

# Revealing Père Receveur: A Portrait Beneath our Noses?

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Claude-François-Joseph Receveur, later also known as ‘Père Laurent’ Receveur, was a chaplain and naturalist aboard the *Astrolabe* during Lapérouse’s fateful expedition (1785–1788). A former soldier who became a Franciscan, he died at Botany Bay, New South Wales, on February 17, 1788, not yet thirty-one years of age. Although Receveur was not the first Frenchman buried in Australia, he was the first Catholic priest and the first scientist to be interred here. His grave is one of the oldest European monuments on the east coast of Australia and is also the site of annual commemorative religious observances.

In February 2011, I published a monograph on Receveur’s short life.<sup>1</sup> I argued that he probably died from a slowly accumulating subdural haematoma, caused by a head wound sustained earlier in Samoa and perhaps complicated by scurvy. I rejected assertions that he was killed by Aboriginal people.

Although we do not have any of Receveur’s journals or natural history specimens, several of his letters home during the voyage were still in the possession of his family in the late 1830s. In 2010, I went in search of these original letters in his birthplace, Noël-Cerneux, and the nearby

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Duyker, *Père Receveur: Franciscan Scientist and Voyager with Lapérouse* (Engadine, NSW: Dharawal Publications, 2011).

city of Besançon. In 1844, Abbé Prosper-Fulgence Verdot,<sup>2</sup> curate of the commune of Vesoul, mentioned the letters in an unpublished manuscript: ‘Recherches historiques sur le Canton de Russey’, which I found in the Bibliothèque d’Étude et de Conservation, Archives Municipales, Besançon. Furthermore, Verdot made tantalising reference to transcriptions of the letters when he stated: ‘I have given a copy of the most interesting [letters] in a manuscript entitled “Recherche historique sur la partie limitrophe des montagnes de la Suisse, adressé à l’Académie de Besançon\* en 1837”’.<sup>3</sup> While this title does indeed appear in the academy’s published *compte rendu* of January 30, 1838, p. 177, it is without any text and I could not locate the manuscript in the academy’s collection.

Nevertheless, another local historian, Canon Jean-Marie Suchet, either had access to this manuscript or Receveur’s original letters, because he acknowledged Verdot’s ‘communication’ in an article he published in 1865.<sup>4</sup> Verdot died in 1871. Suchet died in 1904. Neither the letters nor Verdot’s extracts are listed among Suchet’s books and manuscripts auctioned in Dijon in 1924.<sup>5</sup> Nor are they separately catalogued in the Bibliothèque and Archives municipales de Besançon, nor in the Archives diocésaines. If they have survived, it is not known where. Fortunately, we still have substantial extracts published by Suchet in his article of 1865. In 2011, I included an appendix with extracts from these letters and their very first English translation in my monograph.

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<sup>2</sup> For a biographical account, see Joseph Marie Morey, *L’abbé Verdot : Vicaire Général de Besançon, ancien curé de Vesoul* (Vesoul: Lépagnez, 1874).

<sup>3</sup> P.-F. Verdot, ‘Recherches historiques sur le Canton de Russey’, Bibliothèque d’Étude et de Conservation, Archives Municipales, Besançon, Ms 1671, 1844, 18–19.

<sup>4</sup> J.-M. Suchet, ‘Le P. Receveur, Aumônier de l’Astrolabe : Discours prononcé le 28 janvier [1865] à la séance publique de l’Académie des sciences, belles-lettres et arts de Besançon’, *Annales franc-comtoises : Revue religieuse, historique et littéraire* deuxième année, tome iii (1865): 17.

<sup>5</sup> Me Mourot & E. Rebourseau, *Catalogue de manuscrits et de livres sur la Franche-Comté provenant des bibliothèques du conseiller Fr.-Nic.-Eug. Droz des Villars, 1735–1805 et du chanoine Suchet, 1819–1904, dont la vente aura lieu les 24–27 novembre 1924 à Dijon*, par Me Mourot, commissaire priseur, assisté de M. Etienne Rebourseau, libraire (notices réd. avec la collab. de Edouard André et Jean-Baptiste Mercier), Dijon: E. Rebourseau, 1924, 76.

None of the aforementioned sources offered any portrait of Père Receveur. Ironically, he appears to have been indirectly present, in two engravings I used as illustrations in my monograph. He was, as it were, under my nose all the time. On June 2019, I was sitting in the Phillips Reading Room of the Widener Library at Harvard University, and looking at a book which contained a copy of Louis-Joseph Masquelier's (1741–1811)<sup>6</sup> familiar engraving of the visit of the Lapérouse expedition to Macao.<sup>7</sup> There is a friar in the image and I suddenly thought that it might be worthwhile to re-examine the original sketch on which it was based.<sup>8</sup>



Père Receveur's grave at La Perouse, Sydney, NSW, Franciscan Provincial Archives (1930s)

On my laptop at Harvard, I had digital copies made during research in the library of the Service historique de la Défense, at the Château de Vincennes, in March 2016. All the surviving original sketches from the Lapérouse

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<sup>6</sup> Also known as 'Masquelier père', E. Bénézit, *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs de tous le temps et de tous les pays*, vol. 7 (Paris: Ernest Gründ, 1976), 240.

<sup>7</sup> M. L. A. Milet-Mureau, ed., *Voyage de La Pérouse autour du monde*, Atlas, plate no. 40 (Paris: Imprimerie de la République, an V, 1797).

<sup>8</sup> Gaspard Duché de Vancy, 'Vue de la ville de Macao à la Chine, 1787', Service historique de la Défense, Château de Vincennes, SH 352, dessins originaux du voyage de Lapérouse, annotated 'no. 90'.

expedition are held there. Some were brought back to Paris by Jean-Nicolas Dufresne who left the expedition in Macao; the rest were brought back by Barthélemy de Lesseps (1766–1834) who left the Lapérouse expedition in Petropavlovsk. It then occurred to me to re-examine Gaspard Duché de Vancy's original sketch of the expedition's visit to the island of Santa Catarina, off the coast of Brazil.<sup>9</sup> It, like the Macao sketch, was later engraved as an illustration for Milet-Mureau's 1797 edition of Lapérouse's journal. I had even used a mirror detail of the engraving as the basis for the cover design of my *Receveur* monograph.<sup>10</sup>

When I compared the detail of the friar in the Brazil sketch with the one in Macao, I suddenly realized that the round-faced friar portrayed in two different places across the globe was the same individual. On the screen, I also enlarged the area of the knotted cord cincture around the waist of the friar in the Brazil sketch and realized that it was visibly pale. At first glance, it had seemed too dark for a white Franciscan cord but then I realised that the artist's shadowing had probably produced this effect. It seems highly unlikely that this friar was simply a member of a local Franciscan community who was sketched by Gaspard Duché de Vancy in Brazil, and had then miraculously reappeared in Macao. It is much more reasonable to conclude that he was a member of the Lapérouse expedition, ashore with the artist. There was another priest within the expedition's ranks, the astronomer Abbé Jean-André Mongez, chaplain of the *Boussole*, but he was not a Franciscan. He belonged to the abbaye de Sainte-Geneviève, Paris, which followed the rule of Saint Augustine. Thus, he presumably wore a black habit with a leather belt rather than the distinctive white knotted cord of the Franciscans (hence the popular French name for the latter order '*cordeliers*').

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<sup>9</sup> Gaspard Duché de Vancy, 'Vue de Sainte Catherine au Brésil 1, 1787', Service historique de la Défense, Château de Vincennes, SH 352, dessins originaux du voyage de Lapérouse, annotated 'no. 75'.

<sup>10</sup> 'Vue de l'Île Ste Catherine', engraving by Le Pagelet from an original sketch by Gaspard Duché de Vancy (died circa 1788) in Milet-Mureau, M. L. A. (ed.), *Voyage de La Pérouse autour du monde*, Imprimerie de la République, an V (1797), National Library of Australia, PIC U4638, <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-136113237/view>.

When the Lapérouse expedition visited Monterey, California in 1786, Duché de Vancy did a sketch of the reception they received at the Spanish mission. The original is now lost, but a few years later, in 1791, the Spanish Malaspina expedition visited Monterey and the artist Tomás de Suria apparently copied Duché de Vancy's sketch. It is preserved in the Museo Naval in Madrid, but is reproduced (plate 1) in Jeanne van Nostrand's *A Pictorial and Narrative History of Monterey, Adobe Capital of California 1770–1847*, California Historical Society, San Francisco, 1968, copies of which are held in the National Library of Australia and the library of the University of Sydney. Yet, another version in ink, wash and pencil (21.5 x 25.8 cm), attributed to José Cardero, is held in the Bancroft Library in Berkeley, California: 'Copia de un dibujo que deja el Pintor del Conde dela Perouse a los Padres de la Mision del Carmelo en Monterey' (BANC PIC 1963.002:1311—FR):



Jose Cardero, Copy of Duché de Vancy's sketch of the reception of the Lapérouse expedition at Monterey, California (1791–1792), UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library, CA  
<http://www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf509nb5m2/?order=> , <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/>

Although a very basic sketch, Cardero's copy has a friar in the centre of the image who, in my opinion, has surprisingly similar features to the friar portrayed in the Macao and Brazil Duché de Vancy sketches.

The resemblance in three separate images is unlikely to be accidental. Below you can see the juxtaposed details and judge for your yourself.



Far left, detail from Cardero's copy of Duché de Vancy's sketch of the reception of the Lapérouse expedition at Monterey, and right, detail from Duché de Vancy sketches of The Lapérouse expedition at Macao and Brazil, Service historique de la Défense, Vincennes



Detail from Duché de Vancy's Brazil sketch, Service historique de la Défense, Vincennes