

H-France Review Vol. 15 (December 2015), No. 182

Jean Fornasiero and John West-Sooby, eds., *French Designs on Colonial New South Wales: François Péron's Memoir on the English Settlements in New Holland, Van Diemen's Land and the Archipelagos of the Great Pacific Ocean*. Adelaide: The Friends of the State Library of South Australia, 2014. xviii + 396 pp. Illustrations, appendices, bibliography, and index. \$65 AUS (hb). ISBN 978-1-876-154 72-1; \$35 AUS (pb). ISBN 978-1-876-154-75-2.

Review by Briony Neilson, University of Sydney.

In June 1802, the *Géographe* and the *Naturaliste*, the two ships of French navigator Nicolas Baudin, carrying 170-odd officers, sailors and scientists, came to anchor in Port Jackson, the main port of the fledgling British colony of New South Wales. Having surveyed the south coast of New Holland (present-day Australia) and encountering Matthew Flinders' expedition in the process, Baudin's ships would spend five months in the infant colony.

Officially, Baudin's voyage to the South Pacific was undertaken in the pure Enlightenment spirit of advancing knowledge. The presence of the French in Port Jackson between June and November 1802 was, likewise, supposedly simply practical—they needed to replenish supplies for their return journey. Certainly this was the version of events portrayed in *Voyage de découvertes aux terres australes*, the official account written by François Péron, the expedition's zoologist who later courted the political establishment.[1] Contemporary British newspapers similarly affirmed the altruistic aims of the French expedition. Behind the scenes, however, it was a different story. British officials were circumspect about the real motivations for the Baudin voyage, seeing it as a potential threat to British possessions.[2] Such concerns were understandable—after all, when the Baudin ships sailed out of Le Havre in October 1800 bound for the antipodes, the two countries had been at war. These worries, moreover, might well have boiled over had the British been aware of the secret *Memoir* of the expedition written by Péron between 1804 and 1806.

In *French Designs on Colonial New South Wales: François Péron's Memoir on the English Settlements in New Holland, Van Diemen's Land and the Archipelagos of the Great Pacific Ocean*, Péron's covert account—unpolished, unfinished and certainly never intended for publication—appears for the first time in its entirety in English translation. The complete text of the draft documents that comprise Péron's manuscript was published for the first time in French by Roger Martin in 1998.[3] The volume has been translated and presented by Baudin scholars Jean Fornasiero and John West-Sooby, who provide a meticulously researched contextual and analytical essay on the *Memoir*, its provenance and its historical significance. Both members of the founding team of researchers of the Baudin Legacy project (along with Margaret Sankey, Michel Jangoux and Nicole Starbuck), Fornasiero and West-Sooby have over the past decade produced an impressive corpus of work on Baudin's expedition to the Pacific (1800–1804), serving to shed new light on the history of early European contact with Australia, French-Australian connections, and European expansion into the South Pacific.[4]

Fornasiero and West-Sooby's translation of Péron's entire five-chapter account opens up this text to a wider, non-Francophone audience. Based on material evidence, Fornasiero and West-Sooby estimate that

the *Memoir* was written in two distinct phases: the first two chapters around 1804 (much of the content of these chapters appears in the *Voyage de découvertes*) and the remainder between 1804 and 1806. Five months was an unusually protracted period for an expedition team to spend in a foreign port, and Baudin's team was provided with a rich opportunity to assemble useful data on the status and functioning of a colonial society still in its early years of development, as well as to gather the necessary provisions for their long voyage back to France. In chapter one Péron offers a general picture of the natural environment and condition of British settlements on the east coast of New Holland and prospective ones on the coast, Van Diemen's Land (present-day Tasmania) and other islands and archipelagos of the Pacific, and New Zealand.

Towards the end of chapter one Peron's account takes on a decidedly political focus as he expresses outrage at the "absurd Act of Possession" of 1788 (p. 145), by which Britain effectively laid claim to New Holland and the entire Pacific Ocean. "[T]his ridiculous transfer of sovereignty" (p. 213) provided Britain with untold advantages: rights to all fishing in the southern seas to the exclusion of all other countries, greater opportunities for trade with China, and substantial profits through contraband trade with Peru and Chile (p. 274). Britain's cavalier seizure of New Holland and all islands in the Pacific constituted a real threat to the global balance of power. With New Holland providing a crucial launching point for the dispatch of ships, Spanish colonies on the west coast of America would be intensely vulnerable to attack.

Retreating momentarily from the overtly militant expression of the end of the opening chapter, chapter two, the longest of the five chapters, examines the organization of daily life and the state of trade in New South Wales. Péron provides a glowing assessment of the state of affairs, including the penal system; its combined system of hope and fear, he thinks, has highly positive, moralizing effects on the prisoners. The impression Péron offers of the state of the British settlements in New Holland is overwhelmingly positive. The British settlers have effectively harnessed nature, constructed basic infrastructure (e.g. roads linking townships and hospitals in Sydney, Parramatta and Hawkesbury) and established a bustling and profitable hub for the whaling and seal industries. In setting down solid roots for further development they play the cards of colonial dispossession to perfection, craftily maintaining friendly terms with the Indigenous people in order to more easily dominate them.

The final three chapters are decidedly more bellicose in tone and focus. Chapter three analyses the political situation in the Pacific, especially in relation to the security and interests of Spain's colonial possessions. Péron argues that Britain's interest in New Holland is strategic and global in reach; it is "a project in three parts, namely the conquest of the Spanish colonies or their emancipation, and in the expectation of one or the other of these two events, the establishment of a contraband trade, which will have the inevitable and immediate effect of giving her a joint share in the wealth of Peru and Chile" (p. 244). With Indigenous peoples in Peru and Chile hostile to the Spanish and the Spanish settlers themselves lacking in bravery, Péron says Spain's possessions are completely vulnerable and could easily fall under British control. Péron urges France and other powers to act to disrupt British power: "we must strike a blow at this international bogeyman at all costs, otherwise world trade will be in England's hands. One of the cruelest blows we can deliver her is to overthrow her nascent empire in the Southern Lands" (p. 248).

In chapter four Péron turns to the question of how this overthrow is to come about. He describes the available means of defense for the New South Wales colony and presents the best means available to the French of attacking it. The soldiers of the colony, Péron asserts, are weak, their skills atrophied through lack of use. The convicts (whom he consistently refers to as "slaves") are hardly enamored of their guards or inclined to defend a system that sent them to the far ends of the earth. Intriguingly, Péron points to the ready alliance that might be formed between invading French and Irish convicts. Their shared resentment towards the British makes them natural allies: "How often did we not see all of these unfortunate deportees, their eyes bathed in tears, heap curses on England, implore Bonaparte and call down upon their oppressors the moment of vengeance? How many attempts did they not make to escape on board our vessels, which they persisted in seeing as manned by their liberators and friends!" (p. 261).

Péron concludes in reference to the Irish that “this part of the population harbours the most implacable hatred of England and...should an attack take place, France can count on their unswerving devotion” (p. 264).

Having established the grounds for intervention, chapter five then presents an argument as to how France could maintain possession of the colony after taking it from the British. Péron presents three available options: destroy the colony, grant it independence or maintain possession. Destruction would be too appalling and would cast a pall on France’s standing in the world (as in the recent actions in Sierra Leone). Granting the colony independence would be unworkable as convicts could not be called on to suddenly govern themselves. Maintaining possession was thus the most attractive course of action. Péron envisaged the immediate release of political prisoners (i.e. the Irish) and their deployment as guards of common law convicts, whose sentences would be slightly reduced so as to win them over to their new French leaders.

Until the 1820s Péron’s were the only observations by a Frenchman of the British settlement. Péron’s depiction, based on an unusually protracted period of observation, contrasts noticeably with the accounts of other visitors to the colony. Alessandro Malaspina, dispatched by the Spanish on a five-year voyage to the Pacific, was far from impressed by what he saw in 1793: an underdeveloped society wracked with challenges and established on an inhumane system that violated prisoners’ rights. Malaspina considered transportation costly, unjust and dangerous for the wider stability of the Pacific. He expressed concern about the destabilizing impact Britain’s convicts were likely to make on the region: after they had served their sentence they were denied the right to return to the motherland and were thus likely to end up at large in the Pacific engaged in piracy. Malaspina was also highly pessimistic about the potential of Indigenous people to survive the invasion. Later French visitors Louis de Freycinet and Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, who visited in 1819 and 1825 respectively, were similarly uncomplimentary. By contrast, Peron’s glowing report in *Voyage de découvertes* served as a crucial resource for later advocates of France’s establishing its own penal colony on the British model.[5]

The *Memoir* is intriguing—in more ways than one. In it, Péron contends that the objectives of advancing knowledge and science simply provided cover for what was first and foremost a political venture: the French wanted to spy on British activities in New South Wales in order to position themselves and protect their own global interests. As Fornasiero and West-Sooby are careful to point out, however, there is no reason to believe Péron’s allegations that the Baudin voyage was undertaken primarily for political reasons. What appears probable is that Péron, a consummate opportunist, deliberately misrepresented the visit to Port Jackson in order to advance his own political ambitions. In their interpretative essay, Fornasiero and West-Sooby speculate that Péron’s glowing representation of the New South Wales colony was part of an overall strategy to reinforce the importance of French intervention and, in turn, to cement himself as the great authority on the subject. Péron aspired to follow in the footsteps of the intended recipient of the report, Antoine-François Fourcroy, whose own career straddled the worlds of both science and politics. Nevertheless Péron’s observations do reveal the multiple interests that underlay European movement in the Pacific.

Even if we take Péron’s account as primarily a vehicle for the advancement of a self-interested careerist it nevertheless offers fascinating insights into the mechanics of diplomatic relations between the French and colonial officials in the New South Wales colony, French perceptions of the British colonial project in New Holland, the nature of French intentions in exploring the South Pacific and the relationship between scientific knowledge and political power.

Until recently scholars in both French and English have tended to portray European interests in the South Pacific in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as being motivated by scientific curiosity, the peculiar whims of individual mariners and broad interest rather than by politics or commerce. According to this interpretation, in subsequent decades an important shift in priorities took place, such that by the 1830s European powers were concerned about maintaining strategic global ports

of call for reprovisioning and trading purposes.[6] In recent years, scholars looking at global dynamics have problematized this chronology. Alan Frost, for instance, highlights the importance of access to global markets in shaping Europeans' actions, arguing that it was strategic considerations as much as a need to address the convict problem that lay behind Britain's decision to establish a colony in Sydney.[7]

Skillfully set within its historical context by Fornasiero and West-Sooby, Péron's *Memoir* provides us with a wider perspective on the history of Australia's colonization by Europeans, as well as a window into the codes of seafaring during the volatile post-revolutionary period. Péron's insights stretch our picture of events and motivations to encompass more than just official British perspectives. The *Memoir* reveals the intensity of competition between European powers for access to trading ports and the tactical considerations lying at the heart of the diplomatic codes of civility governing relations at sea and in far-flung settlements. Reading the account, one cannot help but be struck by the contrast between the belligerent language Péron uses throughout and the civility that is said to characterize encounters between French and British. Adhering to the script of diplomatic interaction was crucial not only for ensuring a smooth passage through areas controlled by foreign powers, but also in the interests of assembling the most reliable information on those places which could then be used against them. Tensions were high and overseas possessions jealously guarded and enviously coveted. Nothing on the surface during the visit of the Baudin expedition pointed to any overt ambitions of the French to gazump the British in their takeover of lands in the antipodes.

Péron's account, enhanced by Fornasiero and West-Sooby's diligent contextual essay, gives us an acute sense of the suspicion that ran close to the surface in diplomatic exchanges and the competitive spirit which fueled colonial expansion. Péron's *Memoir* reveals the Baudin expedition to have been Janus-faced: both scientific and political, intended at once to aid humanity and enhance French interests. As Fornasiero and West-Sooby point out, there was nothing underhand about this dual intent: there was a tacit understanding among European powers that exploration was not just about expanding human knowledge. Echoing an observation made by Margaret Sankey, Péron's *Memoir* is characterized by the translators as a "curious mix of anglophilia and anglophobia" (p. 91).[8] It paints a portrait of a foundational period of modern Australia, situating the narrative of the fledgling colony in Port Jackson amid fierce European competition for supremacy in the Pacific. Not least among the insights gained from reading Peron's *Memoir* is that the conclusion that Britain's settlement of New Holland was motivated primarily by the need to address the convict problem recedes even further into the background.

NOTES

[1] As captain, Baudin should by rights have penned the account, but perished in Ile-de-France (present-day Mauritius) on the return voyage. In 1810 Péron himself succumbed to tuberculosis, leaving the account unfinished and the baton thus passed to Louis de Freycinet, who produced the second volume of the official account, along with the charts for both volumes.

[2] John West-Sooby, "Une expédition sous haute surveillance: le voyage aux Terres Australes vu par les Anglais," *Etudes sur le XVIIIe siècle* 38 (2010): 187-201.

[3] Roger Martin, ed., *François Péron, Mémoire sur les établissements anglais à la Nouvelle Hollande, à la terre de Diémen et dans les archipels du grand océan Pacifique* (Paris: Editions SPM, 1998).

[4] The Baudin Legacy project's website offers access to many of the expedition's documents (in both French and English): <http://sydney.edu.au/arts/research/baudin/project/>, cited July 29, 2015.

[5] Colin Forster, *France and Botany Bay: The Lure of a Penal Colony* (Carlton South, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1996), pp. 15-16, 26.

[6] Robert Aldrich, *The French Presence in the Pacific* (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 17-18.

[7] Alan Frost, *The Global Reach of Empire: Britain's Maritime Expansion in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, 1764-1815* (Carlton, Vic: Miegunyah Press, 2003).

[8] Margaret Sankey "The Baudin Experiment in Port Jackson, 1802: Cultural Encounters and Enlightenment Politics," *Explorations* 31 (2001): 23-24.

Briony Neilson
University of Sydney
brionyneilson@gmail.com

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172