

Chapter 8: An Archaeological Heritage

When an archaeologist contemplates the accounts by the diarists during their two visits to Recherche Bay, his or her eyes should light up, just as the Tasmanians' must have done upon receipt of their gifts. The area around Recherche Bay, particularly the north-east peninsula and the Cockle Creek area, offer great opportunities to document both the French occupation and the racial encounter.

The possibilities for excavating the French presence are obvious. Investigations should cover the area of the observatory and the industrial activities near Bennetts Point during 1792. Action should also be directed to the Cockle Creek occupation in 1793. The site of the supposed garden is an essential area to sample, while the seabed beneath the two anchorages offers potential.

At the time of writing, archaeological investigations are proposed by Dr Jean-Christophe Galipaud. Aboriginal Tasmanian evidence would consist of two chief sources of evidence: their occupation sites and European objects given to them by the French. In the first place, the sources all stress the concentration upon shellfish and crustacea as Aboriginal food sources. Their meals were cooked over small hearths. Over time, the ash would mingle with discarded shells, crab claws and the like, to form accumulations which archaeologists call middens. Labillardière wrote of such middens when he referred to 'the heaps of shells which we found near the seashore'. As he also described, occupation occurred at certain places, presumably close to the food source, water supplies and shelter, as depicted in Piron's sketch of a meal. At one northerly site on the ocean coast, 'it appears that this spot is much frequented, as fourteen fire-places were discovered'.¹ 14 hearths in contemporary use on a site visited, say, every year, would accumulate a substantial midden.

Archaeologists therefore need to undertake an intensive site survey, concentrating on a search for middens. Not all archaeological evidence needs to be adjacent to the sea or lakeshores. There is a possibility that traces of bark and brush shelter sites, associated with hearths, still exist. Then there is the frequent reference to Aboriginal paths, tracks or 'roads' that the French followed. Louis Ventenat reported that tracks were rarely found more than about two kilometres from the sea, including one major track that ran at least 16 kilometres from Southport Lagoon to Southeast Cape.² Aborigines avoided densely forested areas according to the French and this has been claimed as making it impossible for them to cross the north-east peninsula. A reading of the diaries establishes that such crossings were made. On their journey from Southport Lagoon to the harbour, when escorted by Tasmanians, Labillardière reported that the

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Tasmanians made rest stops.³ There remains the slight possibility that trackways, artefacts and hearths may be found inland, at rest stops.

Ventenat made a significant reference to an inferred method of Tasmanian kangaroo hunting that had environmental impact. 'My idea, after much thought about this and having examined the ground carefully, is that one frequently comes across in the interior of the country large open spaces which have been burnt. But by whom? Certainly it is by the natives!'⁴ His opinion was that by firing the bush, it drove the fleeing kangaroos into the spears of waiting hunters astride animal paths. Whatever the reasons, his comments must rank as one of the earliest references to ecological changes due to deliberate Aboriginal firing practices, resulting in open land. This is one of the several reasons why the understorey today may be thicker than it was in 1792. Note also, Piron's sketches, which portray open settings in areas that today are thick bush.

It was the gift exchange that occurred during that last week in 1793 that provides such potential for excavations documenting the period of contact. This exchange of European goods took place on a surprisingly large scale, as by their final day together officers, scientists and the entire crews became enthused with gift giving. D'Auribeau remarked 'there was not one of us (without exception) who did not give them something of his own'.⁵

These goods included the conventional 'trinkets for the natives', such as mirrors, glass beads, bracelets, coloured cloth and handkerchiefs.⁶ Like James Cook at Adventure Bay, they were also supplied with unspecified medals. D'Auribeau presented medals to eight men.⁷ However, the main French intention was pragmatic and humanitarian, to provide tools which made life easier. They provided careful demonstrations to teach their use. There are many references to axes and hatchets. D'Auribeau concluded 'that they preferred the axes above all else, and indeed I really think that the axe is the object from which they can draw the greatest benefit'.⁸ D'Entrecasteaux reported with gratification that Mara 'used the axe that had been given to him very promptly and with great skill'. He added, that before such gifts were bestowed, 'none of them had been given without its use being explained'.⁹

Other common items were knives, saws and nails. D'Auribeau is again the most explicit source: 'I showed them at leisure the use of axes, saws, knives, nails, etc.: they understood very quickly — I will even go so far as to say with surprising intelligence. And so they were generally very eager in desiring the objects that I was using.'¹⁰ Labillardière confirmed their adaptability to wielding axes. A tree trunk cut by a Tasmanian was sawed in two, after which 'we made them a present of some handsaws, which they used with great readiness, as soon as we had shown them the way'.¹¹

Two other contributions to local technology may not have proved so practical. Noting that the community lacked any fishhooks, they were presented with some and instructed in their use. It was anticipated that this would relieve the women of the exhausting tasks which so upset the French. Such was the cultural barrier to understanding that one wonders whether those hooks were ever applied to fishing, given the apparent taboo on eating fish. It was presumably Mara who was rewarded with a 'burning glass'. A demonstration that the magnifying glass could set fire to shredded bark so impressed him that he turned the lens on his thigh, with painful results.¹²

Two further items merit archaeological attention. Because of the maritime environment, it is likely that the salty conditions would rust the iron objects presented, so that may not survive intact. This would not apply to the earthenware pot, the 'small glassware' or 'the bottles we gave them and which were hidden in an instant'.¹³ Also, what of the gift of a bottle of wine?¹⁴ These objects broken and used as substitutes for stone tools would survive.

Following shore leave for many crew members of both ships to enable the last meeting with the Tasmanians, Gunner Jean-Louis Féron, from *Recherche*, provided a useful clue to alternative gift giving. 'Each one vied with the rest in giving presents and removing his clothes for these friendly natives,' he recorded.¹⁵ Lieutenant Saint Aignan even presented his jacket to an old man.¹⁶ The reality of archaeological relevance is that the women proved indifferent to gifts of clothing, which they handed to their children. These children busied themselves cutting off any buttons, using their newly acquired knives. 'We gave them presents,' wrote pilot Joseph Raoul, 'but we saw that they were quite indifferent to all the trifles we gave them, even dropping them here and there.'¹⁷ 'The small children who had been given knives entertained themselves by cutting the buttons off our clothes,' remarked d'Entrecasteaux.¹⁸

To conclude this shower of gifts, the reflections of d'Entrecasteaux on their final meeting are appropriate:

Most members of both crews were ashore, competing with one another in giving more garments to their new friends, who were attired with every type of cloth. Medals, bells, mirrors, beads, etc. hung around their necks. They looked like real carnival caricatures; besides, these objects made little impression on them.¹⁹

Readers are provided with scenes of lavish gift giving. In return it is inferred that the French were offered food and that aboard the *Recherche* were spears, baskets and kangaroo skin cloaks, presumably collected from the Tasmanians.²⁰ They made a deep impression upon Mara when he saw them aboard ship. Buttons, medals and beads were presumably soon scattered and lost. To judge from the accounts already quoted, many were discarded near the sites where they were

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presented. This provides the middens on the peninsula with added meaning, because such durable objects may be excavated there. This desire for buttons was commented on in 1802 by Baudin.²¹ Again, they were cut off clothing. One woman wore a locket of an English penny and a metal button.

There was at least one exchange that was of a mythological nature. Its occasion was a carving on a tree. A gunner from *Espérance* carved an evidently realistic human head. From the context of Labillardière, it probably was on the peninsula. Labillardière was walking in the company of a girl when they came upon it. She was 'surprised' to see it, then pointed to and named the various anatomical features. It seemed a matter-of-fact occasion.²²

It recurred in different psychological mode in 1831, when George Augustus Robinson visited Recherche Bay. Woorrady, whose land was Bruny Island, told Robinson of a mythological being named Wraeggowraper, a huge, ugly and bad spirit, a harbinger of death. He became specific: 'There is large tree at Recherche Bay on which is cut the head of a man in large size ... that the natives call Wraeggowraper and that children cry when they see it, that the native men destroyed it, and that this was done by the first white men.'²³ This suggests that despite French satisfaction at their encounter, Tasmanians recognised this as a truly fatal contact.

Here is a hint that Tasmanian minds were fertile, as the French would have agreed. Only 38 years had elapsed since the carving was made. It is helpful to compare two other intellectual transfers which took place following the British settlement at Risdon in 1803. Dogs were adapted into Aboriginal society and within a decade had become valued items of exchange, while packs of dogs lived with the people. It is relevant that on Tasmania's west coast by 1832 dogs had been incorporated into mythology. Significantly, this included a ferocious dog which devoured humans wearing clothes. Dances also were invented depicting dogs. All these incorporations were documented by George Augustus Robinson and imaginatively retrieved by Rhys Jones in a brilliant article in 1970.²⁴

Except for one meeting on the south-western shore of Recherche Bay upon the day the ships sailed, all other contact episodes took place on the peninsula extending up to Southport Lagoon, in the area listed today as a Wildlife Conservation Area, but which a bulldozed track now traverses. It is a heritage tragedy that this track allows mass access to the Conservation Area of destructive 4-wheel drive vehicles. From the above recital, it is evident that in the event of any harvesting of timber on the peninsula, especially if modern mechanised harvesting techniques are employed, archaeological sites would be destroyed and the context of artefacts would be disturbed — an irretrievable loss to Tasmania's heritage.

Apart from the later journals of George Augustus Robinson, containing vital data concerning the displaced people of 40 years later, the d'Entrecasteaux records of the life and times of the first substantial mainland contact are a priceless archive. Contemporary Tasmanians are presented with evidence that was set down as objectively as possible by uncomprehending but sympathetic newcomers. Above all, the keynote of all the observers is the simple humanity of these people, whose family life was seen to exude love, fun and intelligence. Contrast these several accounts with later British descriptions of Aboriginal life and the French acceptance of friendly humanity stands out. That is why Recherche Bay has great symbolic value as a cultural landscape for all Australians, but particularly Aboriginal Tasmanians.

In my opinion, this racial interaction and resulting archive is the prime evidence supporting placing this area on the National Heritage List. Earlier chapters reviewed further criteria — the location of pioneering geomagnetic studies; coastal surveying of supreme excellence; botanical collections which still survive, which include the type specimens of Australian flora, including *Eucalyptus globulus* (blue gum) and heath, now the floral emblems respectively of Tasmania and Victoria. Then there are the cultural associations — a major base for the d'Entrecasteaux expedition, facilitating the French contribution towards European discovery and charting of Australia. Labillardière, a significant eighteenth-century botanist, who knew Sir Joseph Banks and published the first major corpus of Australian flora, is another associated figure of historical significance. It is to Labillardière and the fortunes of his collection that attention is now directed.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 121, 127.
- ² Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 359-60 – Ventenat.
- ³ Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 300.
- ⁴ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 359.
- ⁵ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 279 – d'Auribeau.
- ⁶ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 285, 339.
- ⁷ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 279.
- ⁸ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 280 – d'Auribeau.
- ⁹ Duyker and Duyker (eds and trans), *Bruny d'Entrecasteaux: voyage to Australia and the Pacific*, 2001: 147.
- ¹⁰ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 280.
- ¹¹ Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 313.
- ¹² Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 313; Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 339, 364.
- ¹³ Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 127; Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 339, 364.
- ¹⁴ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 354.
- ¹⁵ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 287 – Féron.
- ¹⁶ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 285.

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¹⁷ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 304 – Raoul.

¹⁸ Duyker and Duyker (eds and trans), *Bruny d'Entrecasteaux: voyage to Australia and the Pacific*, 2001: 146.

¹⁹ Duyker and Duyker (eds and trans), *Bruny d'Entrecasteaux: voyage to Australia and the Pacific*, 2001: 145.

²⁰ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 284.

²¹ Cornell, *The journal of Post Captain Nicolas Baudin*, 1974: 305.

²² Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 306.

²³ Plomley (ed.), *Friendly mission*, 1966: 374.

²⁴ Jones, *Mankind* 7, 1970.