

Chapter 9: Labillardière's Luck

The d'Entrecasteaux expedition proved almost as forlorn a venture as that of La Pérouse, whom they failed to find. Following their Tasmanian departure in 1793 they sailed within 60 kilometres of Vanikoro where La Pérouse was wrecked, but continued on through the Solomon Islands. Previously, off New Caledonia on 6 May 1793, the tubercular Huon de Kermadec died, ostensibly from fever.

Worse followed on 19 July, when d'Entrecasteaux died from scurvy and related complications. As the senior officer, d'Auribeau took command as they approached eastern Indonesian waters. Rossel commanded *l'Espérance*. In a tribute to the significant role of d'Entrecasteaux, Edward Duyker concluded:

Over a period of nearly two years he had held his ideologically divided expedition together, often in dangerous and unknown waters, with patience, discipline and exemplary skill as a mariner. It was all to unravel.¹

Aboard *Recherche*, d'Auribeau, whose record of illness extended across most of their time at sea, was so incapacitated that Lieutenant Crestin (who was to die in Java) was the practical commanding officer until October, when d'Auribeau resumed duties. On 19 October 1793 the ships anchored off Madura, East Java, the crews sickly and debilitated with scurvy. Lieutenant Trobriand set off in a large boat with those men sufficiently fit to man it, to report to the Dutch governor at Surabaya, 40 kilometres away. Trobriand failed to return, but six days later came word that he and his crew were interned as prisoners of war. France was at war, they now heard, with Holland. For the first time in two years they heard news from France — their king had been beheaded in January while they were at Recherche Bay.

The governor gave permission for them to enter Surabaya harbour on condition that they hand over all arms and the rudders of both ships, thereby immobilising them. The sick could receive medical attention and their natural history documents could be retained, but d'Auribeau was instructed to requisition all journals and private papers belonging to the expedition members.² Somehow Labillardière concealed and retained his journal from this confiscation although others were lost. Over the next three months, divisions sharpened between the royalist and republican interests, with the royalist officers holding the advantage. So it resulted that d'Auribeau preferred to submit to Dutch demands, while the republicans would have fought or attempted to escape by sailing off — foolhardy given their lack of stores and water. Dutch troops arrested officers named by d'Auribeau, the savants and 32 crewmen. Officers and savants then had to walk to Samarang, 15 wet and muddy days away. Except for Labillardière and Piron, they were then moved to Batavia.

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The conscientious gardener Felix Delahaye was more fortunate than his superiors in Java. When on Tonga he collected 200 breadfruit plants, emulating the British Captain Bligh. His aim was to transplant them to the Ile de France. By the time that they arrived in Surabaya only 14 plants survived and this was reduced to 10 when Delahaye moved to Samarang. He doubled that minimum by care and layering, so that plants might strike root and propagate, remaining in Java until January 1797. He then tended his breadfruit plants at sea until he planted them on the Ile de France. There they prospered under his care until he returned to France, bearing his journal and collected plant specimens, which he gave to the museum in Paris. He later became gardener to the empress Josephine. At Malmaison he cultivated some plants which originally were collected on the expedition. On a lake, it is reputed, black swans recalled the wilds of Tasmania.³ Delahaye, the first European gardener in mainland Tasmania and gardener to Napoleon's empress is an exemplar of social associations with Recherche Bay, which add to the national significance of that place.

A total of 218 men and one woman had sailed from Brest in 1791. Tropical Java proved destructive of French lives. Labillardière believed that before the French were to reach Ile de France, 99 would perish. Louise Girardin was one of those who succumbed to dysentery.⁴ The number of deaths by the time they reached France probably increased, so a death rate for the expedition of more than 40 per cent is an indication of the perils of the sea and tropical ports at that period.

In July 1794 those prisoners at Batavia, including Ventenat, Riche and Willaumez, sailed with 383 French sailors, all prisoners, for Ile de France. It was not until March 1795 that Labillardière embarked for that destination. Meantime, d'Auribeau negotiated the sale of the two ships to cover payment of all charges for supplies and other costs incurred in Java. Before d'Auribeau could sign this agreement he died from the effects of dysentery on 22 August 1794. The contract of sale was signed by Rossel who was now, through default, the senior officer and commandant. The sale of these historic craft did not even cover the debt that the expedition owed to Holland.

After various alarms and excursions Labillardière finally sailed, reaching France on 12 March 1796, an absence of four and a half years. This was his first good fortune, because he had survived; the second was that he still possessed his journal, despite later efforts while he was at Samarang to again search for it.⁵ The saga of his botanical collections was another story.

It was December 1794 when Rossel, Beautemps-Beaupré, seven other officers and 23 former crew members sailed in a convoy of slow moving Dutch merchantmen. On the *Hougly* Rossel had embarked 92 cases, including 45 cases of d'Entrecasteaux's personal effects. These included ethnographic items, presumably those in his cabin seen during Mara's visit. There also were 37 cases of natural history specimens, which included those seized from Labillardière,

Riche and Ventenat and many other cases of documents. The inventory of Labillardière's natural history collections recorded 28 cases of plant specimens.⁶ From Cape Town, Trobriand and Saint Aignan travelled on the *Hougly* with the records, while Rossel missed the sailing and took passage on the *Herstellder*, which soon fell behind the large convoy.

As the convoy approached St Helena the *Hougly* was captured by the British 64-gun warship *HMS Sceptre*. Captain Essington demanded that Trobriand hand over the French material, which he refused to do. Ignoring Trobriand, Essington had the cases transferred to the *Sceptre* as a prize-of-war, destination England. As Holland was occupied by France, the Dutch ships were regarded by the British as enemy. A few days later the *Hougly*, now emptied of the expedition's scientific outcome, sank during a storm. Labillardière's luck had continued because Captain Essington transferred the cases to his ship, so saving them.

The captured Dutch ships were shepherded to the mouth of Ireland's Shannon River, where Rossel on the subsequently captured *Herstellder* duly arrived. He found the precious cargo safe, but in the wrong hands.

Labillardière's luck continued in the person of Rossel who interceded in England with the duc d'Harcourt, who was the ambassador for the (now exiled) Louis XVIII at the court of St James. He still represented the loyalist lobby. Even before Rossel met Harcourt, however, as he and Captain Essington were preparing to disembark from the *Sceptre*, Prime Minister William Pitt came aboard; surely a very useful contact for a foreign enemy.⁷

Rossel, astronomer, surveyor and eventual leader of the expedition, proved a useful ally at the British Hydrographic Office. He remained in London in self-imposed exile until 1802. It is hardly surprising that this royalist, whose mother had been executed and whose father was killed in battle, preferred London's attention to an uncertain future in Paris. It is clear that Matthew Flinders benefited from Beautemps-Beaupré's charts, which were under Rossel's control. Rossel returned to Paris in 1802 only because the short-lived Peace of Amiens made the risk seem worthwhile.

Upon the arrival of the expedition's cases of natural history specimens, charts and other impedimenta the question of their future was an immediate issue. Harcourt invited Sir Joseph Banks, as President of the Royal Society of London, to view the collections. He did so with deep interest. As representative for Louis XVIII, Harcourt was instructed to offer the collections to Queen Charlotte, consort of King George III, whose palace adjoined the Kew botanical gardens.⁸

Banks wrote an enthusiastic report both as to the size and the quality of the flora and fauna collections, but acted scrupulously in not handling specimens. The Queen agreed to his suggestion that he select specimens for her from the flora, although she was not interested in samples of other material. He had not made

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this selection by the time that he received an imploring letter from Labillardière. It was dated 14 April 1796, so it was sent within a month of his landing in France. His letter was an appeal to facilitate the collection's return to Paris. '[O]bilge me by doing all that you can to recover my most right property,' Labillardière pleaded.⁹

That the collection was his personal property conflicted with the initial instructions of the expedition. Since that time, however, a king had been beheaded and so had the government ministers who were responsible for his execution. Revolution, wars and radical changes of government made the fine print of agreements difficult to interpret, so nobody bothered to query Labillardière's brave claims. Banks, the British government and the French authorities found it convenient to expedite this request.

In his encouraging response Banks made an impressive claim for the supremacy of science even during war:

That the science of two Nations may be at Peace while their Politics are at war is an axiom we have learned from your Protection to Capt. Cook and surely nothing is so likely to abate the unjustifiable Rancour that Politicians frequently entertain against each other as to see Harmony and good will prevail among their Brethren who cultivate science!¹⁰

Labillardière was fortunate to have the right influential nabob in the right place at the right time. By 4 August the Foreign Secretary had approved the return of the collections to France. It remained to placate the Queen for not receiving her promised specimens. Banks did so with diplomatic aplomb, by reassuring her through her Vice-Chamberlain that the 'National character of Great Britain will certainly gain much credit for holding a conduct towards science and scientific men liberal in the highest degree'.¹¹

In his published book, Labillardière acknowledged the role which Banks played 'with all the exertions that were to have been expected from his known love of the sciences, I soon had the satisfaction of finding myself again in possession of the requisite materials, for making known to the world the natural productions which I had discovered in the different countries'.¹²

Labillardière had obtained the collections, made by others as well as himself, now acknowledged as his private property, even though they were returned to him at the address of the Paris *Jardin des Plantes*. He had scooped the pool, because not only had his collections arrived but, unlike most of his colleagues, his journal was still in his possession. Unfortunate Deschamps lost not only his collections but also his journal. During those years in which Labillardière prepared the *Voyage*, other potential competitors were either dead or awaiting the return of Rossel, who controlled the other cases of material in London. That is why Labillardière's *Voyage* and two English translations were published during

1800, as the first statement by the d'Entrecasteaux expedition. The official journal of d'Entrecasteaux, edited and added to by Rossel, appeared only in 1808, too late to attract public attention. Meanwhile, Labillardière had issued the first major scientific study of Australian flora. *Novae Hollandiae Plantarum* was issued in parts between 1804 and 1807. The importance of this work, the social association involving Sir Joseph Banks and the primacy of his publications, are further cultural or social associations with Recherche Bay and Australia.

Labillardière retained the invaluable floral collection until his death in 1834. Auctioned to cover his death duties, it was purchased by a British botanist, Philip Barker Webb, who resided in Paris. When Webb died in 1854 he bequeathed his enormous plant collection to the Grand Duke of Tuscany. Labillardière's good fortune continues because his flora, including many Australian type specimens, survives for reference in the Museo Botanico at the University of Florence.¹³ Following Denis Carr's excellent study of Labillardière, in *People and Plants in Australia* (1981), Labillardière led 'a charmed life'.

ENDNOTES

¹ Duyker, *Citizen Labillardière*, 2003: 187.

² Horner, *Looking for La Pérouse*, 1995: 201. Much of the accompanying information was derived from this source.

³ *Ibid.*: 229.

⁴ Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: lxiii.

⁵ *Ibid.*: 471.

⁶ De Beer, *Sciences were never at war*, 1960: 54 for the inventory.

⁷ Horner, *Looking for La Pérouse*, 1995: 223-34; Duyker, *Citizen Labillardière*, 2003: 189-202 for the information on the preceding pages.

⁸ Duyker, *Citizen Labillardière*, 2003: 203-22.

⁹ Horner, *Looking for La Pérouse*, 1995: 241; de Beer, *Sciences were never at war*, 1960: 45-68 for the series of letters.

¹⁰ De Beer, *Sciences were never at war*, 1960: 55.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 63.

¹² Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 476.

¹³ Duyker, *Citizen Labillardière*, 2003: 244-5.