

# SURVIVING VOLUMES FROM THE SHIPBOARD LIBRARIES OF THE BAUDIN EXPEDITION

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For the historian of books one of the most intriguing results of the research now being done with such zeal on the Baudin expedition is the revelation of the size and compass of the libraries available on board for the use of the commander and of the officers and scientists accompanying him.<sup>1</sup> Baudin's personal library, in particular, is quite astonishing. One can wonder how space could be found for 1,125 volumes, many of them part of large-format—folio or quarto—sets. It would be interesting to have comparative information on the resources of this kind provided officially or by private initiative for other voyages of discovery in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. One of the challenges for people studying such material is to turn summary lists into bibliographically accurate catalogues, but this is no reason to shirk the task.

What happened to the books afterwards if the vessels succeeded in returning to France? There may well be official memoranda somewhere that shed light on the subject. In any case there is always the chance that a volume or a set will turn up on the secondhand or antiquarian market. This is what happened in February 2006 when the well-known specialist dealer Rodolphe Chamonal included in his catalogue for the 39th California International Antiquarian Book Fair at the Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles Melchisédech Thévenot's *Relations de divers voyages curieux* (Paris, Thomas Mœtte, 1696, 5 parts in 2 folio volumes) under the heading "The most extraordinary provenance: this copy was on board *Le Naturaliste* in Baudin and Péron's expedition in 1800–1804".<sup>2</sup> Each of the two title-pages apparently bears the inscription "La Corvette Le Naturaliste". The item "Voyage de Thévenot" was reported as being supplied to both ships.<sup>3</sup> How easy it will be to pick up later finds of this character is another matter. At best works submitted for auction or included in dealers' catalogues are indexed by author and title. Details like provenance are recovered when alert readers make notes about them. To imagine some sort of universal scanning and inclusion in a gigantic data-base at some time in the future is probably pushing optimism beyond reasonable limits. Let us rely, then, on our own vigilance.

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