

FRANK BENSON HORNER (1917–2004)

JANE SOUTHWOOD & EDWARD DUYKER

Dr Frank Horner was that rare individual: a statistician who in retirement abandoned figures for words and wrote two of the most elegant works on French–Australian history in the latter part of the twentieth century. At the age of seventy he emerged as the pre-eminent authority in Australia on the great French navigator, Nicolas Baudin.

Frank Benson Horner was born in Melbourne on 28 October 1917 into a talented family. His brother Arthur (born 1916) achieved fame as a syndicated political cartoonist and his brother Jack (born 1922) came to prominence as an author and advocate of Aboriginal rights. Frank studied for a Bachelor of Economics during evening classes at the University of Sydney, while employed by the New South Wales Bureau of Statistics, which he joined in 1935. He graduated in 1938 with First Class Honours in Economics and the University Medal. While at Sydney University he also joined the University Regiment, recounting proudly, years later, how he had floated a gun carriage across the Georges River during an exercise. It was perhaps a sign that he was destined to get his feet wet. When war broke out he was seconded to the Commonwealth Treasury as an adviser to the Secretary, but was eventually commissioned as a naval officer, serving mainly in New Guinea waters.

On Australia Day 1946 Frank married Patricia Gray, whom he had met at a party in Canberra in 1943 and whom he had courted by letter and during his shore leave. It was to prove a long and happy union, lasting 54 years, until Pat's death in 2000.

In 1946 Pat and Frank sailed to England on the SS *Waiwera* and Frank studied for his doctorate at the London School of Economics with the support of his pre-war Walter and Eliza Hall Research Fellowship, a Denison Miller Scholarship, and Pat. They returned to Australia in early 1949 and Frank developed a number of new fields of statistical analysis at the NSW Bureau of Statistics and Economics.

He then moved to Canberra in 1958 to work with Sir Stanley Carver, the Commonwealth Statistician. Between 1963 and 1965 he was Secretary of the Vernon Committee of Economic Enquiry, whose report he was primarily responsible for writing. Frank was known for his pioneering work in the introduction of social indicators to Australia and for his professional rigour.

On retirement Frank turned his attention to another great love—maritime history. Over a seven-year period he carried out meticulous and exacting research which resulted in his powerful vindication of Baudin and his expedition. His research was initially made possible by the existence in Australia of two important collections: the so-called Hélouis collection of documents pertaining to Baudin's expedition, made by Madame Robert Hélouis prior to and during the First World War at the instigation of Sir Ernest Scott, a copy of which is held in the National Library; and thirty-five reels of microfilmed copies of the French official archives on the Baudin expedition—including Baudin's *Journal de Mer*—assembled in the 1960s by Brian Baldwin for the Libraries Board of South Australia. These collections were rounded out by research Frank carried out in France.

Frank's book, *The French Reconnaissance: Baudin in Australia 1801–1803*, published by Melbourne University Press in 1987—the non-fiction selection for the Fellowship of Australian Writers' Barbara Ramsden Award in 1987—is still considered the finest work ever written on the navigator. A French translation, undertaken by Martine Marin, President of *Les Amis de Nicolas Baudin*, is nearing completion.

After *The French Reconnaissance* Frank directed his energies into a second piece of meticulous research on Baudin's precursor in Australia. This resulted in *Looking for La Pérouse: D'Entrecasteaux in Australia and the South Pacific 1792–1793* (Melbourne University Press, 1995), which soon went into paperback.

For these two ground-breaking works Frank was decorated by the French government. On November 19 2002, in a moving ceremony performed by France's Ambassador to Australia, His Excellency Monsieur Pierre Viaux, he received the insignia of the *Palmes Académiques*. Though frail, he was still witty, and quipped that as a *chevalier* he needed a horse.

At the largest international conference ever held on Baudin—at the University of Sydney in September–October 2002—every scholar in attendance paid tribute to the man whose work is still without peer in Baudin circles and who has paved the way for further research on the navigator.

Frank was a passionate devotee of classical music. He sang with several choirs, was on the committees of the Canberra Youth Orchestra and the Canberra Symphony Orchestra, and spent much time browsing in the Canberra Record Society library. He was delighted when one of his granddaughters, Zoë Barry, became a very fine classical musician.

He was also a wonderful wordsmith. With his beloved wife Pat, he wrote *When Words Fail Us: A Casebook of Language Lapses in Australia*

(1980). The success of the book led to a column of the same name in the *Age* which ran for eighteen years.

Frank Horner died in Canberra on 20 July 2004, aged 86. His books and published articles remain as testimony to his fine intellect and his painstaking research on an important part of Australian and French history.

He is survived by his brother Jack, by his three daughters Harriet, Elizabeth and Philippa, and by his granddaughters Zoë, Emily, Thea and Sarah.

Adieu Frank.

Adelaide

University of Sydney

