Island did not result in such detailed ethnography or racial interaction.¹ Because most of the contact occurred on the north-eastern peninsula and north to Southport Lagoon, these occasions of mutually friendly interaction provide a prime criterion for the area's National Heritage listing. The evidence offered by the several French observers, combined with the area's archaeological potential, provide contemporary Aboriginal Tasmanians with insight into their cultural heritage and the temperament and bearing of their ancestors two centuries ago.

20 years before the French arrival in Recherche Bay, however, their countryman, Marion Dufresne, stepped ashore at Marion Bay in 1772. Although a slave trader, possibly he was imbued with notions of noble primitive societies, innocent of Western ways, living in a pure state of Nature. A few years earlier, Louis de Bougainville had circumnavigated the world and 'discovered' such people living in the Pacific. He returned to France in 1769, so Marion was familiar with their romantic exploits in Tahiti. 'Everywhere,' Bougainville reported, 'we found hospitality, ease, innocent joy, and every appearance of happiness amongst them.'² Innocent joys or not, their experiences supported current Rousseauesque notions of a surviving age of noble primitivism independent of the corruption introduced by European society.

Even though Marion Dufresne acted the part, ordering two crew members to strip naked and emerge from the surf as 'natural men' to face the agitated Tasmanians, the ruse proved temporary. Calm ended with the approach of a second boat, which alarmed the onlookers. In the ensuing fracas a Tasmanian was shot and others presumably were wounded.³ The era of the peaceful interactions may have ended abruptly on this distant beach in 1772, but both French and British attitudes to 'undiscovered' peoples remained essentially humanitarian and philosophically concerned with 'Natural Man'.

While Bougainville's crews were experiencing Tahiti's sexual allurements in 1768, James Cook received instructions from the Royal Society on his behaviour in the Pacific. He should 'exercise the utmost patience and forbearance with respect to the Natives ... and to restrain the wanton use of Fire Arms. To have it still in view that shedding the blood of these people is a crime of the highest nature: — They are human creatures, the work of the same omnipotent Author.'⁴

At the same time, at a distinctly pragmatic level, he was to 'carefully observe the Nature of the soil, and the Products thereof ... specimens of each ... seeds

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of Trees, Fruits and Grains ... that we may cause proper Examination and Experiments to be made of them. You are like wise to observe the Genius, Temper, Disposition and number of the Natives ...'.⁵

The instructions provided for La Pérouse and d'Entrecasteaux could have been lifted from the same manual. High-minded opinions on restraint to be shown to native populations were accompanied by precise details of what should be mapped, studied and collected. In the case of New Guinea, for example, 'everything is to be investigated, and everything is to be done'.⁶

D'Entrecasteaux, according to the King's orders, was:

to recommend to every person among the crews, to live in a good understanding with the natives, to endeavour to conciliate their friendship by a proper way of acting and respect; and must forbid them ... ever to employ force ... On every occasion ... act with great mildness and humanity ... His Majesty will look upon it as one of the most successful parts of the expedition that it may be terminated without costing the life of a single man.⁷

That events in Paris would cost the king his own life, is one of the ironies of these instructions.

It is evident that during the late eighteenth century, both British and French humanitarian and romantic views of new lands were linked with the growth of scientific rationalism, which stressed empiricism. Even Marion Dufresne felt curious concerning the pigmentation of the dead Tasmanian, so they washed his body and found that 'it was only smoke and dirt which made him look so dark' — he was a noble savage no longer, but an experimental item.⁸ The empirical work by the d'Entrecasteaux personnel is described later. Reflecting upon the subsequent Baudin expedition in Tasmania during 1802, Brian Plomley concluded:

To the explorers, the Tasmanians were specimens of natural history rather than people ... It was scientific curiosity, in fact, that did all the damage, because it condemned the various native races to be thought of as strange species rather than as people.⁹

Whether this assessment justifiably applies to the events at Recherche Bay during 1792–93 is a matter for the reader's evaluation.

The notion that the Pacific Ocean was a contemporary reproduction of a Greek Arcadia populated with gentle people, took a severe blow with Cook's bloody death in Hawaii, and a less ennobling, romantic approach might have been expected. But in revolutionary France this was not so. While both officers and savants at Recherche Bay were at first wary of attack from the inhabitants, they soon adjusted to conditions in this peaceful forested landscape. At the conclusion

of their visits, d'Entrecasteaux was pleased to note: 'The encounters we had with them later demonstrated that they are kind, without mistrust.'¹⁰

To their vexation, the Tasmanians remained unseen during most of their 1792 sojourn. Wherever expeditioners moved they saw ample proof of occupancy, including hearths, discarded utensils and artefacts, brush shelters, shell refuse, distant smoke and many tracks, which they followed to negotiate thick woodland. Yet the people remained concealed.

This was a behavioural practice common to this region. When Tobias Furneaux anchored in Adventure Bay for five days during 1773, not a single inhabitant appeared. James Cook was there for two days in 1777 before people arrived, while Bligh waited vainly for 11 days in 1788, failing to meet anybody at close quarters before he sailed the *Bounty* on to filmic immortality. Bligh returned in 1792, this time on HMS *Providence*, establishing only a fleeting contact with about 20 people.¹¹

When Europeans reached Tasmania the entire island possibly supported no more than 5,000 people. Archaeologists believe that the Tasmanian ancestors had walked there across the continent at least 35,000 years before, but had become isolated by the formation of the stormy Bass Strait as melting ice at the end of the ice age caused sea level to rise. Aboriginal people believe that they originated in Tasmania in Dreaming creation times. In either case, there was no further contact with the mainland for more than 10,000 years. In their long period of separation the people developed superficial physical, cultural and linguistic differences. Early Europeans believed that these characteristics distinguished them as a separate race, which some said derived from Africa and others Melanesia. This is not so; they originated from the same ancestral stock as indigenous mainlanders.¹²

The records of the d'Entrecasteaux and Baudin expeditions provide much vital data concerning Tasmanian traditional life at the time of contact. A remarkable source was added in 1966, with Brian Plomley's magisterial edition of George Augustus Robinson's journals 1829–34. Its text extends over 1,000 pages, recording Robinson's journeys with Aboriginal people, including his prolonged hike around the island. He visited Recherche Bay in February 1830 and again during March and April 1833, by which time disease and dispossession had decimated the population.

In a report written during 1831, Robinson stated that in the area stretching from Bruny Island, Recherche Bay and north to Port Esperance, 'the aborigines accompanying the expedition were the only ones remaining of that once formidable and numerous people'.¹³ Those members of his party included Wooraddy, a man from Bruny Island born around the time of the d'Entrecasteaux expedition, and Truganini, born at Recherche Bay or Bruny

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Island in 1812. Artists made them the most painted Tasmanians of their generation.

All these fragmentary historical records allow reconstruction of traditional social life, whose basic social unit was the family. Related groups of families constituted a band, numbering up to 70 or 80 persons. Marriage took place between these bands. According to Robinson, the band name of the Recherche Bay people was Lyluequonny, while Bruny Island was home to the Nuenonne band. Together with perhaps five other D'Entrecasteaux Channel bands north to the Derwent estuary, these people were the most maritime adapted Tasmanians. In recent times they are known as the Palawa. They crossed the waters between the islands and the mainland in craft made of eucalyptus bark lashed together in rolls. The central roll was the largest and lashings were bark strips or rushes. Rather than canoes, they might be termed catamarans: 'a kind of raft or float, consisting of two or more logs [bark rolls] tied together side by side,' as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary.

Saint Aignan and Beaupré examined such a craft on Bruny Island in 1792. It was 'a kind of canoe, flat both above and below, about seven to nine feet long, in the middle three or four feet wide and finishing in a point at the two ends,'¹⁴ where it was tightly bound, in upwardly curved horns. In such craft the Lyluequonny and Nuenonne bands interchanged seasonally, to maximise resource exploitation and cement social life and obligations. During the winter the Recherche Bay people evidently crossed to Bruny Island and the latter returned their visit during summer.

This was a region of marine resource abundance, although it is believed that all Aboriginal Tasmanians avoided one resource that the French avidly pursued. For presumed but unknown cultural reasons, scale fish were never eaten. While in Adventure Bay, Bligh remarked on the plentiful remains of shellfish and crustacea, 'but it is remarkable we never saw any fish bones'.¹⁵ D'Entrecasteaux commented that heaps of shellfish proved that they were a major item of diet. He then observed: 'No fish bones, or fishing or hunting material have been found.'¹⁶ Archaeologists have excavated several sites where fish bones are present only in deposits older than 3,000–4,000 years, so in remote antiquity a cultural taboo may have prevented the eating of fish, and this on an island-wide basis.

The failure of the French to comprehend the cultural mores of the Tasmanians resulted in their decision to teach them the use of fishhooks, donating a supply of hooks, 'congratulating ourselves at having supplied them with the means of diminishing one of the most fatiguing employments of the women'.¹⁷

The coastal waters abounded in crayfish, other crustacea and shellfish (especially abalone, oysters and mussels) and edible seaweed (bull kelp), while seals were

present at Recherche Bay. Mutton birds, their chicks, and swan eggs were seasonally available in great quantity, while possums and wallabies were accessible on land. It must be concluded that this regional diet was more nourishing than that available to the French sailors, and the efforts they made to harvest fish, crayfish and oysters suggest that they knew that they were storing palatable food for the future.

That Tasmanians consumed many other birds may be inferred from those species listed as eaten by the French. Louis Ventenat reported that they ate quail, pigeons, thrush, duck, geese, swans and crows (ravens). D'Entrecasteaux added parrots and pelicans to this tally, saying they were 'good to eat'. Together with abundant fish, he added 'our crews have hardly been without fresh food'.¹⁸

Given the seasonal round between the mainland and Bruny Island, it therefore seems possible that, during the French stay during the 1793 summer, both the Lyluequonny and Nuenonne people were on the mainland around Recherche Bay, thereby maximising the contact possibilities. On rule-of-thumb estimates of band size of possibly 50, upwards of 150 Tasmanians occupied the Recherche Bay and Bruny Island region during 1793. Sadly, by 1831, they could be counted on the fingers of both hands. It is this rapidity with which traditional culture perished that gives cogency to the French evidence for that penultimate generation living in a pristine landscape. More than that, imbued with Rousseauesque sentiments of goodwill towards native peoples, they actively sought contact, disappointed when the inhabitants eluded them. When they finally met, it was friendship and humanity, not racial superiority that governed their curiosity and attempted objectivity in describing these well-adapted people living in their natural landscape. The contrast between their freedom to roam and the confined and uncomfortable life aboard ship must have impressed itself on all visitors. More people crammed into their two ships than occupied the entire area of Bruny Island and south-eastern Tasmania.

During 1792, the smoke from fires was ever present, but the campsites proved empty, though numerous. 'We found some rudiments of huts in these woods,' Labillardière reported soon after their arrival, 'consisting of a framework made of the branches of young trees, and designed to be afterwards filled up with pieces of bark, which the natives always use to cover the outside of their cabins.'¹⁹ Such shelters were made from intertwined sticks with bark covering, less than a metre and a half high and hemispherical in shape. The framework was semicircular and bent so that sticks were tied together with strands of rush where they met. Piron drew two such huts, but the best portrayal was drawn by George Tobin, of HMS *Providence*, at Adventure Bay in 1792, in which sailors are picnicking.²⁰

The French concluded that fire-hollowed cavities in the base of giant eucalypts were human habitations. D'Entrecasteaux measured the girth of one such tree

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at head height and found that it was eight metres. This assumption is unlikely, although these hollows may have provided opportunistic shelter from rain or wind. Labillardière pointed to shells on the ground in such cavities as proof that people ate there. A natural explanation for their formation seems more likely. As the expedition's carpenters found to their frustration, the heartwood in the most sizeable trees was rotten, so during bush fires the prevailing west wind would result in burning the eastern side of the tree. Expeditioners saw some trees resembling chimneys, as they were totally hollow, yet still alive in the external part of the trunk. Brian Plomley suggested that the cause of the decay was the shallow clay soil in which they grew. This was incapable of nourishing the entire tree, while fires would bake the clay, making it deceptively resemble an artificially induced floor.²¹

During their excursions, scientists benefited from using Aboriginal paths through the forest.²² Labillardière described them variously as 'tracks', 'beaten paths', 'well-marked tracks', even 'roads'. During their widespread travels across the north-eastern peninsula and north to Southport Lagoon they encountered numerous hut frames, sometimes several adjacent structures, hearths and other evidence of human presence. No Aborigines were seen at Recherche Bay during 1792. Yet smoke, warm hearths and abandoned utensils and artefacts indicated that people were about, but invisible. A sailor claimed to have seen an Aboriginal running away, but as nobody else in his party saw anyone, Labillardière doubted his claim. D'Entrecasteaux reasonably accepted the sailor's account.²³

Once the frigates left harbour and anchored during their surveying progress in the Channel, people were seen from the decks. Due to light winds it took four days to clear the northern area, allowing time for landward excursions. When landings were made on the mainland or islands, people were seen on at least six occasions, but they melted into the bush before closer contact became possible. They proved annoyingly elusive.

On 20 May 1792, Saint Aignan and Crestin suddenly came upon an encampment, probably on western Bruny Island. A fire was burning and food prepared but nobody was there. Searching the bush they finally saw two men and a child who immediately vanished. Nearby, Saint Aignan had noticed a kangaroo skin hanging on a tree, so he decided to collect it. It had vanished. Both he and Crestin were near, but they neither saw nor heard the lithe removalist who came so close to them.²⁴ Waiting for the Tasmanians occupied the entire 1792 visit. The following year was to follow the same pattern until the final week.

Early during the 1792 stay, seamen discovered some human bones in the ashes of a fire. Sensationalists proclaimed cannibalism. Saner opinion, shared by d'Entrecasteaux, Kermadec and Labillardière, interpreted the remains as a cremation burial.²⁵ Fortunately Huon de Kermadec was interested and told naturalist Riche, who volunteered to inspect the site. It was located 'in a sandy

cove of the outer bay' (possibly near Sullivan Point on the peninsula). His report to Kermadec suggests that it was a cremation site, although Riche remained non-committal.²⁶

Riche described a well-constructed circular hut, in which were found the bones of a young person, some flesh still adhering. The hut 'was a palace in comparison with all the others', Riche concluded. This was not a house for the living, but for the dead. It was constructed from stakes held in place by pliable loops and tied with rushes. Rushes and grass walls were covered with sheets of bark. It was almost two metres high and about five metres in diameter, greater dimensions than for normal shelters.

The Baudin expedition found comparable structures on Maria Island in 1802 and they were depicted in much the same design as Riche inspected and described. They were illustrated by their excellent artist Leseur in a useful composite drawing that showed different sections of the structure.²⁷ It was wigwam-like, with curved poles covered with bark strips pleated in hoops at the top. Below this was a mound of grass held in place by small strips of pliable stems, weighted down at both ends by stones. This entire structure had been built over the cremation ashes. The calcined human bones had been smashed and then inserted into a pit. George Augustus Robinson witnessed a comparable cremation ritual in north-western Tasmania in 1832. On Bruny Island during 1829 he saw another grave where 'there was a heap of ashes and some grass and sticks put on top of them'.²⁸ Betty Hiatt (now Meehan) published an exhaustive survey of cremation in Tasmania for which the evidence indicates that it was practiced throughout the island.²⁹

It is interesting to reflect on the female cremation at Lake Mungo, western New South Wales, dated to about 42,000 years ago.³⁰ This woman had been cremated, her bones deliberately smashed and her calcined remains buried in a pit. Future archaeological research must investigate whether this ancient burial rite reached Tasmania with the original settlers. So far, it is known that cremation took place at West Point, north-western Tasmania around 1,800 years ago.³¹

It was typical of d'Entrecasteaux that he rejected the cannibalism claims, partly because it was a single example, and even though he had not met any Tasmanians, because it would 'represent an outrage to humankind'. He preferred to believe 'that the savages have a custom of cremating the last remains of the human species'. Following their return in 1793, with experience of the essential human values observed of the inhabitants, d'Entrecasteaux exclaimed: 'Oh. How much we should blush, having suspected them last year of eating human flesh!'³²

Huon de Kermadec completed their 1792 visit with a comparable uplifting concept of those Tasmanians fleetingly encountered in D'Entrecasteaux Channel. While they appeared 'very dirty,' he concluded, 'their eyes were very fine and

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expressed sweetness and kindness. During the whole of the interview they laughed continually.³³ In similar vein, d'Entrecasteaux regretted that their 1793 stay involved so short an experience of Aboriginal life.

If our stay ... could have been extended, we would have had a real opportunity of obtaining a very interesting insight on the lifestyle of human beings so close to nature, whose candour and kindness contrast so much with the vices of civilization.³⁴

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See Mulvaney, *Encounters in place*, 1989: 29-37.
- ² Quoted in Smith, *European vision*, 1960: 25.
- ³ Mulvaney, *Encounters in place*, 1989: 29-31.
- ⁴ Quoted in Mulvaney, *Historical Studies* 8 (1958): 136.
- ⁵ Quoted in Smith, *European vision*, 1960: 14.
- ⁶ Duyker and Duyker (eds and trans), *Bruny d'Entrecasteaux: voyage to Australia and the Pacific*, 2001: 290.
- ⁷ Quoted in Dyer, *French explorers and Aboriginal Australians*, 2005: 4.
- ⁸ Mulvaney, *Historical Studies* 8 (1958): 139.
- ⁹ Plomley, *The Baudin expedition*, 1983: 29-37.
- ¹⁰ Duyker and Duyker (eds and trans), *Bruny d'Entrecasteaux: voyage to Australia and the Pacific*, 2001: 141.
- ¹¹ See Mulvaney, *Encounters in place*, 1989: 29-37.
- ¹² Rhys Jones, in Tindale, *Aboriginal tribes of Australia*, 1974: 317-86.
- ¹³ Plomley (ed.), *Friendly mission*, 1966: 226 n35, 374-6, 709.
- ¹⁴ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 133.
- ¹⁵ Mulvaney, *Encounters in place*, 1989: 37.
- ¹⁶ Duyker and Duyker (eds and trans), *Bruny d'Entrecasteaux: voyage to Australia and the Pacific*, 2001: 34.
- ¹⁷ Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 313.
- ¹⁸ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 351 – Ventenat; Duyker and Duyker (eds and trans), *Bruny d'Entrecasteaux: voyage to Australia and the Pacific*, 2001: 36.
- ¹⁹ Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 97, 101, 109.
- ²⁰ Illustrated in Mulvaney and White, *Australians to 1788*, 1987: 324.
- ²¹ Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 99-100; Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 349 – Ventenat, 119 – Kermadec; Duyker and Duyker (eds and trans), *Bruny d'Entrecasteaux: voyage to Australia and the Pacific*, 2001: 37.
- ²² Eg Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 134, 284, 290, 321; Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 132.
- ²³ Duyker and Duyker (eds and trans), *Bruny d'Entrecasteaux: voyage to Australia and the Pacific*, 2001: 36.
- ²⁴ Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 123, 127-9, 132, 134.
- ²⁵ Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 117; Duyker and Duyker (eds and trans), *Bruny d'Entrecasteaux: voyage to Australia and the Pacific*, 2001: 46; Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 118 – Kermadec.
- ²⁶ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 118 – Riche.
- ²⁷ Plomley, *The Baudin expedition*, 1983: 82; Bonnemains, Forsyth and Smith (eds), *Baudin in Australian Waters*, 1988: 50-1.
- ²⁸ Plomley (ed.), *Friendly Mission*, 1966: 637-8, 57. He also witnessed other cremation evidence.
- ²⁹ Hiatt, *Mankind* 7 (1969): 104-19.

³⁰ Bowler, et al., *Nature* 421 (2003): 837.

³¹ Hiatt, *Mankind* 7 (1969): 107.

³² Duyker and Duyker (eds and trans), *Bruny d'Entrecasteaux: voyage to Australia and the Pacific*, 2001: 46-7.

³³ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 122-3 – Kermadec.

³⁴ Duyker and Duyker (eds and trans), *Bruny d'Entrecasteaux: voyage to Australia and the Pacific*, 2001: 140.