

**Frank Horner, *The French Reconnaissance: Baudin in Australia 1801-1803*. Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1987. 461pp. \$47.95.**

His lungs eaten away by what was almost certainly tuberculosis, the great French explorer Nicolas-Thomas Baudin died a lonely and painful death in Mauritius in 1803. He was on the homeward leg of his remarkable voyage into Australian waters—which saw significant stretches of the continent's coast charted for the first time. The ships under his command were brimming with collections of botanical, zoological, geological and ethnographic riches. While others might have gained posthumous glory, Baudin gained ignominy. His great misfortune was that he died before his expedition returned to France and thus before he had an opportunity to do battle with his detractors. Georges Bory de St Vincent and, in particular, the zoologist François Péron who chronicled the achievements of the expedition soon after its return, despised its leader and vented outright calumny against him. As is so often the case, these distortions and lies found their way into later biographies and studies. Frank Horner's *The French Reconnaissance* is a powerful vindication of Baudin.

Horner's work is based on a scrupulous re-examination of the journals, letters and memoirs of the participants. While the author has certainly benefited from the work of earlier Baudin scholars such as Ernest Scott, J.P. Faivre, Christine Cornell, Leslie Marchant, Madeleine Ly-Tio-Fane and Brian Plomley, he has in turn produced an original and perceptive work which addresses a number of specific historical issues of keen interest to Australians. Thus, aside from providing a very elegant and comprehensive account of the expedition and its trials and tribulations, Horner includes a discussion of the conflicting placenames on the charts of Flinders and Freycinet; the possibility that the expedition had non-scientific ambitions; and the reasons why the French failed to make full use of the valuable observations and specimens they collected. Despite the detailed nature of the author's analysis, his narrative never deteriorates into a tedious exegesis. He also subtly infuses into his account the wisdom of personal experience at sea and an appreciation of the disciplinary and morale problems Baudin faced. (Dr Horner served as a naval officer—mainly in New Guinea waters—during the Second World War.)

*The French Reconnaissance* reveals Baudin as a man of great intelligence and humanity. He had a personal passion for botany and a proven record as a "collector-voyager" and leader. A number of the men who sailed with him on the *Belle Angélique* to the Caribbean again gave him devoted service on the *Géographe* on his Australian voyage. His personal library on board (exclusive of the official geographical and scientific tomes supplied by the French government) amounted to some 1200 volumes. Their titles reflect Baudin's wide intellectual interests and cultivated mind. Clearly he was no

boorish ship-board tyrant; and suggestions he was a knave, Horner argues, appear to have sprung from selective references to his far-too-subtle sense of humour. His attitude to exploration and colonialism—as expressed in a letter to Governor King at Port Jackson—deserves to be cited as evidence of a personal sensitivity and compassion uncharacteristic of his age:

“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... it would be infinitely more glorious for 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.”

Why then did this civilised mariner come into such conflict with those he commanded? Horner argues that the antagonism of many of the officers of the expedition towards Baudin was “partly due to a prejudice against him inspired not by the egalitarian ideas of the Revolution but by a pride in family and class persisting from an earlier period—a prejudice reciprocated by their self-made commandant”. The other major problem Baudin faced was the unusually large number of scientists on board who were not subject to the full rigours of naval discipline. His managerial and leadership problems, therefore, were certainly more difficult than one would have expected on a regular naval vessel!

Horner has not rendered a romantic or idealised Baudin. Rather, his is a “warts and all” portrait (even to the extent of re-publishing Petit’s drawing!), tempered by compassion, an understanding of human weakness, and an eye for extenuating circumstances. Horner has reached deeper into the soul of the man than any other historian, but despite the intensity of his scholarship and the power of his prose, Baudin remains an enigmatic figure.

I have no major criticisms of this solid scholarly work, but I do feel that the author’s examination of Baudin’s sojourn in Mauritius is at times sketchy and inconclusive. As Christine Cornell put it: “It may be said that directly or indirectly most of the significant events on the voyage were rooted in the difficulties encountered at and before the *Ile de France* [Mauritius]. The entire course of the voyage was altered by them.” Horner’s chapter on Mauritius would have benefited from a fuller discussion of the economy and politics of the island at the time. Mauritius survived as a semi-independent entity under the tricolour between 1794 and 1802. (Mainly in resistance to the reforms of the Revolution—particularly the abolition of slavery.) To

support themselves, the islanders turned to privateering with spectacular success. Horner mentions the inducements of a corsair captain who succeeded in getting a number of Baudin's men to desert, but he could have better explained the isolation and rebellious pride of the island, the demands on its resources made by a visiting expedition and the manpower shortages its corsairs faced. I found it somewhat disconcerting that while Baudin's good friends on the island are named, Horner refers to Baudin's enemies in rather nebulous terms. He may have rubbed the French administrators the wrong way (with his insinuations of secret political tasks), but I wonder if there was anything really personal in his difficulties with the islanders themselves. They were simply trying to survive in the middle of the Indian Ocean during very troubled times. Ultimately they were competing in the same market for men and supplies.

Nearly two and a half years later, with Australia's coast well behind him, Baudin returned to Mauritius and died soon after in a house belonging to a Madame Kerivel. This was in Port Louis' rue de la Pouderie. The late Mauritian historian Auguste Toussaint felt certain that Baudin was buried in the Kerivel family vault. The accounts of his death, gleaned from the journals of his subordinates, reveal little sadness at his passing and the reader feels robbed of pathos. Like Toussaint I have searched for Baudin's last resting place. If I ever find it, I will bring not flowers—but Frank Horner's fine book.

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