



D'Entrecasteaux In Search of La Pérouse

Edward Duyker links the Bruny d'Entrecasteaux expedition to items in the Library's Collection

Shortly before his execution, Louis XVI is said to have asked: 'Is there any news of M. de La Pérouse?' At the time, the fate of the missing explorer—who had departed Botany Bay on 10 March 1788 and was never seen again by Europeans—was something of a national obsession. Unbeknown to those who waited in Europe, sometime in June 1788 it appears a cyclone had struck La Pérouse's vessels, the *Astrolabe* and the *Boussole*, and driven them onto reefs off Vanikoro in the Solomons.

On 9 February 1791, France's National Assembly had agreed to send a search-and-rescue mission. The man chosen to lead this expedition, the first humanitarian mission on a global scale, was Antoine-Raymond-Joseph Bruny d'Entrecasteaux, born in Aix-

en-Provence in 1737. Two gabares or storeships of approximately 350 tonnes each were chosen for the expedition. The first, the four year old *Truite* from Lorient, was renamed *Recherche* ('search', or 'research'). The second, the 10 year old Toulon-built *Durance*, was renamed *Espérance* (hope) and was placed under the command of Jean-Michel Huon de Kermadec (1748–93). Although d'Entrecasteaux retained overall command of the expedition, the *Recherche* was placed under the command of Alexandre d'Hesmivy d'Auribeau (1760–94), some of whose original letters are now held (at MS 1654) in the Library's Manuscript Collection.

Destined for a long voyage, the *Recherche's* gun-deck was cleared of all but six cannon, and cabins were constructed along each side to accommodate officers and scientists. Another deck was constructed below the gun-deck. (These changes, incidentally, were very similar to those made to the collier *Earl of*

'Fête donnée au Général D'Entrecasteaux par Toubau, Roi des Iles des Amis'
Reproduced from: *Relation du voyage à la recherche de la Pérouse: fait par ordre de l'Assemblée Constituante pendant les années 1791, 1792...* (Paris: Chez H. J. Jansen, Imprimeur-Libraire, an viii de la République, [1800])

Pembroke before she was transformed into His Majesty's Barque *Endeavour*. The *Endeavour*, however, did not have a poop cabin on the after quarter-deck, opening onto a covered wheel-house and crowned with a windmill to grind wheat!

D'Entrecasteaux appears to have attracted many capable officers to serve in his expedition. The enormous social changes in France had already led many officers of noble descent to flee the country. Despite the dangers and hardships involved, d'Entrecasteaux's expedition offered a less extreme alternative to emigration; revolutionary turmoil, some officers

thought, might subside while the expedition was away.

The expedition also included two hydrographers (Beautemps-Beaupré on the *Recherche*, and Miroir-Jouveny on the *Espérance*), four naturalists (Labillardière, Deschamps, Riche and Ventenat), a mineralogist (Blavier), two artists (Piron and Chailly-Ely), two astronomers (Bertrand and Pierson) and a gardener, Félix Delahaye, who later become the Empress Joséphine's chief gardener at Malmaison. Of these savants, the mineralogist Blavier, the artist Chailly-Ely and the astronomer Bertrand would leave the expedition at the Cape of Good Hope. Ventenat and Pierson, who were both priests, also served as chaplains to the expedition. The savants were not subject to naval discipline and, with the exception of Deschamps, they all appear to have had revolutionary sympathies.

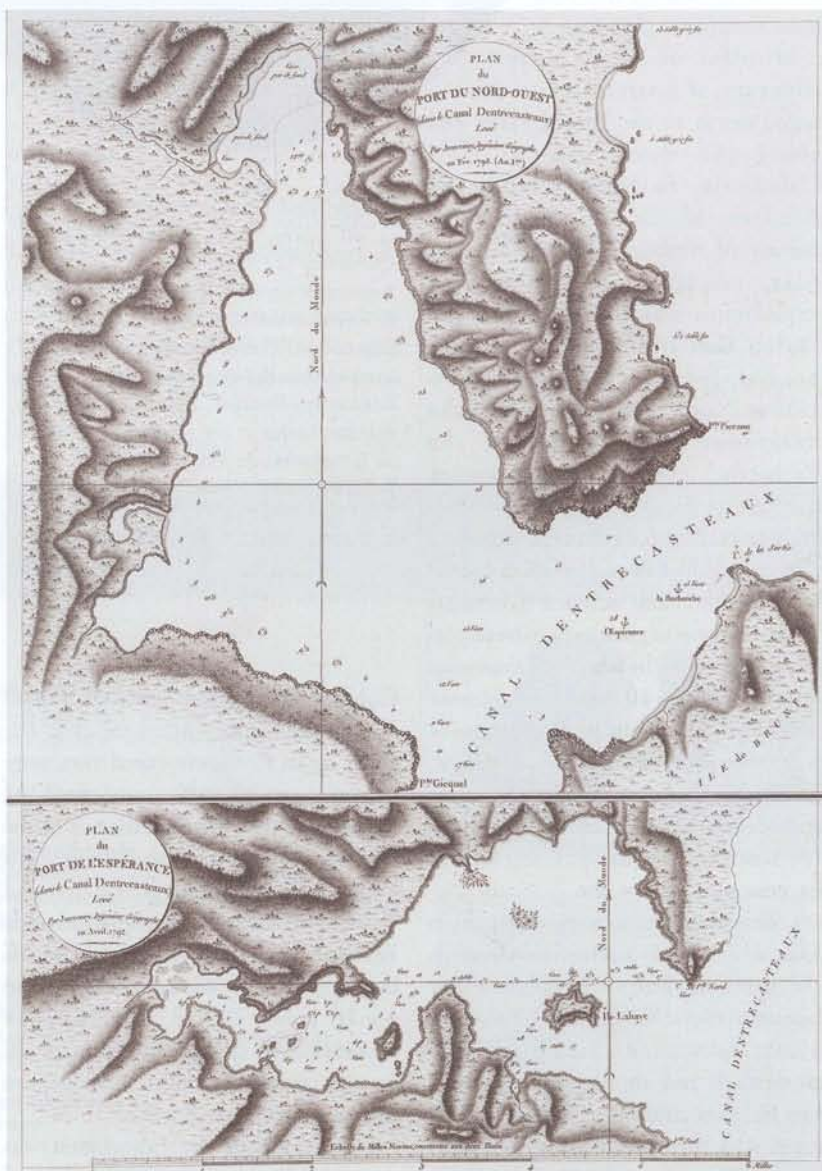
The crew was overwhelmingly Breton, but there were also men from ports in Normandy and on the Mediterranean. One crew-member, Louis Girardin, was not a man at all, but the daughter of a former royal gardener turned wine merchant at Versailles. This was Marie Louise Victoire Girardin (1754–94), who had been widowed in 1781 and in the early days of the Revolution had fled disgrace and paternal wrath after giving birth to an illegitimate child by a disloyal lover. She had disguised herself as a man and journeyed to Brest with a letter of introduction to Kermadec's widowed sister. As a steward she had been exempt from medical examination and enjoyed a small but separate cabin. Although

the truth was soon suspected by her crewmates, Marie Louise maintained her assumed identity with dogged determination. With operatic dash, she was even slashed on the arm in a duel with an impertinent assistant-pilot whom she had challenged. There is evidence, in La Motte du Portail's journal, that she may eventually have formed a relationship with Mérite, the young enseigne on the *Recherche*. (Sadly, both died of dysentery within a day of each other, in December 1794.)

The *Recherche* and *Espérance* left Brest on 28 September 1791. After visiting Tenerife, the expedition called at the Cape of Good Hope, where d'Entrecasteaux received a dispatch from the Isle-de-France (Mauritius) advising him of reports attributed to Captain John Hunter,

who was supposed to have seen inhabitants of the Admiralty Islands 'adorned with French uniforms and marine sword belts'. D'Entrecasteaux was suspicious of these reports, but nevertheless decided to investigate them. First, however, he would fulfill his orders to determine the exact locations of the islands of Amsterdam and St Paul in the southern Indian Ocean. It was not until 28 March 1792 that Amsterdam Island was sighted and their survey work commenced.

Having already taken 43 days to reach the island group, d'Entrecasteaux was reluctant to linger. For almost a month, however, extremely violent winds blew from the west and southwest without interruption. They forced d'Entrecasteaux to abandon, for the time being, his plan to



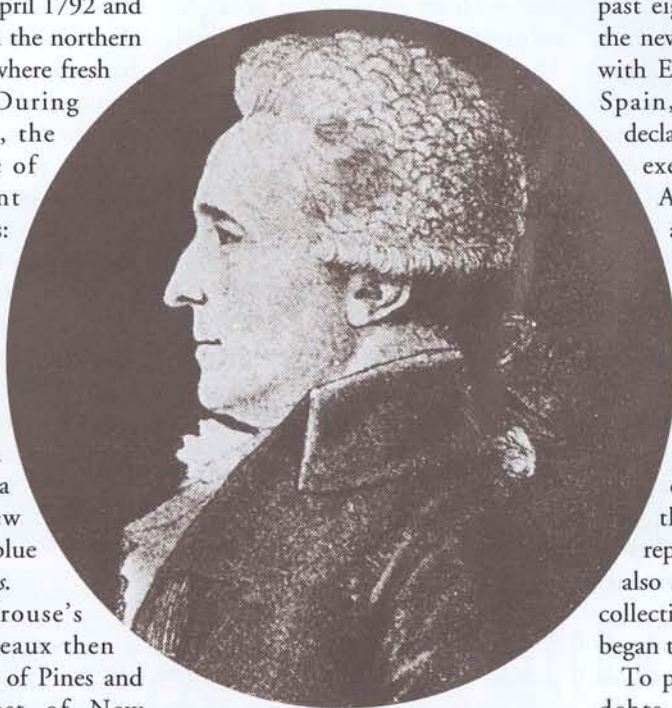
'Plan du Port d'Espérance (dans le canal D'Entrecasteaux levé par Jouveny, Ingénieur Géographe, en Avril, 1792)' Reproduced from *Atlas du voyage de Bruny-D'Entrecasteaux...* par C.F. Beautemps-Beaupré (Paris: Dépôt general des cartes et plans de la marine et des colonies, 1807)

reconnoitre the south-west coast of New Holland. He would instead visit Van Diemen's Land to take on fresh water and find timber to repair his vessels. The expedition reached Van Diemen's Land on 21 April 1792 and on 23 April anchored in the northern arm of Recherche Bay where fresh water was found. During its five-week sojourn, the expedition made one of its most significant geographical discoveries: duly named as the D'Entrecasteaux Channel. Furthermore the ships' naturalists, according to Ventenat, collected some 5000 plant specimens which included some 30 genera and about 100 new species, including the blue gum *Eucalyptus globulus*.

Mindful of La Pérouse's itinerary, d'Entrecasteaux then sailed north to the Isle of Pines and along the west coast of New Caledonia, to New Ireland, the Admiralty Islands, and to the Dutch colony of Ambon in the Moluccas. Alas, no trace of the missing expedition was found. From the Dutch East Indies the expedition headed for south-western New Holland and after negotiating the hazardous 'Archipelago of the Recherche', made another important discovery on 9 December 1792: Esperance Bay. The French remained anchored off Observatory Island until 17 December, and here the naturalists made many other important botanical discoveries—including *Anigozanthus rufa* (or kangaroo paw), *Chorizema ilicifolia*, *Banksia repens*, *Dryandra nivea* and *Eucalyptus cornuta*. D'Entrecasteaux then sailed east, but was forced to break off his survey of the south-west coast of New Holland because of lack of water.

Once more he sailed to Van Diemen's Land, anchoring there in the southern arm of Recherche Bay between 20 January and 27 February 1793, to replenish. This was a particularly important visit because of the ethnographic observations which resulted from the very positive and friendly contact with the Tasmanian

Aborigines, and because of the discovery of the Derwent Estuary. From Van Diemen's Land, the *Recherche* and *Espérance* sailed on to Tonga; visited Balade in New



Charles-Paul Landon, engraver (1760–1826), after a sketch by Edme Quenedey (1756–1830) Antoine-Raymond-Joseph Bruny D'Entrecasteaux Signed by d'Entrecasteaux in 1791 and presented to the hydrographer Beautemps-Beaupré. Published by Baron Etienne Hulot in the *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*, 3e Trimestre, 1894
Rex Nan Kivell Collection; Pictorial Collection

Caledonia (for five weeks), passed Vanikoro Island (unaware that the relics of La Pérouse's expedition were strewn upon its reefs), confirmed the location of the principal islands of the Solomons, and discovered and surveyed the D'Entrecasteaux and Trobriand Islands in the Louisiade Archipelago. Finally, just before his death (probably arising from scurvy) on 20 July 1793, d'Entrecasteaux accomplished important survey work on the coasts of eastern New Guinea and northern New Britain.

Command of the expedition was assumed by the ailing 33-year-old

d'Hesmivy d'Auribeau and reached Surabaya, in Java, in late October 1793. There its members were shocked to learn that France and the Netherlands had been at war for the past eight months. Even worse was the news that France was also at war with England, Prussia, Austria and Spain, that a republic had been declared, and Louis XVI had been executed on 21 January 1793.

Although the Dutch eventually accepted the safe conducts which the expedition carried from the States-General, the expedition began to disintegrate along Royalist and Republican lines. With the agreement of the largely royalist officers under d'Auribeau, the Dutch seized the ships and imprisoned the republicans. The naturalists were also separated from their scientific collections and papers. Disease then began to take a terrible toll.

To pay the expedition's victualling debts to the Dutch, d'Auribeau agreed to sell the *Recherche* and the *Espérance*. On 21 August 1793 he died of dysentery and was succeeded, as commander, by Elisabeth-Paul-Edouard de Rossel (1765–1829). Two weeks before the ships were auctioned, Rossel, seven other officers, the hydrographer Beautemps-Beaupré (1766–1854) and 23 crew members set sail with a convoy of 30 Dutch merchantmen bound for the Netherlands. On one of the vessels, the *Hougly*, Rossel embarked the expedition's papers, maps and natural history specimens in some 143 cases. They would all be captured by HMS *Sceptre* off Saint Helena. France had conquered the Netherlands; and in British eyes Dutch ships were now enemy ships. The republicans imprisoned in Java were eventually released in prisoner-of-war exchanges.

On his return to France the naturalist Labillardière (who is also represented in the Manuscript Collection at MS 7394) ultimately succeeded in his representations to Sir Joseph Banks, whom he had met in London in 1783, to secure the release of the natural history specimens. With them he would produce his magnificent two-volume *Novae*

Hollandiae plantarum specimen (1804–06) and his *Sertum austro-caledonicum* (1824–25), pioneering works of Australian and New Caledonian botany. Labillardière also published his *Relation du voyage à la recherche de la Pérouse* in 1800. A copy of this is held by the National Library, together with two English-language editions of 1800 and Labillardière's magnificent *Atlas*, which comprised engravings of Piron's sketches, but also drawings of plants by the great Pierre-Joseph Redouté (1759–1840) and birds by Jean-Baptiste Audebert (1759–1800). Meanwhile, Rossel, who remained in Britain until the signing of the Peace of Amiens, would edit d'Entrecasteaux's journal and publish it in 1808 (along with his own journal and observations) as the two-volume *Voyage de d'Entrecasteaux envoyé à la recherche de La Pérouse*. (A copy of this, too, is held by the Library.)

The National Library holds a precious copy of Beautemps-Beaupré's *Atlas du voyage de Bruny D'Entrecasteaux* (Paris, 1807) which summarised the cartographic results of the expedition—described by Matthew Flinders as 'some of the finest specimens of marine surveying, perhaps ever made in a new country'.

The Library also holds a copy of Beautemps-Beaupré's *Methodes pour la levée et la construction des cartes et plans hydrographiques* (1811), Richard Copeland's 1823 English translation, and an original manuscript of his notes on the cartographic work of d'Entrecasteaux, Freycinet and Carteret (MS 4045). There are accounts of the expedition and of its commander's life by the Chevalier Fréminville (1838) and Baron Etienne Hulot (1894) and more recently Admiral Maurice Dupont (1983), together with Hélène Richard's meticulously researched *Le voyage de d'Entrecasteaux à la recherche de La Pérouse* (1986) and Frank Horner's excellent *Looking for La Pérouse: D'Entrecasteaux in Australia and the South Pacific, 1792–93* (1995). Furthermore there are two valuable studies which focus on particular landfalls by the expedition: Georges Pisier on New Caledonia (1976) and Brian Plomley on Tasmania (1993). Finally, the account of Pierre Jurien de la Gravière (1722–1849), one of d'Entrecasteaux's junior officers, is also accessible in an edition edited by Jacques Vichot in 1977.

Although d'Entrecasteaux failed to discover the fate of La Pérouse—this would ultimately be achieved by Peter

Dillon in 1826, and confirmed by Dumont d'Urville in 1828—over a period of nearly two years he had held his ideologically divided expedition together in often dangerous and unknown waters with patience, discipline and exemplary skill as a mariner. Without these skills they might all have shared the fate of La Pérouse, or played out the destructive fury of the Revolution on the quarter-deck, long before they reached Java.

DR EDWARD DUYKER is a Sydney historian. His most recent book (with his mother Maryse Duyker) is an English translation of Bruny d'Entrecasteaux's journal: *Voyage to Australia and the Pacific 1791–1793* (MUP, 2001).

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