

Comments on Maria Nugent's chapter on the French at Botany Bay
(pp. 91–117 in Maria Nugent, *Botany Bay — Where Histories Meet*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2005)

GENERAL COMMENTS

Despite its obvious bias, numerous distortions and a few factual inaccuracies, this is a particularly subtle and penetrating study of the Lapérouse expedition's six-week stopover at Botany Bay. Maria Nugent is a generally well-informed historian who has produced an insightful analysis of the significance of the presence of the French at Botany Bay between 26th January and 10th March 1788. Her reference to the work of Pierre Nora and Michel Foucault demonstrates her familiarity with recent French historiography and the social sciences in France.

All in all, this is one of the more perceptive writings on the French at Botany Bay in 1788. It is a pity that what the author considers to be a defence of Aboriginal interests intrudes throughout the chapter and blemishes her achievement as a historian.

It goes without saying that the profound surprise and the spontaneous hostility of the local Aborigines towards the new arrivals, whether they were colonizers as the British or merely visitors as the French, are entirely understandable—nor could the indigenous population be expected to perceive the differences in intention and future plans between the two groups. The author's sympathy and support for the Aboriginal cause does not, however, excuse or justify her distortion of historical truth. Militancy and history should be kept separate.

Ivan Barko

Here are a few instances of inaccuracies and distortions:

Nugent, p. 92: “[..] the expedition had left France in 1786 [...].”

No, it left France in August 1785.

Nugent, p. 93: “[Lapérouse] had his men erect a stockade around their encampment on Botany Bay's north head, presumably as protection against the natives.”

No, not “presumably”: Lapérouse, in his letter of 7 February 1788 to his friend Fleurieu is quite explicit on his reasons for having the stockade built: “I have a very good retrenchment set up here in order to store our new longboats in safety, which are well advanced and will be usable by the end of the month. These precautions were needed against the Indians of New Holland [...].” (Letter to Fleurieu, 7 February 1799, translated by John Dunmore, *The Journal of Jean-Francois de Galaup de la Pérouse*, London, The Hakluyt Society, 1995, vol. II, pp. 539-540)

Nugent, p. 93: “Lapérouse's tolerance for indigenous people was low [...].”

This is not inaccurate as far as it goes, but it is inaccurate on account of its incompleteness. Here is Lapérouse's statement on natives, written at Botany Bay just fifty-eight days after the Tutuila massacre in the Navigator Islands, in which he lost a dozen of his men, including seven officers and Captain de Langle, the commander of the *Astrolabe*: “A rigid follower of the

King's instructions, I have always behaved towards the [natives] with the utmost moderation; but I would not undertake another campaign of this kind without asking for different orders, and a navigator leaving Europe must consider them as enemies, very weak ones, to be honest, whom it would be dishonourable to eliminate, but whom one has the duty of forestalling if a feeling of suspicion allows it in all fairness." (Letter to Fleurieu, 7 February 1799)

Nugent, p. 93: "The French and the locals had clashed violently at Botany Bay in the opening weeks of 1788."

This is a patent misrepresentation of the relationship between the visiting French and the local Aborigines. Here is a more objective and impartial contemporary account of that relationship by Watkin Tench:

"Like ourselves, the French found it necessary, more than once, to chastise a 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."

Watkin Tench, *A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay*, London, J. Debrett, 1789, p. 96.

Nugent, p. 94: "[The French] perhaps were responsible for throwing the first punch."

This insinuation is clearly contradicted by Lapérouse's statement in his letter to his friend Fleurieu: "They threw spears at us one minute after receiving our presents and signs of friendship." (Letter to Fleurieu, 7 February 1788)

Nugent, p. 95: "[..] The French [...] must have had some, perhaps even much, influence on the very earliest cross-cultural encounters. But unfortunately this line of analysis is thwarted by the absence of the French expedition's records about its time in Botany Bay."

If the pages of the commander's official journal covering the Botany Bay stopover were indeed lost in the Vanikoro shipwreck, we have several letters and reports sent by Lapérouse himself and other members of the expedition to their superiors, friends or relatives in France, which have survived (such as the letter to Fleurieu) but the author might have been unaware of their existence.

Nugent, p. 96: "the British colonists called the actual encampment site the 'French Garden'."

While we know from 1824 and 1825 accounts (including Victor Lottin's, René P. Lesson's and Hyacinthe de Bougainville's) that this phrase was used by the British to designate the area where Lapérouse's men attempted to grow vegetables, the undersigned is not aware of it ever having been used as a "placename" (p. 97), i.e. as a synecdoche designating the whole site. The author uses this fiction as the basis for a lyrical development (p. 98) on "endurance despite death".

Nugent, pp. 99–100: "When various French expeditions in Sydney began to make pilgrimages to Botany Bay [e.g. in 1824, ... Father Receveur's] grave was rescued from threatening oblivion. [...] A later account claims that the source for the exact location of

the priest's grave was an Aboriginal man, Cruwee. [...] Once again it is a local Aboriginal man who points the way."

The authority of this later (1882) account of an event that took place in 1824 is subject to grave doubt, especially in the light of the following contemporary French account:

“[There is] a fine sandstone tower built on the Northern point of the Bay. It has no canon or entrenchments, and is solely meant as housing for the garrison which then consisted of a corporal and two soldiers. They received us very courteously and gave us a fine piece of salt meat and some fresh water. We asked them whether by chance they knew of a French tomb in the neighbourhood of their fort. The corporal, one of whose predecessors had spent several years in that spot, took us to a place at a gunshot's distance from the tower, and showing us a spot where the earth was raised and was also covered with grass, he said: ‘There it is. That's all that's left of the monument.’ The inscription made by Lapérouse had disappeared. An enclosure in which Lapérouse had vegetables sown is still there, it has kept the name of the French garden. It is surrounded by a hedge but the inside is almost uncultivated; some vegetables saved by the detachment perished because of lack of water. We searched in vain for a flower in this plot located at 300 paces' distance from the tower; everything was dry and burnt. We were told that Governor Macquarie had intended to plant a beautiful garden in that place and keep its name. We took leave from the corporal, and the idea came to us to return to Father Receveur's tomb. Next to it there was an enormous eucalyptus which shaded it with its branches. We engraved in it, deeply: ‘*Near this tree rest the ashes of Father Receveur, visited in March 1824.*’ ” (Victor Lottin, travelling on Duperrey's ship, *La Coquille*, 1824, quoted by François Bellec, *Les Esprits de Vanikoro. Le Mystère Lapérouse*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006, pp. 37-38, translated by Ivan Barko)

Regarding Aboriginal involvement at an earlier stage in the history of the Receveur grave, on 4 April 1788, lieutenant William Bradley visited Botany Bay and recorded in his journal that the grave marker was found to have been ‘torn down by the natives’ and that the inscription was ‘copied by one of the gentlemen & the same ordered by Governor Phillip to be engraved on a piece of copper and nailed in the place the other had been taken from’. (Bradley, W., *A Voyage to New South Wales: The Journal of Lieutenant William Bradley RN HMS Sirius 1786–1792 Reproduced in facsimile from the original manuscript With a Portfolio of Charts*, Sydney, Trustees of the Public Library of New South Wales/Ure Smith, 1969, p. 99)

Nugent, p. 102: “[...] a brass astrolabe, representing Lapérouse's ship, the *Astrolabe* [...]”

The *Astrolabe* was one of the two ships on the expedition but it was under the command of de Langle, not Lapérouse.

Nugent, p. 104: “A painting made in 1854 by Frederick Terry shows both Lapérouse's monument and Receveur's grave, and depicts a group of Aboriginal people and their dogs in the foreground.[...] They were perhaps included to make a statement about Aboriginal people's anticipated passing in the wake of the imperial age that Lapérouse embodied.”

What support is there for the speculation that the presence of a group of Aborigines in a painting foreshadows their future extinction?

Nugent, p. 113: “The dual commemoration [of 1988]—French and Australian—was itself a re-enactment of sorts, recalling the experience of those early weeks of 1788 when local

indigenous people had suffered an assault from two sides: from a colonizing force and an imperial one.”

Although on p. 93 the author recognizes that the Lapérouse expedition was “a predominantly scientific voyage”, she gradually slips in the word “imperial” in her descriptions, relying on our uncritical acceptance of this epithet to cast aspersions on the expedition. On p. 104 Lapérouse is presented as the embodiment of the “imperial age” and on p. 114 he becomes an “imperial hero-navigator”. The Lapérouse expedition’s visit to Botany Bay did not have an imperial purpose and it did not inflict an assault on the local indigenous population.

Nugent, pp. 114–116: “[...] An early nineteenth century ethnographic sketch [...] produced by a French artist, Jacques Arago, [...] was hung in one of the opening rooms of the Lapérouse Museum. [...] The sketch [...] was displayed as evidence supporting the [...] critical role that France played in imperial science, navigation and discovery. But the sketch of Timbéré has another meaning: [...it] belongs to a series of archival fragments that this family draws on to demonstrate the enduring association with the region [...]. As one of this series of historical fragments, the Timbéré sketch is part of a narrative [...] about the possibility of Aboriginal continuity [....This was a] French curatorial gaffe [...].”

Should 18th and 19th century ethnographic drawings be ignored or destroyed? Far from being a curatorial gaffe, the display of this drawing of an ancestor of the Timbery family has turned out to be a valuable French contribution to Aboriginal history.

Ivan Barko

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