

Chapter 10: Retrospect: Recherche Bay, History and Anthropology

It must be concluded from consulting historical sources that, until recent years, the d'Entrecasteaux expedition caused few ripples in Australian historical waters. Nicolas Baudin's comparable two-vessel exploration from 1800 to 1804 fared little better, although he was fortunate to meet the Australian exploration icon, Matthew Flinders, in Encounter Bay, which helped sustain his memorable status in Australian history. D'Entrecasteaux largely sank from British public memory as Long's two lines in his *Stories of Australian exploration* (1903) bear witness: 'He cruised in Australian waters for more than a year, till he died in 1793.'¹

Baudin benefited from a resurgence of interest as the Australian bicentennial approached. Brian Plomley set the tone in 1983 with his well-illustrated *The Baudin Expedition and the Tasmanian Aborigines*. In 1988, that superbly produced intellectual feast, *Baudin in Australian Waters*, edited by J. Bonnemains, J. Forsyth and B. Smith, brought the entire Australian collections preserved in France to public knowledge. With only seven references to the d'Entrecasteaux expedition, however, it did little to arouse awareness in Baudin's predecessor in the same Australian waters. Presumably it also was prepared for publication too early to take account of Hélène Richard's definitive *Le voyage de d'Entrecasteaux à la recherche de La Pérouse* (1986). In 1999, the Historic Houses Trust sponsored an excellent exhibition and catalogue on Baudin and Australia.²

Those Baudin studies evidently stimulated interest in his predecessor. Plomley and Josiane Piard-Berner edited extracts from many of the available diaries, journals and logbooks concerned with d'Entrecasteaux. Their English translation, *The General* (1993), was the first publication of much of this invaluable material as it related to Aboriginal Tasmanians. Frank Horner, who contributed a chapter to *Baudin in Australian Waters*, had already published in 1987 *The French reconnaissance: Baudin in Australia 1801-1803*. His excellently documented *Looking for La Pérouse: d'Entrecasteaux in Australia and the South Pacific 1792-1793*, followed as a sequel in 1995. Scholars are indebted to Plomley and Horner for their common sense approach.

There are several historical reasons why the results of the d'Entrecasteaux expedition (and to Tasmania particularly) featured in Australian history less than did the Baudin venture. In the first place, d'Entrecasteaux and his captains died and the voyage imploded in Java. The voluntary exile Rossel, in London until 1802, limited access to the expedition's collections. Even so, as Baudin was lavish in his praise of the quality of Beautemps-Beaupré's charts, he must have acquired copies. François Péron reflected this appreciation when he referred to

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the chart of Adventure Bay, 'drawn by the ingenious French artist, M. Beutemps-Beaupres [sic] is particularly to be valued, for its peculiar correctness in every detail'.³

Rossel's edition of d'Entrecasteaux's journal meant that the commander's *Voyage to Australia and the Pacific 1791-1793* only became available in 1808. It was a hefty two volumes, the second volume very dull from the public's viewpoint, because it comprised astronomical data and countless pages of tables. Even the first volume included Beutemps-Beaupré's invaluable, though incomprehensible to lay readers, explanation of his surveying methods. The book did not receive popular acclaim and it was 2001 before an edited English translation of most of the first volume became available. Significantly, the only translation attempted previously served technical needs. In 1823, Copeland translated Beutemps-Beaupré's account for use by naval surveyors.

Consequently, the only published source around the time when the Baudin voyage was being planned was Labillardière's *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*. It proved an international best seller in 1800, both in its French and two English versions. This indicates that public interest was sustained. By 1808, however, Trafalgar had been fought and French and British concerns lay with Napoleon and continental Europe. The British had feared French territorial ambitions in Tasmania, but that disquiet was alleviated by the fortunes of Nelson's sea warfare and by Tasmania's land settlement.

Presumably because the senior naval officers on the previous voyage were unavailable for questioning by Baudin, he must have remained largely uninformed on what they had seen and done. Labillardière was available in Paris, now a celebrity, but would a serious naval officer consult a civilian botanist? Baudin sailed from the Le Havre on 19 October 1800 and Labillardière's book had appeared by March,⁴ so Baudin could read it, because copies were in the libraries on both his ships, the *Géographe* and the *Naturaliste*.⁵ He would learn that Labillardière made disparaging remarks about his commander, so that was another likely reason why he should not be taken seriously.⁶

Another influential but limited circulation book became available during 1800. It was written specifically to urge Baudin to undertake serious anthropological studies — this being one of the first occasions to use the term 'anthropology'. As titled in English by its translator F. C. T. Moore in 1969, *The observation of savage peoples* set forth new ways to study societies. Its author was Joseph-Marie Degérando, who urged that 'philosophical travellers' join the expedition.

Degérando filled his 40-page memoir with remarkably 'modern' advice. He described what he termed eight faults of explorers who observed and wrote about 'savages'. These were that their accounts were incomplete and scrappy; they contained hearsay or were based on an inadequate sample; they were

presented without ordering the information; they judged savages by analogies drawn from European customs; they were vaguely described; they lacked impartiality and included personal prejudices; there was a failure to learn the language; and so finally, an inability due to linguistic deficiencies to adequately present the history, traditions, beliefs of the people.⁷

He advanced a series of topics and issues an observer should record objectively. These included climate, food, the physical strength of a people, cannibalism, clothing, lifespan, intellectual qualities, concepts of human origins and ideas of existence, immortality and imagination, family life and control, kinship, role of women, modesty, social structure and relations, religious ceremonies and many other issues.⁸

This program was systematic and raised questions that became standard approaches for later social and cultural anthropologists. It anticipated handbooks such as the British Association for the Advancement of Science, *Notes and queries on anthropology for the use of travellers and residents in uncivilised lands*, (London 1874). Later editions carried less provocative titles, but *Notes and queries on anthropology* continued in service beyond the 1950s. However Degérando's schedule could be met only when an explorer mastered a language. It would be more than a century before any anthropologist spent sufficiently long periods living with a people to meet his requirements.

Degérando's stipulations resulted in the ambitious François Péron (1775–1810) accompanying the savants as a trainee zoologist, rising to the status of senior zoologist. It is evident that Degérando wrote in ignorance of Labillardière's book and Péron knew no more of d'Entrecasteaux's Tasmanian results than he scornfully read in Labillardière. Consequently, the Baudin voyage sailed to Tasmania largely in ignorance of what went before. It seems, therefore, that d'Entrecasteaux was undervalued, while credit goes to the Baudin expedition for its anthropological emphasis. Baudin's voyaging certainly achieved significant results with its scientists, which are so excellently reproduced in *Baudin in Australian Waters*. The question is, did it achieve more than its predecessor in its record of the Tasmanian people?

Plomley's verdict was that it did. 'So far as the study of man is concerned,' he wrote in 1983,

d'Entrecasteaux's observers seemed to have made little attempt from the well tried course which had been followed by earlier expeditions, that is, they recorded what came to their notice without attempting to treat the subject as a science by posing questions and seeking answers. One of the difficulties is likely to have been that none of his scientists seem to have been particularly interested in studying man.⁹

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Rhys Jones contributed an insightful essay to the Baudin corpus, titled 'Images of natural man'. It combined philosophy, history and anthropology with his Welsh fluency.¹⁰ He examined the concepts of Rousseau and Degérando, setting Baudin's expedition into its intellectual context in order to examine Péron's work. Péron was the first field worker to employ the term 'anthropologist', although he envisaged his study of man as a branch of medical science. He employed objective tests, such as the dynamometer, which measured muscular strength, an invention of 1798.

Péron initially was influenced by Rousseau's romantic notions of Nature and the unrestricted life Man led there. In this he paralleled previous thinking. It is thought-provoking to read Rousseau on society before cultural institutions developed, where people lived in a wilderness 'whose trees were never mutilated by the axe'. Along came Labillardière to Recherche Bay, 'filled with admiration at the sight of these ancient forests, in which the sound of the axe has never been heard'. Soon after Péron landed in Tasmania, he eulogised the forest as being 'coeval with nature itself ... and where the sound of the axe was never heard'.¹¹

Natural man in the Tasmanian wilderness was soon demythologised by Péron and his fall from grace ushered in nineteenth century racism. His lingering romanticism was dispelled by reports of colleagues of a Western Australian woman, 'horribly ugly and disgusting. She was uncommonly lean and scraggy, and her breasts hung down almost to her thighs. The most extreme dirtiness added to her natural deformity.'¹² Tasmanian ladies were no better.¹³ Those on Bruny Island were dirty and greasy, 'their shape generally lean and shrivelled, with their breasts, which were long, hanging down: in a word, all the particulars of their natural constitution were in the highest degree disgusting'. Their men were 'fierce and ferocious in their menaces, they appear at once suspicious, restless and perfidious'.¹⁴ So violent was Péron's reaction that he undertook field tests to provide, as he believed, scientific refutation of the 'vain sophisms' of claims to noble savagery.¹⁵

Using the assumed objectivity of his dynamometer, in which the force of arm or leg was applied to a spring attached to a dial, he measured the strength of Tasmanians, Sydney Aborigines and Timorese. It proved to his satisfaction: 'that the inhabitants of Diemen's Land [sic], the most savage of all, and the real children of nature of the modern philosophers, are the weakest of any ... Hence we may infer, that physical strength is not diminished by civilisation, nor is it a natural consequence of a savage state.'¹⁶ As Jones concluded, Péron 'had in fact rejected the very views by which he had gained a berth on the expedition ... the Aborigines of Tasmania had become symbols of his own reversal of mind'.¹⁷

In the light of the several d'Entrecasteaux expedition journals subsequently located and translated by Plomley, it is reasonable to question whether Plomley

was premature in judging their lack of scientific attitude. Members of that expedition foreshadowed some of Degérando's research ideals. D'Entrecasteaux himself was well aware that a longer sojourn at Recherche Bay would have produced better results. Several members attempted to collect and test the accuracy of their word lists. On Bruny Island they tested their vocabulary against the Cook expedition's and found theirs to be superior. Labillardière and Delahaye provided objective comments upon the method used to throw spears. Ventenat's deductions concerning Aboriginal use of fire to hunt, and therefore to clear forest, was a remarkable conclusion. Their observations on the modesty of naked women, their collecting and cooking food, and serious attempts to observe family life, or to ascertain whether they were monogamous, approached Degérando's maxims. They virtually were a fumbling attempt at participant observation, even though they misunderstood.

More important for the fate and intellectual status of the Aboriginal Tasmanian population was the question of values. The assumed scientific approach by Péron was affected by his contempt for contemporary philosophy as typified by Rousseau. Read his final assessment of Tasmanian culture. Although it is a lengthy piece it foreshadows almost two centuries of attitudes to that society, particularly nineteenth century evolutionists.

'Without any regular chiefs,' Péron pontificated,

without laws, or any form of government, destitute of every kind of art, having no idea of agriculture, of the use of metals, or animals; without clothing or fixed habitations, or any other retreat than a miserable penthouse [sic] of bark, to protect him against the south winds, without any arms than the tomahawk [sic] and the sogaie [spear]; always wandering in the midst of forest or on sea shores; the inhabitants of these regions unites all the characters of man in an unsocial state, and is, in every sense of the word, *the child of nature*. How different is he in his moral and physical capacities, from what is described in those seductive accounts of him by the enthusiastic imaginations of system-mongers, who have laboured to make him appear superior to man in a civilised state.¹⁸

It was only a short intellectual move from that analysis to the Darwinian assumptions of Edward Tylor. In 1894 he wrote a paper titled 'On the Tasmanians as representatives of Palaeolithic man', in which he dehumanised their unchanging culture: 'just as mollusca of species first appearing far back in the earlier [geological] formations may continue to live and thrive in modern seas'.¹⁹

While the members of the d'Entrecasteaux team also assumed that they represented higher civilisation and sometimes expressed surprise at the level of intelligence exhibited by Tasmanians, they saw them as real humans. Nobody

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expressed concepts in the manner of Péron, although they judged the collection and eating of lice from the hair disgusting. While their communion with Tasmanians during that last week in 1793 reads at times like a Rousseauesque idyll, was it any less objective in its record than Péron's jaundiced version?

It must be concluded that both the d'Entrecasteaux officers and savants deserve greater credit than has been paid them. The survey and charts of Beautemps-Beaupré and Jouvency, the geomagnetic measurements by Rossel, botanical research by Labillardière and by Ventenat and Delahaye, (whose contributions may have been minimised by Labillardière) were outstanding. What may be termed the proto-anthropological and linguistic observations by several men, anticipated Baudin's achievements.

In the history of ideas, Recherche Bay contributed vitally towards fostering an intellectual approach to human society that, within its era, merits the term scientific. Above all, this was a humane and peaceful interaction. Expeditioners credited these naked and exotic people as sentient beings, not racial misfits or evolutionary survivals. These were people living in a pristine environment with strong family ties and a sense of fun. While nobody envied them their discomforts, their documentation established that the proper study of mankind is man imbued with inherent human qualities.

ENDNOTES

¹ Long, *Stories of Australian exploration*, 1903: 70.

² Hunt and Carter, *Terre Napoléon*, 1999.

³ Péron, *Voyage of discovery*, 1809: 259, also 188.

⁴ Duyker, *Citizen Labillardière*, 2003: 226.

⁵ Cornell, *The journal of Post Captain Nicolas Baudin*, 1974: 593.

⁶ See Jones, in Bonnemains, Forsyth and Smith, *Baudin in Australian waters*, 1988: 46.

⁷ Degérando (ed. Moore), *The observation of savage peoples*, 1969: 65-9.

⁸ Degérando (ed. Moore), *The observation of savage peoples*, 1969: 70-104.

⁹ Plomley, *The Baudin expedition*, 1983: 9.

¹⁰ Jones, in Bonnemains, Forsyth and Smith, *Baudin in Australian waters*, 1988: 35-64.

¹¹ Jones, in Bonnemains, Forsyth and Smith, *Baudin in Australian waters*, 1988: 35 – Rousseau; Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 94 – Labillardière; Jones, in Bonnemains, Forsyth and Smith, *Baudin in Australian waters*, 1988: 44, quotes Péron.

¹² Péron, *Voyage of discovery*, 1809: 67-8.

¹³ *Ibid.*: 197.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 217.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 186.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 313-14.

¹⁷ Jones, in Bonnemains, Forsyth and Smith, *Baudin in Australian waters*, 1988: 46.

¹⁸ Péron, *Voyage of discovery*, 1809: 313.

¹⁹ Tylor, *Journal Anthropological Institute* 22 (1894): 141-52; quotation 150.