



# In Search of Jean Piron

Edward Duyker traces the fascinating life of an artist who has earned an enduring place in the history of Pacific exploration

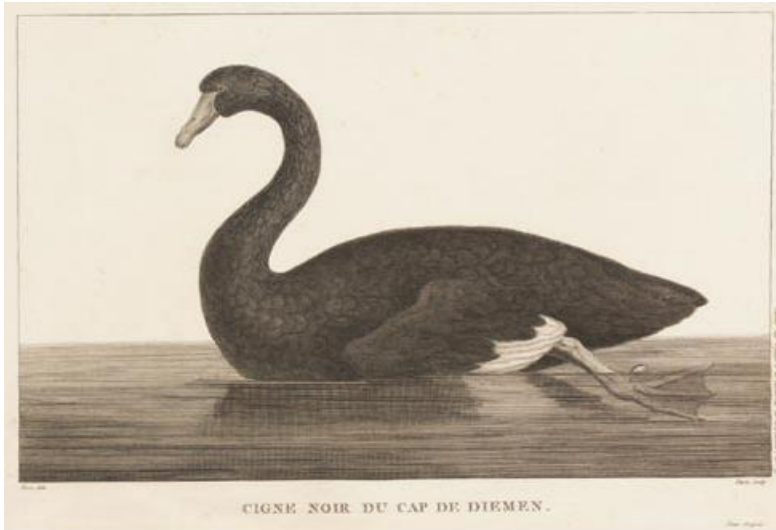
On 9 February 1791, France's National Assembly decided to organise a search and rescue mission for the explorer La Pérouse, who had been missing since 1788. Placed in command of the expedition was a highly experienced naval officer and former governor of the Isle de France (Mauritius), Antoine-Raymond-Joseph Bruny d'Entrecasteaux (1737–1793). He was given two vessels of approximately 350 tons each: the *Recherche* ('search or research') and the *Espérance* ('hope'). Although d'Entrecasteaux retained overall command of the expedition, the *Recherche* was placed under the command of Alexandre d'Hesmivy d'Auribeau (1760–1794) and the *Espérance* under Jean-Michel Huon de Kermadec (1748–1793).

Despite the tumultuous events of the Revolution which had driven many

naval officers of noble origin abroad, d'Entrecasteaux attracted a capable staff to serve in his expedition. Since his mission was also to be a serious scientific voyage, his muster roll included two hydrographers (Beautemps-Beaupré on the *Recherche* and Miroir-Jouvency on the *Espérance*), four naturalists (Labillardière, Deschamps, Riche and Ventenat), a mineralogist (Blavier), two astronomers (Bertrand and Pierson), a gardener (Félix Delahaye) and two artists (Chailly-Ely and Piron).

Since Chailly-Ely quit the expedition at the Cape of Good Hope, Piron was destined to become one of the earliest artists to work in Australia in the wake of Cook's voyages and the First Fleet. He is particularly noteworthy for his images of the Tasmanian Aborigines and for his natural history sketches. D'Entrecasteaux would even name an island in the Louisiade Archipelago in Piron's honour. Yet to this day his surviving 27 sketches in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, and the published engravings of his works by Jacques Louis Copia (1764–1799)

Jacques Louis Copia (1764–1799) *Danse des Iles des Amis, en présence de la Reine Tine* engraving; plate mark 30.3 x 44.5 cm Paris: Chez Dabo, 1817 Pl. no. 27 of *Atlas pour servir à la relation du voyage à la recherche de La Pérouse* Rex Nan Kivell Collection Pictures Collection nla.pic-an20979078



Jacques Louis Perée (b.1769) *Cigne noir du Cap de Diemen* engraving; plate mark 31.0 x 44.8 cm  
 Paris: Chez Dabo, 1817  
 Pl. no. 9 of *Atlas pour servir à la relation du voyage à la recherche de la Pérouse*  
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and Jacques Louis Perée (b.1769), held in the National Library, bear no forename. Indeed, in 1992, the New Zealand scholar Roger Collins wrote with frustration: 'All efforts to discern the origins of Piron are confirmed vain. Of his family, of his country of origin, even his forename, we know nothing.' Helen Hewson, however, in her beautifully illustrated book *Australia: 300 Years of Botanical Illustration*, gave Piron's first name as Nicolas, but her only source for this was the 32-page catalogue for the *Dare to Know* exhibition held by the State Library of New South Wales in 1998. It is certainly incorrect, as are the web pages and catalogue entries for the artist created in the wake of these two publications.

Piron appears never to have returned to France after d'Entrecasteaux's expedition reached the Dutch East Indies. It was the efforts of his widowed sister, Madame Titeux, seeking to recover his unclaimed back pay in 1817, which offered me my first clue to his identity. This meagre fact is contained in Piron's service dossier held at the Château de Vincennes. The first part of my quest, therefore, was to find a Mademoiselle Piron who married a Monsieur Titeux some two centuries or more ago. But where?

I already knew that Piron had joined the expedition on the recommendation of the great Joseph-Pierre Redouté (1759–1840), later famous for his illustrations of the Empress Joséphine's roses and many other botanical subjects. Since Redouté was originally from the Belgian Ardennes, I suspected that Piron was also Belgian.

There is always an element of serendipity in historical research. On the Internet,

among the parish records of the Belgian town of Bouillon, on the River Semois very close to the French border, I came across an intriguing baptismal record. This was of an illegitimate girl named Jeanne who was born on 28 October 1785 to one Thérèse Piron. The curate's record stated that Jeanne's father was one Antoine Titeus [sic], a goldsmith who had acknowledged his daughter at her baptism, and that the parents had later married on 26 July 1786.

Fired with excitement, I wrote to archivist Michel Toussaint in Bouillon and requested a copy of this later marriage record.

Although it did not indicate Thérèse Piron's birthplace, it revealed that Antoine Titeus was originally from Saint-Hubert (Redouté's birthplace, then part of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg), and that he had lived in Bouillon for only three years. My gut feeling was already quite strong that our artist's sister must also have hailed from Saint-Hubert, and I was right. A search of the Archives de l'Etat in Saint-Hubert revealed that a Marie Thérèse Joseph Piron was born there on 3 July 1763. Her parents, Henri Piron and Anne Jeanne Titeux, had married on 3 May 1761. (Thus Antotine Titeux was not only the artist's brother-in-law, he was also his cousin.) Henri Piron, a cooper and brewer, and his wife had another daughter and two sons: Jean Hubert, born on 18 June 1767, and Jean Joseph, born on 19 August 1771. One of these two brothers was almost certainly d'Entrecasteaux's artist. Although we do not know if he was the one born in 1767 or 1771, he clearly bore the first name Jean. Four years seniority and artistic experience would suggest that in 1791 Jean Hubert was a more likely expedition candidate than his 20-year-old brother Jean Joseph, but an artist's talents are usually manifest early.

We have little knowledge of Jean Piron's artistic training. And I'll call him Jean from now on, although he and his brother were probably known by their second names. Like Redouté, Jean Piron almost certainly studied under the monks of the Abbey of Saint-Hubert (founded in the 7th century). And it seems likely that Redouté's growing success in the years immediately before the Revolution may have drawn Piron to Paris in the hope of similar patronage and mentoring. Piron does not appear to have studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Art in Paris,

but his surviving work suggests specific stylistic influences. In his book *European Vision and the South Pacific, 1768–1850*, Bernard Smith asserted that Piron's work was 'invested with a good deal of the heroic stoicism of Jacques Louis David' and drew attention to strong classical inspirations.

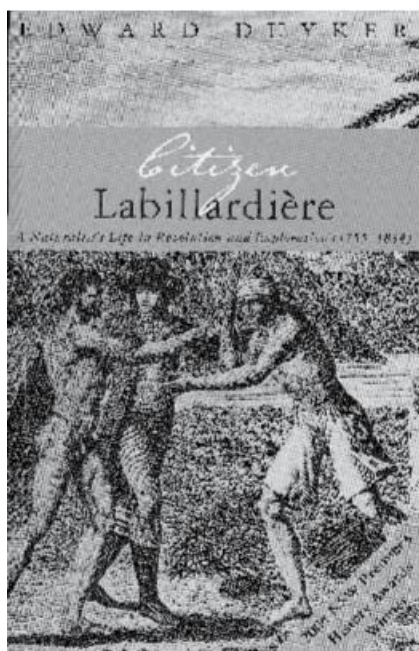
From the records of the expedition we know that Piron was paid a salary of 1500 livres per annum to record 'all the views of land and remarkable sites, the portraits of natives of different countries, their costumes, their ceremonies, their games, their edifices, their sea vessels, and all productions of the earth and the sea in the three kingdoms, if the drawings of these diverse objects appear to him useful to facilitate the comprehension of the descriptions which the savants will make'.

Almost certainly Piron incorporated an image of himself in one of his sketches. Ironically, it seems emblematic of his shrouded identity, for he appears both half-naked and blackened. What he recorded was his own mirthful part in a particularly joyous meeting between the French and the Indigenous inhabitants in Van Diemen's Land in 1793. From the naturalist Labillardière's *Relation du voyage à la recherche de La Pérouse* (1800) we know that Piron sought to emulate the locals by requesting that they cover all parts of his uncovered body with powdered charcoal. Labillardière tells us that Piron's request was favourably received by one of the men who 'appeared highly satisfied with his performance, which he finished by gently blowing off the dust that adhered very slightly, taking particular care to remove all that might have gotten into the eyes'. Plate 5 of Labillardière's Atlas is an engraving, based on a sketch by Piron, of the French visiting the Aborigines while they ate. In it a man, possibly Labillardière—wearing boots, coat, waistcoat and curled-brimmed beaver hat—stands between one of the bearded, naked, Tasmanian men and another man, beardless and clad only in short pantaloons and cloth cap. The Aborigine's hand is outstretched toward the scantily dressed figure. His fingertips seem blackened with charcoal. I believe this beardless man with long flowing hair is Piron, already darkened on the face and chest. This comic self-deprecating image, printed in 1800, is virtually our final trace of Piron. I could not resist using this detail on the dust jacket of

my book, *Citizen Labillardière*. Ironically, in the complete engraving, seated on the right and playing with an Aboriginal child, is another young man with an identical cloth cap and flowing shoulder length hair. It seems to me that Piron may very well have portrayed himself twice: dressed and undressed.

So what happened to Piron? After d'Entrecasteaux's death, command of his expedition devolved to the ailing 33-year-old, Alexandre d'Hesmivy d'Auribeau. When the *Recherche* and the *Espérance* reached Sourabaya, Java, in late October 1793, the French were shocked to learn that their country and the Netherlands had been at war for the past eight months. Even worse was the news that France was also at war with England, Prussia, Austria and Spain, that a republic had been declared and Louis XVI had been executed on 21 January 1793. The expedition began to disintegrate. In collusion with the largely royalist officers under d'Auribeau, the Dutch seized the ships and imprisoned the republicans. Piron was included among the republican prisoners and d'Auribeau gave the following explanation in a personal memoir:

M. Piron sustained a behaviour which was contrary to the opinions held by me and the officers faithful to the king. It is true that his faults are not as enormous as the others. I will even give him credit for the efforts he sustained in rendering drawings worthy of being presented to the public; his extreme remoteness from the chiefs and the comments



Edward Duyker (b.1955)  
*Citizen Labillardière: A Naturalist's Life in Revolution and Exploration (1755–1834)* (Carlton South, Vic: Miegunyah Press, 2003)  
National Library of Australia

Jacques Louis Copia (1764–1799) *Femme des Iles des Amis* engraving print; plate mark 30.5 x 44.5 cm  
 Paris: Chez Dabo, 1817  
 Pl. no. 9 of *Atlas pour servir à la relation du voyage à la recherche de la Pérouse*.  
 Pictures Collection  
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he made on each of them, and on the officers; his particular liaisons, made me decide to have him suffer the same fate as the previous ones, by the necessity of distancing all those who had the same way of thinking.

Thirty-two crewmen became prisoners of war and, according to Labillardière, 'were thrown into the prisons of the Tomagon of Sourabaya'. Then, on 24 February 1794, Piron, Labillardière and the other so-called republicans were forced overland to Samarang in the midst of the wet season. Piron and Labillardière were imprisoned in Batavia's Fort Angké. Labillardière was later included in an exchange of prisoners and allowed to leave Batavia on the *Nathalie* on 29 March 1795, but without his botanical specimens.

Initially I thought that Piron accompanied Labillardière to the Ile de France after he was released in 1795, but the artist's name does not appear on the list of arriving passengers preserved in the National Archives of Mauritius. A newspaper in France suggests Piron was instead employed by the Governor of Sourabaya, but this report was published a mere two and a half months after Labillardière left Java, and might actually refer to the period after Piron's initial arrest. Perhaps the artist did re-cross Java to rejoin Governor Dirk Hogendorp (later a staunch Bonapartist according to his biography held in the National Library), but I have my doubts.

In 1895, E.T. Hamy stated that Piron died in Java shortly after. Piron was probably not in good health. He may even have

suffered from tuberculosis. My evidence for this assertion comes from comments in the journal of the royalist naturalist and medical graduate Louis-Auguste Deschamps (1765–1842) with whom he attempted to climb Pico de Teide on Tenerife in the Canary Islands (along with Labillardière and others). According to Deschamps, Piron had to abort his ascent because of exhaustion and because he was vomiting continually and also spitting blood. Despite evidence of illness, it is doubtful that Piron died in Java. According to one of d'Entrecasteaux's officers, La Motte du Portail, in a footnote on the death of the hydrographer Miror-Jouvency inserted into the bottom margin of two pages towards the end of his journal, Piron was in Manila in 1799. Since Piron confirmed Jouvency's death in Batavia the previous year, this would suggest that he himself arrived in Manila from Batavia in 1798 or in 1799.

What happened to Piron after this is a mystery. There is, of course, the possibility that Piron did not remain in Manila beyond 1799 and moved to another European colony. Ultimately we may never know for certain exactly when and where Jean Piron died. Both the Records Management and Archives Office of the Philippines, and the Archdiocesan Archives of Manila have advised me that they have no record of his death. And there is no indication that he married in the Philippines either. However, if Piron died in Manila prior to 1805 we may never have documentary evidence. The catalogue by Ruperto C. Santos, the former director of the archdiocesan archives of Manila, held in the National Library of Australia, indicates that the earliest 19th-century archdiocesan burial records for Manila commence in 1805. But perhaps we should see Jean Piron as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow saw Albrecht Dürer in his poem *Nuremberg*: 'Dead he is not, but departed,—for the artist never dies.'

Piron's works may be relatively small in number and quaintly classical in style, but they have nevertheless assured him an enduring place in the history of Pacific exploration.

Dr Edward Duyker is the author of *Citizen Labillardière: A Naturalist's Life in Revolution and Exploration* which won the New South Wales Premier's General History Prize in 2004

