

# ANGLO-FRENCH CONTACTS IN 1788 THE KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH ON BOARD LA PÉROUSE'S SHIPS

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The First Fleet put into Botany Bay on 18 January 1788. Just over a week later, to the astonishment of Captain Phillip and his men, two French naval ships appeared and set up camp in the Bay, which the English were in the process of vacating in favour of Port Jackson. Satisfied that they were not, as was first feared, 'Dutchmen sent to dispossess us' (Tench 1789, 49–50) but French vessels soon identified as the *Boussole* and the *Astrolabe* led by La Pérouse, the English welcomed them and established regular contacts for the period of their stay, which lasted until 10 March.

La Pérouse was completing his great voyage of exploration, which had taken him around Cape Horn to Easter Island, Hawaii, the north-west coast of America, across the ocean to China, and up to northern Siberia and Kamchatka. It was there that he received instructions from France to amend his route and go down to Australia before returning home, so that he might report at first hand on a rumoured planned British settlement in New South Wales. As it turned out, this change of route created a disastrous set of circumstances, for a number of his officers and men were massacred during a brief call in the Samoan Islands, and the entire expedition, eventually sailing home by way of New Caledonia and the Solomon Islands, was destroyed by a fierce cyclone off the small island of Vanikoro.

But the stay in Botany Bay was most pleasant. The British visited the French on several occasions and invited them back to Port Jackson. The fact that the two countries had been at war for much of the eighteenth century and that France had sided with the rebel colonists during the recent American War of Independence does not seem to have clouded over their exchanges. Admittedly, after his long and strenuous voyage, Phillip had little in the way of supplies or equipment to spare for La Pérouse 'so that their offers of assistance were limited to good wishes for the ultimate success of our expedition' (Milet-Mureau 1797, vol. 3, 265). Cordiality, however, was invaluable after the long and exhausting voyage and it helped to counter depression and sorrow brought

about by the various hardships they had each endured. Contact with the British also helped the French to deal with the convicts who came around the ships, hoping to find a means of escape.

This raises the question of the means of communication. It had been possible in earlier centuries for Europeans to communicate in Latin. A number of treatises by scientists, philosophers and historians had been written in Latin, so that translations were largely unnecessary, but with the Reformation, the rise of Lutheranism and Calvinism and the growth of the Anglican church, Latin had taken a second place. By the end of the seventeenth century, tutors and the increasing number of grammar schools, while still including Latin in their curriculum, began to teach one or more foreign languages, English or French and some Spanish or Italian. Watkin Tench, for instance, the son of a Cheshire senior teacher, had learnt French from a relatively early age.

Naval colleges, which most of the officers attended, were less concerned with languages than with mathematics and the science of navigation. The teaching of English was included in the French naval colleges' curriculum from 1775.<sup>1</sup> This, however, would have been too late for most of the French officers who visited Botany Bay in 1788. Somewhat ironically, warfare and imperial rivalry, which pitted Britain against France during the eighteenth century, had provided better opportunities to learn the traditional enemy's language. La Pérouse had spent six years at the Albi Jesuit college, where he learnt Latin and possibly some English, but when he entered the Brest Collège des Gardes, his studies centred on mathematics and astronomy. However, war soon broke out, and aged barely sixteen he had to turn to active service. He was wounded and taken prisoner by the British who, after a short period of negotiations, granted him parole. He no doubt first acquired or improved his modest knowledge of English during this episode.

After a short stay in Brittany and a period of leave at home, La Pérouse returned to Brest to continue his studies. The war continued—it became known as the Seven Years War, lasting from 1756 to 1763—and La Pérouse joined an expedition to Newfoundland, part of France's doomed efforts to save French Canada. Later, he served in the Indian Ocean, an area well known to French naval and merchant officers, but again an area where British power was

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<sup>1</sup> The 'Ordonnance du Roi' of 2 March 1775 added English and Spanish to the formal curriculum. Information supplied by Liliane Alfonsi, Université Paris-Sud.

becoming increasingly evident. Undeniably, like many others, he had contact with passing British ships and was able to maintain his knowledge of English.

The American War of Independence soon broke out. France did not declare war on Britain in its early stages, but under the influence of such men as La Fayette gave the rebel colonists a great deal of support. When France joined in, La Pérouse sailed to Rhode Island and Boston as part of the French fleet. He landed on a number of occasions, discussing the situation with American colonists. However, it was as the war was nearing its close that he led two ships into Hudson's Bay, where he destroyed the British commercial outposts and captured their garrisons. It was on this occasion that he showed a degree of gallantry towards the British, helping them to make their way home, which earned the lifelong gratitude and regard of the British authorities.

There seems little doubt that La Pérouse could read and speak English. How well one cannot judge, but his contacts with the commanders and officers of the First Fleet would not have presented him with any problems, at least in the area of communication.

Looking at the background and careers of his fellow officers, one realises that a good number spoke adequate English for the strange situation in which they found themselves. La Pérouse's second-in-command, Fleuriot de Langle, had been taken prisoner in July 1779 and held by the British for several months. After his release, he sailed to America with Washington's aide-de-camp, Colonel John Laurens, who had been held prisoner in the Tower of London; upon his arrival in Boston, he met a number of American officials and military personnel. Sadly, he was one of those killed in Samoa and did not reach Botany Bay.<sup>2</sup>

But among those who did, we find a number who had had contacts with the British on a number of occasions. Paul Mérault Monneron belonged to a leading family of Annonay and received a good education before studying engineering at the *École du Génie*. He had no doubt acquired a good knowledge of English before he sailed with La Pérouse on the Hudson's Bay raid, where he met a number of English speakers. This knowledge plus his training as a scientist led La Pérouse to send him to London to buy scientific equipment. To avoid the British government discovering too early that the French were planning an expedition to the South Seas, Monneron claimed that he was

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<sup>2</sup> For an account of his life and his role in La Pérouse's expedition, see P. Fleuriot de Langle 1954.

acting on behalf of a Spanish trader, Don Inigo Alvarez, but it did not take long in the small London world he visited for this ruse to be swept aside. Monneron may indeed have been recognised by some people he had met in America. He talked to John Webber, Cook's artist on the *Resolution*, and to Sir Joseph Banks, among others, and received all the help he required. Monneron can be regarded as one of the most fluent English speakers in Botany Bay.<sup>3</sup>

Another Frenchman who was known in London was the artist Gaspard Duché de Vancy. He had lived and studied in Vienna, exhibited some of his works in Paris in 1781 and gone to London in 1784 where several of his paintings were being exhibited at the Royal Academy.

Two of La Pérouse's officers had British family links, and although it is not easy to prove it, they probably had a good working knowledge of English. They were the senior officer Robert Sutton de Clonard, who took over command of the *Astrolabe* after Fleuriot de Langle's death. One finds a John Sutton from Wexford listed among the officers of Walsh's Regiment, a brigade of volunteers in the service of Louis XVI. The family was closely associated with the French India Company, and Robert had met La Pérouse in India. The two remained close friends, serving in the Indian Ocean and later in American waters. Upon their arrival in Botany Bay, La Pérouse sent him to make an official call on Governor Phillip: Clonard was made most welcome and actually stayed overnight.

The other was the young Jean-Guillaume Law de Lauriston, who was born in India, the son of the French administrator who played a major role in promoting the voyage of Jean-François de Surville to the Solomon Islands and New Zealand. His uncle was the famous Scottish banker John Law. He was well educated as well as well connected, and brought with him a substantial library of travel narratives on Byron, Wallis, Carteret and Cook.<sup>4</sup>

Out of the seventeen officers of the *Boussole* and *Astrolabe*, fifteen had served in the recent war and were likely to have had some contact with the English-speaking colonists (Gaziello 1984, 130). Some had been taken prisoner, a situation which in some cases allowed for a certain freedom of movement—at least compared with life in modern prisoner-of-war camps.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Monneron's role in obtaining scientific material is detailed in Gaziello 1954, especially pp. 153–154 in which she lists the various people he met in London.

<sup>4</sup> On Lauriston and his family, see John Dunmore 1981, pp. 15–18.

Some were released on parole and sent home; others were exchanged for British prisoners. Their period of incarceration, being held on a ship or ashore within military quarters, varied according to circumstances. Some, as did La Pérouse in an early engagement, suffered mild wounds which a British surgeon, or more likely an assistant, would attend to. Negotiations took time and were carried out partly in English. We can assume therefore that all these men acquired some knowledge of English or were able to improve on what they may have learnt at college or from some tutor.

Among them, we can include Charles Fantin de Boutin, lieutenant on the *Boussole*. He was the son of an official in the Ministry of Finance and had served extensively in the Navy during the War of Independence. Captured in April 1782, he spent several months as a prisoner. Pierre-Louis de la Villeneuve had also been captured in 1782 and held prisoner for several months. Simon-Pierre Lavaux or Lavo, a respected surgeon, had been captured in August 1780 and held prisoner in Falmouth, where he was appointed to the military hospital and tended to the wounded, mostly French. He was released as the war negotiations were being concluded in 1783. La Pérouse and others commented on his gift for languages, and he was asked to attempt to record the local vocabularies of Kamchatkans (Denizet 2009).

However, these various contacts do not imply that there was a high degree of fluency in the various exchanges that took place during the stay in Botany Bay. Communication was possible, easy in some cases, but in all probability marked by repetition, poor grammar, incorrect use of terms, some incomprehension and possibly a fair degree of amusement.

When, however, some formal situation developed, each side would speak in their own language, with the assistance of an interpreter of moderate ability when needed. The same applied to written communications. When the talented astronomer Joseph Lepaute Dagelet wrote to his English counterpart William Dawes, apologising for his inability to visit his observatory, he made no attempt to use English.<sup>5</sup>

What we are left with is an overall picture of a quite amicable situation in the first year of the settlement of Australia, at a critical period for the French expedition. After the first day or two of shock and surprise, the two groups of naval officers and scientists, even though their countries had been at war for so

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<sup>5</sup> Mitchell and Dixon Libraries, CY 1414 zAd49. For a facsimile reproduction of the letter, see <http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/item/itemDetailPaged.aspx?itemID=446692>.

many years, looked upon each other with interest and sympathy, and were able to exchange news and comments with more facility than we imagined.

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