

The Baudin Expedition

IN AUSTRALIA, 1800–1803



Each year, the National Library is host to between two and four Norman McCann Summer Scholars under the age of 30, who undertake research

in Australian History and Literature, based on the Library's collections. The scholarships are named for a former National Library council member. Here Nicole Starbuck describes the Baudin expedition, which gave France its most comprehensive introduction to New Holland, and whose crew members observed our country with a different eye to that of the British

In the French autumn of 1800, the *Géographe* and the *Naturaliste* set sail from the docks of Le Havre, to the tune of sentimental farewell songs, band music and goodbyes from loved ones, government officials, and eminent savants. Under the command of Nicolas Baudin, the ships were headed on a voyage of discovery to the still largely mysterious shores and waters of New Holland. By gathering the most comprehensive knowledge of the southern land—embracing geography, natural history and anthropology—the Baudin expedition was expected to bring great honour and glory to France. It was a day of anticipation, excitement and trepidation.

The National Library of Australia holds many records—correspondence, reports and journals—in which the explorers clearly conveyed these emotions, as well as the pride in discovery and the frustrations of shipboard life. The Map and Pictures Collections have diverse maps, plans and charts, and beautiful pictorial atlases. The Manuscripts Collection keeps the papers of

above:
Louis de Freycinet (1779–1842)
Carte générale de la Nouvelle Hollande 1811
map; 46.4 x 71.5 cm
Map Collection
nla.map-aa1

left:
Greg Power
Nicole Starbuck, Norman McCann
Summer Scholar 2007



above:
Francois Bonneville
N. Baudin, Capitane du
Vaisseau c.1800
mezzotint; oval image 11.9 x 9.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an9288315

below:
Victor Pillement (1767–1814)
Nouvelle-Hollande, Nelle.
Galles du Sud, vue d'une Partie
de la Ville de Sydney, capitale
des Colonies Anglaises aux
Terres Australes, et de l'entrée
du Port Jackson dans lequel
cette Ville est située 1807
engraving; 24.0 x 32.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an7568617

historian Frank Benson Horner, the Robert Helois transcripts, and copies of the papers of Nicolas Baudin, while the Microform Collection includes Baudin's letters written on board the *Géographe*.

From these records, we can accurately piece together the expedition's hydrographical accomplishments. Baudin and his men first sighted New Holland's coastline at Cape Leeuwin on the south-west tip of Australia in May 1801 and, with winter setting in, sailed north up the west coast. Only days afterwards, they made their first major discovery together, Géographe Bay, before the ships separated. Under the command of Emmanuel Hamelin, the *Naturaliste* accomplished a thorough survey of the Shark Bay region. Meanwhile, Baudin and his men determined the exact position of North-West Cape and discovered a number of islands and islets, notably the Rivoli Islands, L'Hermite Island, the Forestier Islands, the Lacépède Islands and most of those comprising the Bonaparte Archipelago. The two ships reunited in Timor at the end of winter and enjoyed three months of respite and replenishment.

In January 1802, from its base in D'Entrecasteaux Channel, Van Diemen's Land, the expedition began its southern explorations. Over the remaining summer, the explorers accurately charted the entire island of Tasmania. Soon afterward, separated once more, the *Naturaliste* surveyed the southern coast of New South

Wales and some of the islands of Bass Strait, while the *Géographe* began charting the Unknown Coast (the stretch of coast from around Nuyt's Archipelago in the west to the far south-east of South Australia)—one of the expedition's most important tasks. Baudin and his men were the first Europeans to chart from, approximately, Mt Schank, to what was to be named Encounter Bay (after they encountered Matthew Flinders there in the *Investigator*).

As winter began to set in, the two captains of the French expedition found their ships short of provisions and carrying an alarming number of men struck down with scurvy and dysentery. Consequently, they each decided to seek assistance at the British colony of Port Jackson. After a five-month sojourn, the *Naturaliste* returned to France with the expedition's voluminous natural history collection while her replacement, the *Casuarina*, accompanied the *Géographe* on her remaining explorations.

With a streamlined staff and having determined the focus for the remainder of the voyage, this 'second campaign' was particularly productive. Baudin led his men on close surveys of King Island, St Peter and St Francis Islands, the Spencer and St Vincent's Gulfs, and the first circumnavigation of Kangaroo Island. He was particularly proud of this southern reconnaissance, remarking that 'the chart we shall make ... will provide accurate knowledge of this entire region which has

remained unknown to Europeans for so long'. From there, the French thoroughly surveyed King George Sound and constructed new charts of the western coast from Cape Leeuwin and of the coastline between North-West Cape and Bonaparte Archipelago. The approaching monsoon made conditions too dangerous for an exploration of the Torres Strait, and so, near present-day Darwin, they turned back and set sail for Mauritius.

Throughout the voyage along Australia's



coastlines, Baudin's naturalists seized every opportunity to collect and study botanical, zoological and mineralogical specimens; their collections were immense. The director of France's Natural History Museum, Antoine-Laurent de Jussieu, asserted on 7 June 1804, after the expedition had arrived back in France, that 'of all the collections they had received from distant lands, at different times, this one brought by the *Naturaliste* and the *Géographe* is certainly the most extensive, especially in zoology'. It was ten times as large as that amassed by Captain James Cook over his three voyages. This was accomplished despite the fact that seven of fifteen naturalists abandoned the expedition at Mauritius—before the exploration of New Holland commenced. Another four were lost to illness between Timor and the south-west coast. On the second campaign, from Port Jackson, the *Géographe* carried the four remaining naturalists: botanist Louis Leschenault de la Tour, zoologist François Péron, mineralogist Charles Bailly, and gardener Antoine Guichenot.

As Jussieu stated, zoological specimens formed the largest part of the collection. The Natural History Museum and the garden of Josephine Bonaparte were endowed with new species of shellfish, marine animals, birds, reptiles, insects and quadrupeds. The botanical collection, too, was impressive. The gardeners collected living and dried plants, grains, and fruits. In addition, Jussieu reported in 1804 that Leschenault de la Tour collected, described and sketched over 600 plant species believed to be new. The mineralogists gained enough information to determine in which periods the land's various mineralogical substances had been laid down.

The expedition's natural history collection was intended to contribute to the pursuit of science and human knowledge for the benefit and progress of civilisation. It was hoped, too, that the plants and animals would contribute to the nation's agriculture by becoming acclimatised to the French environment. Although none of the animal species were bred for commercial purposes, many plants were successfully introduced and still grow in parts of France.

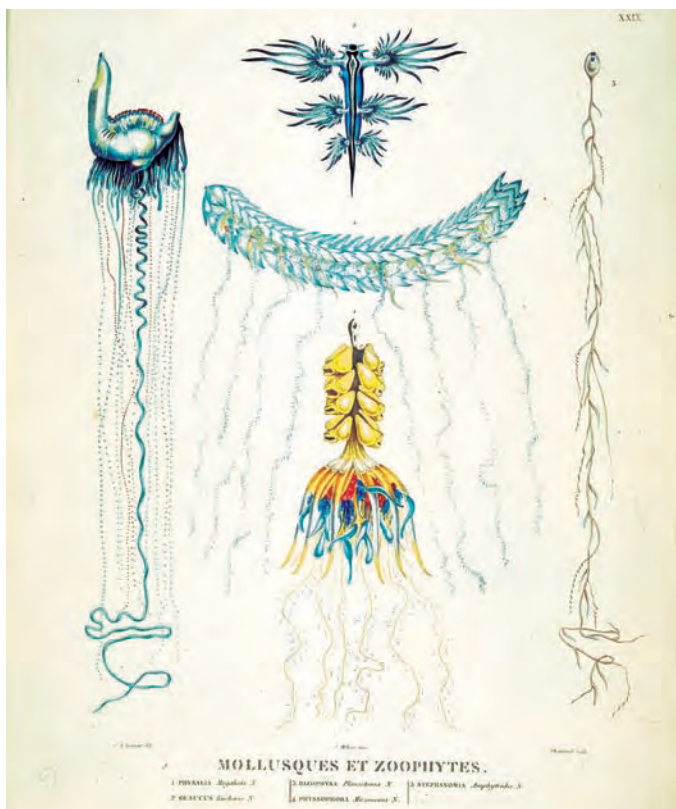
In addition to these 'collecting' fields of science, the expedition also undertook the nascent study of anthropology; and it did so in a manner that truly separates it from

other contemporary voyages of discovery. François Péron was the self-proclaimed 'observer of man' on the expedition but, in fact, Baudin and others experienced several significant encounters with Aboriginal people, and all recorded their observations. Eminent scientists, Georges Cuvier, a zoologist later seen as a pioneer of physical anthropology, and Joseph-Marie Degérando, a social anthropologist, provided Baudin with instructions. The aim of the explorers was to study the 'natives' they met as objectively as possible, noting details about their physique, dress, behaviour, customs, language, social structure, beliefs, and government. They were equally interested, though, in the Aboriginal people's potential to be 'civilised', which we now realise conflicted with their goal of objectivity.

The expedition's observations, ethnographical collections and meticulous illustrations remain valuable records. On New Holland's shores, the explorers experienced only fleeting encounters with Aboriginal people and sometimes were only able to report on huts, tools and food remains. It was in Van Diemen's Land that they had the opportunity to make their most comprehensive observations. Péron perceived the Tasmanian Aborigines to be distinctly different in character and even physique from those encountered in New Holland. In Port Jackson, the Frenchmen spent over five months in close contact with local Aboriginal people while living alongside them on the fringe of Sydney Town. They had the privileged opportunity, therefore, to witness the Aboriginal experience of British colonisation. Several Frenchmen recorded observations of Aboriginal customs, fishing methods, and the effects of environment



Barthelemy Roger (1767–1841)
Nouvelle-Hollande, Nelle. Galle du Sud, Jeune Femme de la Tribu des Bou-rou-be-ron-gal avec son enfant sur les épaules
 1824
 hand-coloured stipple engraving
 31.6 x 24.2 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-an7569787



top:
Choubarde (active 1807–1830)
Mollusques et Zoophytes 1807
hand-coloured engraving
32.0 x 24.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an7573692

above:
Choubarde (active 1807–1830)
Nouvelle-Hollande, Ile King, le Wombat 1807
hand-coloured engraving
24.0 x 31.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an7573691

and lifestyle upon health; with notably more attention than usual given to the Aboriginal people's potential to assimilate into European culture. Pierre-Bernard Milius, first lieutenant on the *Naturaliste*, concluded that 'les sauvages' were lazy and unwilling to assimilate. While Baudin agreed, he did notice how severely the Aboriginal people suffered from colonisation and even warned the Governor, Philip Gidley King, that 'the few who now surround you will not long exist'.

The winter sojourn in Port Jackson was one of the most significant episodes of the expedition. This unplanned respite was the longest period during the whole voyage that the Frenchmen spent in any port. Moreover, it was the furthest point they reached and a pivotal episode that effectively divided the expedition into two distinct campaigns. Baudin and Hamelin

replenished supplies, repaired the ships and hospitalised the sick men while the naturalists continued with their research. The French and British socialised and exchanged scientific and navigational information. Finally, adding a new and unexpected element to the expedition, several Frenchmen took an interest in the colony itself as an intriguing social experiment and a strategic commercial endeavour.

Over the first half of the voyage, the explorers had wondered about the potential of New Holland's environment; in Port Jackson, they saw the results of an experiment they had only imagined. Their fascination also reflected both the Enlightenment drive for progress and

concern about its detrimental effect upon society. In this light, Péron found Britain's convict transportation system particularly inspiring; he declared, 'The population of the colony was for us a new subject of surprise and contemplation. Never perhaps has a more worthy subject of study been offered to a man of the state or of philosophy'. In fact, some years later, his reports about the penal colony were to influence French debate about establishing one elsewhere.

Not surprisingly, the expedition's underlying political considerations came to the fore in Port Jackson. Although the Franco-British conflict was halted thanks to the Treaty of Amiens, the nations did share a long history of hostility that would always necessitate careful diplomacy. Consequently, while the colonists were obliged to accommodate the expedition because of its scientific nature, the French-British relationships were marked by suspicion and rivalry on both sides throughout and beyond the sojourn. The temptation to put their knowledge of the colony to a malicious purpose was strong for some Frenchmen, such as Péron and Milius, who later submitted reconnaissance reports to the Governor of Mauritius about the colony's potential as a commercial base and the state of its defences. There is no evidence, however, that they had any ill intent during the sojourn. So, to what extent was the Frenchmen's interest in Port Jackson only philosophical, or were they considering the potential to attack the settlement? And did the rivalry between themselves and the British inspire their renewed efforts in the second campaign when they left Port Jackson for France?

Clearly, we still have much to learn about the Baudin expedition and, indeed, it is an episode in our history that deserves to be investigated and acknowledged as it gave France its most comprehensive knowledge of New Holland and significantly influenced Australian history.

NICOLE STARBUCK is undertaking a PhD in French Studies at the University of Adelaide and is a participant in the Australian Research Council funded *Baudin Legacy Project*. Her thesis explores the significance of the Baudin expedition's sojourn in Port Jackson, April – November 1802