

# Laperouse

Friends of the Laperouse Museum



Members Quarterly Newsletter

October-November-December 1993 Vol. 4, No.2

## President's Message

We are about to begin what I believe to be the most important year in our short history, since our birth in 1988. The Museum is now five years old and we have had time to take stock of where we are at, and hopefully we should be beginning to have a crystal clear view of where we want to go.

It seems to me that we have two broad objectives for the Museum. First, to make a dynamic contribution to the cultural life of Sydney and Australia, while maintaining the unique flavour that reflects our French beginnings, and not forgetting the local context that evolves from an early European-Aboriginal contact. Second, to provide a 'special interest' program for the Friends that have so actively supported the Museum, demonstrating that the Museum has a special place for them. What are we doing about this? Quite a bit, but we are going to need a lot of help.

To achieve these objectives, there are four major programs in place, which are outlined on page 4. The year ahead promises to be very busy. On a more personal note, we wish Reece Discombe a quick recovery from the accident that prevented him from giving his talk on Lapérouse in early November. We hope we can have him contribute to our program in 1994.

Finally, I would like to give my personal thanks and best wishes to Carole Roussel who, as Vice-President and Founding Member, has been a tower of strength and knowledge to the Friends. Her decision to retire from the committee in no way means that she will disappear from the scene, as she has kindly offered to continue contributing to the newsletter and certainly continues to provide me with much help and advice. I wish you all the best for 1994 and look forward to seeing you all on a number of occasions.

Robert Clancy

## AGM & Grand Pique-Nique Sunday 7th Nov. 1993



L to R. Commandant Svend-Eric Estellon, Consul-General for France M. Michel. Legras, the Hon. Gough Whitlam, QC, A.O

The AGM was followed by a brief ceremony at the Lapérouse Monument with the Captain and crew of the frigate *Nivôse* and members of the Association of Anciens Combattants. Then, in the shelter of the Museum, the Friends and their patron, the Hon. Gough Whitlam, and Mrs Margaret Whitlam, gathered happily to enjoy each other's company and to welcome Commandant and Mme Estellon with the officers and crew from *La Nivôse*, special friends M. and Mme Michel Legras, NPWS Regional Manager, Mr John Mortimer, and the Mayor of Randwick, Councillor Chris Bastic. With fine wines donated by Orlando-Wyndham, delicious Unicorn cheeses, crusty baguettes from La Gerbe d'Or and sparkling Perrier in abundance, the gourmet picnic spread under the marquee was much appreciated by all. Commandant Estellon and his crew warmly offered their festive touch of chilled French champagne. It was indeed a good party and the Friends thank all those whose generosity contributed to its success.

## LAPEROUSE DAY 1994

Wednesday 23rd February

11.00am Ceremony at the Monument

11.30am Reception in the Instrument Room  
for Friends & official guests.

The French and Australian Navies will be in attendance.

All Friends are welcome.

**COMING EVENTS**

**1994 PERE RECEVEUR  
COMMEMORATION AT  
LA PEROUSE**

The next annual Père Receveur Commemoration will take place on Sunday 13th February 1994 at 3.00pm in the vicinity of Père Receveur's Grave at La Perouse.

Open Air Mass will be held on Sunday 20th February 1994 at 11.00am on the verandah of the Cable Station to commemorate the death of Père Receveur in 1788.

A talk on the Lapérouse Expedition by Mr Harry Morris for the Australian Catholic Historical Society will be held in the Instrument Room at 12.30pm

**Madhatted Piqueniquers**



Maurice Blackman (left) and Andrew Wilson (right)

**MUSEUM REPORT**

The last year has been one of consolidation for the Museum, with long awaited major projects, the Instrument Room and the Business Plan, soon to produce results. The major events of the year were the Père Receveur Commemoration Ceremony and Mass, Lapérouse Day, Bastille Day, and The Friends of Lapérouse Museum AGM and Picnic. Early evening concerts in the Instrument Room have been introduced with great success and have attracted a new audience to the Museum. Holiday programmes, Museums Week and Heritage Week events are important highlights for the Museum and are consistently well attended. These events involve Museum and park staff, the local community and the Friends, and bring the Museum to the attention of the public on a regular basis throughout the year. It has been evident over the past few years that the Museum would benefit from a reassessment of its management structure. Also, the proposed reopening of Bare Island has resulted in the preparation of a Business Plan for the sound financial management of the historic resources at La Perouse.

Visits to the museum have fluctuated over the past 5 years and are in the range of 12,000 and 19,000 p.a. The pattern of visitors is tours for schools, special interest and tourist groups during the week, with individual and family visitors during the weekend. The number of visits has been

low this year due to a six-month staff shortage which limited our ability to conduct tours.

**Visitation July 1992 - June 1993**

Visitors	12,000
Busiest month: July	1,500
School groups (number of students)	2,000
Busiest month: March	300
Other tours:	1,100

**Financial Report 1992/93**

The following financial report is consistent with the Museum's annual estimates for July 1992 - June 1993. For the past 4 years, the financial outcome has matched the estimates. The cost of appropriate museum standard lighting and necessary air-conditioning remains a major financial commitment. Some form of sponsorship will be considered this year to assist the museum with this expenditure. The mounting of exhibitions in the Instrument Room will incur additional expenditure. However, it is anticipated that this will be offset by an increase in visitation, and through hiring the space for functions.

**Revenue**

Income (entries, tours, donations, sales, functions)	\$27,000
Museum Expenditure:	\$78,000
Electricity (air-conditioning & lighting)	\$50,000
General running costs:	\$28,000

Throughout the year, the Lapérouse Museum has greatly benefited from the support of a number of regular sponsors:

La Banque Nationale de Paris, Perrier, Orlando-Wyndham Wines, Unicorn Cheese, and Gerbe d'Or fine bread. In addition, the Government of France contributes annually to the upkeep of the Monuments, and the Australian Government through the Australia-France Foundation has broadened the professional contacts of the Museum with France. The generous and ongoing support of all our sponsors and the commitment from individuals is greatly appreciated and enhances that special Australian-French mix which makes this museum unique. The donation by Reece Discombe of relics from the Lapérouse shipwrecks, which is currently on temporary display, is a most significant addition to the museum's collections. I extend my special thanks to the Consul General of France, Mr Michel Legras for his enthusiasm and commitment to the Lapérouse Museum and to out-going Vice-President Mrs Carole Roussel, for her dedication and consistent efforts on behalf of the Museum. I will be spending the next six months in the Office of the Minister of the Environment. Sydney District Manager Peter Shadie will oversee our major projects during that time, but I will remain involved as much as time allows.

Jennifer Carter  
Managing Curator, Lapérouse Museum

*La Gerbe D'Or*



## The Tragedy at Lituya Bay

'It is with the utmost grief that I recount the story of a cruel disaster' . . . It must be written, I have wept over this tragedy and time has not lessened my anguish; every object, every moment reminds me of the loss we have suffered in circumstances where we believed we had nothing to fear' So wrote a shattered Lapérouse in his dispatches to his patron the Navy Minister after twenty-two members of his crews drowned in Lituya Bay, Alaska, the first loss of life on the voyage.

This beautiful bay, for a time known as Baie des Français, but now reverted to its original Tlingit Indian name, is a deep narrow inlet in the Gulf of Alaska, once the bed of a great glacier long ago invaded by the sea, which ebbs and flows through its entrance with terrifying force. Lapérouse experienced this on July 2 1786 as they tried to enter the bay. A tide race with clashing currents and huge waves nearly wrecked their out-of-control ships on the jagged rocks that lined the passage. The longboats, sent to reconnoitre the approaches to the Sound, had earlier got through easily, presumably at slack water, the only safe time to attempt an entry or an exit, as they found later to their cost. Both ships eventually anchored in the placid waters of the austere beautiful bay, where, after a couple of days of stand-off, they met with the Indians and began a lively trade in sea-otter furs and native copper artefacts. They wondered where the copper came from, thinking it must be of European origin. But it appears that each summer the natives would make long canoe trips north to trade with other tribes for copper, found in Alaska and fashioned into knives, spears and ornaments.

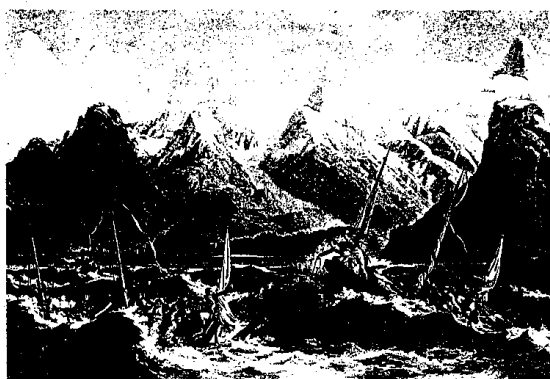
The Tlingit Indian tribes of Lituya had had no contact with Europeans, although James Cook had sailed past in 1778, but well out to sea.

The tribes in that harsh place endowed all nature with spirit life. The glacier was the child of the mountains, the aurora was the warrior spirits at play in the heavens, and in the good season — the short summer — the spirits of the fir trees and rocks became the shadows that rested on the mirror calm of the bay. But the monster of the deep dwelt in the ocean caverns at the entrance and would let nobody approach his domain. Those he destroyed turned into bears, his slaves, and they, from the mountains, grasped and shook the surface of the water, causing tidal waves. For the Tlingit, only death by drowning was feared, as then the spirit could not go to the afterlife of warmth and comfort to which, not unnaturally, given the climate and harshness of their existence, they quite looked forward!

*Astrolabe* and *Boussole* were the first big ships ever to visit Lituya Bay and the fearful natives thought they were great black birds with huge white wings, the incarnation of Yehllh, their bird creator, who turned to stone anyone who looked on him. As the sailors climbed into the rigging to brail up the sails, most of the watching tribe fled terrified into the woods. One warrior family, braver than the rest, launched a war canoe to approach the great birds, but a cloud of smoke rose from one of them, followed by a voice of thunder, so terrifying the braves that in their fright, they overturned the canoe and scrambled ashore! Then, a very old warrior offered to test whether the Yehllh did indeed turn men to

stone, and went out to the ships in a canoe manned by terrified slaves, and being nearly blind, thought the black forms on board were huge crows! He was kindly received and exchanged his cape of sea otter fur for a tin pan and food (rice), which he declined to eat. On returning to shore, he decided that the black figures were men after all, and benign, so the natives visited the ships and traded sea otter furs and copper artefacts for European clothes and other wondrous. These Indians, like the Easter Islanders, were accomplished thieves, and many articles went missing from the camp the Frenchmen set up on shore. By now, Lapérouse, from experience, was expressing some very uncomplimentary views of the 'Noble Savage' uncontaminated by civilisation.

On 13th July they were ready to leave. Lapérouse ordered a careful sounding of the dangerous channel to avoid a repeat of the close shave of their entry. His written instructions to the officers d'Escures and de Marchainville in charge of



Lituya Bay Tragedy

the two biscayennes — ships' boats — and to Boutin in the small boat (canot) were precise and prudent. No risks were to be taken, and they were to sound the pass and measure its width, but only if the sea was smooth. The rather foolhardy d'Escures, through an error of judgement, went too close to the channel, where in a heavy swell, waves were breaking in every direction. Marchainville, sensing danger, went about and waited. Then came tragedy. Because of the wild ebb-

tide, the anchors did not hold, nor could the swamped boats run to shore. The two heavy biscayennes were dragged into the maelstrom and overturned, both waterlogged boats and their crews disappearing under wild water. Boutin managed to get his swamped but still upright small boat to shore without loss of life, but the others had been swept out to sea by the undertow. The whole accident had taken ten minutes. An hour later at slack water, the pass was calm. Twenty-one had died, some of them their best men. Departure was delayed while they searched for survivors or corpses, but none were found. Clearly all had drowned — in those days many sailors could not swim, and in Arctic waters even strong swimmers could quickly have died from hypothermia. Sick at heart, Lapérouse prepared to leave, but the weather turned foul and it was July 30th before it was safe to run the deadly channel. His tight schedule upset, he decided to break off further exploration westward in this dangerous environment, and made his way south, meticulously charting the American coast as far as the Spanish settlement of Monterey.

Eighteen months later, Lapérouse's last dispatches outlining his plans for exploration of the coast of New Holland, his route home and expected date of arrival, were left with Governor Phillip to be sent to France from the new British penal colony of New South Wales. Then, in early March 1788, on the final leg of the long and eventful expedition, he sailed from Botany Bay to his own rendezvous with death on the unknown and uncharted Pacific Island of Vanikoro.

## LAPÉROUSE

Quarterly Newsletter of the  
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### PRESIDENT'S REPORT

1. It is becoming increasingly clear to me that we need an outline of structure and governance of the Museum to ensure its smooth running, to develop long term plans, and to identify clearly understood roles for all the players, including the Friends. **Peter Shadie** of NPWS will soon be organising a workshop with representatives from the Service and from the Friends which will build upon their recently completed financial plan for the La Perouse Peninsula.

2. Financial support - always a limiting factor. We can do much to help the Museum, but we need to coordinate our own activities better. The committee is currently streamlining its activities to focus on particular tasks, such as increasing the number of Friends and looking at revenue generation.

3. A Friends activity program - We can only expect support if we make life more interesting for our Friends. In addition to the usual social and constitutional events, on the first Friday of every second month we plan to arrange and sponsor a series of 'Lapérouse Museum Lectures'. We are indeed fortunate to have **Dr. Helen Wallis** as our first speaker on Friday 4 March 1994 at 6.00pm in the Espace Alliance, 204 Clarence St, Sydney. Her subject will be "Mapping French Discoveries in the Pacific". Dr. Wallis was the British Museum's Map Librarian and is a world authority on the French maps from Dieppe which claim the Portuguese discovery of Australia.

4. The Instrument Room will be a modern and friendly facility for meetings and entertainment. Space for the Friends at the Museum will be organised in the new year. The life blood of any museum is its capacity to change, and the refitted Instrument Room will give us the opportunity to participate in temporary exhibitions. I was recently in Paris where I discussed co-ordinating exhibitions with **Rear Admiral François Bellec** from the Musée de la Marine. **Dr. Kevin Fewster**, Director of the National Maritime Museum, was also in Paris. We have since had a constructive discussion about the possibilities of co-hosting an exciting exhibition provided in part through the generosity of Rear Admiral Bellec. Obviously there is much to be done, but the idea of the two museums working together is an exciting one.

**Robert Clancy**

### AGM NEWS

**Professor Robert Clancy** was re-elected President of the Friends at the AGM held on 7 November 1993.

New Committee members are:

**Patrice Curien** - born in France and resident of Australia for 20 years, involved in importing French skincare products; and **Charles Abela** - resident of La Perouse for many years.

Resignations were reluctantly received and accepted from **Carole Roussel** and **David Elfassy**.

### Letter from John Winch - Paris, December 1993

Dear Carole, I have been firmly established now for a month on *Chant du Monde*, Jean Laurent's wonderful barge on the Seine at St Denis. I have made the drawing look like an old river tramp, but in fact it is very elegant, polished timber floors, rugs, great little kitchen. He has been very hospitable - dinner in Tours, . . . stuffed baby pigs cooked by local farmers and delivered on silver platters, the opening of rare reds!! In a daze of inspiration I went out and spent \$1000 on canvas and in a further daze finished seventeen medium size oils, fourteen are okay only! A great feeling to have completed so much work in such a short time. I learnt heaps, mainly about technique. Martine's museum has offered me an exhibition in 1995. Next week I meet for the second time with the curator of all museums in a department south of Paris, Burgundy area I think. He is interested in showing my work, also a publisher next week. The paintings to be exhibited at the Bridge Street Gallery on March 7th, are all based on one piece of Coptic art from the Louvre.

