The Baudin Expedition in Review: Old Quarrels and New Approaches

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The Baudin expedition (1800–1804) was the third French scientific voyage to New Holland, after those of La Pérouse and d’Entrecasteaux. It was led by Nicolas Baudin, a seasoned botanical voyager, who set out in command of the Géographe; its second-in-command was Captain Emmanuel Hamelin in the Naturaliste. Commissioned by Napoléon, the expedition was organized on a grand scale and consequently generated a wealth of written material in the form of sea journals, letters written to and from members of the expedition, reports and official documents, but also left an important iconographic record, in the form of charts, maps and drawings. While the expedition’s return, and its reputation, were obscured by its internal dissensions, as by the events of the Napoleonic wars, the voyage nonetheless yielded rich results: its naturalists brought large numbers of zoological and botanical specimens to the collections of the Muséum d’histoire naturelle in Paris, as well as providing live plants and animals for the gardens and menageries of the Muséum and of Malmaison. In spite of this impressive bounty, it is only in recent years that the voyage has begun to receive the attention it deserves for the long-term contribution it made to science and to the history of early Australian exploration, too long dominated by the English conquest story, and particularly by the competing claims for superiority made on behalf of the contemporaneous Australian voyage of Matthew Flinders.

Indeed, establishing an accurate record of events has been a long and difficult process, and not only because of the accusations made by the English that the French explorers had plagiarized Flinders’s charts or claimed his cartographic achievements on the south coast as their own. The French authorities were also anxious to forget about an expedition that had brought them neither glory nor diplomatic advantage. In these conditions, the surviving expeditioners were hard pressed to protect their interests and their careers, not to mention the expedition’s

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1 The expedition’s live specimens were not simply propagated within the gardens and menagerie of the Paris Muséum, but also in the grounds of the Empress Josephine’s property at Malmaison. For the history of Josephine’s acquisitions, see the article by Christian Jouanin within this number, and for details of the Malmaison collections, see C. Jouanin, Les Cygnes noirs. Catalogue de l’exposition L’Impératrice Joséphine et les sciences naturelles, Musée national du château de Malmaison, 29 mai–6 octobre 1997 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1997).
results. A scapegoat had to be designated – in this case, their commander, who had died at Mauritius before the completion of the voyage, with no anointed successor to defend his legacy and his memory. This process is palpable in the official account of the expedition, the *Voyage de découvertes aux Terres Australes* compiled by the chief naturalist François Péron (and finished by one of Baudin’s officers, Louis Freycinet). Even though Péron was notoriously biased against Captain Baudin in his reporting, his narrative was officially sanctioned, which meant that Péron was deemed a credible witness, and that his version of events would influence subsequent representations of the voyage and its commander. However, since most of the expedition’s records were immediately consigned to the archives of the Marine and of the Paris Muséum, and others were later to form the Lesueur collection at the Muséum d’histoire naturelle in Le Havre, they constituted a potential resource that would eventually yield up their secrets to historians.

The task of consulting the archives did not begin in earnest until the early years of the last century. Ernest Scott’s *Terre Napoléon: A History of French Exploration and Projects in Australia*, although critical of some of the achievements of the Baudin expedition in comparison with those of Matthew Flinders, was the first major study to use French archival material in order to refute long-standing charges of incompetence and plagiarism against Baudin. Further, the translated archival documents used by Scott and known as the Hélouis transcripts remain available to Australian researchers to this day. These sources were heavily supplemented in the 1960s, thanks to the Archives Copying project instigated by Brian Baldwin of the State Library of South Australia, a project which made copies of primary French sources available to historians in Australian libraries, and whose first major result was the publication of Baudin’s sea log (*Journal de mer*), translated into English by Christine Cornell. This account provided much needed balance in the reporting of the events of the voyage and the conflicts between the personalities on board.

In the meantime, historians in France and Australia had been reviewing a range of archival evidence on the Baudin expedition. French historians René

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2 The official account of the Baudin expedition appeared under the full title of *Voyage de découvertes aux Terres Australes exécuté par ordre de Sa Majesté l’Empereur et Roi, sur les corvettes le Géographe, le Naturaliste, et la goélette le Casuarina, pendant les années 1800, 1801, 1802, 1803, et 1804* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale [later Imprimerie Royale], 1807–1816). The two volumes which relate the events of the journey are: *Historique*, vol. 1, by François Péron, 1807; *Historique*, vol. 2, by F. Péron, continued by Louis Freycinet, 1816.


4 These documents are held in the National Library of Australia, Canberra.

5 *The Journal of Post-Captain Nicholas Baudin Commander-in-Chief of the Corvettes Géographe and Naturaliste. Assigned by order of the Government to a Voyage of Discovery* (Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1974). Unfortunately, this version of Baudin’s journal remains to this date unpublished in French.
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Bouvier and Edouard Maynial, in the 1940s, and Jean-Paul Faivre, in the 1950s, commenced the task of restoring Captain Nicolas Baudin’s lost reputation, a task which Faivre took up again in the pages of this journal. This work was further advanced in the 1970s by the documents and commentaries edited by Jean Copans and Jean Jamin, which laid the groundwork for the re-examination of the aims and results of the French “Observers of Man” – in whose number the authors included Baudin, as well as his anthropologist, François Péron – in all of the regions where they came into contact with indigenous peoples. This is one of the early studies in which the status of Péron’s testimony is challenged on both an historical and scientific basis. It was not until the 1980s and beyond that many of the issues raised by Copans and Jamin would be the subject of detailed investigation by Australian anthropologists and historians. In fact, the extent of Péron’s rewriting of the scientific record of the voyage is only now coming to light.

Australian scholars also played an important role in this process. A major step towards establishing a faithful record of the entire voyage was taken in 1987 by Frank Horner when he published his systematic and meticulously researched study, *The French Reconnaissance: Baudin in Australia 1801–1803*. This work is now the essential reference for scholars working on the expedition, since Horner has not only made a remarkable synthesis of archival records in France, Britain, Australia and Mauritius, but has successfully laid to rest much of the expedition’s mythology, including the persistent stories of Baudin’s incompetence. Other historians have also made distinct contributions to the historiography of the expedition by focusing on the regions where the presence of Baudin and his companions had left lasting traces: Leslie Marchant situated the expedition in the context of French exploration in Australia’s south-west; N.J.B. Plomley published well-documented studies of the expedition’s anthropological findings in Tasmania.

10 See, for example, the article of Michel Jangoux: “Nicolas Baudin par son contemporain André-Pierre Ledru: une autre perception du capitaine naturaliste”, *Relations savantes, voyages et discours scientifiques* (Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne [Collection Imago Mundi], 2004, in press).
The 1980s in Australia also saw the first of a series of national commemorations in which the contribution of the Baudin expedition was hailed as a part of Australian cultural heritage. As a result of such events as the 150th anniversary of the founding of South Australia, in 1986, and the national bicentenary in 1988, the artwork of the Baudin expedition, with its unique portraits of Aboriginal subjects, came to be more widely exhibited. As part of the bicentenary, Jacqueline Bonnemains, Elliott Forsyth and Bernard Smith published a critical catalogue of the artwork held in the Lesueur Collection of the Muséum d’histoire naturelle of Le Havre. Their resulting work, *Baudin in Australian Waters*,\(^{14}\) provided the framework for future analysis of the expedition’s iconography, since it contained reproductions of the drawings made by the expedition’s artists, Lesueur and Petit, and an extensive bibliography, as well as scholarly essays, including Rhys Jones’s influential “Images of Natural Man”.\(^{15}\) During this period, Jacqueline Bonnemains published the authoritative biographical portraits of Charles-Alexandre Lesueur and Nicolas-Martin Petit that have informed all subsequent studies of the two artists,\(^{16}\) as well as an edition of the only journal of the expedition, other than Baudin’s, to have appeared in print.\(^{17}\)

It was then the turn of the bicentenary of the Baudin expedition itself, from 2000–2004, to provide sustained public exposure of the achievements of its navigators, scientists and artists. The *Terra Australis 2001* committee, chaired by Michel Rocard, helped to coordinate and fund a diverse range of commemorative projects in France and Australia, with the cooperation of the French and Australian Governments. In France one of the most notable events sponsored by *Terra Australis 2001* was the first publication, by Jacqueline Bonnemains, of the uncompleted fair copy of Baudin’s journal, under the title *Mon voyage aux Terres Australes. Le journal personnel du commandant Baudin*.\(^{18}\) This publication contained the missing illustrations from Baudin’s manuscript that had been reunited through the efforts of Mme Bonnemains, curator of the Lesueur Collection at Le Havre and, by her influential publications, a leading authority on the expedition.\(^{19}\) With so many


\(^{15}\) Bonnemains et al., pp. 35–64.


\(^{19}\) Jacqueline Bonnemains has recently retired from the post of curator of the Lesueur Collection that she held with such distinction. We would like to express our grateful thanks to her, on behalf of the researchers she has so generously assisted during her tenure, and for the
essential documents now in the public domain, the scene was set for a revival of interest in the complex history of this voyage.

In Australia, strong public interest was aroused by two landmark exhibitions of the artworks that were timed to take place around the bicentenary. Terre Napoléon: Australia through French Eyes was organized in Sydney in 1999 and, in 2002, the Art Gallery of South Australia exhibited drawings from the voyages of Flinders and Baudin, The Encounter, 1802. Art of the Flinders and Baudin Voyages. Both exhibitions had a sustained impact because of their visually striking and well-researched catalogues: both contained essays which embraced the domains of æsthetics, anthropology, cultural and natural history, and which suggested new areas of interdisciplinary study. As its title suggests, the Adelaide catalogue developed the theme of the Encounter, since the exhibition was timed to coincide with the commemoration of the famous meeting of Matthew Flinders and Nicolas Baudin in South Australian waters, a theme which also inspired the study by Anthony J. Brown of the crossed itineraries of the two mariners.

Anticipating the new directions to be opened up by the bicentenary, the then Editor of the Australian Journal of French Studies, Wallace Kirsop, proposed that a special number of the Journal be planned to commemorate the expedition. With this aim in view, the department of French Studies at the University of Sydney offered to host the Tenth Annual International Conference of the Australian Society for French Studies in 2002, focusing on the Baudin expedition and bringing together European and Australian scholars interested in the area. The conference was entitled “Regards croisés: the French and Terra Australis from the sixteenth century to the present” and was held from 29 September to 1 October. This timing was particularly appropriate as exactly two hundred years earlier, between May and November, the expedition had visited the recently established English colony at Port Jackson.

Many eminent scholars attended the conference, which was subsidized by both the French Government and the Terra Australis committee, whose generous support made possible the visits of Professor François Moureau and Rear-Admiral François Bellec. In addition, the Terra Australis committee provided a glittering commemoration dinner at the Art Gallery of New South Wales for all the delegates at the conference, in the presence of the Vice-Chancellor of the University of

help she has also given us for different aspects of this number.


22 Wallace Kirsop had himself compiled the first important bibliography of the Baudin expedition that featured in J. Bonnemains et al., Baudin in Australian Waters.
The conference itself brought together researchers from France and Australia in many disciplines, including anthropology, the natural sciences, maritime history and art history. Current research and the latest findings were presented and areas requiring further investigation identified. This number comprises a selection of the conference papers and also includes several papers by other Baudin scholars who were unable to attend.

The collection of essays gives a snapshot of the preoccupations of scholars who are currently engaged in research on the expedition, both in Australia and overseas. Despite the wide range of topics broached, all of the authors share the common aim of correcting the errors and misapprehensions which have continued to accumulate around the expedition since Baudin’s time. In order to achieve this, all have engaged in the systematic consultation of the primary sources; as a consequence, new material has emerged on many different aspects of the voyage, as well as on its preparation and aftermath. This in turn has led to a better understanding of the relationships between the expeditioners and of their importance to the outcomes and reporting of the voyage. As a whole, the collection thus highlights the competing and conflicting ambitions of the expeditioners, and the use of unpublished material from the shipboard journals has provided a polyphony of voices to balance the Péron narrative.

François Moureau’s article, “Philosophes et marins français dans la Mer du Sud avant Baudin: l’exemple de Bougainville et de ses compagnons”, sets the context for this entire number by providing a comprehensive backdrop to Baudin’s voyage. As Moureau shows, the scientific voyager is a creature of the Enlightenment, and Louis-Antoine de Bougainville more than any other exemplifies the erudition and curiosity that inspired the early French explorers of the Pacific. As well as being a mathematician, Bougainville engaged with the major philosophical questions of the day: critical of Rousseau and his theory of natural man, Bougainville was, as Moureau points out, more interested in self-exploration and the nature of man than in strictly ethnographical concerns. The navigator is important to our story both because of his link with the Pacific and because of his links with the Baudin expedition. Under Choiseul, the French navy renewed its maritime efforts and Bougainville was instructed to search for *Terra australis*, his tantalizingly close brush with the Barrier Reef while circumnavigating the globe making him one of the key figures in the early exploration of Australia. In addition his son, Hyacinthe de Bougainville, the subject of two later essays in this number, participated as a midshipman in the Baudin expedition.

The following paper also sets the scene for the *Voyage aux Terres Australes* by discussing the development of the modern science of hydrography and the problems posed by the mapping of the coastlines of New Holland, prior to Baudin’s departure in 1800. In his article,“La cartographie de l’Australie: compétition et coopération outre-mer (XVIIIᵉ–XIXᵉ siècles)”, François Bellec explains how, in
spite of the rivalry between France and England on the high seas, cooperation between English and French cartographers was an important factor in both the development of accurate map drawing and the solving of the question of longitude. He highlights the essential role played by the maps of Beaumettes-Beaupré, cartographer of the d’Entrecasteaux expedition, which were eagerly perused by the English, who recognized their exemplary accuracy, and which were vital to the endeavours of the Baudin expedition cartographers.

Many public institutions and many individuals had an interest in the successful execution of the voyage, with the result that bureaucrats, scholars and scientists alike participated in the preparation of instructions for the expeditioners. In his article, “Nicolas Baudin chargé de réunir une collection pour la future impératrice Joséphine”, Christian Jouanin draws attention to one particular order that was given to the commander. He publishes for the first time in its entirety a document from the Minister for Marine, Forfait, in which Baudin is given clear instructions to assemble a collection for Joséphine de Beauharnais. Baudin faithfully and discreetly carried out his orders, although it caused diplomatic problems between him and some other members of the expedition, who believed wrongly that he was quarantining some specimens for his personal gain. By examining Baudin’s actions in the light of this document, Jouanin effectively lays to rest the widely-spread rumour that Baudin, in his own interests, had taken it upon himself to make a collection of animals and other specimens distinct from that belonging officially to the expedition. This article is an important contribution to the process of establishing a firm basis in fact on which to judge the commander’s actions.

This is the same process to which John West-Sooby contributes in his article, “Le sourire grinçant du capitaine Baudin”. Through an analysis of Baudin’s humour, West-Sooby explores the dynamics of the relationships between Baudin and his fellow travellers, sketching a profile of this complex man that emphasizes his essential humanity. The breakdown in interpersonal relationships was one of the main factors responsible for the disrepute of the Baudin voyage on its return to France, but West-Sooby attributes the breakdown to a series of misunderstandings rather than to any ill-will or intention to wound on the part of the much maligned commander, who, through his dry humour, is often seeking to defuse rather than to inflame a tense situation. In this article, as in those that follow, the focus on the individuals participating in the expedition, their backgrounds, their personalities and their role in the expedition, is proving to be a fruitful starting point from which to attempt an understanding of the collaborations and enmities that dogged the voyage and impinged on later perceptions of its value.

Michel Jangoux’s article, “Les zoologistes et botanistes qui accompagnèrent le capitaine Baudin aux Terres australes”, explores the reasons behind the recruitment of each of the scientific members of the expedition, highlighting the somewhat haphazard selection procedures and drawing attention to the difficulties encountered because of the defections and deaths of several key members of
the expedition. Using previously unpublished manuscript material from voyage journals, Jangoux describes how the participants envisaged their role as scientific voyagers. He also sheds new light on the question of Baudin’s herbarium, many of the specimens of which he has discovered in the Muséum d’histoire naturelle in Paris and which he is at present cataloguing. Jangoux is also interested in setting the record straight concerning the relationship between Péron and Baudin. He produces important evidence to indicate not only that Péron initially respected and admired Baudin, but also that Péron’s growing disdain for the captain, which eventually led to his opportunistically writing the captain out of his account of the voyage, developed largely under the influence of the Freycinet brothers.

Jacques Vialle’s essay, “Le destin tragique de Pierre-François Bernier, astronome de l’expédition Baudin”, gives the background and profile of the promising young astronomer, who came to join the expedition on the recommendation of his master, Lalande. Bernier was the only astronomer to participate in the voyage almost to its end, perishing at the age of twenty-four. Throughout the voyage Bernier carried out his observations punctiliously in spite of the difficulties of shipboard observation. During the five-month stay in Port Jackson, Bernier established an observatory several hundred metres from that of Dawes, near the site of the present-day Opera House, where he enjoyed more favourable conditions for his work. As well as measuring the tides, he was able to make various astronomical observations which contributed to the work of Freycinet and Boullanger in the mapping of New Holland. His portrait serves to remind us of the quality of the men who accompanied Baudin, but also of the high toll exacted upon its brilliant scientific contingent.

Given the high number of deaths during the voyage, the question of the medical support provided is of particular importance. Jane Southwood and Donald Simpson’s article, “Baudin’s Doctors: French Medical Scientists in Australian Waters, 1801–1803”, traces the background of the five medical men in the expedition, the training they had received and the role they played in the course of the voyage, as well as their subsequent careers. The main diseases they had to deal with were scurvy and dysentery and the article details the kinds of treatments used and relates these to medical knowledge of the time.

 Appropriately, several articles address specifically aspects of the voyage relating to the stay in Port Jackson, the longest period the expeditioners spent in any one place. The articles by Shino Konishi and Margaret Sankey deal with the native inhabitants of Port Jackson. Konishi’s article, “Depicting Sexuality: A Case Study of the Baudin Expedition’s Aboriginal Ethnography”, examines how European accounts of Aboriginal sexual behaviour reflect European preoccupations with sex and marriage, thus preventing dispassionate observation of the behaviour of the natives of Port Jackson. Through an analysis of two key drawings by the expedition’s artists and their relationship to the writings of the various participants, Konishi concludes that the European paradigms act as powerful obstructions to
anthropological understanding. Aboriginal sexuality is thus constructed rather than observed and Konishi concludes that we learn more about contemporary European discourses on sexuality than about the Aborigines. Sankey’s article, “The Aborigines of Port Jackson, Seen by the Baudin Expedition”, is complementary to that of Konishi. She asks why there is relatively little about the Aborigines of Port Jackson in Péron’s official account, given the interest of the French in the Aborigines prior to the arrival in Port Jackson. However, she demonstrates that the French interest in and contact with the Aborigines did not abate in Port Jackson, as is attested by the numerous diary entries, illustrations and results of experiments. Against the backdrop of the English settlement, and mediated by it, French perceptions of the Aborigines are redefined, albeit in a fragmentary fashion.

In his second article, “La première relâche du Naturaliste au Port Jackson (26 avril – 18 mai 1802): le témoignage du capitaine Hamelin”, Michel Jangoux also focuses on the expedition’s stay in Port Jackson, drawing upon the previously unpublished account of Emmanuel Hamelin, commander of the Naturaliste, to elucidate the mystery surrounding one of the least understood episodes in the history of the voyage. Jangoux asks the question as to why Hamelin, after arriving first at Port Jackson, and knowing of Baudin’s imminent arrival, decided prematurely to leave on 18 May (only to return to Port Jackson again because of insufficient supplies and the unseaworthy state of the Naturaliste which seemed to be shipping water). By publishing the journal entries made by Hamelin in Port Jackson, Jangoux sheds light not only on the professional frustrations that he sees as motivating the captain’s decision to leave, but also on some of the aspects of daily life in the colony at that period.

The two following articles in the volume deal with another key witness to events in the fledgling colony of New South Wales. The focus of both is on Hyacinthe Yves Philippe Potentien, Baron de Bougainville, son of the great French navigator. Hyacinthe de Bougainville was a midshipman on the Géographe who, in his later career, made a second visit to Port Jackson. During the Baudin expedition, Bougainville had fallen into disfavour with his commander, who contemplated sending him back to France in disgrace. Recovering from this initial stain on his career, partly because of the ill-repute into which Baudin had fallen, Bougainville’s career advanced and he was made post-captain in 1821. He commanded his own scientific voyage round the world on the Thétis from 1824 to 1826 and thus had the opportunity to revisit his initial impressions of the colony of New South Wales. Serge Rivière’s article, “Distant Echoes of the Enlightenment: Private and Public Observations on Convict Life by Baudin’s Disgraced Officer, Hyacinthe de Bougainville (1825)”, places Bougainville’s commentary on the colony at Port Jackson in the context of French debates on the advantages and disadvantages of penal colonies as a solution to criminality. Noting that comments by French visitors to the colony of New South Wales in the early part of the nineteenth century provide a rich source of information, Rivière focuses on Bougainville and shows
how the navigator’s impressions during the Baudin expedition were critical of the English penal colony, but that thirty years later his notes in the margins of Ernest de Blosseville’s *Histoire des colonies pénales de l’Angleterre dans l’Australie* reveal that he espouses a more even-handed and pragmatic approach, taking issue with the negative attitudes of Barbé-Marbois and Pierre-Louis Etienne Dumont.

Hyacinthe de Bougainville’s marginalia are also the subject of Jean Fornasiero and John West-Sooby’s article, “Notes in the Margin: Bougainville, Freycinet and the Baudin Expedition”. The authors have located in the Barr Smith Library of the University of Adelaide a copy of Louis Freycinet’s *Navigation et Géographie* which originally belonged to the Baron. The margin notes in his hand, added during the 1820s and 1830s, were made first and foremost with the aim of verifying the findings of the Baudin expedition and providing up-to-date information for mariners and scientists. The Baron is anxious to present his contribution to Pacific exploration in the most advantageous light and this entails negative comments concerning Baudin and, notwithstanding his friendship with the Freycinet brothers, his at times abrupt correction of Louis Freycinet’s errors. In contrast, the memory of Péron, whose erudition is seen as unfailing, continues to glow brightly for the navigator who, in his own quest for knowledge, seeks to emulate him.

For present-day scholars too, the esteem in which Péron was held by his peers holds little surprise. In spite of Péron’s status as an unreliable narrator of the Baudin voyage, he still emerges as a remarkable figure, whose important written legacy is his scientific writing. Indeed, the bibliography of Péron’s work, compiled by Jangoux, and which contains recent entries, reveals that Péron’s reports are still relevant to researchers today. However, the bibliography itself will serve an important purpose for researchers, as it provides information about the whereabouts of Péron material that has been difficult to source. One of the new entries in the bibliography is Christine Cornell’s excellent translation of the second volume of Péron’s *Voyage de découvertes*, a publication that makes this account available for the first time to an English-speaking audience.23 In his review of this new work, Elliott Forsyth discusses some of the anomalies in Péron’s descriptions, while highlighting the crucial importance of the document as a whole to our understanding of the voyage. He concludes by expressing the hope that a new translation of the first volume, also by Cornell, will shortly appear in the same series – and be a welcome replacement for the imperfect version of the text that has deformed Péron’s version of events since the early nineteenth century. Péron, like his commander, will be well served by the restoration of an accurate record of events.

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As the summary of its contents has shown, the main purpose of this collection of essays has been to present current research on the Baudin expedition, while at the same time indicating the new directions that are being opened out by the use and analysis of hitherto unpublished material. We also hope that, as well as setting the record straight in many particulars, this number of the journal can be read as a celebration of the immense scientific value of the expedition – ironically a goal sought by Péron, as much as his own glory – and an aim he shared, even more ironically, with Nicolas Baudin. Through the portraits of the scientific voyagers that are traced here, one cannot but be impressed by the significance and extent of the scientific work accomplished. By presenting these dedicated men and their endeavours, we seek to make our own contribution to the process whereby the French expedition, and all of its key players, including its maligned commander, will finally achieve the full recognition they deserve both in the history of Australia and the history of science.

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