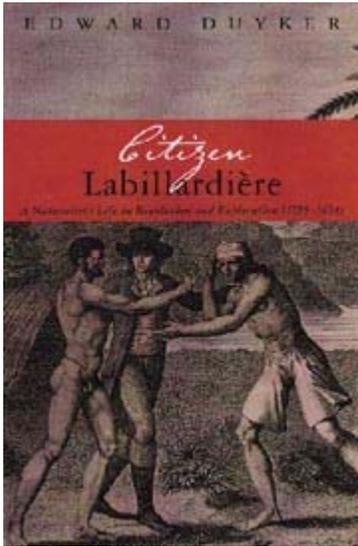


Citizen Labillardière: A naturalist's life in revolution and exploration (1755-1834) by Edward Duyker. Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2004, pp. xx & 383, paperback, A\$39.95, ISBN 0-522-85160-6.



Jacques-Julien Houtou de Labillardière ('Labill.' to botanists) is a familiar name to those who know Australian plants or work with botanical literature. Twenty-five years ago Carr and Carr (*People and Plants in Australia*, 1981) provided a long biographical essay that helped flesh out his life, and pointed out (p. 80) that his *Novæ Hollandiæ Plantarium* (1804-6) 'was the first general flora of Australia'. Duyker has gone much further than they did, and despite the absence of unpublished material from Labillardière's hand (fewer than sixty letters survive) he has produced an exceptionally readable, richly textured work. The scale and depth of his scholarship is indicated by the 173 pp. of apparatus, including bibliography, bibliographic explanatory endnotes – some of which are miniature essays – as well as glossaries of botanical and French terms and institutions, botanical, zoological and general indexes and a useful appendix discussing the contents of Labillardière's library.

Labillardière's life journey from provincial bourgeois of Normandy to republican Parisian savant, via medical studies and visits to England (where he met Joseph Banks), the Alps, the Middle East and back to Paris at the beginning of the revolution, circumnavigating Australia and visiting Polynesia and Melanesia as a naturalist on d'Entrecasteaux's expedition in search of La Pérouse, returning to post-terror revolutionary France after a spell as a prisoner of the Dutch in the East Indies, and finally travelling to Italy as a commissioner of the republic before settling as a savant and then a recluse, is told with verve, insight and sympathetic attention to the interests of the other protagonists. In the complex story of difficult interactions between royalists and republicans confined to the limited domain of ships at sea Duyker conveys brilliantly the tensions between ships' officers, wanting to be at sea and surveying, and the naturalists, wanting to be ashore collecting; the issues of cultural interpretation between European interlopers and indigenes; the problems of illness and loss of successive commanders; and the uncertainties of the differential treatment of royalist officers and republican crew and savants by the Dutch in Java who knew, whereas the explorers did not, that the Netherlands and England were at war with revolutionary France.

The account is no hagiography. Duyker contrasts Labillardière's almost simultaneous successful pleas to Sir Joseph Banks, for the return of his natural history collections taken as war booty to Britain, with his own role in Italy as a selector of victor's spoils for France. Yet there is no

mistaking the energy, curiosity and skill of the natural historian, both in field and the cabinet. The life Duyker recreates is as rich as that of the hero of any adventure novel, and the context is insightful history, not just the history of an important natural historian. Highly recommended.

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