

BOOK REVIEWS

Alexander Massov and Lena Govor, *Rossiiskie moryaki i puteshestvenniki v Avstralii* [Russian Sailors and Travellers in Australia], Moscow, Nauka, 1993. ISBN 5 02 017384 3. [Reviewed from translated extracts.]

Rossiiskie moryaki i puteshestvenniki v Avstralii [Russian Sailors and Travellers in Australia] is a major work on a subject which has been largely ignored in Australia. The coverage is extensive from the early nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. It is essentially an anthology of primary sources—both published and unpublished—with a general introduction and short sectional introductions. It was published in Russia in 1993 with the financial assistance of the Australian Embassy in Moscow.

The collection provides a very valuable background for our understanding of the history of relations between Russia and Australia. When one considers how much of our nineteenth-century military architecture resulted from fear of Czarist Russian ambitions in the region, it is amazing that it has taken so long for scholars to assemble a collection which for the first time documents the actual nature of Russian contact with this continent. The account of the forged Russian orders which were published by the *Melbourne Age* in February 1882 and which alleged that the Russians intended to capture the city is a particularly interesting example of the hysteria associated with Australian colonial perceptions. Significantly a French-born chemist named Henri de Beaumont (born 1831) was the prime instigator of this farce.

Apparently a fugitive convict from New Caledonia, Henri de Beaumont, passing himself off as the "Comte" de Beaumont, arrived in Melbourne in 1880 on the steamship *City of Melbourne*. He initially gained ready acceptance in polite Melbourne society, but was arrested for jewellery theft and received a sentence of hard labour in Pentridge. On his release from gaol on 28 January 1882, he posed as a Mr Bryant and attempted to sell Admiral Aslanbegov, of the visiting Russian cruiser *Afrika*, plans for a new torpedo for 5000 roubles. He also requested that he might be allowed to enter the Okhrana (the Russian Secret Service) to spy on nihilists! Unhappy at being spurned by Aslanbegov (who quickly suspected him of being French rather than English and telegraphed his superiors over the matter), Beaumont determined on revenge by presenting the *Age* with a forged secret dispatch implicating the Russians in a planned act of war.

Although the document was treated as a clumsy forgery by other newspapers, Aslanbegov wrote to the Governor of Victoria, the Marquess of Normanby, demanding action be taken over the slander. But unwilling to remain in Victoria if the matter was prosecuted in the courts, Aslanbegov eventually accepted official apologies for the incident and departed from the colony. No doubt to the acute embarrassment of the *Age*, the *Argus* thoroughly investigated the incident and published details of Beaumont's record on 30 March, 1882.

At times the Russians were amused by the misconceptions of their Australian hosts and played up to them with entertaining results. The story of a colonial miss (who believed the Russians ate tallow candles and went hungry at a ball given by them) is a good example. The Russians had their own misconceptions too. I could not help laughing at the Russian who complained of being unarmed in the bush except for a stick to protect him from the kangaroos!

The extract from A. L. Yashchenko's book *A Journey Around Australia*, provides interesting references to yet another Frenchman with aristocratic pretensions. Georges de Pienes, station manager at Hergott Springs, represented himself to Yashchenko as the "Vicomte de Pierre". He was found to be no savant and uncomfortable with the democratic ways of South Australia, but nevertheless a useful informant on the local Aborigines.

This is an important new work which will be "mined" by Australian scholars in many different ways.

Edward Duyker

Sylvania, New South Wales

R. E. R. Banks, B. Elliott, J. G. Hawkes, et al., *Sir Joseph Banks: A Global Perspective*, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 1994, 235 pp., illustrations, notes, index, £12.95. ISBN 0 947643 61 3.

This book contains edited transcripts from a conference hosted by the Royal Society, in April 1993, to coincide with the 250th anniversary of the birth of Sir Joseph Banks. Although one would not readily expect such a conference to elicit much of French-Australian cultural interest, the papers do in fact contain some valuable observations on Banks's

relations with French scientists and French natural history collectors in Australia. Maurice Crosland's essay, "Anglo-Continental Scientific Relations, c.1780–c.1820, with Special Reference to the Correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks", largely focuses on French and francophone Swiss connections. Georges Métaillé offers a French perspective on acclimatization and the role of botanic gardens in his essay "Sir Joseph Banks—An Asian Policy?". I was particularly interested to learn of the assistance Banks gave those attempting to grow tea in Corsica. As Métaillé puts it, "if France did not become one of the main tea producers, this cannot be attributed to the lack of goodwill of an eminent English gentleman". In Glyndwr Williams's paper on Banks, exploration and empire, I was equally surprised to learn that Banks despised Charles Louis l'Héritier de Brutelle (the man who named our genus *Eucalyptus*), declaring in 1786: "Of all the impudent Frenchmen in the whole world, he is the most impertinent and dangerous".

Banks is often referred to as the "Father of Australia", yet in recent years historical analysis of the events and motives which led to the British settlement of New South Wales in 1788 has prompted a significant reassessment. Simplistic notions that Australia was colonized as a convict dumping-ground in desperate response to Britain's loss of her American colonies have receded into the realm of mythology. I was glad to see a contribution by Australia's Alan Frost, "The Planting of New South Wales: Sir Joseph Banks and the Creation of an Antipodean Europe", expanding on some of the themes he examined in his pioneering study *Convicts and Empire*. And given my well-known interest in the Mauritian contribution to this country's development, I was delighted to read the second last sentence in Frost's paper. In reviewing the introduction of cultivable species in Australia, he writes: "Many of the species—appropriately tropical and subtropical varieties from South America, Africa, India, the East Indies and Pacific—that underwrote the occupation of northern Australia came from a nursery established at Rockhampton in the 1860s by Antheleme Thozet, a migrant from Mauritius".

Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle du Havre, *Les Velins de Charles-Alexandre Lesueur*, Exposition du 4 mai au 2 juin 1996 à l'Espace Claude Monet, 76310 Sainte-Adresse, organisée par la Municipalité de Sainte-Adresse et le Muséum du Havre. Distributed in Australia by Jean-Louis Boglio, P.O. Box 72, Currumbin, Qld 4223. \$45 plus postage.

The life of Charles-Alexandre Lesueur (1778–1846) is intimately associated with Le Havre. He was born and educated there, served in the Garde Nationale there and for the last few months of his life was the curator of the recently created Le Havre Museum. Despite this, he spent much of his life far from his birthplace.

When Baudin's expedition to Australia was outfitted in Le Havre, Lesueur was attracted by the prospect of adventure in southern waters and enlisted as an assistant gunner, 4th class. But when the expedition's artists deserted in Mauritius, Lesueur took on the task of illustrating the natural history collections of the expedition. He accomplished his new role with remarkable virtuosity and gave valuable assistance to the naturalist François Péron in gathering more than 180,000 specimens. Later he assisted Péron in publishing an account of the voyage. Faced with the loss of his imperial pension, in 1816 he accompanied William Maclure (1763–1840) on a scientific expedition to the West Indies and the United States. In 1825 he participated in Robert Owen's ill-fated utopian experiment at New Harmony, Indiana.

This catalogue is of an exhibition of his vellums executed during his voyage with Baudin. It comprises fauna of Australia (plates 1–9), Timor (plates 10–14), Madagascar (plates 15–21) and South Africa (22–26), together with a number of marine invertebrates (27–40). The forty plates are beautifully produced, although there is the same bluish tint which characterized Jacqueline Bonnemain's, Elliott Forsyth's and Bernard Smith's *Baudin in Australian Waters: The Artwork of the French Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Lands 1800–1804*, published in 1988. Nevertheless, this elegant catalogue is a fine tribute to this important natural history artist in a year which marks the 150th anniversary of his death.

Colin Forster, *France and Botany Bay: The Lure of a Penal Colony*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1996.

In 1852 France began transportation of convicts to French Guiana and in 1863 to New Caledonia. Colin Forster examines the manner in which French perceptions of Britain's experience of convict transportation to her Australian colonies shaped arguments for and against the establishment of a French "Botany Bay". His work is a valuable study of French views of the nascent Australian colonies in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries and of French contributions to early Australian historiography.

Aside from clearly demonstrating the bearing Australian history had on French policy making, Colin Forster's study is also a valuable addition to the history of penology. There is much for an Australian reader to take note of. At a time when we are questioning the celebration of our National Day on 26 January, one cannot help but be startled by the grand opening statement of chapter VII of Ernest de Blosseville's book *Histoire des colonies pénales*, published in 1831: "The 26th of January should be inscribed with honour in the annals of civilisation". Forster reveals that one of the greatest French poets of the same era, Alphonse de Lamartine, also saw the Australian example as a moral and economic triumph. Yet, Tocqueville, one of the great political analysts of the nineteenth century, condemned the convict system in Australia: "Can it be that in the nineteenth century, and in a nation in the van of civilisation, men are made to submit to treatment worthy of savage countries and barbarous times?" Appalled by the régime of the lash and the prospect of the establishment of a French penal colony, he rejected outright any penal code "based on blood and torture".

Although I have been able to give ready reference to great and familiar names such as Lamartine and Tocqueville, one disconcerting aspect of Forster's work is the number of names that are mentioned without explanation. The author dissects political debates, naming speakers and authors as he proceeds, but the reader is often left wondering who on French earth are Charlret-Durieu, M. Quentin (a Lieutenant-Colonel according to the index), Laisné de Villevesque, Delpon, Podenas, Odillon Barrot and François Maugin? What were their constituencies and political allegiances? What kind of analysis could we make of our own Hansard reports without such information? In

some cases the footnotes offer some tantalizing clues. In discussing Comte François Barbé-Marbois's views there is a reference to a full-length biography (E. Wilson Lyons, *The Man Who Sold Louisiana: The Career of François Barbé-Marbois*, University of Oklahoma, 1942), but rich ore is left unmined. We learn very little of the life of Ernest de Blossville or the genesis of his pivotal book *Histoire des colonies pénales*. The same can be said for Jules de la Pilorgerie, author of *Histoire de Botany Bay*.

In recent years historical analysis of the events and motives which led to the British settlement of New South Wales in 1788 have undergone a significant reassessment. We now know that Botany Bay was to be a strategic outlier for the Royal Navy in order to help defend Britain's growing eastern trade. In the two sections of this book dealing with the role of the French navy, I expected to see broader discussion of French strategic thinking and the role that a penal colony might play. I was disappointed. But this is not a pretentious work (it is an easy 200-page read including the notes, bibliography and index). Its shortcomings are minor and it remains an important historical contribution—complemented with charming early Australian images from refreshingly different French sources.

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