

UNCOVERING JEAN PIRON: IN SEARCH OF D'ENTRECASTEAUX'S ARTIST¹

EDWARD DUYKER

On 9 February 1791, France's National Assembly decided to organize a search-and-rescue mission for the explorer La Pérouse, who had been missing since 1788. Placed in command of this expedition was a highly experienced naval officer and former governor of the Isle de France (Mauritius), Antoine-Raymond-Joseph Bruny d'Entrecasteaux (1737–1793). D'Entrecasteaux was given two vessels of approximately 350 tons each: the *Recherche* (search or research) and the *Espérance* (hope). Although he retained overall command of the expedition, the *Recherche* was placed under the command of Alexandre d'Hesmivy d'Auribeau (1760–1794) and the *Espérance* was placed under the command of Jean-Michel Huon de Kermadec (1748–1793).²

Despite the tumultuous events of the Revolution, which had driven many naval officers of noble origin abroad, d'Entrecasteaux attracted a capable staff to serve in his expedition. Since his mission was also to be a serious scientific voyage, his muster roll included two hydrographers (Beautemps-Beaupré on the *Recherche* and Miroir-Jouvency on the *Espérance*), four naturalists (Labillardière,³ Deschamps,⁴ Riche⁵ and Ventenat⁶), a mineralogist (Blavier), two astronomers (Bertrand and Pierson), a gardener (Félix Delahaye)⁷ and two artists: Chailly-Ely and Piron. Chailly-Ely quit the expedition at the Cape of Good Hope, and thus Piron was destined to become one of the earliest European artists to work in Australia in the wake of Cook's voyages and the First Fleet. He is particularly noteworthy for his images of the Tasmanian Aborigines and for his natural history sketches. D'Entrecasteaux would even name an island in the Louisiade Archipelago in his honour. Yet to this day his surviving twenty-seven sketches in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris⁸ and the published engravings of his works by Jacques Louis Copia (1764–1799) and Jacques Louis Perée (born 1769) bear no forename. The New Zealand scholar Roger Collins wrote with frustration: "All efforts to discern the origins of Piron are confirmed vain. Of his family, of his country of origin, even his forename, we know nothing."⁹ Helen Hewson, in her beautifully illustrated book *Australia: 300 Years of Botanical Illustration*, gave Piron's first name as "Nicolas", but her only source for this was the 32-page catalogue for the *Dare to Know* exhibition held by the State Library of New South Wales in 1998. It is certainly

incorrect, as are the web pages and catalogue entries for the artist created in the wake of these two publications.

Piron appears never to have returned to France after d'Entrecasteaux's expedition disintegrated on royalist and republican lines in the Dutch East Indies. It was the efforts of his widowed sister, a certain Madame Titeux, seeking to recover his unclaimed backpay in 1817, which offered me my first clue to his identity. This meagre fact is contained in Piron's service dossier held at the Château de Vincennes. The first part of my quest, therefore, was to find a Mademoiselle Piron who had married a Monsieur Titeux some two centuries, or more, ago. But where? I already knew that Piron had joined the expedition on the recommendation of the great Joseph-Pierre Redouté (1759–1840), later famous for his illustrations of the Empress Joséphine's roses and many other botanical subjects. Since Redouté was originally from the Belgian Ardennes, I suspected that Piron was also Belgian. The surname Piron is common in France, but it is particularly common in parts of Belgium. There is always an element of serendipity in historical research. On the internet, among the parish records of the Belgian town of Bouillon, on the River Semois, very close to the French border, I came across an intriguing baptismal record. This was of an illegitimate girl named Jeanne who was born on 28 October 1785 to one Thérèse Piron. The curate's record stated that Jeanne's father was Antoine Titeux [*sic*], a goldsmith who had acknowledged his daughter at her baptism and that the parents had later married on 26 July 1786. Fired with excitement, I wrote to archivist Michel Toussaint in Bouillon and requested a copy of this later marriage record. Although it did not indicate Thérèse Piron's birthplace, it revealed that Antoine Titeux was originally from Saint-Hubert (Redouté's birthplace, then part of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg), and that he had lived in Bouillon for only three years. My gut feeling was already quite strong that our artist's sister must also have hailed from Saint-Hubert, and I was right. A search of the Archives de l'Etat in Saint-Hubert, with the assistance of M. Thierry Scholtes, revealed that a Marie Thérèse Joseph Piron was born there on 3 July 1763. Her parents Henri Piron and Anne Jeanne Titeux had married on 3 May 1761. (Thus Antoine Titeux was not only the artist's brother-in-law, he was also his cousin.) Henri Piron (a cooper and brewer) and his wife had another daughter and two sons: Jean Hubert, born on 18 June 1767, and Jean Joseph, born on 19 August 1771. One of these two brothers was almost certainly d'Entrecasteaux's artist. Although we do not know if he was the one born in 1767 or 1771, he

clearly bore the first name Jean. Four years' seniority and artistic experience would suggest that Jean Hubert was a more likely expedition candidate than his twenty-year-old brother Jean Joseph in 1791, but an artist's talents are usually manifest early on.

We have little knowledge of Jean Piron's artistic training. (I will call him Jean from now on, although he and his brother were probably known by their second names.) Like Redouté, Jean Piron almost certainly studied under the monks of the Abbey of Saint-Hubert (founded in the seventh century) and it seems likely that Redouté's growing success in the years immediately before the Revolution drew Piron to Paris in the hope of similar patronage and mentoring. Piron does not appear to have studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris,¹⁰ but his surviving work suggests specific stylistic influences. In his book *European Vision and the South Pacific 1768-1850*, Bernard Smith asserts that Piron's work was "invested with a good deal of the heroic stoicism of Jacques Louis David" and draws attention to strong classical inspirations: "a close imitation of Doryphoros, Polykleitos' ideal warrior" in a sketch he executed in the Admiralty Islands; "the gestures of a *Vénus de Medici*" in his *Femme du Cap de Diemen*; and the head of Jupiter in his *Sauvage de la Nouvelle Zélande*.¹¹ Taking up Bernard Smith's mantle and that of an earlier New Zealand historian, Eric McCormick, Roger Collins has suggested other strong classical and Italian Renaissance influences in Piron's *Danse des Amboinais*. In Piron's sketch of storm-swept Esperance in Western Australia, Collins has pointed to the influence of Joseph Vernet's work, *Le Naufrage de Virginie à l'Île de France*, exhibited at the salon in 1789.¹² If this is true, then it seems likely that he was also in Paris when the Bastille was stormed and when the Revolution began.

From the records of the expedition we know that Piron was paid a salary of 1500 livres per annum to record "all the views of land and remarkable sites, the portraits of natives of different countries, their costumes, their ceremonies, their games, their edifices, their sea vessels, and all productions of the earth and the sea in the three kingdoms, if the drawings of these diverse objects appear to him useful to facilitate the comprehension of the descriptions which the savants will make".¹³ Prior to departure, he expended just over 384 livres on twelve dozen English pencils, 42 paintbrushes, gum elastic, and two boxes of colours, including four different kinds of ultramarine.¹⁴ During the expedition he dined with the officers of the *Recherche*.

Almost certainly Piron incorporated an image (perhaps two) of himself in one of his sketches; ironically, it seems emblematic of his shrouded identity, for he appears both half-naked and blackened. What he recorded was his own mirthful part in a particularly joyous meeting between the French and the indigenous inhabitants of Van Diemen's Land in 1793. From the naturalist Labillardière's *Relation du voyage à la recherche de La Pérouse* (1800) we know that Piron sought to emulate the locals by requesting that they cover all parts of his uncovered body with powdered charcoal. Labillardière tells us that Piron's request was favourably received by one of the men, who "appeared highly satisfied with his performance, which he finished by gently blowing off the dust that adhered very slightly, taking particular care to remove all that might have gotten into the eyes".¹⁵ Plate 5 of Labillardière's *Atlas*¹⁶ is an engraving, based on a sketch by Piron, of the French visiting the Aborigines while they ate: in it a man, possibly Labillardière—wearing boots, coat, waistcoat and curled-brimmed beaver hat—stands between one of the bearded, naked Tasmanian men and another man, beardless and clad only in short pantaloons and cloth cap. The Aborigine's hand is outstretched toward the scantily dressed figure. His fingertips seem blackened with charcoal. I believe this beardless man with long flowing hair is Piron, already darkened on the face and chest. This comic self-deprecating image, printed in 1800, is virtually our final trace of Piron. I could not resist using this detail on the dust-jacket of my book *Citizen Labillardière*. Ironically, in the complete engraving, seated on the right and playing with an Aboriginal child is another young man with an identical cloth cap and flowing shoulder-length hair. It seems to me that Piron may very well have portrayed himself twice: dressed and undressed.¹⁷

So what happened to Piron? After d'Entrecasteaux's death, command of his expedition devolved to the ailing thirty-three-year-old Alexandre d'Hesmivy d'Auribeau (1760–1794). When the *Recherche* and the *Espérance* reached Sourabaya, in Java, in late October 1793, the French were shocked to learn that their country and the Netherlands had been at war for the past eight months. Even worse was the news that France was also at war with England, Prussia, Austria and Spain, that a republic had been declared and that Louis XVI had been executed on 21 January 1793. The expedition began to disintegrate. In collusion with the largely royalist officers under d'Auribeau, the Dutch seized the ships and imprisoned the republicans. Piron was included among the republican prisoners and d'Auribeau gave the following explanation in a personal memoir:

M. Piron sustained a behaviour which was contrary to the opinions held by me and the officers faithful to the king. It is true that his faults are not as enormous as the others. I will even give him credit for the efforts he sustained in rendering drawings worthy of being presented to the public; his extreme remoteness from the chiefs and the comments he made on each of them, and on the officers; his particular liaisons, made me decide to have him suffer the same fate as the previous ones, by the necessity of distancing all those who had the same way of thinking.¹⁸

Thirty-two crewmen became prisoners of war and, according to Labillardière, “were thrown into the prisons of the Tomagon of Sourabaya”.¹⁹ Then, on 24 February, Piron, Labillardière and the other so-called republicans were forced overland to Samarang in the midst of the wet season—trudging roads “bad in the extreme” and several times boarding small boats to traverse extensive flood plains and rivers. After two weeks of negotiating mud and swollen rivers, they reached Samarang and were aghast to learn that they were to be housed in the local hospital. Adamant that they “were not sick, and did not wish to become so by living in a hospital”, they pleaded for a “better reception from a civilized nation”.²⁰ Heeding their appeals, the local governor, van Overstraaten, allowed them to reside in the centre of the town. There is evidence that Labillardière was seconded to the governor’s staff as a naturalist during his time in Samarang. On 6 May, Overstraaten even allowed the naturalist Claude Riche and Ensign Jacques-Bertrand Legrand to leave for Batavia to seek passage to Europe. Shortly before the two left for the Dutch colonial capital, Piron, Labillardière and several other officers co-signed a denunciation of d’Auribeau as a traitor, which they expected their compatriots to take back to France.²¹ However, Riche and Legrand got no further than a prison cell in Batavia’s Fort Angké. On 2 September, less than two weeks after d’Auribeau’s death, Labillardière and Piron arrived in Batavia from Samarang and were also imprisoned in the same fort. Labillardière was later included in an exchange of prisoners and allowed to depart Batavia on the *Nathalie* on 29 March 1795, but not with his botanical specimens.

Initially I thought that Piron accompanied Labillardière to the Isle de France after he was released in 1795, but the artist’s name does not appear on the list of arriving passengers preserved in the National Archives of Mauritius. A newspaper in France suggests Piron was instead employed by the Governor of Sourabaya, but this report was published a mere two and

a half months after Labillardière left Java and might actually refer to the period after Piron's initial arrest.²² Perhaps the artist did re-cross Java, to rejoin Governor Dirk Hogendorp (later a staunch Bonapartist),²³ but I have my doubts. E.-T. Hamy states that Piron died in Java shortly after his release.²⁴ Piron was probably not in good health. He may even have suffered from tuberculosis. My evidence for this assertion comes from comments in the journal of the royalist naturalist and medical graduate Louis-Auguste Deschamps (1765–1842) with whom he attempted to climb Pico de Teide on Tenerife in the Canary Islands (along with Labillardière and others). According to Deschamps, Piron had to abort his ascent because of exhaustion and because he was vomiting continually and also spitting blood.²⁵ Despite evidence of illness, it is doubtful that Piron died in Java. According to La Motte du Portail,²⁶ in a footnote on the death of the hydrographer Miror-Jouvency inserted into the bottom margin of two pages towards the end of his journal, Piron was in Manila in 1799.²⁷ Since Piron confirmed Jouvency's death in Batavia the previous year,²⁸ this would suggest that he arrived in Manila from Batavia in 1798 or in 1799. What happened to him after this is a mystery. There is of course the possibility that Piron did not remain in Manila beyond 1799 and moved to another European colony.²⁹ Both the Records Management and Archives Office of the Philippines and the Archdiocesan Archives of Manila have advised me that they have no record of his death; and there is no indication that he married in the Philippines either. However, if Piron died in Manila prior to 1805 we may never have documentary evidence. The catalogue by Fr Ruperto C. Santos, the former director of the Archdiocesan Archives of Manila, held in the National Library of Australia,³⁰ indicates that the earliest nineteenth-century archdiocesan burial records for Manila commence in 1805.³¹

Ultimately we may never know for certain exactly when and where Jean Piron died. But perhaps we should see him as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow saw Albrecht Dürer in his poem *Nuremberg*:

Dead he is not, but departed,—for the artist never dies.

Piron's works may be relatively small in number and quaintly classical in style, but they have nevertheless assured him of an enduring place in the history of Pacific exploration.

University of Sydney

Notes

1. This article is based on the text of an address given to the Institute for the Study of French–Australian Relations on 24 August 2005 (Annual Dinner, RACV Club, Melbourne).
2. See *Bruny d'Entrecasteaux: Voyage to Australia and the Pacific 1791–1793*, edited and translated by Edward Duyker and Maryse Duyker, Carlton, Vic., Melbourne University Press, 2001.
3. Edward Duyker, *Citizen Labillardière: a Naturalist's Life in Revolution and Exploration (1755–1834)*, Carlton South, Vic., Miegunyah Press, 2003.
4. Edward Duyker, "Deschamps, Louis Auguste (1765–1842)", in *Dictionnaire de biographie mauricienne*, Port Louis, Mauritius, Société de l'histoire de l'île Maurice, n° 54, October 2000, pp. 1743–1744.
5. Edward Duyker, "Riche, Claude Antoine Gaspard (1762–1797)", in *Dictionnaire de biographie mauricienne*, n° 53, October 1999, pp. 1709–1710.
6. Edward Duyker, "Ventenat, Louis (1765–1794)", in *Dictionnaire de biographie mauricienne*, n° 54, October 2000, pp. 1786–1788.
7. See Edward Duyker, "A French Garden in Tasmania: the Legacy of Félix Delahaye (1767–1829)", in *Pacific Journeys: Essays in Honour of John Dunmore*, ed. G. M. Cropp, N. R. Watts, R. D. J. Collins and K. R. Howe, Wellington, Victoria University Press, 2005, pp. 21–35. Also in *Explorations*, n° 37, December 2004, pp. 3–18.
8. According to E.-T. Hamy, the Piron sketches acquired by the Musée de l'Homme came from the collection of Phillip Barker Webb (1793–1854); see E.-T. Hamy, "Collection de dessins provenant de l'expédition de d'Entrecasteaux", *La Nature*, 24, 1896, pp. 86–87. This would suggest that they previously belonged to Labillardière, whose library and herbarium were purchased by Webb (after the naturalist's death) in 1834.
9. Roger Collins, "Voir avec d'Entrecasteaux: l'œuvre du dessinateur Piron", in *Fleurieu et la marine de son temps*, ed. Ulane Bonnel, Paris, Economica, 1992, pp. 53–62.
10. Hamy, art. cit.
11. Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific 1768–1850: a Study in the History of Art and Ideas*, London, Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 110–111.
12. Collins, art. cit.
13. "Mémoire du Roi pour servir d'Instruction particulière au Sr d'Entrecasteaux", Archives nationales, Marine, BB⁴ 992. An abridged version of this text was published by E. P. E. de Rossel in *Voyage de D'Entrecasteaux envoyé à la recherche de La Pérouse*, Paris, Imprimerie impériale, 1808.
14. "Etat des despenses", Archives nationales, Marine BB⁴ 994.

15. J. J. H. de Labillardière, *Relation du voyage à la recherche de La Pérouse, fait par ordre de l'Assemblée constituante pendant les années 1791, 1792, et pendant la 1ère et la 2ème année de la République Française*, Paris, H. J. Jansen, An VIII [1800], 2 vols, II, pp. 43–44. English translation in *Voyage in Search of La Pérouse...*, London, printed for J. Stockdale, 1800, p. 304.
16. J. J. H. de Labillardière, *Atlas pour servir à la relation du voyage à la recherche de La Pérouse...*, Paris, H. J. Jansen, An VIII [1800].
17. It is this right-hand half of the engraving, hand-coloured by Sandra Nobes, which was used as the basis of the cover design of my mother's and my translation of d'Entrecasteaux's journal (see note 2 above).
18. "Lettres et mémoires de M. d'Hesmivy d'Auribeau", Archives nationales, Marine BB⁴ 993.
19. Labillardière, *Relation*, II, pp. 320–321 (Stockdale trans., p. 468).
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 321–322 (Stockdale trans., p. 469).
21. "Lettre commune datée du 1 mai 1794, signée par La Billardière, Piron, Willaumez et Laignel portant dénonciation contre le sieur d'Auribeau", Mauritius Archives, OA 85/1.
22. See S. G. M. Carr and D. J. Carr, "A Charmed Life: the Collections of Labillardière", in *People and Plants in Australia*, ed. S. G. M. Carr and D. J. Carr, Sydney, Academic Press, 1981, p. 110, note 21; their source would appear to be the *Gazette nationale ou le Moniteur universel*, n° 265, Quintidi, 25 prairial, l'an 3 [13 June 1795], p. 1068.
23. See P. Melon, *Le Général Hogendorp*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1938.
24. Hamy, art. cit.
25. L.-A. Deschamps, "Journal de mon voyage sur 'la Recherche'", cited in M. Hocquette, "Louis-Auguste Deschamps 1765–1842, sa vie — son œuvre", *Bulletin trimestriel de la Société académique des antiquaires de la Morinie*, XXXIX, 1970, p. 10.
26. Edward Duyker, "La Motte du Portail, Jacques-Malo de (1761–1812)", in *Dictionnaire de biographie mauricienne*, n° 54, October 2000, pp. 1752–1753.
27. Archives nationales, Marine 5JJ13^A; copies of this journal are available on microfilm in both the Mitchell Library (FM4/10342) and the National Library of Australia (Mfm G24663).
28. H. Richard, *Le Voyage de d'Entrecasteaux à la recherche de Lapérouse*, Paris, Editions du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 1986.
29. I spent a great deal of time pursuing a Piron (the son of a musician) who died in Mauritius in 1819, having settled there in 1793. It soon became obvious that he was not the artist, but he might easily have been. Antoine Louis Piron (1763–1819) was born in Montpellier and baptised on 21 November 1763 in the parish of Saint-Pierre, the second son of Jean Piron, musician, and his wife Louise-Clémence Arlabosse. Piron arrived at the Isle de France on the *Expérience* in 1793. In the census of 1803 he was described as a "commis" and residing, unmarried, in Port Louis with four male and one female slaves. When he died in Port Louis on 3 January 1819, he was described as a "merchant".

Antoine Piron's eldest brother Jean-Laurent (1760–1834) was secretary of the Faculty of Medicine at Montpellier between 1794 and 1819. His youngest sibling, Jean-Baptiste Germain (1774–1854), served as a controller of finances for Napoleon's expedition to Egypt and, from 1814 until his death in 1854, was assistant secretary to the Faculty of Medicine in Montpellier; see *Fichiers généalogiques de la Société de l'Histoire de l'Ile Maurice*; Recensement, Port Louis, 24 septembre 1803, Mauritius Archives, KK 2.

30. R. C. Santos, *Archdiocesan Archives of Manila: a Catalogue of Archival Documents, Testaments and Holdings*, Manila, Archdiocesan Archives of Manila, 1993 [Call Number: YY 027.670959916 A669], pp. 148 and 267.
31. Loc. cit. ("Cementerios: 1805–1945"—RG.II S.06 [34.B.4]). The only surviving internment records in the eighteenth century are in the "Libro de entierros: 1726–1759" (RG.II S.06 [34.B.6]), but these are confined to Batangas.