

# Laperouse

Friends of the Laperouse Museum



Members Quarterly Newsletter

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## THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE:

I feel it in my bones that 1996 is going to be a good year. It needs to be. I share with you the address I gave to the Annual General Meeting in November, which summarises my thoughts on where the Museum is. But there is good news: Ms Robyn Kruk (Director General of the NSWNP&WS) has made an appointment for February 16, where we can finally address the issue of governance and funding. She has a realistic view. The committee agreed in November to remain unchanged, and to meet once we had a direction to take.

Best wishes for this still-relatively New Year.

## REPORT FOR THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING - NOVEMBER 1996

Nearly eight years ago, on February 23, 1988, Mr Bob Carr, State Minister for Planning, Environment and Heritage, accepted a "Deed of Gift" from the French Minister for Defence, M. André Giraud, of the Laperouse Museum. In accepting this gift, the Government of NSW took responsibility for the administration of this symbol of friendship between France and Australia. The Museum, of course, is much more than a symbol, as it uniquely focuses attention on the evolving cultural interface between European and Aboriginal people, and on Pacific studies.

The concept of the Museum and its place in Australian society, and the driving force behind the realisation of the vision, was the Laperouse Association for the Australian Bicentenary chaired by the energetic and committed Pierre Roussel. The Association evolved into

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## AGM & Grand Pique-nique Sunday, November 5, 1995



L-R: Professor. Robert Clency, Carole Roussel, Stephen Thompson, Consul General for France, M. Thierry Vitteu.

If the AGM was a somewhat disconcerting experience (cf President's Report), the Grand Pique-nique more than compensated for it. This year the Friends invited the French community group, Sydney Accueil, to visit the Museum and be our guests for the day. After several days of cold and miserable weather, we were once again blessed by perfect conditions, enticing sun lovers to strip off and acquire a "healthy tan", and enhancing the pleasure of that cool glass of wine, generously provided by Orlando-Wyndham, our special pique-nique sponsors. The buffet was splendid, and we thank those who participated so readily with their tempting platters of home-cooked *délices*. Special thanks go to Marie-Hélène Gilly, President of Sydney Accueil and a Friends committee member, for her brilliant idea which generated such a happy and successful day.

## IMMANENT EVENTS:

- **Sunday, February 18, 11am:** The annual celebrating Mass in honour of Father Laurent Receuver will be held on the verandah and surrounds of the Laperouse Museum. Père Jan Chrzczonowicz, priest to Sydney's francophone community, will be there to welcome his parishioners. The Campsie-Belfield parish choir will sing hymns in French and English. Please bring hats, chairs or rug, and a picnic. Stay on, swim, walk, relax . . .
- **Friday, February 23, 11am — Laperouse Day 1996:** Ceremony at Monument, followed by a reception for friends and guests in the Instrument Room, hosted by Councillor Chris Burtis. Mayor of Randwick.



The Museum attracts many distinguished visitors. Last October Mme Monique ben Guiga, Senator representing French nationals living overseas, was, she said, "amply rewarded" for having found time to include a Museum tour in her busy schedule. She was accompanied by M. Thierry Viteau, Consul General for France and M. Vladimir Perm, Délégué des Français de l'Étranger (Pictured right to left).

Carole Roussel enjoyed meeting and giving a special Saturday morning tour in French for l'Association Médicale Francophone d'Australie with their President, Dr Robert Ouvrier; the interested and interesting group of doctors and their wives stayed on to lunch on the terrace of Danny's restaurant, thus combining two "discoveries" in one day.

#### President's report for the 1995 AGM continued:

the "Friends of the Laperouse Museum Ltd" to provide ongoing support for the Museum. An example of the importance of The Friends to the Museum was the payment of more than \$50,000 to the NP&WS to renovate the Instrument Room, when it was recognised that without the flexibility that this room gave, it was impossible for the Museum to hold temporary exhibitions and educational functions.

Let us have an honest look at where the Museum is, eight years down the track.

- There has never been a committed and focused curator to provide a professional plan for the Museum, or a framework for its development. This statement is not meant to reflect on any individual as there have been some good people at the Museum. The problem is one of interest, with career paths and responsibilities always lying within mainstream NP&WS. There has not been insightful support from above and there has never been a serious budget. Thus the staffing has always been skeletal with uncertain responsibilities; there has never been an acquisition or exhibition budget, and maintenance is done as crisis management.

- The Museum is not function-

ing — the base exhibits are not maintained, there has not been ONE exhibition in eight years, there are no proper education programmes, there is no leadership or incentive provided to The Friends. There is no vision and there are no plans. It is a tired Museum.

- The role of The Friends has been one of increasing frustration and uncertainty. From our point of view, the central problem has been one of a lack of professional leadership, a near absence of communication, and no proper framework in which we can work. It has become a culture of suspicion rather than one of co-operation. In the absence of progress from within the NP&WS the Friends increasingly have found themselves involved in activities for which they have no mandate. In brief, we have tried to initiate structural changes within the building, to develop educational programmes, process exhibits, and draw attention to issues of governance, finance, and planning. These initiatives, however, are doomed to failure without the professional and financial support of the government.

- What happened in 1995? Not much!

- February: I met with the

senior administrative staff of the NP&WS to discuss governance, curatorial position, and finance. The follow-up meeting agreed upon was never arranged, and most of the committees have been cancelled or never organised.

**May:** I wrote to the Premier requesting a meeting to discuss the future of the Museum. My only reply (two months later) was a note from the Secretary for the Ministry for Arts, indicating I had missed the date for a grant application!

**October:** I was advised by the Acting Curator that the planned exhibition for the end of this year was cancelled. The reason for this became clear when I was sent a copy of an internal memo (source unknown) from the Curator, who advised on cancelling this year's exhibition because of the uncertain future of the Museum (with options examining closure or conversion to a NP&WS Visitors' Centre). This is an extraordinary and unacceptable position, and one which must be resolved. None of the senior staff of the NP&WS has ever seen the Laperouse Museum as "core business" (their term). The schizoid meandering that has governed the Museum for eight years due to lack of commitment or understanding must stop. We

must press for a political decision on the governance and funding of the Museum, otherwise there is no future for the Museum or the Friends. What a disaster that would be for so many sections of our community, and for so many tangents of relationships. What could have been!

It is not a good time for the Museum; it is all the more important that we now take the big and long-term view. The Laperouse Museum must not be confused with the inefficiencies of museums such as the Earth Museum (whose staff and budget was ten times that of the Laperouse Museum, but whose "visit per dollar rate" was around one quarter of ours). We do not need an enormous budget — but we do need leadership and vision, to provide a unique programme for our community. This will only come from proper governance of the Museum; then we can become "Friends" again.

**ROBERT CLANCY**

Copies of this report were sent to the Premier and Minister for the Arts, the Hon. Bob Carr, and to the Director General of NSWP&WS, Ms Robyn Kruk. Each also received a personal letter from Robert Clancy requesting a meeting for further discussions.

## Group Captain Hugh Birch DFC., Aviator and Pacific Pioneer Born Melbourne, June 26, 1916. Died Sydney, January 3, 1996, aged 79

(A fond farewell) Proposed by Marie-Hélène Gilly, Hugh Birch joined the Friends' Committee soon after it was formed in 1989. We were all proud to have Hugh with us. His knowledge of people and places in the Pacific was boundless and most valuable. He knew Reece Discombe well, visited him in Vanuatu and encouraged him to donate part of his collection of relics from *Astrolabe* and *Boussole* to the Museum.

Always on the lookout for objects, prints or publications worthy of inclusion in the Museum's collections, Hugh was a constant source of information for the Newsletter.

On behalf of all the Friends, the Committee offers its most sincere condolences to his widow, Margery, and daughter, Annabel, for Hugh will be sorely missed. May God rest his soul.

CAROLE ROUSSEL

To the QANTAS public relations department in the 1960s and '70s, Captain Hugh Birch was always "the airline executive from central casting". If a QANTAS executive was needed for a television interview or to explain a particularly sensitive operational problem to journalists, he was their man.

Simply, he looked, talked, and acted like a PR person's dream of the quintessential Australian international airline man. It wasn't just the handlebar moustache, the tan against the snowy white hair, the pink candy-striped shirts with white collars and silk ties. Birch was utterly convincing in the role because he was the genuine article.

His 50-year career in aviation began in 1937, when he went from Melbourne's Scotch College to the Royal Australian Air Force as a cadet at No. 1 Flying Training School, Point Cook, south of Melbourne. A year later he graduated as a pilot officer. For the next couple of years he was engaged in routine aerial survey work along the coasts of Australia and Papua New Guinea. In July 1939 he was one of seven RAAF pilots selected to go to England and ferry Sunderland flying boats back to Australia.

However, the outbreak of World War II meant that there were more urgent tasks in London. Birch became one of the original members of No. 10. Europe, Gibraltar, Malta and the Middle East.

He was always modest about those years, but his decorations speak for themselves — the Distinguished Flying Cross, Dunkirk Medal, Cross of King Albert of Belgium, French Croix Des Combattants, the Atlantic Star, the Africa Star, the Pacific Star, and he was twice mentioned in dispatches. He was also involved in the only recorded battle of the war between two flying boats, and became Australia's youngest group captain at age 25.

Returning to Australia via the United States, he volunteered to work his passage, and arrived home at the controls of the first B25 Mitchell bomber to land in this country.

He was demobilised in 1946 and went to Port Moresby where he joined W.R. Carpenters' airline, flying local labourers into the remote plantations of New Guinea. When QANTAS took over Carpenters' in 1949, they also acquired Birch.

It was at the controls of his beloved Catalina flying boat that Birch began to build up the swashbuckling reputation that he was to enjoy with QANTAS. In his book *Wings to the World*, QANTAS founder Sir William Hudson Fysh describes what was then a fairly routine flight for QANTAS's New Guinea pilots. Birch was based in Port Moresby and took Fysh and his wife on a flight to an outlying police post on the West Irian border. They landed on a fast-flowing river surrounded by impenetrable swamp and jungle.

Locals paddled to the aircraft in dugout canoes, took the mail sack and medical supplies and then, with crocodiles watching from the banks, they loaded the cargo of 300 live mud crabs and a sack of mummified hands. The latter, Birch assured his chief executive, were bound for an American museum.

As QANTAS began to expand into the South Pacific, Birch's horizons also broadened. QANTAS records retain the report of a journey he began at 9pm, July 22, 1950, on the flare-lit waters of Rose Bay as he took the Catalina, *Island Voyager* on a pioneering survey flight from Sydney to Noumea, Fiji,

future commercial aviation contact between Australia and her Pacific neighbours.

Of course, it was the stories not contained in the official reports that made Birch the centre of attention at countless airline cocktail parties and gatherings over the next four decades.

Long before any of us had heard of Indiana Jones, Birch would tell of landing on beautiful Tahitian lagoons where wahines paddled out to carry the Australian crew ashore to the languid, steamy waterfront of Papeete. He told of the time a *semme* and devoutly Methodist QANTAS executive decided to accompany his crew on a Tahiti service.

The executive went to bed early but woke about 11pm and asked local staff if the crew were still up. He was told they would all be at a place named Quinn's. He tracked them down to Quinn's Bar, probably the most infamous dive in the South Pacific.

He entered and found Birch and his first officer covered in garlands of frangipani, with a wahine on each knee. He demanded they leave immediately and as they got outside he said, "Good Lord, Birch, now I know what's meant by a den of iniquity. The only thing I can say about that hell hole is the woman singing on stage had a beautiful voice. I love that song she was singing."

Luckily, the senior executive had not recognised the second officer on stage in a coonshell bra and straw wig, singing an old French ballad in a style favoured by Edith Piaf.

By the 1960s Hugh had given up flying and was commercial manager of marketing for QANTAS. For international airlines, it was a time of low load factors, high fares, and little marketing in the current sense of the word.

Birch's real value to the airline world can be described today as customer and public relations, and in the early 1970s he was the manager of public affairs for two years. He was also manager, North America, for three years and was made an honorary sheriff by San Francisco County.

Later he went to Melbourne as manager, Victoria and Tasmania. His main challenge was to win over hostile travel agents who, increasingly, were being wooed with financial incentives by foreign airlines.

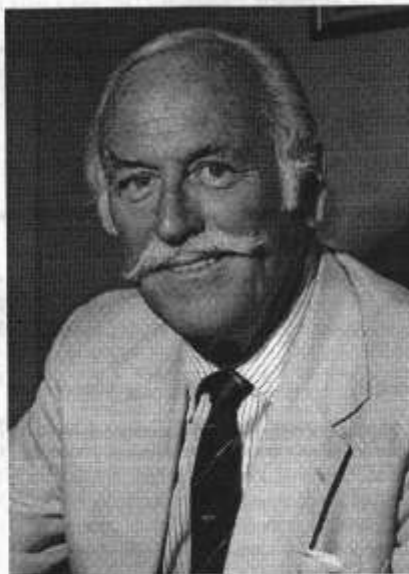
Birch set up a special room he called the "Sheriff's Posse" and decorated it with country and western artefacts he had gathered in the United States. He began calling in the most recalcitrant agents for drinks in the Posse. There, with his charm and skill as raconteur, he won back much lost ground for his company.

To talk with him in the 1970s and '80s was to savour the romance, glamour and adventure of international travel for isolated Australians. Birch reminded us that long-distance air travel is something Australians have excelled at since the dawn of aviation. There was always a trace of the leather helmet and white silk scarf about him.

He left QANTAS, after 28 years, in 1977 with the title of regional director, South Pacific. He was quickly snapped up by the kingdom of Tonga, and became their tourism representative in Australia. Most recently, he took on the promotion in Australia of the state of Alaska.

He is survived by his widow Margery, and his daughter, Annabel.

KEN BOYS



## LAPEROUSE

Quarterly newsletter of the  
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**NSWPS:** Jennifer Carter  
**Curator:** Stephen Thompson

## CURATOR'S REPORT:

January 26 1996

The January school holidays have been extremely busy. The interpretive staff have delivered an extremely popular children's program that explored and contrasted the diet and lifestyle of Europeans and Aboriginal people at Botany Bay in 1788. The kids found the program very exciting and enjoyed comparing "pease pudding" and hard tack with bush tomatoes and lillipillis.

The future of the Museum is still under review. Professor Clancy is to meet with the NP&WS Director General Ms Robyn Kruk and we all hope that a positive solution is found soon.

Most of the **Reece Discombe Collection** objects which were receiving conservation treatment have returned from the conservator's workshop and are on display in Room Ten. An interesting sideline to the conservation treatment was that during the waxing of the brass shackle, after the initial electrolysis treatment, the brass screw moved and was able to be unscrewed. To all involved it was amazing that over 200 years after the doomed French sailor had fastened it and after 180 years under the sea the screw was removed. The shackle is currently on display in its two separate pieces in Room Ten.

Some new publications have arrived at the Museum. These include Dunmore J. (Ed), *The Journal of Jean-François de Galaup de la Pérouse: 1785-1788*, The Hakluyt Society, London, 1995 and Kuilboer, M. & Rivière, M.D. (Trans & Eds), *The French Presence in Australia: Sailors, Settlers and Ships*, James Cook University, 1994. These publications are available for inspection in the Museum library.

**The Père Receveur Commemoration** is scheduled for Saturday, February 17, 1996. **The Père Receveur Celebration Mass** is scheduled for Sunday, February 18, 1996. I hope the weather will favour us and we will get good attendances.

**Lapérouse Day** is scheduled for Friday, February 23, 1996. A brief ceremony will be held at the Monument starting at 11am and a light morning tea will be held shortly after in the Instrument Room.

There are some new faces at the Museum. David Thompson, Karyn Kearns and Nicole Lillis are our new casual guides.

STEPHEN THOMPSON  
Acting Managing Curator.

• As well as the publications mentioned in Stephen Thompson's Curator's Report, the Friends have received on behalf of the Museum, two fine and generous gifts.

\* **Mr Bob Somervaille A.O.**, originally Chairman of Dawson Waldron Solicitors, now consultant for Blake, Dawson, Waldron, is a valued, long-standing and most supportive member of the Friends.

He has given the Museum a beautiful framed watercolour of the historic town of Albi, with its famous aqueduct in the foreground, by Australian artist Rupert Richardson. The painting has been hung and look splendid in the Laperouse Room.

\* **Mr Roland Girault** General Manager of Banque Nationale de Paris in Australia, has given further proof of the Museum's most favoured status with his corporation.

Each year the BNP will acquire a print relevant to the Museum's story, reproduce it

on their Christmas cards, and then donate it to the Museum. This year's gift, a particularly fine Sainson print entitled *Vue de l'entrée de Sydney Cove* should greatly enhance the Encounter Room.

• Our President, **Professor Robert Clancy**, has amazingly enough found time to produce, with Universal Press, a unique publication called *The Mapping of Terra Australis*. We are all familiar with Robert's antique maps, on loan to the Museum in the Discovery Room, which particularly illustrate early French mapping of the Australian coastline.

Here's an opportunity to discover the whole picture, with more than 200 full-colour reproductions of antique and rare maps from Australia, the Pacific and Antarctica, plus many other exciting features. Copies are available at the Museum, selected bookstores and department stores for the recommended retail price of \$59.95.

• **Carole Roussel** has been honoured by the President of France with a nomination as Knight in the National Order of Merit, in recognition of services rendered to the Museum and French compatriots.

Having been recommended to the Minister for Foreign Affairs by past Consul General M. Xavier Driencourt, now Conseiller Technique to the Prime Minister of France, Carole is especially happy to publish here her sponsor's fax, sent on November 22, 1995:

*Chère Carole,*

*Le journal officiel d'aujourd'hui publie votre nomination comme Chevalier dans l'Ordre National de Mérite.*

*Je me réjouis de cette distinction qui vous honore, et avec vous, Pierre.*

*Je vous présente toutes mes sincères et amicales félicitations — Lise se joint à moi.*

Xavier.

**PERNOD**

ORLANDO  
CARRINGTON

ORLANDO  
WYNDHAM