

On the Trail of Lapérouse

Edward Duyker

Keesing Studio Resident
Cité internationale des arts
Paris
February–July 2016

Introduction

I was awarded a six-month Australia Council residency in the Keesing Studio, at the Cité internationale des arts in Paris, to research a biography of the French explorer Jean-François Galaup de Lapérouse (1741–c.1788). The biography of someone born 275 years ago inevitably presents historiographical challenges; the range of surviving documents from the eighteenth century is very limited. Furthermore, they are often in difficult handwriting, with idiosyncratic or archaic spelling, or have words from once-vibrant regional languages. When the subject of a biography is Lapérouse, who disappeared before he could forward his final papers, it is even more difficult to reconstitute all his achievements. Letters, journal fragments and dispatches sent back to Europe from colonial outposts and the testimony of those who quit his expedition and returned to France before its final tragic conclusion are particularly precious.

Research in Paris

I arrived in France on the trail of Lapérouse, on 2 February 2016, with a forty-page research plan heavily based on the archival survey of Madame Catherine Gaziello, the bibliography of Australian librarian Ian McLaren and the references of earlier biographers such as Admiral Maurice de Brossard and New Zealand historian Professor John Dunmore. I also had a great many questions and hunches based on more than three decades of research on other early French explorers and naturalists in Australia. Ultimately, I was keen to explore primary sources overlooked by previous scholars.

The most important documentary repository for my project was the *Archives nationales*. I worked systematically through documents in the ‘Marine’ series and complemented this with very productive research amongst notarial records. Among my discoveries were Lapérouse’s marriage contract and an inventory of his widow Louise Eléonore Broudou’s (1755–1807) estate after her death. Other notarial records helped me shed light on Lapérouse’s friends and associates. I was struck by his connections with some of France’s wealthiest individuals and gathered useful background information on the Le Couteulx, Laborde and Sutton de Clonard families. Lapérouse was a personal friend of the banker Laurent Le Couteulx and stayed with him in rue Montorgueil during several of his visits to Paris. Later their wives became close friends. Members of the Laborde and Sutton de Clonard families were represented among Lapérouse’s officers. Many Australians will be surprised to learn that Robert Sutton de Clonard, who commanded the *Astrolabe* when it entered Botany Bay in January 1788, was an Irishman. I pursued a number of sources to learn more of his life and that of his father Thomas Sutton de Clonard, a wealthy Irish Jacobite. He, like the father of the Laborde brothers, had a fortune tainted by the institution of slavery. Lapérouse’s father-in-law, Abraham Broudou, and his brother-in-law were also both directly involved in the slave trade. And I now have conclusive evidence that Lapérouse himself, despite his Enlightenment sensibilities, owned at least one slave during his time in Mauritius.

I also worked my way through numerous service dossiers for members of Lapérouse’s expedition. Some yielded valuable information; others were disappointing or entirely absent. For example, the file for the artist Gaspard Duché de Vancy merely contained correspondence in the 1840s from another man named Duché who sought the artist’s place and date of birth—presumably to determine if he was related. I never found a service dossier for Mel de Saint-Céran, an ailing officer who left the Lapérouse expedition in Manila. However, there was a consolation prize in the alphabetical series: the dossier of Charles Mengaud de la Hage (died 1780), an officer with whom Lapérouse purchased land in Mauritius. This was during Lapérouse’s Indian Ocean sojourn of 1772–78, when he also met his future wife.

There was no file for the naturalist Jean-Nicolas Dufresne (1747–1812), who left the Lapérouse expedition in Macau. Previous scholars of the expedition were not even aware of his first names. At the *Archives nationales*, I found several substantial documents written by Jean-Nicolas Dufresne.

They have been microfilmed for years, but knowing his handwriting (from a letter he wrote to Lapérouse) was crucial to identifying the author. He wrote a natural history of sea otters and was clearly obsessed with the fur trade. One document contained extracts from James Cook's account of the north-west coast of America. I almost ignored it as familiar territory, then noticed references to events in 1786, seven years after Cook's death. It was only then that I realised that Dufresne was quoting substantial chunks of his own journal in Alaska. If it still exists, the entire journal must be a manuscript of several hundred pages. I also made contact with Dufresne's family in Étampes (50 kilometres from Paris) in the département of Essonne. There I took up an invitation from the dowager Comtesse Elisabeth Dufresne de Saint-Léon to have lunch at the château de Jeurre with her and her brother-in-law. Although she knew nothing of Dufresne's missing journal, the park of the château has a monument to the Laborde brothers drowned at Lituya Bay in Alaska, during Lapérouse's visit in July 1786. Their father was guillotined during the Terror. The monument was one of several acquired from the Laborde château at Méréville and moved to Jeurre by Jean-Nicolas Dufresne's great-grandson, the archivist Arthur Henri Dufresne de Saint-Léon (1858–1947). On the staircase at Jeurre I also saw an engraving of Louis-Philippe Crépin's painting of the same tragic drownings in Alaska. I suspect that it, too, was originally at Méréville. The original painting by Crépin is probably now in the possession of one of the Marquis de Laborde's descendants in Spain.

There were other important letters to be found in the *Archives nationales*. I was delighted to read the loving letters that Lapérouse's armourer and watchmaker, Pierre Guery, wrote home to his wife and child. Ultimately these letters offer another important historical voice from the expedition.

In search of reports made by French consuls during Lapérouse's landfalls, I waded through numerous weighty volumes of correspondence from various consular posts held at the *Archives nationales* and at the *Centre des Archives diplomatiques* (the latter located at La Courneuve). The series for the Canary Islands yielded a number of relevant letters, but I also found useful information on France's consular representatives in Canton at the time of Lapérouse's visit. The papers of Charles de Constant (1762–1832) in Geneva also shed additional light on Lapérouse's visit to Macau in 1787.

On my first free Sunday in Paris, I visited the church of Sainte-Marguerite in the 11th arrondissement where Lapérouse married Louise Eléonore

Broudou in 1783. (I later realised that some of my own ancestors lived in this same parish until they moved to Brest to work for the French navy around 1737.) I also researched the witnesses at the wedding, including a Swiss guard named de Redding and the naturalist Louis-Augustin Bosc d'Antic (1759–1828). The *Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris*, in the lovely seventeenth-century Hôtel Lamoignon, was a source of valuable background information on Lapérouse's Paris sojourns, including the streets he lived in and the parish in which he married. This research was also augmented by important indexes and documents in the *Archives de Paris* in the 19th arrondissement.

Two of the manuscripts I consulted at the *Archives nationales* indicated that Lapérouse's bride was residing in the Abbey de Saint-Antoine when she married. This later became the Hôpital Saint-Antoine. Although the site is much changed, with the help of my wife Susan's skills as a heritage architect, I was able to locate those parts of the hospital which were in existence when Lapérouse married. I saved excursions such as this for Sundays when archives and libraries were closed. Unfortunately, the Sunday we chose to visit the Hôpital Saint-Antoine was also May Day and during a period of serious industrial unrest. Soon after leaving the hospital, Susan and I found ourselves among wall to wall CRS (*Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité*) riot police as the May Day March was broken up with teargas. Together we also visited Louise Eléonore Broudou's final resting place. Although she was living near the Église de la Madeleine when she died in 1807, Madame Lapérouse was initially buried in the grounds of the Château de Voisins at Louveciennes. This was the home of the Le Couteulx family, which we also visited or, more correctly, photographed from the outside. Eléonore had spent many happy days there with her friend Fanny Le Couteulx. Now they share the same relocated grave in Père Lachaise cemetery.

In late May, Susan and I visited Versailles to see Nicolas-André Monsiau's painting of Louis XVI giving his instructions to Lapérouse. Because it hangs in the *Salle du capitaine de la garde de la reine*, it is not generally accessible to the public. We were given special access thanks to the gracious assistance of the conservateur Monsieur Frédéric Lacaille. Madame Gabriela Lamy, a researcher at the Trianon, also invited us to discuss the life of the botanical artist Guillaume Prévost who worked at Versailles before the Lapérouse expedition.

In the second week of June I worked in the *Archives de l'Académie des Sciences*, located in the *Institut de France* on the southern end of the Pont des Arts. There I consulted dossiers on several scientists of the Lapérouse expedition and correspondence relating to Lapérouse himself. In the *Bibliothèque de l'Histoire de la Médecine* at the *Université Paris Descartes*, I did further useful research on the medical studies of the botanist Joseph-Hugues Boisseau de Lamartinière (1758–c.1788) and the surgeons of the expedition.

On a number of occasions, I did research in the naval archives of the *Service historique de la Défense* located at the Château de Vincennes. All the surviving original sketches from the Lapérouse expedition are held there. They were brought back to Paris from Petropavlovsk by Barthélémy de Lesseps (1766–1834). I was also able to access a collection of letters written by one of Lapérouse's midshipmen, Jean-Guillaume Law de Lauriston (1766–c.1788), son of a former French governor of Pondicherry and his Portuguese wife. The last of the letters was sent from Botany Bay in February 1788. It was therefore one of the very earliest letters sent from Australia to Europe.

I was similarly privileged at the *Bibliothèque centrale du Muséum national d'histoire naturelle*, when I consulted a letter written by the botanist Lamartinière from Botany Bay in the same month. Yet another letter from Botany Bay is held in the *Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France* and was written by the expedition astronomer Joseph Lepaute Dagelet (1751–c.1788) to the Marquis de Condorcet. In 1788 Condorcet was the permanent secretary of the *Académie des sciences*. My permission to use the *Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France* was kindly signed by the current permanent secretary of the academy, Madame Catherine Bréchnac. While working at the *Institut de France*, I was disappointed not to be able to see Lapérouse's original orders preserved in the adjoining *Bibliothèque Mazarine*. This was because of the fragility of the documents. I may yet be able to see a digitised copy. There are other versions and I am keen to cross-reference them in search of previously overlooked or deliberately excluded details.

To make the most of my limited time in Paris, my working week was often spent in a variety of institutions with meshing opening hours. Most archives and libraries in Paris only allow five manuscripts or books to be requested each day. The Arsenal branch of the *Bibliothèque nationale* was a delightful exception: it allows ten books to be requested each day.

The collections of the *Bibliothèque nationale* are vast: over 40 million items including 14 million books. The annual budget is a staggering 254 million euros, of which I contributed 60 euros for my reader's ticket. On a number of occasions industrial strikes, the Paris floods and security alerts affected my work at the *Bibliothèque nationale*, so too did the library's computerised catalogue and ordering system. I was surprised by the number of times the request system did not recognise reference codes from the library's own online catalogue. On several occasions during my residency, I also needed to use the collection of the *Département des cartes et plans* in the Richelieu building. It was undergoing renovation and its collections had been moved temporarily to the library's Mitterrand site. Individual items could not be requested with the normal online ordering system. One had to arrive in person, at a particular part of the library, and complete a paper form before the few designated daily deliveries from the stacks. At times such obstacles reduced my efficiency, but at least I could put aside items for use on another day and there were rich pickings to be had. The *Bibliothèque nationale's* manuscript collection is also meant to have an online ordering system accessible via the library website. Alas, it does not work. Instead, the exasperated researcher has to go to the seventeenth-century *Galerie Mazarine* at the Richelieu site, fill out a request form by hand and then wait forty-eight hours. Ironically, notification is by e-mail. Unlike other French libraries and archives, the BNF does not allow personal photography of its manuscripts and microfilms. As a result, I ended up with a 346 euros copying bill. Fortunately, since September 2015, the library has allowed pages from most modern books to be copied personally.

Albi

In April I spent a week in Lapérouse's hometown, the wonderful red-brick episcopal city of Albi in Tarn (Languedoc). This visit enabled me to gain some understanding of where the explorer spent his childhood and to do research in the *Archives départementales du Tarn* and the *Médiathèque d'Albi Pierre Amalric*. Both these institutions hold important original manuscripts which I was permitted to copy. Searching notarial documents in the archives, I found a previously unknown testament that Lapérouse's father signed three days before his death. I was very warmly received at the *Musée Lapérouse*, which also has a good collection of documents, books, paintings and artefacts. I am particularly grateful to Monsieur Pierre Bérard, Monsieur Bernard Jimenez and Madame Armelle de Brondeau who went out of their

way to facilitate my research. Monsieur Bérard kindly drove us to see the nearby farm of ‘Lapeyrouse’, given to the future explorer by his father so that he could add its name (with some spelling variation) to his own family name Galaup, in the manner of the nobility, on joining the navy. Madame Marie-Christine Pestel (descendant of Lapérouse’s sister Victoire), who lives in the *Château du Gô*, birthplace of the explorer, was also very knowledgeable and welcoming, as was her son Monsieur Jean-Marie Pestel. Madame Pestel invited us to dinner. She let me photograph her historic home and also the portrait of Louise Eléonore Broudou. I was touched by the informality and warmth of her family. Susan sat in Lapérouse’s chair. Jean-Marie Pestel kindly drove us back to our accommodation at the Albi YHA after dinner.

Ancillary research

Lapérouse was a young midshipman aboard the *Formidable* during the Battle of Quiberon Bay in November 1759. There were hundreds of French killed and badly wounded on this vessel. Lapérouse was one of those wounded and taken prisoner. French records (and his previous biographers) are unclear as to what happened to him after his surrender and when, exactly, he returned to France having given his parole. In 1989 I did research at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich among the Sick and Hurt Board papers and I thought it likely that this same record series offered the best prospect of solving the mystery of Lapérouse’s fate after the Battle of Quiberon Bay. I will always be grateful to my kind and generous English cousin, Pauline McGregor Currien, who went to Greenwich on my behalf and assisted me by researching this question with meticulous skill. I aided her with copies of numerous documents I found in the *Archives nationales*, in Paris, and this proved a very fruitful cross-channel collaboration. In Vannes, on 10 December 1759, the future explorer gave his word of honour not to fight against Britain until formally exchanged (for a British officer of equivalent rank), signing his parole as ‘*François Lapérouse, garde de marine*’. The document also has significance for the ongoing, sometimes heated, debate with those who still assert that the explorer’s name should be written ‘La Pérouse’ (with two words), rather than as he himself signed it with one word ‘Lapérouse’.

I must also acknowledge the assistance of my wife Susan who accompanied me during numerous research excursions in Paris and its environs, but also undertook independent research for me at the *Archives nationales d’Outre-Mer* in Aix-en-Provence. This was to learn more of the

vessel which brought the naturalist Jean-Nicolas Dufresne back to France and to identify a number of *archives privées* relating to Lapérouse's in-laws, associates and superiors.

Macau

On my way to Paris, I had a stopover in Macau. Lapérouse visited the former Portuguese colony in January 1787 and recruited a dozen Chinese sailors there. They were the first Chinese to visit New South Wales and probably Australia. The *Arquivo Historico de Macau* was something of a disappointment. The catalogue was very idiosyncratic and there are evidently large gaps in the Portuguese records for the eighteenth century. Although I failed to discover the names of Lapérouse's Chinese sailors, I gained valuable contextual information on the French expedition's visit. I also learned more about the Portuguese governor Bernardo Aleixo de Lemos (1754–1826) and life in Macau in the late-eighteenth century. I was also there in the same month of the year as Lapérouse. The Augustinian monastery where he set up his observatory (for navigational astronomy) was essentially re-built in 1874. Susan and I went in search of historic images that might shed light on what it looked like a century before and we were kindly assisted by Carla Maria Figueiredo, an architect with the Instituto Cultural de Macau. My hunt focused on the sketches and paintings of an interesting British painter named George Chinnery who lived in Macau for many years. In the Macau Central Library the local studies librarian, Luís Crisóstomo Lopes, showed me a number of reproductions of Chinnery sketches in two publications. I also did research on the eighteenth-century Chinese market for Alaskan sea otter furs. Lapérouse delegated Jean-Nicolas Dufresne to sell a large number of such furs in Macau before returning to France. They had been gathered by the expedition in Alaska.

Madeira

The Portuguese island of Madeira, some 600 kilometres west of the North African coast, was Lapérouse's first landfall after leaving France. In Paris I had found a list of plants that the botanist Boisseau de Lamartinière collected during his visit to Madeira and I wanted to retrace the likely route of his botanising. One of these plants was later published by Lamarck and I have a tentative chain for seeds Lamartinière sent back to Paris, which were then passed on to a nursery which was the source of Lamarck's type specimen.

I also wanted to research the individuals Lapérouse met in Madeira and the places he visited. On our first day on the island we took a local bus to Monte, one of the high points overlooking the capital Funchal. We then walked to the Church of Nossa Senhora do Monte built in 1741. Along the path is a drinking fountain constructed for parishioners by Charles Murray (c. 1733–1808), a native of Philiphaugh in Scotland, who came to Madeira in 1771 in the employ of the wine merchants Scott, Pringle, Cheap & Co. Murray was on my research schedule because he entertained Lapérouse on his visit to Madeira in August 1785. He was then the British consul on the island and I would learn more about him and his estate near the church when I visited the *Biblioteca Pública Regional*. Susan accompanied me to the *Archivo regional de Madeira* where we were assisted by the archivist Dr. Maria da Cunha Paredes. We found no mention of the Lapérouse expedition in the correspondence of the secretary of Governor Diogo Pereira Forjaz Coutinho. However, I learned more about the governor himself and almost certainly identified the French *chargé d'affaires* (Antonio Jose Monteiro) who aided Lapérouse in resupplying the expedition. Visiting the *Jardim Botânico* and the native bay forests further inland provided valuable additional orientation on Lamartinière's botanical collecting. The Franciscan monastery in Funchal was almost certainly visited by Lapérouse's Franciscan naturalist and chaplain Père Receveur. Earlier, in 1768, it was visited by Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander during the *Endeavour* voyage and I had their description. I could not visit the monastery myself, because it was demolished in 1866, but I found copies of an early-nineteenth-century lithograph of the building in both the *Frederico Freitas* and the *Quinta das Cruzes* museums in Funchal.

Manila

On my way home to Australia after my Paris residency, I had a stopover in Manila. Lapérouse visited Manila in August 1787, so it was a good opportunity to visit yet another of his landfalls during the same month of the year and without major additional expense. Aside from walking around the remnants and reconstructed parts of the old city, 'Intra Muros', over four days I did research at the National Library, National Museum, the Tchinoy Centre and Santo Tomas University. I gathered valuable details on the individuals Lapérouse met in Manila. I had limited time and did not attempt to visit the port of Cavite. The ferry across the bay is no longer operating.

Furthermore, the peninsula was heavily bombarded during the Second World War and the silhouette across the bay looked radically different from that represented by the expedition artist Duché de Vancy in 1787. The historic tip of the peninsula is also the location of a military base not normally accessible to the public.

Edward Duyker

Australian Catholic University/University of Sydney