

H-France Review Vol. 10 (December 2010), No. 193

John Dumnoore, *Where Fate Beckons: The Life of Jean-François de la Pérouse*, Fairbanks, University of Alaska Press, 2007, 304 pp. 17 halftones, 17 maps. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-160023-0026.

Review by John West-Sooby, University of Adelaide.

During the eighteenth century, so many voyages of discovery ended in tragedy that this just about became the standard trope. Few such voyages, however, captured the public's imagination to the same degree as the expedition led by Jean-François de la Pérouse. The mystery of his disappearance was a key element in the romance that quickly became attached to his name. The various unsuccessful attempts to locate him and to resolve that mystery undoubtedly also played their part. It was not until 1827, nearly forty years after the event, that the Irish captain Peter Dillon discovered traces of the wreckage of the *Boussole* and the *Astrolabe* on the island of Vanikoro – by which time the French mariner's disappearance had taken on an almost mythical dimension. Other circumstances added to the aura surrounding La Pérouse – the revolutionary turmoil that engulfed France, for example, and the fate that befell his major sponsor and supporter, Louis XVI, who is reported to have asked as he stood before the guillotine if the explorer had yet been found, or the remarkable 16,000 kilometre journey undertaken by Barthélémy de Lesseps to bring La Pérouse's journals, maps and notes back to Versailles from the Russian peninsula of Kamchatka. Then there is the uncanny coincidence of his arrival in Botany Bay on 23 January 1788, a mere six days after Phillip's First Fleet had anchored there – the last recorded contact with the French navigator.

There is, of course, much more to the La Pérouse story than the circumstances of his demise, and there is no-one better placed to tell that story than John Dunmore, whose name is synonymous with the study of Pacific exploration, and of the French navigators in particular. This new book reprises his 1985 study, *Pacific Explorer: The Life of Jean-François de la Pérouse*, but with significant changes to its organisation and content. It offers the reader a complete and extremely well-documented account of the life of La Pérouse, from his birth in Albi in 1741 to his departure from Botany Bay on 10 March 1788. There is also a final chapter devoted to the "forty years of oblivion" that followed his disappearance, and during which a succession of navigators sought his trace. The story is framed by a Prologue, which presents a *mise en scène* of Peter Dillon's interview with the British Chief Secretary in Calcutta, an interview that secured official support for an expedition to locate the wreckage of La Pérouse's ships, and by an Epilogue in which Dunmore reminds us of the considerable achievements of the French navigator's great voyage, which, as he notes, have largely been "overshadowed" by the "mystery of the lost expedition" (p. 265).

As the book's title suggests, this is an account of the life of La Pérouse and not a biography in the traditional sense. There are occasional references to the temperament of the man from the warm southwestern region of France, and his family relationships are carefully documented, as indeed is his long and troubled courtship of the woman he fell in love with and eventually married, Éléonore Broudou. However, while his personal trials and tribulations are presented in an informed and detailed manner, La Pérouse the man is not here the subject of any real psychological analysis. In some respects, this is to be regretted, even though it is patently not the aim of the book. It would be of interest to know more, for example, about La Pérouse's approach to the business of navigation and to the management of

men. What kind of a captain was he? What was the real nature of his relationships with his officers and staff? The events that are recounted here do of course give us some indication of his character and attitudes. A strong sense of decency, for example, emerges from the account of his gentlemanly conduct in the Hudson Bay raid. We also see the depth of his emotion following the tragic loss of 21 men in Lituya Bay. His disdainful attitude towards the traditional practice of claiming territory is likewise a clear indication of his values, which owed much to the Enlightenment (and to Fleurieu's instructions in this regard). And yet La Pérouse somehow remains for the reader an external figure, whose psychological complexities are never really explored.

Where Dunmore excels, however, is in his ability to set the background to the events, drawing on his great knowledge of the period and its characters. His presentation of Hudson Bay, for example, and of its role in the history of Franco-British rivalry is remarkable for its clarity and economy (p. 150). His brief biographical sketch of William Bolts and his description of the part this unusual character played in the planning for La Pérouse's expedition (pp. 179-180) is similarly informative and entertaining while at the same time uncluttered by extraneous detail. The book is full of *tableaux* of this kind which provide all of the necessary background and context for the events that are about to unfold, but without distracting from the narrative of those events. Indeed, Dunmore writes throughout with a lightness of touch that belies the weight of his erudition. This is an accomplished piece of writing, and the general reader and the specialist alike will readily appreciate the quiet authority and the easiness of Dunmore's style. A well-researched and eminently readable book, Dunmore's account of the life of La Pérouse will serve as a valuable reference work for anyone interested in the life and achievements of the celebrated French navigator.

John West-Sooby
University of Adelaide
john.westsooby@adelaide.edu.au

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172