

Sir Joseph Banks and the Baudin Expedition: Exploring the Politics of the Republic of Letters

Nicole Starbuck

During the late eighteenth century, French and British scientific voyagers shared a preoccupation with the mysteries of Australia and a connection to one individual: Sir Joseph Banks. Once referred to as “the common centre of we discoverers,”¹ Banks played a leading role in the international scientific community as President of the Royal Society of London and he wielded great influence with the British government.² In addition to promoting several British expeditions,³ he also assisted French voyages of discovery—such as those led by Jean-François de la Pérouse and Bruni d’Entrecasteaux⁴—according to the Enlightenment belief in the universal

Nicole Starbuck is a PhD student at the University of Adelaide. As part of a collaborative ARC project on “The Baudin Legacy: A new history of the French scientific voyage to Australia (1800-1804),” she is writing a thesis on the Baudin expedition’s stay at Sydney, June-November 1802. She has presented conference papers on the British colonists’ perspective of the expedition and on the natural history collection gathered in the colony by Baudin and the French scientists.

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¹ Quoted in O.H.K. Spate, *Paradise Found and Lost*, vol. 3 of *The Pacific since Magellan* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1988), 198.

² For insight into the roles played by Joseph Banks in politics and science, see the following texts by John Gascoigne, *Joseph Banks and the English Enlightenment: Useful Knowledge and Polite Culture* (Cambridge, 1994) and *Science in the Service of Empire: Joseph Banks, the British State and the Uses of Science in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, 1998).

³ Gascoigne, *Joseph Banks and the English Enlightenment*, 14.

⁴ Banks famously supplied the La Pérouse expedition with two dipping needles, instruments used previously by James Cook. See John Dunmore, *The Life of Jean-François de La Pérouse: Where Fate Beckons* (Sydney, 2006), 184. After the natural history collections from the d’Entrecasteaux expedition had been seized by the English as spoils of war, Banks campaigned for their return, recovered them and returned them to the expedition’s botanist, Jacques-Julien de Labillardière. He told the Frenchman, “The science of two nations may be at peace while their politics are at war.” See F. Horner, *Looking for*

benefit of scientific endeavor.⁵ His support of French science has in fact been well documented.⁶ However, as historian John Gascoigne demonstrates, his attitudes toward scientific endeavor and the activities of the French could be complex, for he was committed not only to the Republic of Letters but also to the interests of his nation.⁷ Banks steadfastly served the state, in particular, through his pivotal position in the colonial affairs of New South Wales.⁸ By the early nineteenth century, this role had gained greater importance than it had had in the nascent years of the colony when La Pérouse and d'Entrecasteaux entered Australian waters. Therefore, a combination of both scientific and colonial interests marked the connection commencing in 1800, between Banks and the contemporary voyages of Englishman Matthew Flinders and Frenchmen Nicolas Baudin.⁹

It is often pointed out that the Baudin expedition took place in the midst of the Napoleonic Wars; however, it should be highlighted that it also coincided with a period historian Jonathon King refers to as “the golden age of expansion” in New South Wales.¹⁰ Largely due to fear of French intervention in the region, Banks had collaborated with the governor of the colony, Philip Gidley King, to organize a series of British expeditions to explore the south coast of Australia in the hope of

La Pérouse: D'Entrecasteaux in Australia and the South Pacific, 1792-1793 (Melbourne, 1995), 240-43.

⁵ Rendering support to foreign discovery ships was a tradition that began in 1779 with Benjamin Franklin. Franklin issued the following instructions to the captains and commanders of ships acting by commission from the Congress of the United States concerning the expedition led by Captain James Cook: if Cook's ship “should happen to fall into your Hands, you would not consider her as an Enemy, nor suffer any Plunder to be made of the Effects contain'd in her, nor obstruct her immediate return to England, by detaining her or sending her into any other Part of Europe or to America, but that you would treat the said Captain Cook and his people with all Civility and Kindness, affording them, as common Friends to Mankind, all the assistance in your Power.” The French minister, M. de Sartines, followed the example provided by Franklin and issued similar instructions to the French Navy and French privateers. See Gavin de Beer, *The Sciences Were Never at War* (London, 1960), 26-27.

⁶ For broad studies concerning the support that Joseph Banks gave to French scientists, see the following works: Harold B. Carter, *Sir Joseph Banks, 1743-1820* (London, 1988); John Gascoigne, *Science in the Service of Empire*; de Beer, *The Sciences Were Never at War* and “The Relations between Fellows of the Royal Society and French men of Science when France and Britain were at War,” *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 9 (May 1953): 244-99; John Fornasiero, Peter Monteath and John West-Sooby, *Encountering Terra Australis: The Australian Voyages of Nicolas Baudin and Matthew Flinders* (Kent Town, 2004), 338-39; and J.H. Maiden, *Sir Joseph Banks: The “Father of Australia”* (Sydney, 1909).

⁷ Gascoigne, *Science in the Service of Empire*, 147-62.

⁸ Joseph Banks, as botanist aboard the *Endeavour*, had accompanied Captain James Cook ashore at Botany Bay, New South Wales, in 1770. Shortly after returning to England, he recommended Botany Bay as the location for a penal colony. The colony was established in 1788 and thereafter he played a significant part in directing the affairs of New South Wales through close relationships with the governors of the colony and his influence with the British government. See Carter, *Sir Joseph Banks*.

⁹ For comprehensive accounts of the Australian voyages of Nicolas Baudin and Matthew Flinders, see Anthony J. Brown, *Ill-Starred Captains: Flinders and Baudin* (Fremantle, 2004); René Bouvier and Edouard Maynial, *Une aventure dans les mers Australes: l'expédition du Commandant Baudin, 1800-1803* (Paris, 1947); John Dunmore, *French Explorers in the Pacific, II: The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1969); Miriam Estensen, *The Life of Matthew Flinders* (Crows Nest, 2002) Jean-Paul Faivre, *L'Expansion française dans le Pacifique de 1800 à 1842* (Paris, 1953); Fornasiero, Monteath and West-Sooby, *Encountering Terra Australis*; Frank Horner, *The French Reconnaissance: Baudin in Australia 1801-1803* (Melbourne, 1987); and Geoffrey C. Ingleton, *Matthew Flinders: Navigator and Chartmaker* (Sydney, 1986).

¹⁰ Jonathan King and John King, *Philip Gidley King: A Biography of the Third Governor of New South Wales* (Sydney, 1981), 96.

strengthening Britain's imperial claim to the land (fig.1).¹¹ Following a proposal from ambitious young navigator Matthew Flinders, who had earned his reputation in



Figure 1 Carte générale de la Nouvelle Hollande, 1808 (Freycinet map) – from “Voyage de découvertes aux terres Australes.” Image courtesy of the State Library of South Australia.

Australian waters,¹² in 1801 Banks's aspirations culminated in a plan to circumnavigate the continent. Flinders would set sail aboard the *Investigator* nine months after his French counterpart, Nicolas Baudin, both intent on studying the geography and natural history of Australia. Baudin, a “favorite of the scientists of the Muséum” [of Natural History] in Paris,¹³ had considerable experience in leading such voyages.¹⁴ He had instigated this particular expedition himself and, while it would serve French commercial and strategic interests, it had no colonial objectives.¹⁵

¹¹ On the collaboration between Governor King and Joseph Banks in arranging British expeditions to the south coast of Australia, see Ingleton, *Matthew Flinders*, 60-61.

¹² Matthew Flinders had first sailed to New South Wales in 1794 aboard the *Reliance* under Captain John Hunter. With George Bass in 1796, he charted Port Jackson, Botany Bay and Broken Bay on the *Tom Thumb*, and in 1798 aboard the *Norfolk* they proved the existence of Bass Strait and became the first to circumnavigate the island of Tasmania. Again on the *Norfolk*, in 1799 Flinders explored the coastline from Port Jackson to the northern tip of Fraser Island. See Estensen, *The Life of Matthew Flinders*, 55-61, 74-80 and 97-106.

¹³ Jean-Paul Faivre, “Foreword” in Nicolas Baudin, *The Journal of Nicolas Baudin*, trans. Christine Cornell (Adelaide, 1974), xi.

¹⁴ Nicolas Baudin had captained numerous botanical expeditions: three voyages for Joseph II, Emperor of Austria, aboard ships all named the *Jardinière*, and for the French, with the support of director of the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle, Antoine-Laurent de Jussieu, aboard the *Belle-Angélique*, 1796-98. Exotic specimens from this last voyage featured in a parade on the Champs Elysées, on 28 July 1798, in celebration of the Republican Day of Freedom. See Fornasiero, Monteath and West-Sooby, *Encountering Terra Australis*, 18.

¹⁵ For further information about the objectives of the Baudin expedition, see Baudin's proposals for the voyage that he submitted to the Minister for Marine and the Colonies, undated, Archives nationales (hereafter AN) BB4995 and to the members of the Institut National, dated 6 floréal an VIII [26 April

Nevertheless, it was inevitable that a French voyage to Australia at this time would be of not only scientific interest to Banks, as well as to Governor King and Flinders, but also of political concern.

Anglo-French relations, with their intricate mix of scientific, diplomatic and imperial concerns, played a critical part in the European exploration of Australia—a point illustrated with particular clarity by Banks’s connection with the Baudin expedition. When Baudin sailed from Le Havre in 1800 to “increase the mass of human knowledge,”¹⁶ it was, as shall be demonstrated, with support from Banks in his capacity as advocate of the Enlightenment Republic of Letters. Yet, in setting out to explore Australia, the French would encroach on what Banks undoubtedly perceived as his territory. Both as the “father of Australia”¹⁷ and as the “international patron of Pacific travel,”¹⁸ Banks was to take a strong interest in the progress of Baudin’s voyage and even play a part in its destiny.

The full nature of his association with the expedition, though, is yet to be explored. Historians have described his role in brief, acknowledging that Banks was concerned about the French presence in Australian waters but concluding, most often, that his overall conduct was in line with the supportive, cosmopolitan, ideals of the republic of learning.¹⁹ While this is a valid conclusion, certain details remain unclear. Further insight may be gained by examining the correspondence Banks held with the Admiralty, the Flinders expedition and colonial authorities in New South Wales. These letters reveal a great deal about his political considerations regarding the Baudin expedition as well as his interest in its scientific work. It is therefore possible not only to judge which of his concerns—international scientific endeavour or the national colonial project—was more significant overall but to discern precisely how he balanced them in his involvement with the French voyage.

It was to promote “the progress of useful sciences” that Banks initially rendered his assistance to Baudin’s vessels, the *Géographe* and the *Naturaliste*.²⁰ Through anthropological, geographic and astronomical observations, coastal surveys and natural history collections, Baudin and his men promised to make a great contribution to Europe’s understanding of the natural world and, in particular, the still largely mysterious land of Terra Australis. It would be expected that the scientific results of their voyage would have been of considerable interest to Banks: however, this is an element of his association with the Baudin expedition about which little is actually known.

When asked by some of France’s most eminent savants for help in obtaining passports for Baudin’s voyage of discovery, Banks responded promptly. Within a month he notified the French government that he had “made immediate application to the King’s Ministers” and was happy to find in them “every disposition to promote as

1800], AN BB4995, as well as the plans and instructions that were issued to him by the Ministry of Marine and the Institut and which are reproduced in Jacqueline Bonnemains, ed., *Mon voyage aux Terres Australes: journal personnel du commandant Baudin* (Paris, 2000), 29-120.

¹⁶ “Plan of Itinerary for Citizen Baudin” in Baudin, *Journal*, 1.

¹⁷ Maiden, “*Father of Australia*”.

¹⁸ Gascoigne, *Science in the Service of Empire*, 158.

¹⁹ For example, see Gascoigne, *Science in the Service of Empire*, 126, 159, 160 and Fornasiero, Monteath and West-Sooby, *Encountering Terra Australis*, 11, 34, 36, 338. Less balanced conclusions have been reached by Carter, who writes that “the sciences were at much at war as the battle fleets they sought to avoid” (see Carter, *Sir Joseph Banks* (London, 1980), 366) and Maiden, who claims that “jealousy seems to have been foreign to Banks’s nature” (see Maiden, “*Father of Australia*”, 167).

²⁰ Letter from Joseph Banks to Louis-Guillaume Otto, dated 13 June 1800, in de Beer, *The Sciences Were Never at War*, 93.

all men of education ought to do the increase and improvement of human knowledge by whatever nation it may be undertaken.”²¹ Further, he gave the French his promise that if any difficulties arose in the arrangements of the passports, he would “most willingly” use his “utmost endeavours and promote arrangements on that head satisfactory to the National Institute provided they do not interfere with the necessary precautions which every nation must adopt for the security of their Colonies and the consequent prosperity of the Realm.”²² From his initial involvement with the expedition, Banks showed willingness to conform to the tradition of scientific cooperation but also highlighted his concern for British interests.

Given that he was a leading member of the Republic of Letters, a “gentleman scientist” said to possess “an omnivorous curiosity” and in particular an “enormous botanical appetite,”²³ it would be expected that Banks would have maintained contact with the organizers of Baudin’s voyage. It was the Institut National that was chiefly responsible for the Baudin expedition: its members, particularly Antoine-Laurent de Jussieu, carried out most of the preparations, maintained contact with Baudin throughout the voyage, and managed the organization and publication of its results. Banks had regular contact with these men and was in fact a corresponding member of the institute, maintaining a particularly cordial relationship with Jussieu.²⁴ Had Banks been eager to learn about the expedition’s scientific work, he could easily have inquired with his fellow “friends of science.” Surprisingly though, beyond arrangements for the passports no correspondence between Banks and the French savants concerning the expedition has yet come to light.

However, Banks did communicate about Baudin’s voyage with fellow Britons: his contacts in the colony of Port Jackson. In 1802, the *Géographe* and the *Naturaliste* sought respite at the British colonial port. They were hosted there for over five months according to the conditions of their passports and, as Governor Philip Gidley King mentioned, following “a pressing recommendation on the part of Mr Banks” (une recommandation pressante [...] de la part de M. Banks).²⁵ The French savants took full advantage of this opportunity, recording detailed observations of the environment and the colony and gathering an immense collection of natural history specimens.²⁶ Based on their extended encounter with the French at Port Jackson, King, Lieutenant-Colonel William Paterson and Robert Brown, botanist with the Flinders expedition, sent information to Banks concerning the expedition’s scientific collection. Each of these men, particularly King and Paterson, had long known and enjoyed cordial

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Greg Dening, *Mr Bligh’s Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty* (Cambridge, 1992), 24; Gascoigne, *Joseph Banks and the English Enlightenment*, 238; Geoffrey C. Ingleton, *Charting a Continent: A Brief Memoir on the History of Marine Exploration and Hydrographical Surveying in Australian Waters from the Discoveries of Captain James Cook to the War Activities of the Royal Navy Surveying Service* (Sydney, 1944), 36.

²⁴ Fornasiero, Monteath and West-Sooby, *Encountering Terra Australis*, 11.

²⁵ J.F.E. Hamelin, *Jacques Félix Emmanuel Hamelin des Essarts, Capitaine de Frégate Commandant le Naturaliste, Corvette destinée avec celle du Géographe sous les ordres du Capitaine Nicolas Baudin pour une expédition de découvertes, armée et équipée pour 4 ans*, II, entry dated 7-8 floréal an X [27-28 April 1802], AN 5JJ42.

²⁶ Nicole Starbuck, “La Collection Scientifique du Port Jackson” (paper presented at the conference, ‘A la conquête des Terres Australes (1800–1804): de la découverte à la collecte’ Museum of Natural History, Le Havre, and University of Le Havre, 6-8 December 2007).

relationships with Banks. In fact, both King and Paterson largely had Banks to thank for their positions in the colony.²⁷

King's connection with Banks was based mainly on a shared interest in the welfare and development of British possessions in New South Wales. As Harold B. Carter states, he had a thorough understanding of Banks's desire to expand the colony and make it more profitable by establishing additional settlements and discovering useful products in the region.²⁸ He also comprehended and supported Banks's desire to support voyages of discovery in the universal cause of scientific endeavor. Following the French expedition's stopover, King wrote to Banks: "They were received by us with that attention and hospitality which would have made the most lasting impression on their minds, and I am bold to say would have equaled the impression made on your coadjutor, Cook's, mind by the hospitalities of Major Behm and his countrymen."²⁹ Banks maintained a regular correspondence with King concerning all matters relating to the colony: political, scientific and commercial.

It is curious to note though that very little of the information King sent to Banks concerning the expedition related to natural history. He referred to this subject on only two occasions. The first reference concerned the commercial potential of a mineralogical study. French mineralogist Charles Bailly had made experiments on ferruginous stones and found that a substance might be extracted from them for glazing porcelain. King regretted, however that Bailly had been unable to find any limestone in the region.³⁰ Bailly and his colleague Louis Depuch were the first mineralogists to set foot in Australia, and, consequently, the results of their work on the composition of the land in New South Wales was immensely important to the colony.³¹ This was just the sort of "useful" knowledge that Banks had been seeking. He instructed King to send him some samples of the stones so that he could have them analyzed in London. King's second reference to the expedition's scientific results was simply a brief, general comment: "[Baudin's] collections in natural history are immense; he sends them by the *Naturaliste*."³² It appears that when it came to the scientific work of the Baudin expedition, King deemed only the discoveries promising commercial benefit to the colony as worth reporting to Banks.

Lieutenant-Colonel Paterson also wrote very little about the work of the French savants. This is particularly surprising, as Paterson was not only a military

²⁷ See Carter, *Sir Joseph Banks*, 357; Manning Clark, *A History of Australia, I: From the Earliest Times to the Age of Macquarie*, (Melbourne, 1962), 161; King and King, *Philip Gidley King*, 63 and D.S. Macmillan, "Paterson, William (1755-1810)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 17 vols. (Melbourne, 1967), 2: 317.

²⁸ Carter, *Sir Joseph Banks*, 364.

²⁹ Letter from Philip Gidley King to Joseph Banks, written in Sydney and dated 9 May 1803, in *Historical Records of New South Wales*, vol. 4: *Hunter and King, 1800-1802*, ed. F.M. Bladen (Sydney, 1896), 133.

³⁰ Letter from Philip Gidley King to Joseph Banks, written in Sydney and dated 5 June 1802, in Bladen, *Historical Records of New South Wales*, vol. 4, 782. As Australian geologist Wolf Mayer explains, the British had been particularly eager to find a significant limestone deposit. See Wolf Mayer, "The quest for limestone in colonial New South Wales, 1788-1825," in *Four Centuries of Geological Travel: The Search for Knowledge on Foot, Bicycle, Sledge and Came*, ed. Patrick N. Wyse Jackson (London, 2007), Geological Society special publication no. 287, 325-42. Miriam Estensen also points out that mineral deposits of commercial value were of great interest to the British government and to Joseph Banks personally. See Estensen, *The Life of Matthew Flinders*, 263.

³¹ Wolf Mayer, "Deux géologues français en Nouvelle-Hollande (Australie): Louis Depuch et Charles Bailly, membres de l'expédition Baudin (1801-1803)," *Travaux du comité français d'histoire de la géologie*, 3 série, t. XIX, no. 6 (séance du 8 juin 2005): 95-109.

³² Letter from Philip Gidley King to Joseph Banks, written in Sydney and dated 2 October 1802, reproduced in Bladen, *Historical Records of New South Wales*, vol. 4, 844.

man but also a member of the Royal Society, with a passion for natural history. His letters to Banks concerned mainly scientific specimens and observations. Moreover, during the period of the Baudin expedition's visit to Port Jackson, Paterson had become well acquainted with the French savants and their work. He arranged guides, accommodation and transport to facilitate their excursions into the countryside, at times accompanied them in the field, and openly admired their collections. Indeed, he was in an ideal position to provide Banks with information about the Frenchmen's discoveries. However, he only mentioned the expedition in passing. In the context of his botanical collections he referred to some plants that Baudin had given him, collected from Timor and various places along the coast of Australia.³³ He also asked Banks to send him a copy of the official account of the French voyage once it had been published.³⁴ Why Paterson did not provide more detail is difficult to explain. Perhaps, in his role as a colonist, he sensed that there was a strong political element in British relations with the expedition and thus felt that it was rather the governor's place than his own to report on the French guests, including their scientific work.

Robert Brown, by comparison, was relatively unencumbered by colonial priorities. His stopover at Port Jackson, aboard the *Investigator* with Matthew Flinders, corresponded with a month of the Baudin expedition's sojourn, and he was able to compare notes with some of the French savants. This information he clearly felt free to offer to Banks. He explained that few of the many savants who left France with Baudin were remaining by the time the expedition reached Port Jackson, and he promised to send Banks a list of the French scientific staff. He also gave his opinion on the skills of the botanist aboard the *Naturaliste*, Théodore Leschenault de la Tour, whom he had accompanied on an excursion: "he is [...] as far as I could judge from my very short acquaintance with him an acute observer." Finally, Brown came to the actual collection:

In Van Diemen's Land, Mr Leschenault inform'd me, he had not found more than 200 species of plants. On the west they do not appear to have collected very much; however, on this subject my information was not distinct. A small collection of plants made at Shark's Bay I saw. They differ'd but little from those of King George Sound.³⁵

Unfortunately, Brown wrote this letter before the *Géographe* arrived in Port Jackson carrying most of the savants and the greater part of the expedition's natural history collection. It is evident nevertheless that Brown felt a sense of rivalry concerning his French counterparts and assumed it was shared by his correspondent. In fact, his assumption appears to have been correct. When Banks responded to this letter, he remarked: "Many thanks for your news respecting the French discovery ships. They do not, by what I have been able to learn, appear likely to prove formidable rivals to you as Investigators. They seem too much afraid of the land."³⁶ Obviously, Banks had been monitoring the French expedition's progress, but with the hope of

³³ Letters from William Paterson to Joseph Banks, written in Sydney and dated ca. August 1803 and 13 May 1803, *The Papers of Sir Joseph Banks*, State Library of New South Wales, series 27.28 and 27.27.

³⁴ Letter from William Paterson to Joseph Banks, written at Port Dalrymple [Launceston] and dated 7 January 1805, *The Papers of Sir Joseph Banks*, State Library of New South Wales, series 27.32.

³⁵ Letter from Robert Brown to Joseph Banks, written at Port Jackson and dated 30 May 1802, in Bladen, *Historical Records of New South Wales*, vol. 4, 776.

³⁶ Letter from Joseph Banks to Robert Brown, written at Soho Square and dated 8 April 1803, reproduced in *The Letters of Sir Joseph Banks: A Selection, 1768-1820*, ed. Neil Chambers (London, 2000), 245.

comparing the size of their collection to that of the Flinders expedition rather than out of an interest in the discoveries themselves. This supports the claims made by Carter and Patricia Fara that the Baudin expedition made Banks anxious about “the spectre of new gains in natural history beyond his reach, of new species found for other herbaria than his own.”³⁷

Certainly, there are no records indicating that Banks took an interest in the French natural history collection following its arrival in France. When the *Naturaliste*, which carried the collection from the expedition’s first campaign, was captured and held at the British port at Spithead, Banks was involved in her release. He brought the matter to the attention of King George III, who immediately issued orders for the ship to be liberated. His letter notifying Captain Hamelin of the release of the *Naturaliste* was brief and functional. He made no mention at all of the immense natural history collection the ship was carrying, a collection Jean-Paul Faivre reports was ten times the size of that returned to Britain by the three voyages of Captain Cook.³⁸

In fact, it seems that the natural history collection of the Baudin expedition figured very little overall in Banks’s correspondence. It could be inferred then that although Banks did provide assistance that facilitated the gathering and preservation of this collection, which was only wise given the political climate at that time, he was not motivated by a personal scientific interest in the specimens and objects it comprised. Perhaps he was content to wait until the results of the expedition had been published; however, it seems that, at least at the time of the voyage, he was curious about only those discoveries that could potentially benefit the economy of Port Jackson and Britain. The most likely explanation for this is that another issue concerning Baudin’s voyage absorbed his interest: the French presence in his colonial territory.

New South Wales held special significance for Banks, and, as mentioned, he had been attempting to improve and expand Britain’s possessions in the region. Furthermore, he was eager to resolve the question of whether or not a strait existed dividing the landmass of New Holland from New South Wales. Such a waterway would provide access into the interior where he hoped that fertile land and materials useful to manufacturing might be discovered. Moreover, as Carter points out, “This was the last great puzzle of the Australian continental outline to be solved and there were many good strategic reasons, in the state of war with the French, why it should be.”³⁹ Charting this part of Australia’s coastline, particularly what was commonly referred to as the “Unknown Coast” to the west of Bass Strait, and searching for the mythical north-south strait also happened to be two of the chief objectives of the Baudin expedition. Of course, this caused Banks some concern. But was it as simple as fearing that the French would establish a settlement in the region, as historian Geoffrey Ingleton claims?⁴⁰

Significant insight may be gained from a letter that Banks addressed to the Earl of Spencer, First Lord of the Admiralty, in December 1800. In this letter, Banks suggested the route and schedule he believed “may be pursued with advantages by the

³⁷ Carter, *Sir Joseph Banks*, 366. Patricia Fara believes that it was in response to the imminent voyage of Baudin to Australia that Banks sent British naturalist George Caley to Port Jackson to collect specimens for the Kew gardens “which would otherwise have been added to the Royal Gardens at Paris.” See Patricia Fara, *Sex, Botany and Empire: The Story of Carl Linnaeus and Joseph Banks* (Cambridge, 2003), 137.

³⁸ Jean-Paul Faivre, ‘La France découvre l’Australie: l’expédition du Géographe et du Naturaliste (1801-1803)’ *Australian Journal of French Studies* 2, no. 1 (1965): 58.

³⁹ Carter, *Sir Joseph Banks*, 363.

⁴⁰ Ingleton, *Matthew Flinders*, 67.

Investigator discovery ship.”⁴¹ Significantly, he based his suggestion upon the proposed itinerary of the Baudin expedition and his suspicions about the actual intentions of the French. Banks believed that scientific endeavor was not in fact the chief objective of the expedition, as the French claimed it to be. “It seems probable,” he states, “that [Baudin] had other business to perform before his scientific plans were to be Carried into execution.” This supposition was based on his shrewd observations concerning Baudin’s itinerary—an itinerary he found to be so ill-conceived that he could not believe it to be genuine. He noted that October, the month when the French ships sailed from France, was “the worst possible time of Sailing for a Ship bound to discover in New Holland, as she must naturally arrive there when the Commencement of winter renders an investigation of the Southern parts very inexpedient, and when the S[outh] E[ast] Monsoon renders the Northern parts almost inaccessible.”⁴² In addition, Banks pointed out that the object of the voyage had been stated to be the discovery of the northwest coast of Australia, which he stated was “a part of the Coast better known to navigators than any other.”⁴³ Banks presumed that Baudin had been ordered to stopover and spend at least two months at Mauritius (then known as the Isle or Ile de France) and La Réunion (Reunion Island) on his way to Australia. Although in this letter he does not explain what business he believed Baudin intended to pursue in the French colony, Banks clearly assumed it was important. He claimed that Australia’s north-west coast was only the expedition’s “alleged destination,” intended as an excuse in case the ships encountered British cruisers near the French islands of the Indian Ocean. This point will be revisited further on.

Banks perceived that this “political manoeuvre” on the part of the Baudin expedition would provide a crucial advantage to Matthew Flinders.⁴⁴ If, as Banks predicted, Baudin did stay at Mauritius for at least two months and then chose to wait until at least October, when the weather would be favorable, to begin his exploration of Australia, then Flinders, leaving in January 1801, would reach the coast of Australia around the same time as Baudin. Banks suggested that Flinders commence his exploration on the southwest coast “in order to secure themselves from being anticipated by the French.”⁴⁵ The season would not be conducive to a close, accurate examination of the coastline, but Banks believed that a survey could be made “sufficient to anticipate the French and possibly to discover some harbours that may be of infinite utility when the Coast is afterwards minutely and accurately examined.” If Flinders were to be fortunate enough to discover an opening in the shore likely to lead to an inland sea or strait, he was to take at least a rough sketch of it, which would “ensure to him and to the English nation, the honor of discovery.”⁴⁶ This gamble on the part of Banks did limit French discoveries on the south coast of the Continent,

⁴¹ Letter from Joseph Banks to George John Spencer, written at Soho Square and dated December 1800, in Chambers, *Letters of Sir Joseph Banks*, 219.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.* In fact, this coastline was not at all well-known and neither was the charting of this coast, which was the main objective of the expedition. In the itinerary for the Baudin expedition, Count Charles-Pierre Claret de Fleurieu explained, “Although the *Gulf of Carpentaria* and the *north* coast of *New Holland* were discovered as early as 1628 by the Dutch, and although the maps that they have published of them give details which seem to indicate that a complete examination of them has been made, this part of *New Holland* is still more or less unknown. It appears, even, that no navigation has visited it since the first period and that no account of the Dutch discovery of it has been published. Everything remains to be done and known in this area.” See “Plan of Itinerary” Baudin, *Journal*, 5.

⁴⁴ Letter from Joseph Banks to George John Spencer, written at Soho Square and dated December 1800, in Chambers, *Letters of Sir Joseph Banks*, 219.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

though not as far as he had hoped thanks to Baudin's determination and resourcefulness, and prevented the French commander from being the first European to confirm that New Holland and New South Wales formed one, entire, continent.

The fact that Banks intended his expedition to forestall Baudin's survey of and potential discoveries on the south coast was well understood by Flinders, his men and also the colonists at Port Jackson. When the departure of the Flinders expedition from Spithead was delayed, Flinders complained to Banks that the French were gaining time upon him.⁴⁷ Later, during his stopover at Port Jackson, Flinders wrote, "I am happy, Sir Joseph, in announcing to you the success of our voyage this far, and scarcely less so to say that before we met the French ship *Le Géographe* the most interesting part of the south coast of New Holland had undergone the examination of the *Investigator*."⁴⁸ Correspondingly, Banks assured Flinders that according to a French publication he had read, the "French captains will not be formidable rivals to you, they seem to [...] have missed a very many of the openings you have anchored in."⁴⁹ Robert Brown's report to Banks reflected a similar perspective and, more specifically, demonstrated a clear understanding of the vulnerability of the harbors and islands recently discovered in Bass Strait by British colonial explorers. Brown wrote of the French,

they do not seem to have very accurately survey'd Basses Strait. Cap'n Baudin and the *Géographe* we met after having pass'd thro' it. He had neither been in Port Dalrymple or Western Port, nor had he discover'd Port Phillip, or even King's Island. When we met him he had not once anchor'd on the south coast.⁵⁰

Similarly, Governor King provided Banks with great detail on Baudin's geographic work and again compared it to that of the Flinders expedition. In October 1802 he wrote, "They have circumnavigated all the west and SW coasts of this country, but I do not think they have examined it so closely as not to have left much for Captain Flinders to do." Monitoring the progress of each expedition in their geographic discoveries, the success of the British and, as far as he was concerned, the failure of the French, was clearly of primary importance to Banks.

However, it was not his only concern. As observed earlier, he believed that the expedition's real purpose was to visit Mauritius and Réunion Island. But what business did he believe Baudin was to carry out there? In January 1801, he explained to Governor King

⁴⁷ Letter from Matthew Flinders to Joseph Banks, written aboard the *Investigator* at Spithead and dated 3 June 1801, in Bladen, *Historical Records of New South Wales*, vol. 4, 381.

⁴⁸ Letter from Matthew Flinders to Joseph Banks, written at Port Jackson and dated 20 May 1802, in Bladen, *Historical Records of New South Wales*, vol. 4, 755.

⁴⁹ Banks explains that the publication was of a letter written by the gardener on board the *Géographe*, Anselm Riedlé, in which Riedlé complains of too seldom having had the opportunity to anchor in a harbour or to go ashore. It is important to note that Riedlé died before the Baudin expedition reached the south coast. His letter could only have concerned the first few months of the expedition's exploration of Australia, which were spent on the west coast where Flinders had not yet surveyed. See the letter from Joseph Banks to Matthew Flinders, written at Soho Square and dated 10 April 1803, Papers of Sir Joseph Banks 1745-1923 [manuscript], series 1: Correspondence and Papers of Sir Joseph Banks, National Library of Australia, ms 9/22.

⁵⁰ Letter from Robert Brown to Joseph Banks, written at Port Jackson and dated 30 May 1802, reproduced in Bladen, *Historical Records of New South Wales*, vol. 4, 776.

Two French ships sailed from [Le] Havre in October last for the avowed purpose of surveying the NW coasts of New Holland. Their vessels are the *Géographe* and *Le Naturaliste*, Commanded by M. Baudin. They have a passport from the Admiralty and they carry men of science of all descriptions.

I suspect their principal view is to visit the Isles of France and Bourbon and to come after the inhabitants to prevent them from giving up their allegiance to the Republic.⁵¹

If they visit you and I suppose they will it will be very desirable that you pick out of any of their people who will tell you the history of their visit to the French islands and as much as you can of what they have done there.⁵²

This letter adds an element to the history of the Baudin expedition and the roles played by Anglo-French relations and colonialism in that history that has not previously been recognized: clearly, Banks's political interest in the Baudin expedition extended beyond potential French discoveries or territorial claims in the region of New South Wales. There are several important points to note about this letter. First, as in his proposal to Spencer, he acknowledges that the expedition intended to carry out a certain amount of natural history and geographic work, but he does not believe this was its principal purpose. Second, although he implies that King should receive the expedition, he did not directly instruct the governor to render his assistance. Indeed, if this was the "pressing recommendation" that he spoke of to the French expeditioners, and indeed no other has yet come to light, it is hardly of the generous nature it was assumed to have been by the Frenchmen.⁵³ Third, neither does Banks request King to report to him about the expedition's discoveries and plans concerning its exploration of Australia. Finally, his only stated interest is in what he assumes to be the real and principal objective of the expedition: preventing the French colonists at Mauritius from giving up their allegiance to the Republic. Although he does not explain why he is so desirous to receive an account of this business, and it is possible that it was partly due to plain curiosity, the reason is not too difficult to surmise.

The French colony at Mauritius played an important role in the early history of the British colony at Port Jackson. During the years of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, which had covered most of New South Wales's colonial history up to the period of the Baudin expedition, French men of war and privateers based at Mauritius proved a significant obstacle to British ships bringing supplies to Port Jackson.⁵⁴ The French colony also threatened the peace and welfare of the Australian settlements in more direct ways. King had been troubled on several occasions by merchants from the island attempting to sell spirits at Port Jackson, which he had

⁵¹ The colonial administration at Mauritius had been growing increasingly independent as local interests clashed with those of the French India Company and then of the French government. Since 1794, the French colonists had been refusing to abide by the National Convention's decree to abolish slavery. In fact, when the Baudin expedition arrived in Port Louis in 1801, colonial authorities asked the commander whether he had a secret agent on board, sent by the French government, to enforce the emancipation order. See Dunmore, *Life of Jean-François de La Pérouse*, 58-61 and Edward Duyker, *François Péron, An Impetuous Life: Naturalist and Voyager* (Melbourne, 2006), 69.

⁵² Letter from Joseph Banks to Philip Gidley King, written at Soho Square and dated 1 January 1801, *King family—Correspondence and memoranda, 1775-1806*, 37, Mitchell Library, Sydney, reference A 1980/2 CY 906.

⁵³ Hamelin refers to King's comment in the context of the warm reception he found at Government House. See *Journal de Hamelin*, vol. I, entry dated 7-8 floréal an X [27 April 1802], 101. AN 5JJ42.

⁵⁴ Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History* (Melbourne, 1966), 50.

strictly prohibited in an effort to curb the liquor trade. King also feared that the French, from their base at Mauritius, would make an attack on the colony. In 1803 he pointed out to Lord Hobart that: “the voyage from thence may be done in less than seven weeks.”⁵⁵ Indeed, the French colony was a problem for Port Jackson, British trade, and British mariners in general. If it were to come under British control, however, it would prove to be of immense strategic advantage. The French colonists themselves were alert to the desirability of their settlement. When the *Géographe* and the *Naturaliste* visited in 1801 to replenish supplies, the colonists at first took them to be British warships and, upon discovering they were in fact French discovery ships, attempted to keep them in the port so that if the British did attack, Baudin’s sailors could be conscripted to defend the colony. The British were indeed interested in possessing Mauritius and finally took it over in 1810. Banks’s assumption that Baudin had political business to pursue in the French colony was mistaken but, all the same, remarkably astute. Given the political climate at that time, he probably believed that the purpose he imagined was more likely than that of discovery in the South Seas.

Banks clearly had a strong and active political interest in the Baudin expedition. It is true that it was not unusual for him to mix science and politics; indeed, “the politics of great powers could rarely be divorced from scientific exploration,” states Gascoigne.⁵⁶ However, usually when there existed a political element to Banks’s actions in the realm of the Republic of Letters, it related to his use of science in the service of the state: for example, to advance commerce, manufacturing or agriculture, or to encourage positive foreign relations.⁵⁷ In the case of Baudin’s voyage, he actually lost faith in French integrity in the pursuit of scientific knowledge and sought to hinder the discoveries of the expedition.

Banks’s political perspective of the Baudin expedition was much deeper and more complex than has previously been recognized and his interest in the universal benefit of discovery played a markedly less significant role in his connection to the voyage than has been generally assumed. Through his loyal colonial network, he closely monitored the progress of Baudin and his men, and, in so doing, he demonstrated minimal interest in their scientific work and a preoccupation with the potential and actual French influence on New South Wales. His concerns were strong enough to lead him even to design a rival expedition, based on calculated assumptions about the objectives of Baudin’s voyage, and to seek actively information about the affairs of the French colony at Mauritius. Furthermore, given his prevailing concern for the colonial project and the fact that he showed such little interest in the scientific results of the expedition, it seems likely that the assistance he provided, purportedly in the cause of science, was actually largely motivated by a need to avoid conflict with French authorities and maintain advantageous links with French savants. The part Banks played in Baudin’s Australian voyage was shaped predominantly by concern not for “the increase and improvement of human knowledge,”⁵⁸ but for the welfare and advancement of New South Wales. As a result,

⁵⁵ Letter from Philip Gidley King to Lord Hobart, written at Sydney and dated 7 August 1803, *Historical Records of Australia*, series I, 26 vols. (Sydney, 1914-1925), 4:357.

⁵⁶ Gascoigne, *Science in the Service of Empire*, 160.

⁵⁷ For a general discussion of how Banks balanced his political and scientific interests, see Gascoigne, *Science in the Service of Empire*. A specific example is provided by Horner in his study of the d’Entrecasteaux expedition where he explores the political element in Banks’s efforts to return the natural history collection to Labillardière. See Horner, *Looking for La Pérouse*, 242-43.

⁵⁸ Letter from Joseph Banks to Louis-Guillaume Otto, dated 13 June 1800, in de Beer, *The Sciences Were Never at War*, 93-94.

although his assistance to some extent facilitated the Baudin expedition's remarkable achievements in geography and natural history, Banks the patriot significantly contributed to the marginalization of the French voyage in Australian history.