

## COUTANCE AND THE VOYAGE OF THE ADELE

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Louis Charles Ruault Coutance (1763-1810) was born in Saint-Malo but settled in Mauritius, then known as the Isle de France, in 1790. Based on the island, he commanded a number of Mauritian corsairs until his capture by an English corvette in November 1801. With the signing of the Peace of Amiens he was repatriated to Mauritius and given command of the 130 ton, Mauritius-built and registered, *Adèle* owned by the firm of Merle, Cabot & Cie.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, the *Adèle* with a crew of twenty-two men reached Port Jackson in July 1803 and thus after the collapse of the Peace of Amiens, but well before news of renewed conflict between Britain and France. Her cargo consisted of 4,000 gallons of rum (which Governor King considered of very bad quality) and four hundred and thirty gallons of Cape wine, together with six thousand pounds of sugar, forty casks of meat, eleven anchors, a case of jewelry and a considerable quantity of cloth. Rum had become a de facto currency in New South Wales and Mauritian merchants saw lucrative opportunities for trade in Mauritius and Indian spirits in Port Jackson. Governor King, as we have already seen, was not the least bit inclined to encourage this trade. (His successor, Governor Bligh, actually faced open rebellion in 1808 as a result of his attempts to suppress rum trading.) Coutance claimed he was in need of repairs and that he was destined for Chile, but he soon sought permission to dispose of his cargo. Rather than cause a political incident, King allowed Coutance to land his cargo of spirits, but made it abundantly clear that no further consignments would be welcomed. To make doubly sure, King sent the governor of Mauritius a letter in which he firmly stated his intention to prevent any trade in spirits. In addition, he suggested there was little else of trading interest in New South Wales and that his colony's needs were already being adequately met.

I consider it necessary to request you will see fit to inform the inhabitants within your Government that no Such Articles [spirits] will hereafter be allowed to be landed - And if any are brought it will be My Duty to send the Vessel away after she may have refitted any damages or replenished their Water. It is also necessary I should inform you for the information of the Merchants that this Country possesses no known staple whatever, and that the Bounty of His Majesty's Ministers Supply the Inhabitants with everything they can possibly want at an advance of 50 pr. cent. on the English prime Cost, Hence they will observe that any advantage by adventuring hither is very hazardous.<sup>2</sup>

King was not only anxious to curtail any possible trade in Mauritian rum,

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he was also nervous about Mauritius-based, French aggression. Thus, in August 1803, he wrote to Lord Hobart:

I cannot help regarding the encouraging [of] a commerce with the inhabitants of the Isle of France [Mauritius] but ill calculated for the prosperity of this colony, as spirits will be the general object of their commerce. Altho' there is no other inducement for the French to cast their eyes on this country in case of a war but its recommendation for fertility, the spirit of conquest, extending their dominions, &c., yet I consider it my duty most respectfully submitting to your Lordship's consideration the possibility in any future war of the Government of the Isle of France annoying this colony, as the voyage from thence may be done in less than seven weeks; and on the same idea this colony may hereafter annoy the trade of the Spanish settlements on the opposite coasts.<sup>3</sup>

Yet while Coutance was in Port Jackson, Simeon Lord, the emancipated convict turned entrepreneur, reached an understanding with him, whereby the owners of the *Adèle*, Merle, Cabot et Cie, would supply him with additional Mauritian merchandise.

Coutance, despite his ethnocentric prejudices towards the Aborigines, was deeply impressed with Sydney. In his journal (a copy of which exists in the Mitchell Library) he recorded a description of Port Jackson and commented on the beauty of its natural harbour: "Port Jackson is one of the most beautiful ports in the world... All the vessels of the universe could fit in it".<sup>4</sup> Coutance stayed forty-eight days in Sydney. In January 1805 he assumed his old naval rank of Lieutenant de vaisseau and was appointed commandant of Port Sud-Est by Governor Decaen. Suffering from ill-health, he returned to France, in 1810, and died not long after.<sup>5</sup> An abridged translation of Coutance's journal, where it refers to Sydney, follows in Appendix I.

*Sylvania, N.S.W.*

### Notes

1. A. Toussaint, "Coutance, Louis Charles Ruault (1763-1810)", *Dictionnaire de Biographie Mauricienne*, No 40, pp. 1192-3.
2. "Governor King to the Governor of the Isle de France", Sydney, 3 August, 1803, *Historical Records of Australia*, Series 1, Vol. IV, p. 360.
3. King to Lord Hobart, 7 August, 1803. *Historical Records of Australia*, Series 1, Vol. IV, p. 358.
4. L.R. Coutance, "Observations sur Sidney et Le Port Jackson", July 19-September 5, 1803, Mitchell Library, B 1190.

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5. A. Toussaint, "Coutance...".

### Appendix I

#### COUTANCE AND THE VOYAGE OF THE *ADELE* (1802)

Extract of the voyage of the French Brig *Adèle* from Isle de France, owned by Messrs Merle, Cabot & Co., for a voyage to Port Jackson, New Holland; Conception, West Coast of America, Coquimbo, Lima, Java, under the command of Louis Ruault Coutance, former naval officer.

13 Prairial XI

We sailed from the North West Port of the Isle de France on the French brig *Adèle*, of 120 tons, with a crew of five officers, 2 cadets and 13 men, for a voyage which had never been undertaken in this colony. Trying to take advantage of the strong wind, I cracked my small mast; on the 16th Prairial, at 7 o'clock in the evening, I landed on Deux Frères for repairs; at midnight, without having communicated, I set sail, ship repaired [...]

Passing the strait from the north of the Kent Group, we passed alongside the Isles aux Cerfs [...] On the 25th, good weather, full sails, calm sea... On the 26th, variable winds from S.E. to S.S.E., rough sea, direction from the North... weather not promising. At 4 o'clock in the morning steered towards land for investigation. At 6 o'clock, all sails. At 10 o'clock, land visible... set up again to enter Botany Bay from a west position... Not being familiar with the entrance to Port Jackson, I remained on the south, with full sails; the cool south-east wind... At 3 o'clock, at 1 league from the entrance to Botany Bay, I followed the coast from that distance, and sometime after, I saw on a point at the south of the entry to a bay, a flag mast, a watch-tower, and a keeper's hut; a few minutes later, I was signalled with a flag – a red cross on white base – then with a Dutch flag. I then entered a narrow entrance – 1 mile wide at the most between two high and rugged points; I saw bays everywhere; seeing a reef and fearing to endanger my vessel, and on account of the insurance, I decided to spend the next 24 hours in a beautiful bay. I anchored at 4 o'clock, at 5 fathoms. The water was tranquil, like in a basin, although the sea was very rough in the entrance, and beyond. At five o'clock, two ships came from Sydney; one was the *Bridgewater V & Co.*, the other was the pilot; on the *Bridgewater* there was an officer, who from his uniform, I recognized being from the company, and in spite of my insistence, refused to come up on board, because of orders. I placed the ship in the pilot's care. All night, we had non-stop rain. At 7.30 a.m. we landed. The pilot's vessel and ours passed the point of Hunter Bay; we had felt the southerly winds and the pilot sheltered in the narrow entrance. The sea

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was rough, and the pilot told me that this was always so. The depth is only 8 fathoms. At 9.10, Chapman came on board and gave me the orders from the Governor-General, remitting the code of law in this new colony, of which I asked for a translation in my language. At 10 o'clock, my vessel doing too much speed, my dinghy capsized and was lost. At 11.30, I anchored at Neutral Bay at 9 to 20 fathoms. The governor sent me one of his boats, I landed after listing the reasons for my presence here. I was allowed entry in the port of Sydney, with the express prohibition against selling any liquor without permit, and a guard of four men and a corporal were sent on board. The lack of wind did not allow us to go to Sydney which is two miles away. At long last, on the 30th, at 10 o'clock, we anchored at 9 fathoms.

## MY OBSERVATIONS ON SYDNEY AND PORT JACKSON

During our stay here, of 48 days, I have made some observations about the country. Port Jackson is one of the most beautiful ports in the world. After having passed the heads, which forms the entry, at about 2 leagues from Sydney Cove, which itself contains three superb bays, and it is everywhere the same.

Port Jackson is not a river but a stretch of sea which enters the interior of the land up to Parramatta, 30 miles from its mouth. All the vessels of the universe could fit in it. There are more than 200 places where 100 canon vessels could board on the wharf. The soil in the neighbourhood is not very good, but in the interior, the yield is good. Everything grows well, vines progress well; although they suffer from the N.E. winds which are frequent, specially in summer, they are cultivated by French vine growers. The Governor King sent some of his wine to England this year through Captain Flinders. I have tasted it; it is not good, a bit like the wines of Nantes. There are cloth factories and breweries etc. There is an educational institution for orphans; it is a hospital. The city is protected by an infantry regiment, commanded by Colonel Patterson, companion of the famous Colonel Gordon in his voyages in Africa. Iron mines are numerous, as well as coal mines. I was told that in the interior there is gold and silver; there are also mountains of rock crystal. The population, at the time of my departure numbered 12 to 13,000 souls; they have a considerable trade of whale oil, sea-elephants, and seal skins etc... The natives disappear slowly, although the British are not unhappy about that, since they have never been able to cultivate the soil; only a child of 15, brought up by a Protestant minister, seems to be willing to do something. He speaks English, reads and writes fairly well. These natives, both men and women, are repulsively ugly; they are nude; they fish in the morning, and, wherever they find their food supplies, they settle, eat and sleep, until hunger forces them to start again. They have no industry, and I believe they are the only people of this kind. A javelin and a stick are their only fishing tools. Their canoes are made of bark,

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which wears out every year. They tie down the two ends, and in the middle they place two seats. I have seen in these frail vessels tonnage, women and children; they eat neither bread nor potatoes; grilled fish and shell-fish are their only food. On the 18th Fructidor, we left this beautiful country, heading for Conception, the Chilean coast.

Service Hydrographique de la Marine, Vol. 102, 1-35.

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