

THE CASE AGAINST THE ALLEGATION THAT LAPÉROUSE'S MEN KILLED 20 ABORIGINES ON 26 JANUARY 1788

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As part of the current review of the future of the La Perouse Headland within the Botany Bay National Park, the Parks and Wildlife Division of the New South Wales Department of Environment and Conservation commissioned a study entitled *La Perouse Headland, Botany Bay National Park: A Shared History*. The report was written by Dan Tuck, an archeological consultant, and was completed in December 2006.

The Tuck report generally aims at an even-handed presentation of the interaction between the local communities which have a stake in the La Perouse Headland. This includes the French community, for whom the area has both historical and current significance. Among the landmarks are Father Receveur's grave, highly visible at Botany Bay, the Lapérouse monument (erected in the 1820s at Hyacinthe de Bougainville's expense) and the Lapérouse Museum (created on the occasion of the 1988 bi-centenary).

Although Tuck's desire to be an impartial interpreter of the history of the La Perouse Headland is not in doubt, his report does raise a few problems. In the present paper I will focus on the most serious of these, namely the allegation that, soon after landing at Botany Bay on 26 January 1788, members of the Lapérouse expedition killed twenty Aborigines. Here is the excerpt in question from the report:

Lapérouse, like Phillip, had instructions to use "every possible means to open intercourse with the natives" and "to conciliate their affections". Despite these objectives the French were involved in a deadly melee with local Aborigines soon after landing—a battle that saw 20 Aborigines killed and several Frenchmen injured. Captain [sic] Bradley of the First Fleet recorded that the firing of [sic] Aborigines by the French of Lapérouse's party had been in response to the theft of some items. Both the degree of violence shown by the French and the stockade erected seem somewhat excessive and contrary to these objectives of the French mission. They may however reflect the French fleet's post-Samoan mindset. It was in Samoa, the fleets [sic] last landfall before Australia, that the French suffered considerable losses after what was initially friendly intercourse with the islanders. (pp. 66–67)

Tuck's reference to the French of the Lapérouse expedition using guns during their six-week stay at Botany Bay to defend themselves as well as their property, and erecting a stockade to protect them from the local Aborigines while constructing new longboats to replace the ones destroyed at Tutuila by the Samoan natives, is accurate.

The sole problem with this narrative is that the author failed to follow up and critically assess his source for the claim that twenty Aborigines were killed and some Frenchmen injured soon after landing. The quoted source is a handsomely produced volume entitled *The Myth of Terra Nullius: Invasion and Resistance—The Early Years*, a 1995 NSW Board of Studies publication authored by Kevin Butler, Kate Cameron and Bob Percival. On pages 51–52 and 85 there are some intriguing and disturbing claims which the authors in turn attribute to their quoted primary source, Newton Fowell's *Sirius Letters*, first published in 1988 but originally written 200 years earlier.¹ Here are the crucial excerpts from the 1995 publication:

[. . .] Only after the letters of Newton Fowell were found, 200 years later, was there written evidence that the French sailors had shot Eora people. (p. 51)

Newton Fowell says 20 Eora people were shot. For 200 years the story of the battle between Eora warriors and French sailors was hidden in the journal of a British sailor named Newton Fowell. The battle appears to have happened on the same day that Governor Phillip raised the flag in Warrane. It may have been the first large-scale Aboriginal resistance. [. . .] "The natives before had been friendly to them and at this time one of the boats was aground and when they came down to murder them the French supposed their intent was to assist them with launching the boat that was aground. It was supposed upwards of 500 stones were thrown in the first shower. The French immediately discharged a volley of small arms at them and it is supposed above 20 of the natives must have been killed—several of the French were also wounded. Those who escaped swam off to the other boat which lay off at a small distance. The reason for this we could not learn" (p. 52)

26 January: Using spears and stones, Eora warriors attack the French on the beach at La Perouse. Several French are wounded while 20 Koori people die in musket fire. (p. 85)

The suspicion of readers familiar with the history of the early days of the First Fleet and the French expedition at Botany Bay and Port Jackson should have been raised by several inconsistencies in this account. First of all it is completely out of character for Aborigines to come down to the beach to "murder" newcomers such a short time after they had landed, without any apparent provocation. Anyone familiar with the area where the Lapérouse expedition set up its camp (near the sandy Frenchman's Bay) would wonder where the local natives found "upwards of 500 stones" to stone the French. Readers with a knowledge of the Lapérouse expedition would ask themselves when and where French boats ran aground at Botany Bay. It also seems quite out of character for Lapérouse and his companions not to have reported injuries to the crew in their several surviving Botany Bay letters to their Paris correspondents, including the Minister for the Navy. Finally, one might wonder how it was possible for such a deadly mêlée to remain unreported for two centuries, especially as it is claimed to have occurred on 26 January 1788, the very day when the last ships of the First Fleet were still in the process of transferring from Botany Bay to Port Jackson.

Here is the passage in Fowell's *Sirius Letters* which Butler et al. claim reveals the alleged killings that have been supposedly glossed over by French and British historians since 26 January 1788:

In the afternoon the Govonor Returned found Port Jackson to be an excellent harbour, got everything in readiness to Proceed there

24 Saw Two Ships in the offing Working up for the Bay but the Wind being to the N.W. & a Strong Current setting to the Southward they were soon out of sight

25th [January 1788] The Supply with the Govonor on board Sailed for Port Jackson where he intends to make the Settlement

26th the two fr Ships which were seen in the offing on the 24th Arrived this morning they proved to be the Boussole & L'Astrolabe two French Ships on Discoveries they were commanded when they left France by Monsieur De La Perouse & Monsieur De Langle, the latter of whom was killed by the Natives of one of the Navigators [an island] with 12 men, 8 of whom were officers They were on Shore in two of their Boats for Water their ships were under weigh & had dropt out of the Bay The Natives before had been very friendly to them and at this time one of the Boats was a ground and when they came down to

murder them the French Supposed their intent was to assist them in launching the Boat that was a ground it was supposed upwards of 500 Stones was thrown in the first Shower, The French immediately discharged a Volley of Small Arms at them & it is Supposed above 20 of the Natives must have been killed—Several of the French were also Wounded those who escaped Swam off to their other Boat which lay off at a small distance the reason of this we could not learn the French at first say'd // they supposed it must have been done for the sake of keeping the Boats, but afterwards some hints dropt that it was one of their Sailors had behaved very ill to some of the Natives—

Monsieur Clunard was afterward given the Command of the Astrolabe

Once the quotation is seen in context, it becomes patently obvious that the passage is the story of the Tutuila (also referred to as the Mahouna) massacre in the Samoan (also referred to as Navigator) Islands on 11 December 1787, a few weeks before the French landed at Botany Bay.

Kevin Butler, Kate Cameron and Bob Percival focused on a few lines in the Fowell letter taken out of context, which on first reading seemed to them to describe events that took place at Botany Bay. It is however a continuous narrative which begins with the killing of Captain de Langle and his men by the Samoan natives, continues with a detailed account of the events, and ends with the information that de Langle was replaced by Clonard as Captain of the *Astrolabe*. In the course of the Tutuila tragedy twelve Frenchmen were stoned and clubbed to death by the local natives and subsequently twenty to thirty Samoan natives were shot by the remaining French in their attempt to escape.

We know that the story was told by the French as soon as they arrived in Australian waters and was then recounted in their respective journals or letters in a very similar manner by two future governors of New South Wales, Philip Gidley King² and Midshipman Newton Fowell's commanding officer, John Hunter,³ as well as by Newton Fowell himself. The three accounts are very close, with only the quality of the writing varying. They are complemented by Lapérouse's own narrative, the most authoritative of all.⁴

No doubt there were numerous skirmishes between the French and the Indigenous population at Botany Bay, and on several occasions the French fired at Aborigines to defend themselves and their property. Drawing on his Botany Bay experience, Lepaute Dagelet, the expedition's astrono-

mer, urged William Dawes, his British counterpart at Port Jackson “not to venture too far without [his] weapons”.⁵ Lapérouse himself, in a letter to Fleurieu, spelt out the precautions he found himself obliged to take: “I have had a very good retrenchment set up here in order to store our [new] long-boats in safety, which are well advanced and will be usable by the end of the month. These precautions were necessary against the Indians of New Holland who, although very weak and not numerous, are, like all savages, very ill-natured and would set fire to our boats if they had means of doing so. They threw spears at us one minute after receiving our presents and signs of friendship.”⁶

The most comprehensive characterization of the relationship between the French and the Botany Bay Indigenous population is to be found in Watkin Tench’s narrative: “Like ourselves, the French found it necessary, more than once, to chastise the spirit of rapine and intrusion which prevailed among the Indians around the Bay. The menace of pointing a musquet to them was frequently used; and in one or two instances it was fired off, though without being attended with fatal consequences. Indeed the French commandant, both from a regard to the orders of his court as well as to our quiet and security, shewed a moderation and forbearance on this head highly becoming.”⁷

Watkin Tench’s reading of the interaction between the Lapérouse expedition and the local Aborigines is confirmed by all the surviving contemporary accounts: nowhere can be found any written or recounted oral evidence of there having been any Aboriginal or French casualties.

The allegation that on 26 January 1788, soon after the French landed at Botany Bay, local Aborigines “came down to murder” the French, that they hurled “upwards of 500 stones” at them and injured several, and that in this *mêlée* the French killed twenty Aborigines, is not only absurd but injurious both to the Indigenous community and the French.

Epilogue

Having been presented with the arguments developed in the current study, Dan Tuck, the author of *La Perouse Headland, Botany Bay National Park: A Shared History*, readily and generously recognized that he had inadvertently repeated an accusation unjustly levelled at Lapérouse and his men. Here is his recommendation to the government agency which had commissioned his report:

I would suggest [...] that we collect up the existing bound and unbound copies and master CD and trash them, and that I reissue the report [...] after making the necessary corrections.

I believe that his recommendation has been accepted.

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Notes

1. *The Sirius Letters: The Complete Letters of Newton Fowell, Midshipman & Lieutenant Aboard the Sirius, Flagship of the First Fleet on its Voyage to New South Wales*, edited and with commentary by Nance Irvine, Sydney, Fairfax Library, 1988.
2. Lieutenant King's Journal, in John Hunter, *A Historical Journal of the Transactions at Port Jackson and Norfolk Island with the Discoveries which have been made in New South Wales and in the Southern Ocean, since the publication of Phillip's Voyage, compiled from official Papers, including the Journals of Governors Phillip and King, and of Lieut. Ball; and the Voyages From the first Sailing of the Sirius in 1787, to the Return of that Ship's Company to England in 1792*, London, John Stockdale, 1793, reprinted by the Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1968, pp. 289-291.
3. In *ibid.*, pp. 43-45.
4. *The Journal of Jean-François de Galaup de la Pérouse 1785-1788*, translated and edited by John Dunmore, London, The Hakluyt Society, 1994-1995, 2 vols, II, pp. 398-401.
5. "Je vous engage a ne vous ecarter que peu sans vos armes". Letter to William Dawes, Mitchell Library, Manuscript Section, CY 1414 zAd49, available at http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/discover_collections/society_art/french/letter/letter.html (accessed 20 May 2008).
6. "J'ai fait à terre une espèce de retranchement palissadé, pour y construire en sûreté de nouvelles chaloupes: ces constructions seront achevées à la fin du mois. Cette précaution était nécessaire contre les Indiens de la nouvelle Hollande, qui, quoique très-faibles et peu nombreux, sont, comme tous les sauvages, très-méchans, et brûleraient nos embarcations s'ils avaient les moyens de le faire et en trouvaient une occasion favorable: ils nous ont lancé des zagaies après avoir reçu nos présens et nos caresses." Translated by John Dunmore and included in *The Journal of Jean-François de Galaup de la Pérouse*, II, pp. 540-541. See M. L. A. Milet-Mureau, *Voyage de La Pérouse autour du monde*, Paris, Plassan, 1798, vol. IV, pp. 266-267.
7. Watkin Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, ed. L. F. Fitzhardinge, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1961, p. 55.



The Lapérouse monument at Botany Bay
Lapérouse set up his camp on the present site of the
monument (erected in his honour in the late 1820s)
Photo by Doug Morrison



Father Receveur's grave at Botany Bay
Father Receveur died at Botany Bay on 17 February 1788
Photo by Doug Morrison

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