

## BOOK REVIEWS

EDWARD DUYKER

John Dunmore, *Pacific Explorer: The Life of Jean François de La Pérouse 1741-1788*. The Dunmore Press, Box 4993 Palmerston North, New Zealand, 1985, 318 pp.

It is a brave scholar who embarks upon a major enterprise in an already well-worked patch. There have been at least seven substantial biographies of La Pérouse published since the beginning of this century, not to mention many other articles and scholarly papers. So what does Professor Dunmore have to offer that his predecessors lack? Earlier biographers have tended to concentrate on the naval battles and the voyage of exploration. Professor Dunmore cannot avoid examining these, but he has achieved a broader overview of the explorer's life. He uses the work of his precursors to excellent effect and combines them with the concerns of a social historian. Dunmore's linguistic skills and his impressive knowledge of eighteenth-century French sources are rare in the English speaking world. (It is a sobering thought to recall that E.H. Jenkin's *History of the French Navy*, which only appeared in 1973, was the very first such history to be published in English!) The result of Professor Dunmore's efforts is an immensely readable book—a true adventure yarn which holds the reader's attention to the very end and still manages to break new psycho-biographical and social-historical ground.

Not much is known about the explorer's early life. Despite the paucity of sources, the author recreates the life of eighteenth-century Albi "a gentle town, somnolent under the warm sun of south-west France, nestling in a curve of the river Tarn" where La Pérouse was born. He shows how Jean François' family, with their concerns for social status as marginal "nobles", chose to attach the name of one of their small farms *La Pérouse* to their surname, Galaup, in order to make their son seem more aristocratic and thus further his naval prospects. How many place names which now honour the explorer around the world ultimately have their etymology rooted in this modest farm?

At times Dunmore's eloquent prose seems really to be speculation about La Pérouse's inner thoughts or movements, but he writes with a gifted intuitive certainty. At times he should have been more cautious—especially when he lacked empirical evidence—but we should be grateful to him for opening up more of the soul of the man. From the surviving documents and the contemporary chronicles, Dunmore shows us that La Pérouse's class background and his strong sense of family loyalty and honour were at odds

with his individualism and honesty of heart. The facts surrounding the explorer's romance with Elénore Broudou (whom he met in Mauritius and ultimately married in Paris) might seem operatic to some. But behind the melodrama were very real personal and family tensions. The Galaups thought Elénore beneath their son, but he married her anyway!

It is the matter of fact, realistic and humane La Pérouse who is so endearing. But this likeable gentleman was also a brilliant mariner who led one of the greatest scientific expeditions of the eighteenth century. Certainly there were ancillary strategic considerations behind the voyage, but in the expedition's disappearance it is the loss of gifted human life and hard-earned knowledge which heightens our pathos. In this study Professor Dunmore has also woven well-crafted biographical summaries of many other extraordinary men whose paths crossed with La Pérouse's, or who served with him. They include Baron Benyowski (whose career Dunmore justly states in a footnote "still awaits treatment by an inspired novelist and an enterprising television series producer") and de Lesseps who was despatched by La Pérouse on an epic journey across Siberia with reports for Versailles. I was also glad to learn more of the life of one of the expedition's naturalists, Father Receveur, the first Frenchman buried on Australian soil, whose tomb I have often visited.

This excellent biography has a sweeping canvas. It includes endearing portraits of the eighteenth-century port of Brest; the tropical warmth of Mauritius; the harsh frozen wastes of Hudson Bay; the mysteries of Alaska, Sakhalin and Kamchatka; and, of course, Botany Bay a few days after the arrival of the "First Fleet". Professor Dunmore concludes his book with a discussion of the search for La Pérouse's expedition after its disappearance. The summary of the various archaeological finds on Vanicoro, the oral historical record and the evidence of La Pérouse's visit to New Caledonia will certainly be of interest to those who ponder on the final fateful act of a drama which took place two centuries ago.

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Amédée Nagapen, *L'Eglise à Maurice, 1810-1841*. Diocèse de Port Louis, Ile Maurice, 1984, 453 pp. (available from the Centre de Documentation Religieuse, Sir Cécilcourt Anteleme Street, Rose Hill, Mauritius).

At first glance, Amédée Nagapen's history of the Catholic Church in Mauritius, between 1810 and 1841, would appear to be of little interest to Australian readers. But this work does have a broader significance than merely

recording the course of ecclesiastical tensions on a tiny Indian Ocean island. (For one thing, the Catholic Church in Australia was administered from Mauritius, between 1819 and 1834, and Nagapen tells us how this came to be.)

The period the author covers was one of considerable change and dislocation in Mauritius. In 1810 Britain captured the island from France, and the ensuing years were those in which the new colonial administrators sought to integrate Mauritius into the imperial order. Much of the conflict which developed stemmed from the fact that the island had a strongly French cultural identity. (There were no indigenous inhabitants when the island was settled by colonists, mainly from Brittany and Normandy.) The Franco-Mauritians resented alien rule and they clung to their language and religion with a tenacity which rivalled that of the Irish. The population of Mauritius, however, was not homogeneous, for the Franco-Mauritians had their slaves (largely from Madagascar and Mozambique) whom the British permitted them to retain until 1839. Although the terms of the island's capitulation—especially with regard to language and religious freedom—were far from harsh, the colonists resisted Britain's determination to affirm her sovereignty over the island.

In 1818, an English Benedictine, named Edward Bede Slater, was consecrated Bishop, in Rome, with the Vatican's intention that he be despatched to the Vicariate of the Cape of Good Hope. Britain's Colonial Office, however, flatly refused permission for Slater to reside at the Cape. Britain wanted him in Mauritius, as a tangible sign of the island's changed status: a British Bishop for a British island. The Vatican, grateful for Britain's support to the French clergy during the French Revolution, had already gone out of its way to find an acceptable British candidate for the Cape, and was prepared to acquiesce in his appointment to Mauritius. Slater would still administer the Cape from Mauritius, but the island would now be removed from the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Paris. Nagapen argues that the British Treasury was prepared to pay the expenses of a Prelate, though one only; but if it was going to pay, it wanted the Prelate to reside in the most favourable location for Britain. That locality was Mauritius—with its "disaffected Catholic francophones". In arguing the reasons why the Colonial Office demanded Slater reside in Mauritius and why the Vatican acquiesced, Nagapen follows Frances O'Donoghue's argument (in her pioneering article "Australia's Connection With Mauritius", *Australasian Catholic Record*, January 1976). Yet he gives her only the barest acknowledgement in his footnotes.

Slater's being chosen for additional ecclesiastical jurisdiction over Australia, from Mauritius, resulted from Father Jeremiah O'Flynn's expulsion

from New South Wales, by Governor Macquarie. When the political repercussions of discrimination against Catholics in New South Wales were felt in the House of Commons, Britain and the Vatican agreed to add New Holland to Slater's responsibilities.

Nagapen's version of these events is an example of his French language rendition of O'Donoghue's prose. In only mentioning O'Donoghue in an earlier footnote, he stops just short of outright plagiarism! Another example of his unacknowledged use of O'Donoghue's work is his discussion of the reasons why John Bede Polding (Australia's first Catholic Archbishop) refused the Vicariate of Mauritius. Though he is guilty of a discourtesy to O'Donoghue, Nagapen does acknowledge a heavy debt to H.N. Birt's *Benedictine Pioneers in Australia* (1911), and to the scholarship of Joseph Mamet.

But there is much that is fundamentally dissatisfying about this book. It lacks the force of a work of scholarship rooted in a rich social history of the island. Slater and Morris (but particularly Slater) were deeply resented, if not hated by the Franco-Mauritians. Because they were English, they symbolized alien rule. Nagapen, however, does not adequately explain the reasons for the intensity of this resentment. He does tell us that Slater was an inept, undiplomatic authoritarian who "fought for ecclesiastical privileges that Mauritian society refused to acknowledge or at the same time understand". My feeling, however, is that Slater not only represented a break with the French tradition, but a threat to the Gallic Church's ideological sanction of the colonial order in Mauritius. When the conservative champion of the Franco-Mauritians, Adrien d'Épinay, wrote of the "Colons of Mauritius" needing "French priests, capable of instructing...their children in the maxims revered by their fathers" and of the "doctrines of the Gallic Church", he was harking back to the ethos of the *Ancien Régime* and of the Church as a buttress of feudalism in France and slavery in the colonies. Indeed, the hapless Slater became bishop of a diocese which continued to OWN SLAVES until the end of the 1830s. Though he was somewhat embarrassed by this fact, and even showed sympathy for the Church's human chattels, to his shame he did virtually nothing about it. Was he as helpless in this matter as Nagapen makes out? The Catholic Church in Mauritius during his administration appears to have been more interested in making the libertine slaves marry, rather than securing their emancipation. (Between 1821 and 1823, no marriages between slaves were recorded on the island and only six slave-marriages took place in the three succeeding years!) Slater was no Wilberforce, though the British administration was dedicated, however sluggishly, to the eradication of slavery in Mauritius. Nevertheless, to the Franco-Mauritians, Slater was an ultramontane, unsympathetic to the

mores of colonial society and to the values of the French Church.

Given the extent of resentment against Slater, it would be easy to fall into the trap of assuming that he was an acutely anglicised and culturally chauvinistic Englishman. For all his faults, this does not appear to be the case. Nagapen, himself, tells us that Slater was educated in Westphalia and France; that he mastered both German and French; and that as a student he imbibed the riches of French civilization. It would seem, therefore, that he could do little more to be forgiven his nationality. Everything else he did was made worse by his temperament. Slater died at sea a few days after leaving Mauritius in despair and disgust on his recall.

From an Australian perspective, Slater will be remembered as the man who recruited Fathers Therry and Connolly, in Ireland, to follow Jeremiah O'Flynn as the first Catholic missionaries in Australia (after no volunteers could be found in England). It was Slater's successor, Morris, who appointed Ullathorne the first Vicar General of Australia. Like O'Donoghue, Nagapen argues that the ecclesiastical link between Mauritius and Australia was tenuous and "spasmodic". The nascent Australian Church ultimately found it more convenient to deal directly with London and by-pass Mauritius. In due course, New Holland gained the status of an independent Vicariate Apostolic in 1834. Slater's cousin, John Bede Polding, became the first Archbishop of Sydney.

Amédée Nagapen's *L'Eglise à Maurice, 1810-1841* has its fair share of typographical errors and a number of rather poorly reproduced photographs. Physically, it is far from being a masterpiece of the bookbinder's art. But Mauritius is a poor country, and I should not be too harsh in such criticisms. It is a sad irony, though, that the glossy paged cloth bound "coffee table" books, aimed at the tourist market, are destined to endure longer than the more substantial scholarly works of the island. Despite what is sometimes an unprofessional approach, *L'Eglise à Maurice* is still an important study. It is based on considerable original research and it presents the reader with a major biographical portrait of Slater and much new information on his successor, William Placid Morris. It is also an interesting contribution to the literature on colonialism.

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