

# JOSSELIN AND ALEXANDRE LE CORRE: EARLY FRENCH VOYAGERS TO VAN DIEMEN'S LAND AND NEW HOLLAND

EDWARD DUYKER

Perhaps the least known of early French connections with Australia is that of the Le Corre family. Both father, Josselin (1727–1785), and son, Alexandre (1766–1802), sailed into Australian waters in separate historic expeditions. Josselin firstly took part in Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's global circumnavigation of 1766–1768 and then joined Marion Dufresne's search for the Southland in 1771–1772. In 1802, Alexandre Le Corre commanded the first Mauritian trading expedition to Australia.

Who were these men? Josselin Le Corre was born on 29 August 1727 at Pléherel (Côtes d'Armor), France, the son of Pierre Le Corre and Janne Brien.<sup>1</sup> In 1742 and 1745 he made two voyages on the merchant ship *Assomption*—the first to Newfoundland and the second to St Domingue. He made another two trans-Atlantic voyages on the *Grâce* to St Domingue in 1747 and to Martinique in 1749. In May 1750 Le Corre served as a *matelot* or able seaman on the King's ship *Sceptre* under M. de Moutlouet. He returned to merchant shipping with a voyage to Guinea on the *Rubi* in March 1751 and then made two voyages to Louisbourg (Nova Scotia) on the *Hirondelle* in 1753 and 1754. After another voyage to Guinea on the *Perle*, he joined the *Eclair* on 16 June 1758.

Under Jean-François Trobriand de Keredern (1730–1799), Le Corre took part in anti-corsair operations on the Breton coast until 2 May 1758. He again served under Trobriand on the *Guirlande* in the observation of the movement of the British fleet at Plymouth. In August 1758 the *Guirlande* was pursued by three English vessels and captured after a spirited defence. Le Corre may have been repatriated with his commander in February 1759, but he does not re-appear in service records until October 1763.

In Saint-Malo, on 7 January 1766, holding the rank of *capitaine de vaisseau*, he married Augustine Guyot, daughter of Alexandre Guyot and Marie Seigneurie. After a brief voyage to Marseilles on the *Sainte*

*Marie* in the same month, he joined the *Boudeuse* commanded by Louis-Antoine, comte de Bougainville (1729–1811). Bougainville's second-in-command, Nicolas Pierre Duclos-Guyot was a relative of his new bride and appears to have been a witness at his wedding. Under Bougainville, Le Corre circumnavigated the globe as an *officier bleu* (non-noble "officer of the blue" distinguished by the colour of their uniform) and effectively reached the fringes of Australia's Great Barrier Reef. He returned to Saint-Malo on 16 March 1769 and took leave on 25 March 1769.

A capable officer, Bougainville nominated him for the rank of *capitaine de flûte*, but the Intendant of Brest vetoed the appointment on the grounds that Le Corre's four naval campaigns constituted insufficient experience. With regard to his many years in the merchant marine the intendant wrote: "It is true that he has made eleven [voyages] in merchant vessels, but the pecuniary advantages of this sort of navigation are compensation for the preferences given to those in the King's service".<sup>2</sup> (This was a reference to the preference given to aristocrats in the officer corps—"unsullied" by bourgeois commerce.) Given this kind of aristocratic prejudice, the navy must have held little attraction for him. He appears to have arrived at the Isle de France (Mauritius) in 1770 and was almost certainly the same Le Corre who served as "Second Captain" on the 16-gun, 700-ton *flûte Marquis de Castries*<sup>3</sup> under the young and inexperienced aristocrat Ambroise Bernard Le Jar du Clesmeur (born 1751)<sup>4</sup> in the expedition organized and commanded by Marc-Joseph Marion Dufresne (1724–1772). In company with the *Mascarin*, the *Marquis de Castries* departed the Isle de France on 18 October 1771. Marion's expedition discovered the most westerly islands in the Indian Ocean—the Prince Edward Group and the Crozet Archipelago—and was the first after Abel Tasman's (c1603–1659) to reach Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania).<sup>5</sup> It also brought back the first description of the island's indigenous inhabitants and, tragically, was responsible for the first European killing of a Tasmanian Aborigine.

Given du Clesmeur's lack of experience, Le Corre must have had an important but difficult role in the day-to-day sailing of the *Marquis de Castries*. Perhaps reluctant to give him any credit, du Clesmeur makes no mention of him in his journal. After Marion's murder in New Zealand's Bay of Islands, Le Corre and the other surviving crewmembers returned to the Isle de France, via Guam and Manila, on 8

April 1773 and then made their way back to France. In command of the *Confiance*, he returned to the Isle de France on 20 January 1777 and made several other trading voyages in the Indian Ocean between 1777 and 1780. He died at La Moutonnerie in Saint-Servan, Brittany, on 23 August 1785.<sup>6</sup>

Seventeen years later, Josselin Le Corre's son, Alexandre, commanded a pioneering trading expedition from the Isle de France to New Holland in 1802. Alexandre was born in Saint-Malo on 6 October 1766, two months before his father departed with Bougainville. Perhaps inspired by his father's talk of the Isle de France, he settled there in 1790 after a voyage from Indo-China on the *Saigon*. The following year he married a local girl, Jeanne Laurence Legrand,<sup>7</sup> in Port-Louis and settled down to a career in vessels engaged in the island trade. It was during the Peace of Amiens, that brief lull in the middle of the Napoleonic Wars, that Le Corre was given command of the 90-ton Bordeaux-built *Entreprise* (owned by the merchant Pierre François Roussel) and fitted out at the Isle de France.<sup>8</sup> The idea was to profit from the cessation in fighting and forge new trading links; he undertook to sail with a crew of twelve men and an American supercargo named Cogswell<sup>9</sup> to the previously hostile British colony of Port Jackson in order to sell provisions. On the way, however, the *Entreprise* was savaged by a violent storm which did much damage to her sails and bulwarks. She reached Port Jackson on 9 September 1802 and the authorities mistakenly registered her as the *Surprise*. No doubt her arrival was a surprise!

Le Corre was grudgingly given permission to sell as much of his cargo in Port Jackson as was necessary to pay for repairs. This amounted to about a third of his cargo of 180 gallons of spirits and half of his lading of 400 gallons of wine. He then asked for permission to go sealing in Bass Strait. Governor Philip Gidley King (1758–1808), ever suspicious of French ambitions, flatly refused him. Apparently facing financial disaster, Le Corre managed to secure the intercession of Nicolas Baudin (1754–1803) whose battered expedition was also visiting Port Jackson at the time. King finally relented on the condition that permission would not be given again and that the sealing would be confined to the Two Sisters in the Furneaux Group which offered no permanent anchorage.

Le Corre sailed south, on 4 October, to try his luck in these inhospitable waters of Bass Strait. On 27 October 1802, after a week off the Sisters, he was surprised by a storm and the *Entreprise* was

wrecked,<sup>10</sup> according to Nicolas Baudin, "while anchored in the foul bay on the east side of these islands".<sup>11</sup> Le Corre and five other members of the crew drowned. The American Cogswell managed to gain the help of the sealing schooner *Endeavour*. While he went to Sydney for assistance, the rest of the survivors continued sealing. Baudin and his expedition, on their way to King Island, encountered the *Endeavour* on 20 November. After learning of the fate of the *Entreprise* and her captain, Baudin wrote in his journal: "We were all sorry for the loss of Captain le Core, whom we had known at Port Jackson and whose company was extremely pleasant."<sup>12</sup> However, when Governor King learned of the loss of the *Entreprise*, he expressed no remorse for the terrible danger he had imposed on Le Corre, and was even happy enough to write to Lord Bathurst suggesting that Le Corre's fate might stop "more adventurers" from the Isle de France.

In Sydney, the American Cogswell reached an agreement with Henry Kable and James Underwood to attempt to salvage the *Entreprise* and to bring her crew to safety. On 12 March 1803, the *Sydney Gazette* reported that "From the position, and shattered state in which the hull [. . .] was found, it was conjectured the tempestuous weather [. . .] had so powerfully operated upon her as to render an attempt to restore her useless." Nevertheless, the *Entreprise* was stripped of all salvageable cargo and usable gear (including sails, rigging, muskets and 4-lb guns) which was eventually auctioned by Simeon Lord (1771-1840) in Sydney, in mid-March. So ended the first trading expedition to Australia, mounted from Mauritius.<sup>13</sup> To Governor King's annoyance, however, the following July another Mauritian trading vessel, commanded by Louis Charles Ruault Coutance (1763-1810), with a crew of twenty-two men, arrived at Port Jackson.<sup>14</sup>

Alexandre Le Corre was survived by his wife Jeanne and two sons Adolphe (later treasurer of the municipality of Port-Louis) and Timoléon.<sup>15</sup> The exact location of the wreck of the *Entreprise*, off the Two Sisters, remains unknown.

*Sylvania, New South Wales*

Notes

1. Registre de l'état civil de la commune de Fréhel, section Pléherel.
2. Cited by J. Aman in *Les officiers bleus dans la marine française au XVIIIe siècle*, Geneva, Librairie Droz, 1976, p. 109, cf. 32.
3. In the muster-roll of the *Marquis de Castries* (Archives Nationales, Marine b<sup>4</sup> 317 pièce 56) Le Corre's first name is not given. I have not come across any other Le Corre with the same rank in French records.
4. E. Duyker, "Du Clesmeur, Ambroise Bernard le Jar (1751-c1810)", *Dictionnaire de biographie mauricienne*, n° 47, janvier 1992, pp. 1447-1448.
5. Edward Duyker (ed.) *The Discovery of Tasmania: Journal Extracts from the Expeditions of Abel Janszoon Tasman and Marc-Joseph Marion Dufresne 1642 and 1772*, Hobart, St David's Park Publishing, 1992.
6. Etat de Service, Archives Nationales C<sup>7</sup> 175 & Archives Municipales, Saint-Malo.
7. Daughter of Jean René Legrand and Jeanne Renée Blanchard.
8. A. Toussaint, "Lecorre, Alexandre Josselin (1766-1802)", *Dictionnaire de biographie mauricienne*, n° 38, janvier 1982, p. 1137.
9. Almost certainly Nathaniel Cogswell; see N. Wace & B. Lovett, *Yankee Maritime Activities and the Early History of Australia*, Canberra, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1973, pp. 60 and 101.
10. J. S. Cumpston, *First Visitors to Bass Strait*, Canberra, Roebuck, 1973, pp. 15-17.
11. *The Journal of Post Captain Nicolas Baudin [ . . . ]* (translated from the French by Christine Cornell), Adelaide, 1974, p. 427.
12. Loc. cit.
13. J. S. Cumpston, op. cit.
14. E. Duyker, "Coutance and the Voyage of the *Adèle*", *Explorations*, n° 4, March 1987, pp. 21-25; see also E. Duyker, *Of the Star and the Key: Mauritius, Mauritians and Australia*, Sylvania, Australian Mauritian Research Group, 1988, pp. 12-15.
15. G. Sarré, "Recueil de renseignements généalogiques sur les familles de l'île Maurice", typescript, circa 1944.