

NAPOLEONIC TOPONYMY IN AUSTRALIA

Frank Horner's account of the Baudin expedition, *The French Reconnaissance - Baudin in Australia 1801-1803*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1987 (reviewed by Dr Edward Duyker in *Explorations* No. 6, September 1998), is the indispensable source for the story of the directly or indirectly Napoleonic place names which formed a very minor proportion of the total of French names attributed by Baudin himself, or later by Péron or Louis de Freycinet, the successive compilers of the report of the expedition, to various geographical features in Australia.

Bound up with the story of these names and their ultimate survival or abandonment is that of British suspicions of covert territorial purposes of the ostensibly scientific expedition which some of the namings seemed to indicate. This was at a time when rival nations, even if at war, recognised the neutrality and rights of circulation of ships engaged in peaceful pursuits. Such suspicions were exacerbated by the fact that Baudin and Matthew Flinders, who were actually to meet at Encounter Bay, exchange information and leave one another on the best of terms, had both covered some stretches of southern coastline and left names along it, while other parts of it had already been mapped by other British navigators. Worse still, it was believed for many years that Péron and Freycinet had had the benefit of Flinders' maps and charts, allegedly purloined from him during his long detention at the Ile de France (Mauritius) on his way home to England. Completing the work of some predecessors, Horner shows conclusively that this did not happen and could not possibly have happened.

While Baudin had naturally been keen to honour the instigator and patron of his expedition, the British understandably saw matters with a different eye, particularly after Napoleon's abdication in 1814 and ultimate defeat at Waterloo in 1815.

It was already in 1807 a great surprise for Flinders to learn that the first volume of the official report of the Baudin expedition contained the name *Terre Napoléon* for the coastline and the territory behind it stretching from Westernport to islands off present-day Ceduna, with his Kangaroo Island named *Ile Decrès*, his Spencer Gulf as *Golfe Bonaparte* and his St Vincent Gulf as *Golfe Joséphine*. This last was to prove an embarrassment to

Freycinet “ ... when Napoleon had divorced Josephine in 1810, too late for the engraver to change *Golfe Joséphine* to *Golfe Marie-Louise* in the atlases of 1811 and ‘1812’.” (Homer, p. 14) There was even greater embarrassment when the atlas of ‘1812’ actually appeared in 1814, with Napoleon already on Elba and the whole Napoleonic adventure, and with it, the pseudo-Empire and pseudo-nobility, apparently at an end.

However, some Napoleonic nomenclature has survived, most notably on parts of the Australian coastline where Baudin could be considered to have had legitimate prior claim to naming rights. The most important of these is the Bonaparte Archipelago, included in which are the d’Arcole Islands, named in memory of Napoleon’s victory against the Austrians in Italy at Arcola in 1796. Similar reminders may be found with the Rivoli Islands, further south off Exmouth Gulf, named after another victory against the Austrians at Rivoli in 1797, while further to the north, beyond Barrow Island are the Montebello Islands, named after the victory over the Austrians with Lannes in command at Montebello in 1800¹

Lannes is also remembered through the present Cape Lannes in South Australia, although this is not the same cape to which Freycinet gave that name (see Homer, p. 15). Other generals of Napoleon are remembered on the South Australian coast through Massena Bay and Murat Bay, within Denial Bay. *Cap Murat* did not survive as the name for North West Cape, but the man himself, a brother-in-law to Napoleon, whose sister Caroline he married in 1800, was destined for great nobiliary rank, first as Duc de Rivoli (see above) and Prince d’Essling, after yet another Napoleonic victory, then from 1808 as King of Naples. After the downfall of Napoleon he failed to realise that this dynastic game was up and paid with his life for a rash attempt to reclaim part of his kingdom.

Finally, off the very end of Western Australia’s northern coastline, where it joins that of the Northern Territory, is Joseph Bonaparte Gulf, named after Napoleon’s elder brother who was to become King of Naples in 1806 and then apparently hand this kingdom to his brother-in-law in 1808 to become King of Spain until 1813.

To put the importance of the Napoleonic place names still extant from the Baudin expedition into perspective, it must be stressed firstly that they represent a tiny minority of the total of French names arising from this expedition, and an even smaller one from the totality of French expeditions. Secondly, some of these names belong to uninhabited islands

or to geographical features so insignificant that they are only to be found in maps of a scale and detail far beyond that of standard atlases.

After the downfall of Napoleon there would have been little incentive for his name to be perpetuated in Australia, although the presence of Frenchmen or French Canadians on the gold-fields could lead to use of the name. There was a Napoleon's Gully near Bendigo, while near Eldorado in the Beechworth area a site worked by French Canadians was called "Napoleon's". While both these uses may well have referred to Napoleon III, there is no doubt that in the following case Napoleon I is involved. To this day there is a small town called Napoleons 13 km south of Ballarat; this was originally named Napoleon's Lead, after a seam of gold discovered in 1856, apparently by a miner who was nicknamed Napoleon because he was portly and dignified.² Thus have the mighty fallen, but the story goes that it is still illegal in France to call one's dog Napoleon.

NOTES

¹ Richard and Barbara Appleton in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Australian Place Names*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 197, state that the Montebello Islands were named by Nicolas Baudin in 1802 after the Duke of Montebello, one of Napoleon's marshals. In fact, it was only after Napoleon crowned himself as Emperor in 1804 and subsequently completed the imperial charade with the creation of an aristocracy, that he named Lannes the Duc de Montebello. Baudin died at Ile de France on 16 September 1803.

² See Les Blake, *Place Names of Victoria*, Adelaide: Rigby, 1977, p. 198.

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