

## BOOK REVIEWS

John Dunmore, *Monsieur Baret: First Woman Around the World, 1766–68*, Auckland, Heritage Press Limited, 2002, 198 pp., map, notes, bibliography, index, paperback \$25. ISBN 0 908708 54 8.

This book is a biography of Jeanne Baret, who disguised herself as a man and accompanied the naturalist Philibert Commerson on Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's major voyage of exploration (1766–1768). Although Baret left the expedition at the Isle de France (Mauritius), after Commerson's death she married a soldier named Jean Dubernat and around 1775 returned to France, thereby becoming the first woman known to have circled the globe.

Professor John Dunmore is a well-known authority on French exploration in the Pacific and has recently translated Bougainville's journal for the Hakluyt Society, so this biography has greater depth than one would expect given the paucity of information about Baret's life. Born the daughter of a farm labourer in Autun (Burgundy) in July 1740, by the age of 24 Jeanne was already Commerson's housekeeper. The naturalist was then a doctor in the town of Toulon-sur-Arroux, some 30 kilometres south of Autun and needed someone to care for his infant son Archambaud after his wife died in childbirth. By August 1764, however, Jeanne herself was five months pregnant and—presumably to avoid the scandal—Commerson was forced to move to Paris with her. He left Archambaud in the care of his brother-in-law, the parish priest, and never saw his son again. Jeanne also bore a son, Jean-Pierre, but he died a few months after being fostered. When Commerson was offered the opportunity to join Bougainville's expedition as a naturalist, he at first thought of leaving Jeanne (who had assumed the name of Madame Bonnefoy) in charge of his Paris apartment and possessions. Instead she joined the expedition in male guise.

Jeanne Baret never set foot on Australian soil, but she did reach the coral fringes of the Great Barrier Reef and witnessed Bougainville's important discoveries in the Solomons and in New Guinea waters. As Commerson's servant she rendered important assistance during the natural history investigations of the voyage: undertaking arduous inland treks, carrying musket, game bag, provisions and collecting specimens (perhaps even the famous *Bougainvillea*). Maintaining her assumed identity was not easy. She had to perform bodily functions with discretion and could never strip to the waist in front of the crew. Although she initially allayed the suspicions of the officers by asserting she was a eunuch, there were always

doubts about her story. The Polynesians, however, appear to have had no such uncertainties about her gender and she faced unwelcome advances in Tahiti. Ultimately she was brutally set upon and examined by a number of the other domestic servants aboard the expedition. Though she faced catcalls and suitors, the unmasking was perhaps a blessing: the tight bandaging of her breasts, in the humidity and heat of the tropics, had led to a distressing skin infection. She continued to dress as a man, but never compromised Commerson by admitting to a relationship with the naturalist prior to the expedition. For his part, Commerson made substantial provisions for Jeanne in his will, which she eventually succeeded in having honoured.

Although Dunmore often has to speculate on events in his subject's life, he has made good use of the available primary and secondary sources. *Monsieur Baret* is an engaging account of a remarkable woman's life. I have to admit to sheer delight in discovering, close to the end of the book, that my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather was one of the witnesses at Baret's wedding in Mauritius.

*Edward Duyker*

*University of Sydney*

Watkin Tench, *Letters from Revolutionary France: Letters Written in France to a Friend in London, Between the Month of November 1794, and the Month of May 1795*, edited by Gavin Edwards, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2001, xxxviii + 186 pp., 7 plates (including map), introduction, chronology, notes, bibliography, appendices, index, paperback \$32.90. ISBN 0 7083 1692 1. Hardback \$65.90. ISBN 0 7083 1691 3. (Available in Australia from Eleanor Brasch Enterprises, P.O. Box 586, Artarmon, NSW, 2064; email: brasch2@aol.com.)

Captain of Marines Watkin Tench first learned of the outbreak of revolution in France when the Second Fleet brought belated reports to Port Jackson in June 1790. In his second book, *A Complete Account of the Settlement of Port Jackson* (London, 1793), he wrote: "The French revolution of 1789, with all the attendant circumstances of that wonderful and unexpected event, succeeded to amaze us." It would not be long before he would have time to observe and reflect on the course of the Revolution, post-Thermidor, as a prisoner of war in Brittany between 1794 and 1795. His experiences would form the basis for his third book, *Letters Written in France to a Friend in London*, published in 1796. While Tench's books on the expedition to Botany Bay and the establishment of the penal colony have been

republished in editions edited firstly by L. F. Fitzhardinge in 1979 and then by Tim Flannery in 1996, his epistolary work on France has, until now, not been republished except in the form of extracts. In marked contrast to Tim Flannery, who offered his readers a slender twelve-page introduction and no scholarly annotations or index, Gavin Edwards has done a superb editorial job. His erudite introduction places Tench's book in literary and political context and his meticulous annotations leave few personal names, terms or quotations unexplained. The bibliography is very useful and the whole work has been complemented by important appendices (especially Mary Wollstonecraft's review in the *Analytical Review* of September 1796), together with a detailed index.

Tench, a whiggish Protestant supporter of constitutional monarchy, admitted his sympathy for the initial democratic goals of 1789, but recoiled from the excesses of the Revolution. Despite his antagonism to Catholicism, he was affronted by the treatment of the clergy and the sacrilege he witnessed—including the enforced singing of *La Marseillaise* in church:

In the most solemn part of the service, the *Marsellois Hymn* was heard from the organ: that war-whoop, to whose sound the bands of regicides who attacked their sovereign in his palace marched; and which, during the last three years, has been the watch-word of violence, rapine and murder! How incongruous were its notes in the temple of the Prince of Peace!

Tench also considered the obligatory revolutionary forms of address—*citoyen* and *citoyenne*—boorish and degrading, and was offended by France's divorce laws, particularly the rights extended to women. Despite his conservative prejudices, however, Tench was often an astute and open-minded observer. On parole in Quimper, he was able to make numerous excursions into the countryside and was soon confronted with the cultural distinctiveness of Celtic Brittany:

These people are, indeed, a separate race from the body of the French, and have a language and customs of their own, to which they are tenaciously attached. I much lament that I cannot speak Welch [*sic*], although so many of my happier days have been passed in Wales. As to French, it is of no more use to me among these natives, at the distance of half a mile from the town, than if I were at Ispahan or Delhi.

Given the state of war at the time, Watkin Tench's *Letters* are a particularly valuable English-language record of life in France at a time of rapid political and social change. That the author was also a first-hand observer and chronicler of the foundations of the penal colony of New South Wales cannot escape the attentions of those interested in the history of French-Australian relations. Gavin Edwards deserves our thanks and congratulations for making Watkin Tench so marvellously accessible.

*Edward Duyker*

*University of Sydney*