

UNE TASMANIE FRANÇAISE? WHAT IF THE FRENCH HAD SETTLED?¹

EDWARD DUYKER

In a welcome spirit of reconciliation, it has become customary in many parts of Australia to acknowledge the traditional custodians of lands where community events take place. I don't think 'custodianship' does true justice to the deep spiritual association and indigenous symbiosis with the land; nevertheless, in a session like this in which terms like 'European discovery', 'territorial claims' and 'colonisation' are used, it is even more important to acknowledge the fact that we are discussing, albeit at times hypothetically, lands inhabited by Aboriginal people for very many thousands of years.

Living in Sydney, every now and then I hear or read flippant comments that Australian history might have been very different had Lapérouse arrived a little earlier than the First Fleet. Yet Lapérouse only received orders to sail to Botany Bay at Petropavlosk in September 1787. He clearly did not receive orders to abandon the rest of his voyage of exploration and there is no evidence, whatsoever, that he was ordered to establish a rival or preemptive French colony in New South Wales. In any case, when he left in March 1788, he was never seen again by Europeans. We know now that he foundered off Vanikoro in the Solomons.

There is no doubt, however, that positive French perceptions of Britain's experience of convict transportation shaped arguments for and against the establishment of a French 'Botany Bay'. François Péron, to whom this festival is dedicated, was one of the first French writers to praise the British convict experiment in New South Wales. Others who saw the Australian example as a moral and economic triumph included Ernest de Blosseville and the poet Alphonse de Lamartine. In 1852 France began transportation of

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convicts to French Guiana and, in 1863, to New Caledonia, a decade after taking possession. Even earlier, Van Diemen's Land, Western Australia and Western Port Bay in Victoria were seriously considered by the French. The last two locations were evaluated on secret orders by Dumont d'Urville in 1826.

The French, of course, reached Van Diemen's Land before the British. Marion Dufresne's expedition, the first after Abel Tasman's, anchored on the east coast for five days from 6 March 1772 in waters embraced by Marion Bay now named in his honour. Had Marion Dufresne not been killed soon after in New Zealand, one can hypothesise that he might have advocated a colonial experiment here. There is no doubt that he was looking for a replacement for the rich fishing grounds of Terre Neuve (now Newfoundland) which France had lost to Britain along with Quebec during the Seven Years War. Given Marion Dufresne's past involvement in the slave trade and even the presence of Malagasy slaves aboard his vessels, I suspect that Van Diemen's Land might have had a history similar to that of Mauritius where Marion Dufresne had settled and from whence he launched his final expedition.

Thirty years after Marion Dufresne's visit, France seemed even more likely to colonise Van Diemen's Land, in British eyes at least, given the statements of François Péron. Although the Baudin expedition had no such orders, in 1802 Péron brazenly told Colonel Paterson (who then told Governor King) that France 'had the plan to make a settlement on the D'Entrecasteaux Channel'.² The British knew well that the Channel was first charted by the French in 1792 and revisited by them in 1793 and 1802. It should also be remembered that in 1800 the naturalist Labillardière had stated that the D'Entrecasteaux Channel 'might present great advantages to a commercial nation' (Labillardière 1800, 136–137). Governor King would take no chances: that commercial nation would be Britain rather than France. Thus Baudin's second-in-command, Hamelin, declared indignantly that the 'English are about to take from us the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, where it would [...] interest the French Republic very much to have a settlement' (Horner 1987, 264).

Twenty-three years later there was a similar scenario: in late 1826 news of Dumont d'Urville's voyage provoked preemptive British settlement of Western Port and King George Sound by Governor Darling (on the orders of Lord Bathurst). I should add that Western Australia had been visited and

² Ronsard, Journal, Archives nationales, Marine 5JJ 30, folio 42.

claimed (in one of the flag-raising pantomimes of the time) as early as March 1772 by another French explorer, François Marie Aleno de Saint-Aloüarn.

There was, of course, an alternative to founding a French colony in Australia and that was to capture a pre-existing British one. This is precisely what François Péron advocated on returning to Mauritius and learning of the collapse of the Peace of Amiens in 1803. Péron thought that this could be done with the aid of rebellious Irish convicts.

In 1810, the year Péron died, Bonaparte did finally order Vice-Amiral Decrès, the Navy Minister, to ‘faire prendre la colonie anglaise de Jackson’ (Napoléon 1866, 467, document 16 544). Of course it was pure political whimsy: France did not have the naval resources to do this. Indeed at the end of that very year, Mauritius, Bonaparte’s principal naval base in the Indian Ocean, would fall to the British.

After receiving a warning from Governor King that any attempt at French settlement would be construed as a breach of the ‘bonds of friendship’ recently re-established with Britain, Baudin responded in a frank private letter:

To my way of thinking, I have never been able to conceive that there was justice or even fairness on the part of Europeans in seizing, in the name of their governments, a land seen for the first time, when it is inhabited by men who have not always deserved the title of savages or cannibals that has been freely given them; whereas they were still only children of nature and just as little civilized as your Scotch Highlanders or our Breton peasants, etc. who, if they do not eat their fellow-men, are nevertheless just as objectionable. From this it appears to me that it would be infinitely more glorious of your nation, as for mine, to mould for society the inhabitants of its own country over whom it has rights, rather than wishing to occupy itself with the improvement of those who are very far removed from it by beginning with seizing the soil which belongs to them and which saw their birth.

(Bladen 1897, 826)

And, in marked contrast to Péron’s praise for Britain’s convict transportation policy, Baudin added:

[...] had this principle been reasonably adopted you would not have been obliged to form a colony by means of men branded by the law and made criminals by the fault of a government which has neglected them and abandoned them to themselves. It follows therefore that not only have you to reproach yourself with an injustice in having seized their land, but also in having transported on to a soil where the crimes and diseases of Europeans were unknown all that could retard the progress of civilization, which has served as a pretext to your Government.
(Bladen 1897, 826)

Despite these fine sentiments, it is shocking to recall that early in his career Baudin had been involved in the terrible slave trade between Mozambique and Mauritius. We should also remember that it was the French expedition of Marion Dufresne in 1772 which was responsible for the first indigenous Tasmanian death at the hands of Europeans, however much the French wanted to avoid violence and regretted what happened.

As I suggested earlier, had France settled Van Diemen's Land prior to the Revolution, we might now have been dealing with a legacy of slavery. Bonaparte, for all the fine phrases of progress and individual liberty with which he dressed-up his despotism, did not extend freedom to the slaves of his colonial empire. (To be fair, slavery continued in the British West Indies too.) It was not only Marion Dufresne and Baudin who were sullied by associations with slavery; even François Péron, fearful of a Haitian-like slave rebellion in Mauritius, declared his opposition to emancipation in his private manuscripts and asserted that slaves were probably better off than French peasants. So, had slavery become an institution in Tasmania, it is possible that Huon pine square-riggers might have plied a horrific trade in human beings from Africa or perhaps, even closer, from New Zealand—since slavery was also a Maori institution. It does not require much imagination to conceive of deals struck for members of conquered rival tribes, in return for firearms, ammunition and other European trade goods.

The late eighteenth century has other lessons for us regarding what Tasmania might have been like under French rule. When France sided with the American revolutionaries during the American War of Independence, a number of formidable expeditions were mounted from her colonies. In Mauritius, many colonists served in raiding corsairs. Privateering (state-sanctioned

commerce raiding, perhaps better described as a form of unadulterated free enterprise) was another of Marion Dufresne's early callings: in the first five months of 1746, during the War of Austrian Succession, he captured a 1,000 tons of British shipping with just one armed vessel, the *Prince de Conty*. I can imagine Tasmanian vessels sailing from the Derwent (or should I say the 'Rivière du Nord', as d'Entrecasteaux called it in 1792) as armed privateers about to prey on British-Victorian and New South Wales shipping. But while Mauritius did not have a hinterland large enough to provide adequate naval stores, Tasmania could have fulfilled that purpose well. It is worth looking at the Mauritian statistics. Between 1793 and 1802, the local French naval squadron and eighteen armed local merchantmen-turned-privateers preyed on British Indian shipping with spectacular success: more than 176 British ships were taken as prizes! Shipbuilding and commerce-raiding became major local industries.

I realise that many of you were probably expecting me to say something about Tasmania's could-have-been Baudelaires and, of course, all those could-have-been Franco-Tasmanian impressionist painters in the Latin quarter of the left bank of the Derwent, sorry, Rivière du Nord. I hate to be a killjoy, especially at such a festival; however, even if Tasmania had started out French, I think it highly unlikely that the island would have remained French in the wake of the destruction of French seapower at Trafalgar. Your Franco-Tasmanian alter egos might have been conquered by British arms—as Quebec was in 1759 or Mauritius in December 1810. But there is also a good chance that Bonaparte might have thrown you in as sweetener when he sold off Louisiana to the Yanks in 1803 for \$15 million. As in Quebec, this would not necessarily have stopped you dreaming, singing or making love in French. Cajun French survives in Louisiana in nearly twenty parishes, although the number of speakers ranges from only 4% to 30% of each parish. And in Mauritius the major newspapers remain French to this day, despite 158 years of British rule, forty-two years of independence, membership of the Commonwealth and the very diverse heritage of the population.

I don't think historians are ever truly comfortable with hypothetical scenarios, but, geophysical and climatic considerations aside, the social inequities unmasked in Louisiana post-Hurricane Katrina will hardly make Tasmanians long for such a could-have-been present. Just search firearms and/or handguns and Louisiana or Bayou on the internet, and you will also have

no doubt that Louisiana is the ballistic child of the United States, rather than France.

However, given the presence of Bass Strait, perhaps a Tasmanian version of the Louisiana Purchase would have left Tasmania looking like an even more far-flung Hawaii or Alaska on the nose of Anglo-Canada, or, in our case, Anglo-Australia.

Australian Catholic University / The University of Sydney

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