

BOOK REVIEWS

Marc Serge Rivière (translator & editor), *The Governor's Noble Guest: Hyacinthe de Bougainville's Account of Port Jackson, 1825*, Melbourne, The Miegunyah Press (an imprint of Melbourne University Press), 1999, pp 291, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, ISBN 0 522 84852 4.

Hyacinthe de Bougainville (1781-1846) always had a hard act to follow. His father was Louis-Antoine de Bougainville (1729-1811), the commander of the first French circumnavigation of the globe. Bougainville fils entered the navy in 1799 and the following year joined Nicolas Baudin's expedition as a midshipman on the *Géographe*. What might have been a springboard to glory, proved otherwise. As a result of repeated clashes with his commander, Hyacinthe sought voluntary repatriation from Port Jackson on the *Naturaliste* in 1803. Baudin's uncomplimentary report on his young subordinate might have destroyed his prospects in the navy, had his famous father not intervened on his behalf. After the collapse of the Peace of Amiens, Hyacinthe rose steadily through the ranks. He commanded a succession of corvettes and frigates - when not serving as a senior officer on larger men-of-war or languishing as a prisoner of the British (1814). In 1811 he was made a baron of the Empire, but was also decorated under the Bourbon Restoration. In 1824 he was given command of an expedition which visited Bourbon (La Réunion), Pondicherry, Manila, Macau, Surabaya, Port Jackson (Sydney) and Valparaiso in two vessels: the *Thétis* and the *Espérance*. Although Bougainville was expected to conduct hydrographic research during the voyage, his mission was not one of exploration, rather it was one of political, strategic and mercantile reportage. A decade after Waterloo, a more confident, commercially expansionist, France wished to show the flag, seek-out trading opportunities and gather intelligence in case of any future war.

This book marries Bougainville's private diaries kept during his return visit to New South Wales in 1825, with extracts on Port Jackson from the published *Journal de la navigation autour du globe* (1837). The former are part of the Bougainville family archives now held in the Archives Nationales in Paris. Among the appendices, Professor Rivière has included a detailed list of Bougainville's papers on Australia, his Port Jackson journal of 1802 and his confidential report on the colony's defences.

Although Professor Rivière's translation is praiseworthy, his explanatory annotations are at times frustrating. Historical translation often requires a grounding in numerous fields. It is sometimes difficult for historians and translators to secure the range of expertise required for a particular project.

Nevertheless, there is no substitute for meticulous checking. Popular reference works such as Frances Bodkin's *Encyclopaedia Botanica* (1986), cited by Professor Rivière, should be used with caution. Tasmania's majestic Huon pine (famed as a timber for shipbuilding) has not been included in the genus *Dacrydium* (p. 52) for nearly twenty years; rather it is a member of the restricted genus *Lagarostrobos*. The grass tree used by Australian Aborigines to make spear shafts (p. 98) and as a source of resin to 'fix the points of spears' (p. 195) was the *Xanthorrhoea*. It can even be seen in Joseph Lycett's illustration on the dust-jacket of this book. Professor Rivière's square-bracketed textual inclusion, *Dracophyllum milliganii*, a member of the *Epacridaceae* family found only in Tasmania, is a serious ethnographic and botanical mistake. There are others. The 'white-coloured myrtle' in the botanic gardens (page 65) is unlikely to have been *Melaleuca acuminata*, since this species was first collected many years later. Indeed the botanist who described it, Ferdinand von Mueller, was born in the same year Bougainville visited Port Jackson.

While Professor Rivière makes admirable use of familiar Australian biographical sources, his textual notes lack symmetry with regard to French sources: I was very surprised to see no explanation, for the general reader, of significant French scientific figures such as André Thouin (after whom a bay is named in Tasmania) and Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. They could have been easily had from the *Dictionnaire de biographie française*. Furthermore, biographical details of Bougainville's officers would have been readily accessible among the dossiers of the *Service Historique de la Marine*.

Despite its editorial omissions and errors, *The Governor's Noble Guest* is yet another beautifully produced Miegunyah book complemented by a fine selection of illustrations. Like Professor Rivière's earlier translations, it will undoubtedly prove a valuable historical resource, making accessible much candid material on familiar names in early Australian history, such as Governor Brisbane, Nicholas Rossi, John Macarthur, Samuel Marsden, John Piper, Allan Cunningham and many others. Furthermore, it offers valuable descriptions of early Parramatta, Windsor, Liverpool, the Blue Mountains, Cow Pastures and Emu Plains. From his narrative, Hyacinthe de Bougainville emerges as a thoroughly likable and erudite individual who very much left his heart in Sydney.

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*This is a revised version of a review first published in the *Northern Mariner*.

Dominick LaCapra, *History and Reading: Tocqueville, Foucault, French Studies*, Melbourne, MUP, pp. 246, ISBN 0 522 84913 X, \$21.95.

This curious book, the blurb tells us, “offers Australian readers a sophisticated guide as to how to combine textual analysis with the practices of the traditional historian.” Sophisticated, Yes. Guide, no. History and Reading is in no wise addressed to Australians. Rather it addresses historians of France and students of French literature and culture. It seeks ultimately to demonstrate that all of us, historians and *littérateurs*, could and should work together on “French Studies”, by which LaCapra means a highly sophisticated, modern if not deconstructionist reading of French texts in context. It is a curious project.

LaCapra seeks to compare Tocqueville, especially *L’Ancien Régime*, with Foucault’s *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique: folie et déraison* (translated as *Madness and Civilisation*). This comparison in turn grounds his analysis of “French Studies”. To justify this project, he provides a long first chapter (there are only four) on “History, Reading and Critical Theory”. Here he seeks to show that modern, heavily theorised practices of “reading” are required for the historian. Then he explains the different practices, spending most of his time on “deconstructive reading” (pp. 38-52). These pages will be of interest to practitioners, but they won’t help those who are not yet comfortable with the approach. LaCapra also discusses “redemptive reading”, by which he means reading that, instead of teasing texts open to show they don’t mean what they are meant to mean, teases them open to find how trauma and terror have already occurred and that we can, by confronting them, live in more satisfaction if not true redemption. LaCapra concludes by emphasising “dialogic reading”, of which he is the main advocate. By this he means reading that not only opens the text, as does deconstruction, but also opens the context.

LaCapra is now ready to take us on a “reading” of Tocqueville. But here he does not bring so much intellectual firepower to bear. He notes Tocqueville’s racist assumptions, widely shared by nineteenth-century Europeans, even the most “liberal” in the US sense. He cites Tocqueville’s acceptance of repression in Algeria and the US: he accepted that “when the side that has the physical force has intellectual superiority too, it is rare for the conquered to become civilized; they either withdraw or are destroyed” (p. 96). But he excuses this, curiously, since he thinks it is distinct from “biologistic racism of the sort found in Gobineau”, bound up with “a cultural ... racism closely bound up with a theory of stages of civilization” (pp. 94-5). This is disingenuous. Gobineau got his start as Tocqueville’s private secretary. What separates them is not that Gobineau was more biologistic, but that he was more pessimistic: his narrative is one of

decline, while Tocqueville's and other liberals' was one of rise. My point here, however, is that LaCapra's dialogic reading doesn't get us beyond what other commentators have achieved with Tocqueville.

The long third chapter offers a "rereading" of Foucault's *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. The master's first influential book remains, in my view, the best introduction to his work. While it has a playful, teasing style, it offers an analysis of the "age of reason" that remains fresh. Foucault seeks to show how "dividing practices", especially between "folie et déraison", laid the intellectual foundations of the Enlightenment. For those concerned with the derailment of the Enlightenment project of the twentieth century, Foucault's work shows how the repression and exclusion of all that was not reason left us with a limited view of the world. In these terms, there is much to be said of Foucault's work.

LaCapra, however, operates here on a highly socialised level. His reading is not a discussion of what we might read from Foucault's work, but of the strategies Foucault there deployed (to use a Foucauldian term). This will be of interest to the specialist, for LaCapra brings a staggering breadth of reading and understanding of the issues to his analysis. But it won't be of interest to the ordinary historian or *littérateur*.

This is a pity, because the point that LaCapra is coming to in the fourth and final chapter is an important one. He would like all those involved in issues of French culture to build on the immense renaissance of critical theory that came out of France, beginning alongside the New Novel and New Wave cinema, but continuing on into the 1980s. He would like us to make the reading and teaching of this work a central concern, a focal point for dialogue and a method to redeem our areas from empiricism and come from behind to challenge the glib, Anglo-American based cultural studies practitioners, who have wrenched the French thinkers from their context and offer them as Fast Culture.

Unfortunately, however, LaCapra does not offer much here that we can take hold of. The book so far has not produced anything from the confrontation of Tocqueville and Foucault; indeed, LaCapra has not really confronted them. And here LaCapra, while making some interesting points about the institutional positions of practitioners in the first part of the chapter, is reduced to three worn if not threadbare ideas. "First is the important movement or turn from the French to the francophone" (p. 190). Australians might feel that we have been doing this as much as our limited resources allow. Certainly there are more Australian than American students in New Caledonia. And we are not behind in teaching, say Tahar Ben Jelloun. "A second challenge is to come more cogently to terms with the demands of cross-disciplinarity that cannot be reduced to mere

interdisciplinarity” (p. 192). Yes, to be sure. “A third challenge involves the movement or expansion of the field of interest from literature to culture, society, and history” (p. 193). Again, yes, but this is obviously addressed to my beleaguered friends in French departments. It doesn’t address the problem of how this is to be done in French, after the hard yakka of learning French or, if it is to be done in English, how we settle territorial disputes between, say, French and History Departments, compounded as they are by rigid budgetary compartmentalisation, especially when only penury is budgeted.

I don’t wish to denigrate the intense thought, reading and analysis found in this book. But I do question its focus and its relevance to the actual difficulties we face in a leaner, meaner university and in a world where American English is becoming not just a lingua franca but an exclusion of other languages if not an obliteration of other cultures. Reading LaCapra, I felt a bit like a digger reporting from the trenches and being lectured by, say, Charles de Gaulle at his most eloquent. The lecture is timely, but it should be addressed to our generals. But they wouldn’t get through a page of LaCapra’s dense text. And there we are, back where we started.

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