

BOOK REVIEW

Jacqueline Bonnemains, Elliott Forsyth and Bernard Smith (eds), *Baudin in Australian Waters: The Artwork of the French Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Lands 1800-1804*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1988, 347 pp., \$250.

Only recently have the very great scientific contributions of Nicolas Baudin's expedition begun to be recognized in this country. To a large degree, the pervasive ignorance of Baudin's achievements has been rooted in the anglocentrism of Australian historians. Non-British exploration of our coast has rarely been a favoured field. Even the "major Dutch voyages" section of the recent "First Impressions" exhibition at the Australian Museum in Sydney made no mention of the charting of our southern coast (almost as far as Ceduna) by Nuyts and Thiessen in 1627! And the worship of Cook has surfaced once more in the form of a holographic icon on the Bicentennial \$10 note. Baudin's expedition may have brought back a scientific treasure trove which far outshone Cook's, but his name seems destined to be known by only a handful of Australians for many years to come.

Bonnemains, Forsyth and Smith's magnificent work will certainly become an enduring reference source. Aside from Frank Horner's summary of his fine scholarship in *The French Reconnaissance* and Rhys Jones' astute examination of the anthropology of Baudin's expedition, this book is noteworthy for the biographical chapters on the artists Charles-Alexandre Lesueur (1778-1846) and Nicolas-Martin Petit (1777-1804) and, most importantly, for its richly illustrated catalogue of the drawings and paintings of the Australian subjects of these two artists.

Lesueur and Petit were not the original official artists of the expedition. Baudin turned to them in desperation when Milbert, Lebrun and Garnier deserted him in Mauritius. Fortunately they proved more than competent. Both men eagerly recorded the Australian coast, its inhabitants, and its flora and fauna. In the case of their portraits of Aborigines and the settlement of Port Jackson, they produced priceless historical documents. Although not the first to encounter the indigenous Tasmanians, they were to provide the most detailed contemporary pictorial account. To their great credit, Baudin and his men were not responsible for the death of a single Aborigine. This was in marked contrast to the first British settlers.

Charles-Alexandre Lesueur's life was one long adventure. Born at Le Havre, he was the son of an admiralty administrator. He appears to

have gained his artistic grounding while educated at the Collège du Havre until its closure in 1793. In that year he enrolled in a local cadet battalion and was soon elected corporal. Between 1797 and 1799 he served as a non-commissioned officer in the Garde Nationale. Because of an "umbilical fistula" he was exempted from further military service in 1799, but, attracted to the prospect of adventure in southern waters, Lesueur enlisted as an assistant gunner with Baudin's expedition the following year. Aside from the artistic record he eventually provided, Lesueur assisted François Péron with important natural history observations and helped him collect more than 180,000 specimens. When the expedition returned to France, he assisted Péron in publishing an account of the voyage and was granted an Imperial pension. Threatened with the loss of this pension, after Napoleon's fall, he signed a contract to accompany William Maclure (1763-1840) on a scientific expedition to the United States. He was to remain there for over twenty years and even participated in the foundation of Robert Owen's utopian settlement at New Harmony, Indiana. Lesueur continued his zoological and geological observations in Missouri, Illinois and Tennessee and then in France after his return in 1837. He died suddenly in Le Havre in December 1846.

Nicolas-Martin Petit was born in June 1777, the fourth child of a Paris fan maker. It seems likely that his father's craft gave him his initial artistic training. But it was as a student of the great Jacques Louis David that he volunteered for service as an assistant gunner with Baudin. His artistic talents were quickly recognized and he was also entrusted with the task of illustrating Baudin's log from the beginning of the voyage. Despite recurrent attacks of scurvy, Petit made an enormous contribution to the artistic record of the expedition. He returned to France on the *Géographe* on 25 March 1804 and again settled near his family in Paris. He married four months later, but after a fall avoiding a carriage, his bruised knee became gangrenous and he died on 21 October 1804.

Baudin in Australian Waters is quite simply a dazzling contribution to our printed heritage. Those familiar with the actual colours of the plant and animal species represented by Lesueur and Petit will appreciate the full grandeur of their work and of the printer's craft. In producing this book, the authors and Oxford University Press have helped define one extreme of the Bicentenary: that of scholarly and publishing excellence in the face of an abundance of kitsch.