

## **A Cordial Encounter? The Meeting of Matthew Flinders and Nicolas Baudin**

**(8-9 April, 1802)**

*Jean Fornasiero and John West-Sooby*

The famous encounter between Nicolas Baudin and Matthew Flinders in the waters off Australia's previously uncharted south coast has now entered the nation's folklore. At a time when their respective countries were locked in conflict at home and competing for strategic advantage on the world stage, the two captains were able to set aside national rivalries and personal disappointments in order to greet one another with courtesy and mutual respect. Their meeting is thus portrayed as symbolic of the triumph of international co-operation over the troubled geopolitics of the day. What united the two expeditions—the quest for knowledge in the spirit of the Enlightenment—proved to be stronger than what divided them.

This enduring—and endearing—image of the encounter between Baudin and Flinders is certainly well supported by the facts as we know them. The two captains did indeed conduct themselves on that occasion in an exemplary manner, readily exchanging information about their respective discoveries and advising one another about the navigational hazards they should avoid or about safe anchorages where water and other supplies could be obtained. Furthermore, the civility of their meeting points to a strong degree of mutual respect, and perhaps also to a recognition of their shared experience as navigators whom fate had thrown together on the lonely and treacherous shores of the “unknown coast” of Australia.

And yet, as appealing as it may be, this increasingly idealized image of the encounter runs the risk of masking some of its subtleties and complexities. National rivalries and personal ambitions may well have been temporarily transcended, at least in appearance, but this does not mean that they somehow became irrelevant or redundant. Nor should we allow ourselves to imagine that such concerns suddenly disappeared from the preoccupations of the two navigators and of the expeditioners

---

Jean Fornasiero and John West-Sooby are Senior Lecturers in French Studies at the University of Adelaide. They have both published widely on the intersections between nineteenth-century French history and literature. As part of a joint project to rehabilitate the reputation of Nicolas Baudin, they have recently published studies on the artwork and the scientific results of his voyage of discovery, including a book with Peter Monteath entitled *Encountering Terra Australis: The Australian Voyages of Nicolas Baudin and Matthew Flinders, 1800-1803* (Wakefield Press, 2004).

who accompanied them. Particularly revealing in this regard are the records of the encounter left by those who participated in it. Indeed, a close reading of these written accounts reveals a number of discrepancies which have not to date been considered significant enough to warrant detailed analysis. This is undoubtedly because many of the inconsistencies can rightly be deemed to be the result of communication difficulties between the English navigator and his French-speaking counterpart. In consequence, historians have not generally been tempted to question the reliability of the accounts nor the motives of those who compiled them. Even Frank Horner, in his scrupulous retelling of the encounter,<sup>2</sup> quashes any hint of unreliable reporting that his own analysis appears to bring out; he is quick to refute his own observation that Flinders “does less than justice to Baudin” by adding that this is “through no fault of Flinders.”<sup>3</sup> This intriguing detail alone, in our view, justifies a close re-examination of the eye-witness accounts, and of the anomalies they reveal. Only then will we be able to determine whether there were significant undercurrents to the encounter between Baudin and Flinders and whether it was experienced by its protagonists as being as cordial as is popularly believed.

The two meetings themselves were intimate affairs. Apart from the two captains, the only other participant was the botanist from the *Investigator*, Robert Brown, whom Flinders took with him to serve as interpreter.<sup>4</sup> In the event, Brown’s expertise in French was not put to great use: the conversations, as Flinders notes in *A Voyage to Terra Australis* “were mostly carried on in English, which the captain spoke so as to be understood.”<sup>5</sup> However, Flinders’ assessment may be a little generous, since Brown was moved to comment on the “extreme badness of [Baudin’s] English”<sup>6</sup> and to highlight several details of the Frenchman’s conversation which he did not fully comprehend.

Written records of the meetings, the first of which took place late on the day of 8 April 1802, the second early the next morning, over breakfast, were made by all three participants. The most influential and frequently cited description of the encounter is that to be found in *A Voyage to Terra Australis*. It is important to remember that this narrative was compiled by Flinders several years after the event, during his imprisonment on Mauritius, and later, in England, after his release from detention in 1810. However, Flinders’ official narrative is generally taken to be a reliable account, as it was based upon an entry he made at the time in his captain’s log and it contains no major variations from this primary source.<sup>7</sup> Robert Brown also provides a useful eye-witness account in the notes he confined to his diary immediately following the encounter.<sup>8</sup> On the French side, Baudin’s sea log is the

<sup>2</sup> Frank Horner, *The French Reconnaissance. Baudin in Australia, 1801-1803* (Melbourne, 1987), 216-222.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>4</sup> Describing the encounter in his official account, Flinders explains: “As I did not understand French, Mr Brown, the naturalist, went with me in the boat.” Matthew Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis; Undertaken for the Purpose of Completing the Discovery of that Vast Country, and Prosecuted in the Years 1801, 1802 and 1803, in His Majesty’s Ship, the Investigator*, 2 vols. and Atlas (London, 1814), entry bearing the date of 8 Apr. 1802.

<sup>5</sup> Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, entry dated 9 Apr. 1802.

<sup>6</sup> See T.G. Vallance, D.T. Moore and E.W. Groves, eds., *Nature’s Investigator: The Diary of Robert Brown in Australia, 1801-1805* (Canberra, 2001), 178.

<sup>7</sup> The manuscript of the Captain’s log kept by Flinders on the *Investigator* is to be found in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. A microfilm copy is held in the Flinders University Library (AJCP reel 1586, piece no. 75).

<sup>8</sup> Brown’s record of the encounter is to be found in T.G. Vallance, D.T. Moore and E.W. Groves, eds., *Nature’s Investigator: The Diary of Robert Brown in Australia, 1801-1805*, 177-182.

only first-hand account,<sup>9</sup> but there is also the letter he sent to the French Minister of Marine some months later, from Port Jackson, in which he reports on the encounter with Flinders.<sup>10</sup> The description given by François Péron in the official account of the French expedition, the *Voyage de découvertes aux terres australes*,<sup>11</sup> is of no value to us here: as Péron was not a direct participant in the meetings, his description of them simply draws on the information contained in Baudin's log—information which, on a number of key points, he blatantly misrepresents to suit his own purposes.<sup>12</sup>

Of the various discrepancies that emerge from a comparison of the accounts left by the two captains and by Robert Brown, a certain number can be attributed uncontroversially to misunderstandings based on language difficulties. When Baudin notes, for example, that Flinders gave him the map “of a harbour that he had discovered on an island only 15 or 20 leagues away and that he had named Kangaroo Island,”<sup>13</sup> it is fairly clear that he has conflated two separate items of information. Unless he had misconstrued the status of Nepean Bay, on the north coast of Kangaroo Island, the harbor in question is almost certainly that of Port Lincoln, on the Eyre Peninsula. Baudin similarly misplaces the site where Thistle and his crew were lost: “As I told him of the accident that had befallen my dinghy and asked him to give it all the help he could, if by any chance he came across it, he told me that he had met with a similar misfortune on his Kangaroo Island, where he had lost eight men and a boat.”<sup>14</sup> The men were lost, in fact, off Cape Catastrophe at the foot of Eyre Peninsula. Baudin also makes mention of a “companion ship” from which he believes Flinders became separated “during the equinoctial gale.”<sup>15</sup> As Count Alphonse de Fleurieu speculates,<sup>16</sup> this probably refers to the *Lady Nelson*, which Flinders could well have mentioned in the course of the conversation as he outlined his future plans, and which Baudin must have misunderstood to be already engaged in surveying work with the *Investigator*. These factual errors suggest, firstly, that Baudin was still very much preoccupied with his own losses—the disappearance of his large dinghy under the command of Maurouard, with the geographer Boullanger on board, and the separation from his consort ship the *Naturaliste*—to the point of overlaying his story onto that of Flinders. They also indicate that the French commander did not always have an accurate understanding of what was being said to him in English.

In addition to these errors of fact, there is a notable difference in tone when we move from Baudin's account to that of Flinders. The record left by Flinders, both in

<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Baudin, *Journal de mer* (entry dated 19 Germinal—9 Apr. 1802). The manuscript of Baudin's sea log is held in the Archives nationales, Paris, Marine 5JJ 36-40, 5 vols. The State Library of South Australia holds a microfilm copy of this sea log and other papers relating to the Baudin expedition (ARG 1 series).

<sup>10</sup> This letter, dated 11 Nov. 1802, is to be found in the Archives nationales, Paris, BB Marine 995.

<sup>11</sup> F. Péron, *Voyage de découvertes aux terres australes exécuté par ordre de Sa Majesté l'Empereur et Roi, sur les corvettes le Géographe, le Naturaliste; et la goélette le Casuarina, pendant les années 1800, 1801, 1802, 1803, et 1804*, vol. 1, *Historique* (Paris, 1807).

<sup>12</sup> For an account of these, see F. Horner, *The French Reconnaissance*, chap. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Baudin, *Journal de mer* (entry dated 19 Germinal—9 Apr. 1802). All translations of original French documents are our own.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> On a visit to South Australia in 1911, Alphonse de Fleurieu, the descendant of Count Charles-Pierre Claret de Fleurieu (the French navigator and former Minister of Marine who drew up the itinerary for the Baudin expedition), compiled some papers concerning the meeting of Baudin and Flinders in Encounter Bay. These papers, which are held in the library of the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia, housed within the State Library of South Australia (RGMS 107c), include notes of his own in which he comments on various points raised in the descriptions of the encounter given by Baudin and Flinders. The comment relating to the *Lady Nelson* is to be found in note 6.

his captain's log and in his official narrative, is reserved and factual, whereas that of Baudin is lively and enthusiastic. This contrast is not in itself especially significant: readers of *A Voyage to Terra Australis* quickly become used to Flinders' detached, matter-of-fact tone, while in contrast Baudin's sea log contains many musings that make his feelings and emotions more transparent and immediate. Nevertheless, in this particular instance, the different tenor of the two accounts, apart from reflecting fundamentally different writing styles, is indicative of the contrasting attitudes and expectations of the two captains as they prepared to meet. Flinders, despite being fully aware of who Baudin was and what he was doing in these waters—or perhaps *because* of this knowledge (a rival explorer and hydrographer was a far more menacing proposition, in terms of his ambition and his fledgling career, than a hostile enemy)—appears guarded during their first meeting. He maintains a formal and deferential attitude towards Baudin, insisting, for example, on inspecting the French commander's safe-conduct even though he knows that the Admiralty has granted him one. Baudin, on the other hand, according to Flinders' account, returns the English captain's passport “without looking at it” and seems happy to dispense with formalities on this occasion. This unexpected encounter has provided him with the opportunity of sharing his experiences and discoveries with a man whose exploits he knows and admires, and Baudin refers to their meeting with an enthusiasm bordering on excitement.

It is useful to keep these contrasting attitudes in mind when considering the more problematic discrepancies between the accounts of Flinders and Baudin. Among these, the most significant, and the most potentially damaging for Baudin, is the question of when he became fully aware of the identity of his interlocutor. According to Flinders, it was only at the end of their second meeting that the French commander thought to ask him his name:

At parting, the captain requested me to take care of his boat and his people, in case of meeting with them; and to say to *Le Naturaliste*, that he should go to Port Jackson so soon as the bad weather set in. On my asking the name of the captain of *Le Naturaliste*, he bethought himself to ask mine; and finding it to be the same as the author of the chart which he had been criticising, expressed not a little surprise; but had the politeness to congratulate himself on meeting me.<sup>17</sup>

This is in stark contrast to Baudin's account. In his sea log, Baudin records his pleasure at coming across the young explorer, whose work he judges worthy of greater recognition:

The English captain, Mr Flinders—the self-same Flinders who discovered the Strait which ought to bear his name, but which has most inappropriately been called Banks Strait—came aboard, expressing his delight at making such a pleasant encounter, though he was extremely reserved about everything else. As soon as I learnt his name, I paid him my compliments, informing him of the great pleasure it gave me to make his acquaintance and of all that we had done systematically up till then in terms of geographical work.<sup>18</sup>

The difference here is irreconcilable and, unfortunately, the account of the third party who was present at the discussions does not provide us with the definitive means of

<sup>17</sup> Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, 9 Apr. 1802.

<sup>18</sup> Baudin, *Journal de mer*, 18 Germinal—8 Apr. 1802.

resolving it. Nonetheless, Robert Brown does confirm that there was a degree of enthusiasm in Baudin's attitude to Flinders' work. He states that Baudin had praised, not criticized, Flinders' chart before he knew the captain's name.<sup>19</sup> While his account also seems to indicate that Baudin was not immediately aware of the exact identity of his counterpart, it does not point to the kind of social blunder that Flinders seems to be attributing to Baudin.

Although language difficulties must certainly provide part of the explanation for the conflicting accounts, it is difficult to dismiss the notion that one of the captains may have misrepresented the facts to his advantage—and that this may well be Flinders. Firstly, it is highly implausible that Baudin, who, despite the legend, was a courteous man,<sup>20</sup> would have allowed himself to conduct not one but two meetings in the company of an English officer without manifesting any curiosity about his identity. What is very believable, on the other hand, is that, on the point of bidding farewell to his fellow explorer on the second day, Baudin might have sought to verify the name that he thought he had understood at their first meeting, but which he had not seen written down and of whose English pronunciation he may have been unsure.<sup>21</sup> The fact that he had not felt the need to inspect Flinders' passport and that he had not seen his name in written form would tend to confirm this. We need to recall, also, that Flinders would encounter precisely the same problem of pronunciation exactly eighteen months later, on the occasion of his fateful visit to Mauritius while en route for England. In an ironic turn of events, this time it was he who did not recognize his name when asked by the French authorities if he was Mr "Flandaire." His indignant denial was at the heart of the misunderstanding that led to him being imprisoned by Governor Decaen. At the very least, then, it would appear to be careless of Flinders to imply that Baudin was only interested in knowing his name as they prepared to depart or that he had criticized his charts (rather than praising them, as Brown had said) before he knew his name. At worst, this could be construed as a conscious attempt to portray the French commander as socially inept and disrespectful. Either way, and in view of their different attitudes before and during their encounter, it is Baudin who emerges as the least formal, more expansive and more cordial of the two.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> R. Brown, 179.

<sup>20</sup> See Horner, 43, for the description of Baudin's "courteous and refined behavior" that was made in a letter to Antoine-Laurent de Jussieu by the young naturalist, André-Pierre Ledru.

<sup>21</sup> This is also the view of Frank Horner, who states: "Flinders would hardly have failed to give his name when he first came aboard, as Baudin said he did. Baudin must have thought he caught the name, without identifying it as Flinders, and asked it again before Flinders left, in order to make certain. No doubt he thought it unnecessary to record a social gaffe on his part." Horner, 221.

<sup>22</sup> It is worth recalling, as a pointer to Flinders' state of mind as he prepared to meet Baudin, that on approaching the as yet unidentified ship, the captain of the *Investigator* "cleared for action, in case of being attacked" (*A Voyage to Terra Australis*, 8 Apr. 1802). This precaution seems excessive, given that Flinders, as he notes in his captain's log, thought it more likely at the time that he had encountered an English merchant ship. However, Flinders maintained his wary vigilance even after he had ascertained that he was in fact dealing with the *Géographe* under the command of Captain Baudin, whose mission he knew to be peaceful in nature: "We veered round as *Le Géographe* was passing, to keep our broadside to her, lest the flag of truce should be a deception." (*A Voyage to Terra Australis*, 8 Apr. 1802). No doubt the recent hostilities between their two nations played some part in Flinders' watchful approach, but on this occasion, as on many others, he preferred to observe a rigid formality. His maneuver and the motivation behind it certainly point to a very different state of mind compared to that of Baudin who, being unaware of the existence of the Flinders expedition, was probably more entitled to be cautious and mistrustful than his English counterpart. Baudin's relaxed frame of mind, in contrast to Flinders' formal correctness, can also be seen in their attitudes to checking one another's

If the records of the famous meeting that we have highlighted do not themselves provide the definitive answer to some of the questions we have raised, there is also interesting evidence to be gleaned from the encounters that followed and from the reaction to these that Flinders inscribed in *A Voyage to Terra Australis*. Several entries in this text, that understandably serves as an act of self-justification after Flinders' misadventures in Mauritius and the misrepresentation of his discoveries in the official account of the French voyage, incontrovertibly give weight to Frank Horner's perception that Flinders' *Voyage* "does less than justice to Baudin." However, we would add that the injustice done to Baudin is perhaps more conscious, or at least more systematic, than Horner has implied. We shall concentrate on three incidents where Flinders is either in sympathy with the view expressed by Baudin's sworn enemies or shows concern for their situation, in spite of the knowledge that two of these same men, François Péron and Louis Freycinet, were responsible for the misrepresentation of his discoveries that had so deeply wounded him.

In our first example, Flinders presents the entry of the *Géographe* into Sydney Harbor as an unmitigated catastrophe, thereby implicitly supporting the version published by François Péron of Baudin's poor management and inhumanity towards his crew. Flinders is careful not to comment explicitly on the question of responsibility for the ship's sad plight—a plight that Péron declares to have already been in evidence at the time of the April encounter, but that Flinders did not note at that time. During the difficult entry into port, however, Flinders makes it clear that the ship was so disabled and so undermanned as to be unable to reach anchorage without assistance—from the British, including himself and his crew. This account obviously places the Englishman in a much more flattering light than Baudin. However, it is flatly contradicted by the evidence to be derived from more impartial sources. Unlike other commentators, who readily grant Flinders the status of independent witness to this incident,<sup>23</sup> Horner finds his reporting to be troubling. While Horner does not suggest that Flinders's wildly inaccurate figures on the number of men fit to serve on deck are anything more than an honest mistake, he rejects the idea, heavily embroidered upon by one of Flinders's early biographers, Ernest Scott,<sup>24</sup> that Baudin's ship was "so disabled as to need assistance in coming to anchor,"<sup>25</sup> a notion that is contradicted by the independent evidence of the ship's log and the matter-of-fact journal of one of the French officers, Ronsard.<sup>26</sup> The *Géographe*'s depleted and weary crew were indeed grateful for the assistance offered them after the difficult passage through the heads in heavy weather, but they had certainly not been at the mercy of the waves. Flinders's reason for dramatizing the event may well have been to contrast the hospitality that the French received in Port Jackson with the poor treatment to which he was subjected by the French in Mauritius, but his description of the inglorious arrival of the *Géographe* became an important element in the folklore concerning Baudin's incompetence, which successive generations of Flinders's biographers repeated uncritically and unquestioningly. The consequence has been that

---

passports or to dressing up for their meeting. Flinders appeared in full uniform, while Baudin is described by one of his hostile officers as "looking like a robber" (quoted by Horner, 219).

<sup>23</sup> Sydney [sic] J. Baker, on citing Flinders' evidence to damn Baudin, goes so far as to say that Flinders' testimony represents "an impartial view by an outsider." See "A Madman in the South Seas," *Nation Review*, May 30-June 5 (1975), 866.

<sup>24</sup> Ernest Scott, *The Life of Captain Matthew Flinders R.N.* (Sydney, 1914).

<sup>25</sup> Horner, *The French Reconnaissance*, 240.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

the myths continue to circulate,<sup>27</sup> since Flinders's story provides the main source of information on Baudin to the general reading public.

The second type of comment on Baudin that Flinders makes in his official account is perhaps more directly damning—namely, his allusions to Baudin's so-called failings, that include the accusation of poor hydrographic practice or the mention of Henri Freycinet's less than flattering remark about his commander's preoccupations in Tasmania.<sup>28</sup> In these instances, Flinders's judgments echo those of the constant and sworn enemies of Baudin: the two Freycinet brothers, Louis and Henri. As career naval officers, of noble origins, they did not accept that the ex-merchant seaman was a fit commander for a grand scientific expedition. They contested his navigational decisions and deplored the departures he made from his instructions, however justified, as well as his lack of cartographic skills, even though with two hydrographers and Louis Freycinet on board, the cartographic work of the expedition was in very good hands. New research has also shown that it was the Freycinet brothers who persuaded François Péron that Baudin was a dangerous incompetent and inspired many of the untruths about the commander<sup>29</sup>—particularly his so-called errors in navigation—that the scientist was to include in the official account.<sup>30</sup> Since their professional jealousy extended to Baudin's reputation as a scientific voyager, it is in this context that we should also view Henri Freycinet's comments on Baudin's predilection for chasing butterflies as opposed to pursuing his charting. The impression given by the comment is that the French had failed on both counts: to make scientific discoveries that were of any importance or to complete the discovery of the south coast in a timely fashion. For Flinders to give credence to Henri Freycinet's disloyal and patently misleading remark<sup>31</sup> amounts to an acceptance of the judgment on Baudin that underlies it, and also constitutes another discreet affirmation of his own superior claim to success in the charting of the unknown coast. This attitude is effectively relayed through the diary of Robert Brown, in which

---

<sup>27</sup> The following recent publications serve as characteristic of the tendency to voice criticisms of Baudin that have currency among Flinders's biographers, even though they have been convincingly refuted by historians of the Baudin expedition, notably Frank Horner: Jonathan King speaks of the "inferiority of the French charts" and "French incompetence" in "Nine Years in a Leaky Boat," *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, Sept. 29-30 2001; James Griffin refers to Baudin's poor leadership in "Voyage to the Depths," *The Weekend Australian*, "Books Extra," Nov. 24-25, 2001; Stuart Macintyre, in his introduction to the re-edition of Ernest Scott's 1914 study of Matthew Flinders, repeats without question or reference to later scholarship Scott's opinion that Baudin's reconnaissance was "dilatatory and careless." *The Life of Matthew Flinders* (Sydney, 2001), 5.

<sup>28</sup> Flinders reports the remark as follows: "Captain, if we had not been kept so long picking up shells and catching butterflies at Van Diemen's Land, you would not have discovered the south coast before us." (Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, 1: 192-193). See also Horner, *The French Reconnaissance*, 356, 220.

<sup>29</sup> Michel Jangoux, "Les zoologistes et botanistes qui accompagnèrent le capitaine Baudin aux Terres australes," *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 41 (2004), esp. 77-78.

<sup>30</sup> Even Miriam Estensen, the most critical of Flinders' biographers, has cast doubt, like her subject, on Baudin's skills as a navigator and seaman: Miriam Estensen, *The Life of Matthew Flinders* (Crows Nest, NSW, 2002), 203. The accusation of navigational errors—namely, the decisions responsible for the expedition's slow progress along the African coast—was made by François Péron in the official account of the expedition: Péron, *Voyage de découvertes*. Oscar Spate and Frank Horner have clearly demonstrated that Péron's accusations are completely unfounded and that Baudin's navigation across the Atlantic was in no way unusual or deficient: Oscar Spate, "Ames damnées: Baudin and Péron," *Overland*, 58 (Winter 1974), 54; Frank Horner, *The French Reconnaissance*, 93-95

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of this remark and a refutation of its implications, see J. West-Sooby, "Baudin, Flinders and the Scientific Voyage," in *Actes du Colloque Baudin-Flinders de l'île Maurice*, M.S. Rivière and V. Hookoomsing, eds., forthcoming, 2004.

Baudin's charts and discoveries are denigrated, under the stated influence and advice of Flinders himself.<sup>32</sup>

We can determine from such examples that Flinders is not averse to showing Baudin in a bad light, but should we assume that his act was deliberate? On the one hand, Flinders was bound to Baudin by the professional solidarity that dictated the lending of assistance to a fellow mariner in need, although their difference in age and rank had not encouraged intimate friendship between them. On the other hand, Flinders was much closer in career terms to the Freycinets. Flinders and his men enjoyed socializing with the French officers and scientists in Port Jackson.<sup>33</sup> The fact that Flinders, in writing up his account, tried to excuse Péron for misrepresenting his own findings is further evidence that the Englishman seemed to have felt some warmth towards the French zoologist and otherwise accepted him as a reliable source—all of which suggests that Flinders may well have been persuaded by Péron's, and the Freycinets', vilification of the French commander.<sup>34</sup> In Mauritius, Flinders was also befriended by another of Baudin's officers, Charles Baudin, who is known to have been critical of his commander.<sup>35</sup> It is by no means impossible that the Englishman, who felt that his talents had gone unappreciated by none other than Captain Bligh, could identify with the resentment that the young Frenchmen bore their commanding officer.<sup>36</sup> During his enforced residency in Mauritius, he may also have heard the stories that circulated about the colorful past of the French captain and the accusations of shady dealings.<sup>37</sup> While a sense of honor and due respect for rank prevented Flinders from expressing forcefully the doubts he may have felt about the competence or qualities of Baudin, neither his narrative choices nor his omissions regarding the Frenchman can pass for entirely innocent. Baudin's case does not seem to have attracted the sympathy of Flinders, who was understandably absorbed by his own plight, even though he knew the Frenchman to be held in great esteem by a mutual friend, the Governor of New South Wales, Philip Gidley King. Conversely, Flinders has conciliatory words to say on behalf of Péron, the rival whose dishonest claims about the extent of the French discoveries on the south coast he knew to have

---

<sup>32</sup> R. Brown, 178-179.

<sup>33</sup> John Franklin, a midshipman on the *Investigator*, reports on the good relations between the French and English officers at Port Jackson in a letter to his mother: "now I feel the want of a knowledge of French, for there are two national ships on Discovery here and I'm not able to converse with them in French, but am obliged to refer to unfamiliar Latin. They are a pleasant good lot of men, and would instruct you if they were able." (Letter dated 21 July 1802, from the Flinders University Library microfilm records pertaining to the Flinders expedition, AJCP Reel M379—typed transcripts of letters.) We are grateful to Gillian Dooley, Special Collections Librarian of the Flinders University Library, for providing us with this and other archival documents from the Flinders expedition.

<sup>34</sup> Flinders chose to believe (*A Voyage to Terra Australis*, 1: 193) that what Péron had written about the French discoveries on the unknown coast was dictated by "over-ruling authority and smote him to the heart."

<sup>35</sup> Horner, *The French Reconnaissance*, 84.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Brunton, in *Matthew Flinders. Personal Letters from an Extraordinary Life* (Sydney, 2002), 29, mentions how Bligh's lack of respect for his achievements continued to rankle with Flinders.

<sup>37</sup> There is no doubt that Baudin did transport to Mauritius items of commercial interest, including a printery, as Bory de Saint-Vincent alleged. How "shady" these transactions were is perhaps another question. Although trading itself was a clear breach of Baudin's instructions, Horner adds that Baudin "was so open about what he was doing that we cannot help thinking that the practice may have been common enough at the time for the participants to feel able to count on the silence of their subordinates." Horner, *The French Reconnaissance*, 129.

been so detrimental to his reputation.<sup>38</sup> The evidence points to a conscious attempt on Flinders' part to defuse the pain that this personal betrayal had caused him by deflecting responsibility on to a distant and, for all he knew, disreputable figure.

Is there not after all something inevitable about Flinders embracing, albeit at a distance, the paradigm of rivalry? It was he who knowingly had entered into a race with Baudin and, for a man of his temperament, only winning it was good enough.<sup>39</sup> In that context, we can understand why his account of a manifestly unwelcome brush with his rival would so discreetly undermine his counterpart's reputation, while promoting his own by purporting to be so cordial. On the other hand, it was not likely that Nicolas Baudin, the more genuinely cordial of the two navigators, who knew nothing, upon his departure, of Flinders' mission, would have considered himself to be in a race, or in the same race as his young English counterpart.<sup>40</sup> Because his scientific brief was so important in his own eyes, he was not as deeply preoccupied with the colonial prize that was at stake in the race undertaken by Flinders.<sup>41</sup> Rivalry sits firmly within the colonial framework, within a value system and a context espoused by Flinders, who was vitally interested in the future of New South Wales; but it was this very system that was ultimately rejected by Baudin, as we know from his famous letter to Governor King in which he showed himself to be so skeptical of the benefits of colonization, particularly to indigenous peoples.<sup>42</sup>

To judge the achievements of both men by the standard of their commitment and service to colonial expansion is surely no longer in the spirit of our times. On that score, too, Baudin deserves a far more even-handed treatment than history, borne along by the equally self-serving narratives of Matthew Flinders and Baudin's enemies, has so far refused to grant him.

---

<sup>38</sup> The most potentially damaging act of Péron, of which Flinders was unaware, was to suggest to Governor Decaen that Flinders' mission was a political one; this untruth had a direct consequence on Flinders' fate as a political prisoner in Mauritius. Horner, *The French Reconnaissance*, 322.

<sup>39</sup> Flinders' competitive streak is well attested in his correspondence. See, for example, in Paul Brunton, Flinders' letter to Sir Joseph Banks, dated 24 May 1801, in which Flinders states his intention "to accomplish the important purpose of the present voyage; and in a way that shall preclude the necessity of any one following after me to explore." Cited in Brunton, *Matthew Flinders*, 69.

<sup>40</sup> If Baudin's expectations of glory were high, it was also because these expectations were widely shared. His expedition was predicted to rank alongside the great voyages of discovery, not only by Jussieu, in a letter of 20 July 1798 to the Minister of Marine—cited by André-Pierre Ledru, *Voyage aux Iles de Ténériffe, la Trinité, Saint-Thomas, Sainte-Croix et Porto-Rico*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1810), 307-308;—but also by Louis-François Jauffret, who claimed Baudin to be the "successeur de Cook et de Bougainville et de La Pérouse"—cited by J. Copans et J. Jamin, *Aux origines de l'anthropologie française. Les mémoires de la société des observateurs de l'homme en l'an VIII*, 2d ed. (Paris, 1994), 68. Under the portrait of Baudin issued at the time of the expedition's departure, there is an inscription by Péron comparing Baudin to Cook and Bougainville. See Horner, *The French Reconnaissance*, 80.

<sup>41</sup> Baudin clearly saw himself as first and foremost a scientific voyager. His writings prior to the voyage to Australia reveal both his disdain for politics and his passion for the natural sciences. The journal of his voyage to the Caribbean is particularly striking in that regard. See Nicolas Baudin, *Journal de la flûte la Belle Angélique armée au Havre et commandée par le citoyen Baudin*, Paris, Bibliothèque centrale du Muséum d'Histoire naturelle, Ms 49-50.

<sup>42</sup> See F.M. Bladen, ed., *Historical Records of NSW* (Sydney, 1897), 5: 826-830.