

CORRECTING THE RECORD: THE FOUNDATION OF THE LAPÉROUSE MUSEUM IN SYDNEY

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I would like to bring to the attention of your readers the recent publication by the National Parks and Wildlife Service of New South Wales (NPWS) of a book, *Challenges in the Landscape*, by Caroline Ford (NPWS, June 2009), in which a very partial and grossly inaccurate account is given of the founding of the Lapérouse Museum in Sydney.

Professor Sharon Sullivan AO,² in an interview with Jennifer Cornwall,³ is reported as saying, ‘We did the best we could. **We set up** the La Perouse Museum. It was a really big job. I don’t know how we did all these things. But **we did** [emphasis added].’

Nowhere in the book is any mention made of the part played by the French government, the French-Australian business and artistic world or the ‘Laperouse Association for the Australian Bicentenary’, the precursor of the ‘Friends of the Laperouse Museum Inc’, of which I have the honour to be the current president. All credit is taken by Professor Sullivan and, by extension, the National Parks and Wildlife Service of NSW.

The idea to set up the Museum came from the late Pierre Roussel who, in 1988, was a delegate to the *Assemblée des Français de l’Étranger* in Paris. He had unrivalled contacts within the French government and the local French-Australian business and artistic community, attested to by the fact that the Museum was opened by M. André Giraud, the then French Minister for Defence, in conjunction with Mr Bob Carr,⁴ the then Member for Maroubra.

The interior design and painting of the Museum were planned and executed by Guy de Compiègne, architect, Stan de Hauteclocque, art expert, and François Olivier Connefroy de Tirel, artist specialising in murals and *trompe-l’œil*. The colours, stencils and interior design of the Museum were chosen by this panel of local French experts to reflect the history and interior decoration of the eighteenth century, thus helping to illustrate the Lapérouse story.

Dr Anne-Marie Nisbet⁵ chose in France a number of objects for display within the Museum. The French government provided the services of some *coopérants du service national*⁶ to staff the Museum. Rear-Admiral François

Bellec,⁷ who had recently published a book⁸ on the Lapérouse expedition, also provided advice and encouragement.

Unfortunately, in spite of the ‘Disclaimer’ on p. 2 of the book, given the fact that *Challenges in the Landscape* is copyrighted by the State of New South Wales and the Department of the Environment and Climate Control (now the Department of the Environment, Climate Control and Water) and that in ‘Acknowledgements’⁹ the statement is made that ‘Sharon Sullivan [...] provided honest and perceptive assessments of their experiences at NPWS’, it is likely that most readers would consider the book to be an ‘official’ publication and its contents therefore accurate.

To read *Challenges in the Landscape*, one could be excused for thinking that the French and the Franco-Australian business and artistic community played no part in the genesis of the Museum, when this is clearly not the case. *Challenges in the Landscape* is likely to become the accepted authority on various aspects of conservation in New South Wales and accounts propounded in it thus may well become regarded as historical truth. I am very concerned that, by neglecting the fundamental part played by the French (in the broadest sense of the term), the ‘Laperouse Association for the Australian Bicentenary’, the ‘Friends of the Laperouse Museum, Inc’, and other key players, such as Dr Anne-Marie Nisbet, an incomplete history is being touted as truth.

Regrettably, no definitive history of the founding of the Lapérouse Museum has yet been written.

Sydney

Notes

- 1 Dr William Land, AM, is the President of the Friends of the Laperouse Museum Inc.
- 2 A former Executive Director, Australian Heritage Commission, and Deputy-Director, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service.
- 3 Caroline Ford, *Challenges in the Landscape*, Sydney, National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2009, p. 49.
- 4 Later Premier of New South Wales.
- 5 Then of the University of New South Wales.
- 6 *Service national à l'étranger* in lieu of military service, prior to the abolition of conscription in 1996.

- 7 Then Director of the Musée national de la Marine, Paris.
- 8 *La généreuse et tragique expédition Lapérouse*, Rennes, Ouest-France, 1985. François Bellec is also the author of *Le Livre des Terres inconnues*, Paris, Éditions du Chêne, 2000, and *Les Esprits de Vanikoro : Le Mystère Lapérouse*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006.
- 9 Ford, *Challenges*, p. 2.