

# **‘Inhabited by a race of formidable giants’: French Explorers, Aborigines, and the Endurance of the Fantastic in the Great South Land, 1803**

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## **Introduction**

This paper concerns a very small episode in Australian history that few would be aware of: a failed fishing expedition off Shark Bay, Western Australia, in 1803, which culminated in two cross-cultural encounters between French explorers and local Aboriginal men. The few scholars who are familiar with this incident generally explain it away in a brief sentence or two—for instance Colin Dyer simply states that ‘the French experienced the usual hostile reception extended in this region’ (113)—and then quickly move on to more significant events in the history of French maritime discoveries in Australia. So why am I writing about this seemingly uneventful event?

There are three reasons. Firstly, this incident challenges the assumption that post-Enlightenment explorers were thoroughly modern, rational, sceptical men of science, who eschewed their pre-modern predecessors’ fabulous imaginings. Many hagiographers of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century explorers overemphasise their scientific and secular achievements, and pay less attention to their journals’ discursive qualities, including their roots in pre-modern thought (for example see Fornasiero et al. 258; Duyker 183-8; Brown 354-7). Secondly, the episode sheds light on contemporary theories about the ‘South’ and the ‘antipodes’, that is, in the words of Ross Gibson, how Australia has been a ‘duplicitous object for the West’, identified as both self and other, so simultaneously known and unknown, European and exotic, offering a canvas for European projections of a ‘world upside down’ (Gibson x; Beilharz iii-vi; Hetherington 3-4). The final reason, which has been omitted from the historiography, is the most important because it both explains why the fishing expedition failed and gives rise to the first two reasons outlined: the indigenous group that the erstwhile fishermen encountered at Shark Bay were not recognised as Aboriginal men as the scholarship states, but were instead believed to be a ‘race of formidable giants’. I am intrigued by the fact that the possibility that a remnant race of giants existed in the Great South Land was entertained as late

as 1803, and by the fact that no historian has considered this worthy of exploration.

The possibility that this cross-cultural encounter involved not only an exotic race, but a monstrous race, gives rise to new ideas about the role Australia and the South played in the modern European imagination. Giants, along with other fabulous beings and marvels, played a significant role in evolving western conceptions of this continent, from its beginnings as the unknown *terra australis incognita*, or Great South Land, to the modern nation, Australia, it has become. This is because stories of giants have permeated the West since antiquity, represented in the Old Testament, medieval folklore, and Renaissance *mappae mundi* (Cohen; Stephens, *Giants in Those Days*).

Stories of giants have also flourished in indigenous and post-contact Australia. Some Aboriginal Dreamings and legends depict giants, locating them in marked spaces and thereby rendering them taboo places; for example the Yawaru people of Broome, Western Australia tell stories of Wadaba (or Gumbun), who lurks in the mangroves and must be avoided (Kerr 23; and see also Mathews 139-41). Giants also figured in Anglo-Celtic-Australian folklore in the guise of the Wildman and bunyip since the time of the First Fleet (Holden).

In all of these disparate temporal and geographical cultures giants have marked the boundaries between known and unknown lands or domesticated and untamed spaces, as well as symbolising the differences between contained and unrestrained bodies, through their sexual and gastronomic indulgences (Cohen xii-xiii). By exploring this little episode in Australia history, which began as a humble fishing trip in 1803, I hope to explore the history of the fabulous possibilities contained in the idea of the Great South Land before it was domesticated and transformed into a western nation, only contingently found in southern waters.

## Historicizing the Great South Land

Before exploring the French fishermen's terrifying clash with the ostensible giants of Shark Bay, it is imperative to explore the history of western conceptions of the Great South Land, or *terra australis* as it was better known, for it provides the foundation for why such an extraordinary encounter in Australia was even remotely entertained by the French explorers in 1803. Like legends and stories about giants, ideas about *terra australis* have their roots in antiquity. In the fifth century BC, Pythagoras proposed that a great southern land mass must exist in order to balance the known land masses in the northern hemisphere. He contended that the world was divided into five parts: two frigid parts in each hemisphere, two temperate, and a fiery equator bisecting the two zones. The logic, that an inaccessible, great southern land mass must exist in order to balance the weight of the northern continents, was similarly put forth by Crates of Mellos in the second century BC, Pomponius Mela in the first century AD, Ptolemy in

150 AD, and Macrobius in the fifth century AD. This theory came under attack from Christian dogma in the Middle Ages, when scholars 'felt repugnance for imagining lands not mentioned in the Bible' (Sankey 28), and St Augustine declared such ideas heretical. However, some brave cartographers continued to imagine *terra australis*, only now populating it with fabulous races, such as the skiapods who had one giant foot, or antipodes with backward-facing feet (Eisler 9-11; Holden 25-6; Sankey 28-9).

Such cartographical embellishments were emblematic of the medieval period, as cultural Others were represented as increasingly marginalised from the Christian centre of Jerusalem in accordance with their degree of difference, ranging from the exotic and curious peoples of the east (Freedman 3), through to the monstrous races of the extreme periphery, exemplified by the inaccessible and unknown southern continent. This schema, mapping human difference to geographical distance, was also replicated in the late Middle Ages in the wildly popular fourteenth-century opus, *The Book of John Mandeville*, which charted a fictitious journey around the world and Mandeville's encounters with a range of bizarre peoples and monstrous beings (Camargo 69). That these monsters were then depicted in the *Nuremberg Chronicle* of 1493 further entrenched expectations that the margins of the known world were peopled with fabulous creatures (Holden 27).

During the Renaissance the notion of *terra australis* became more than just hypothetical as European explorers such as Marco Polo and Amerigo Vespucci discovered new coastlines in the south, and cartographers creatively, if not accurately, incorporated them into their new maps. Despite remaining elusive, the unknown continent was now imagined to be south of either South America or Java. For instance the kingdoms Marco Polo discovered, Beach, Lucach and Maletur, were eventually incorporated into *terra australis* and mapped south of Java, precisely where Western Australia exists. And Ferdinand Magellan's discovery of Tierra del Fuego was also imaginatively mapped by Gerard Mercator in the sixteenth-century as separate from South America, and part of the uncharted fifth continent, *terra australis* (Eisler 11-6, and 22-37; Sankey 29-31).

It is also at this point that ideas of *terra australis* intersect with giant lore, for on the same voyage, Magellan's crewman, Antonio Pigafetta, recorded that they saw a giant standing on the beach north of Tierra del Fuego. He claimed that the tallest was 'so tall that our heads did not reach his belt' and that he was 'a size like a giant, who had a voice like a bull' (Sturtevant 331). This encounter was forever engraved on the history of this land, for it was subsequently named Patagonia (from Patagón, or 'big-foot') after the colossal people seen there, and seventeenth-century maps of this territory, for example those of Jodocus Hondius and Willem Janszoon Blaeu, were adorned by illustrations of giants (Harvey 21-2). Magellan's sighting inaugurated the giants' entry into the menagerie of

fantastic beings, amongst skiapods and antipodes, depicted as inhabiting the still incompletely-charted southern extremes of the world.

In the seventeenth century, the conceptions of *terra australis* became more prosaic, with the Dutch going in search of the Great South Land because rumours of gold and spices portended its mercantile potential. Travelling south from Batavia (Java) the Dutch launched various expeditions, beginning with Willem Jansz's discovery of Cape York in 1606 and culminating in Willem de Vlamingh's extensive survey of the west coast and the Swan River in 1696-7. In fact, the west coast received the most landings because many failed to navigate Brouwer's 1611 route, which was supposed to halve the journey time between Europe and the Spice Islands. Dirk Hartog, for example landed in Shark Bay on the *Eendracht*. Such landings, intended or otherwise, enabled the Dutch to chart great tracts of the Australian coastline, but, disappointed by the 'low and monotonous' coastline (Jansz, qtd in Schilder 94), the Dutch did not recognise it as the fabled Great South Land and so named the country New Holland (Schilder 57-94, Eisler 68-99).

However, the advent of New Holland did not quell British and French fantasies about *terra australis*, which in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries manifested in a number of imagined voyages to the Great South Land, perhaps most famously in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1735). This novel accentuated its satire by intertwining absurdly fantastic elements with real world examples of European explorations. For instance, in a letter Gulliver admits to advising his 'cousin Dampier' on 'his book called *A voyage round the world*' (Swift 39), here referring to the famed English buccaneer William Dampier who landed in north-western Australia twice in the late seventeenth century. Swift also plotted his fictional lands cartographically within the vicinity of *terra australis*. Lilliput and Houyhnhnms Land, inhabited by fabulous races of giants, little people, horses and yahoos, were mapped south of Java, and next to the actual Dutch discoveries in Australia: the former near Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), and the latter next to Edel's Land, Lewin's Land, and Nuyt's Land (all Western Australia) (Plate 1, Part 1 and Plate 4, Part 4, Swift 48 & 216). French authors similarly wrote novels about imagined voyages, and one which merits discussion here is the Huguenot writer Gabriel de Foigny's little-known 1676 novel, *Terres Australes, Connu* (*The Southern Land, Known*) because it fancifully represents the society of the 'Australians'.

*Terres Australes, Connu* traces Sadeur's epic journey on the back of a giant bird to the Southern Land: 'an earthly paradise that, while containing all the riches and curiosities imaginable, is exempt from the irritations of our world' (de Foigny 46). One of these curiosities is the fact that the inhabitants—the 'Australians'—are a race of hermaphrodites, who go completely naked, lack possessiveness, never quarrel, and 'all love each other equally and in equal measure' (48). Yet the

Australians' oppressively monocultural society, in which difference is obliterated (through killing strangers or 'half-men', and the Australians' wars with their austral neighbours), and corporeal functions such as sexual intercourse are regarded as 'shameful and irrational' (Faussett xxxvii), progressively disillusioned Sadeur, so he eventually escapes back to Europe. This utopian novel, which was a fictional allegory of religious sectarianism, was also a historical treatise on *terra australis*. De Foigny, much like Swift in his reference to Dampier, begins by charting real explorers' searches for the unknown continent, which lent much credibility to the more fantastic elements of the novel, such as the fabulous creatures, and the 'world upside down' of the hermaphroditic society.

The French and British also harboured ambitions to discover the actual *terra australis*, because while New Holland still remained to be circumnavigated, there was always a chance that its coastline was part of the larger unknown southern continent. Abbé Paulmier's *Memoirs concerning the establishment of a Christian mission in the Third World, otherwise called the Austral, South, Antarctic, Unknown Land* (1654), a compendium of French ideas about *terra australis*, inspired various French expeditions in the eighteenth century (Sankey 36-49). The British search is best represented by James Cook, the most famous navigator to land in Australia. One of the aims of his first expedition was to discover *terra australis*, but after charting the east coast of New Holland in 1770, and exploring Antarctic waters on his second voyage in 1772-3, he concluded that it did not exist. Even though the mythical *terra australis* was now replaced by the reality of New Holland, and later Australia, the fabulous possibilities of the former could not be completely discounted in the latter. Which brings me to the Baudin expedition's *Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Lands* (1809), and their extraordinary encounter with giants in 1803.

## **Turtle fishing at Shark Bay**

One of the later voyages of discovery in Australian waters was the French expedition, led by Post-Captain Nicolas Baudin, of the *Géographe* and *Naturaliste* to the 'southern lands' from 1800-1804. Devised by Baudin, this assignment aimed at discovering the natural history of this still incompletely charted territory, and to make new discoveries in the south-west of New Holland in particular. But once word spread about Baudin's ambitions his proposal was co-opted by the newly formed *Société des Observateurs de l'Homme* and intrigued none other than Napoleon Bonaparte. The expedition eventually transcended Baudin's humble amateur-naturalist fantasies, incorporating two corvettes, a crew of 251, including 23 naturalists—the 'largest and best-qualified scientific team ever to leave Europe'—and a budget of 150,000 francs (Brown 34-51).

The expedition set sail from Le Havre on the 19th October 1800, and, after crossing the Indian Ocean, finally spied the Australian coast seven months later (Baudin 157). The ships then made numerous stops along the western and

southern coasts, including longer stays at Maria Island and the D'Entrecasteaux channel in Tasmania, a five-month sojourn at Port Jackson, and a visit to Timor, before returning to the west coast again in 1803. During this long period the French crew encountered numerous Aboriginal peoples and compiled detailed ethnographic studies of their corporeality, culture, and material life. By the time they returned to the west coast the naturalists' attitude towards the Aborigines was somewhat jaded (see Konishi); no longer considering them exemplars of Rousseau's noble savage, the French were bored by the ostensible poverty and striking uniformity of the different peoples throughout the continent (Péron 269). In 1803, having decided that they had achieved all of their aims, except those ruled out by circumstance, the French explorers prepared their ships for the long voyage home. Throughout the entire period of their journey, it was probably the least likely time that they expected to encounter the fantastic.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> March 1803 the crew of the *Géographe* were alarmed by the sudden return of one of their boats from a routine turtle-fishing trip. The corvette was anchored off Péron Peninsula at Shark Bay, a site on the west coast they had visited and named back in July 1801. Baudin had remembered that the waters were teeming with giant turtles and that the arid waterways were an excellent source of salt, so returned for the sole purpose of restocking the ship's food supply before embarking on the final leg of their expedition. To this end, he anticipated staying at this seemingly uninhabited barren cape on the edge of the Indian Ocean for no longer than five or six days (Baudin 505). Though largely unknown, this stretch of land held no interest for the French, who were familiar with it not only from their own earlier visit, but also from the well-known account of the English buccaneer William Dampier, who had dismissed its potential in the late seventeenth century. However, their curiosity was reinvigorated by the extraordinary story told by the unexpectedly returned sailors.

The expedition's zoologist and chronicler François Péron observed that 'Fear was still evident in the faces of the crew' who manned the boat, as they blurted out the story of their terrifying encounter with the 'extraordinarily big, strong men' who 'prevented their going ashore'. He was told that:

These giants (there were a hundred or more) carried great shields and enormous spears; long, black beards grew down to the middle of their chests; they ran like furies along the beach, brandishing their weapons; they uttered great, long cries and threatened [the] fishermen, who fled precipitately toward the ship (Péron and Freycinet 134; see also Baudin 506).

Upon hearing this fabulous tale the listeners laughed at the frightened men, but were soon perturbed by the arrival of the second fishing boat manned by equally 'panic-stricken' sailors. This 'second detachment of fishermen (who had been

sent for the same purpose to another point on the mainland)' had unfortunately landed on the beach before the giants had appeared, so had 'an even closer view of these so-called giants and had only managed with difficulty to escape from them' (Péron and Freycinet 134). Reflecting the eighteenth-century divide between the 'erudite' and 'vulgar' classes (Stephens, *Giants in Those Days*; Daston and Park), the learned post-captain and naturalists were sceptical about the lowly sailors' claims that such 'marvels' actually existed. Yet, these ostensibly rational men of science could not easily dismiss the notion that this part of New Holland harboured colossal people because there had been earlier reports which corroborated the extraordinary claim.

As the sailors explained the details of their bizarre experience, Péron immediately recalled that 'the most ancient chronicles that we possess concerning this part of New Holland portray it as inhabited by a race of formidable giants'. Before visiting the southern lands he had read a French edition of the Dutch navigator Willem de Vlamingh's account which alleged that he had found 'gigantic human footprints' during his exploration of the Swan River.<sup>1</sup> Further, Péron remembered that his own compatriots, Sub-Lieutenant François Heirisson and Midshipman Charles Moreau, had found 'the print of a man's foot, of an extraordinary size' on the 18<sup>th</sup> June 1801 during their reconnaissance of the Swan River (Péron 144). He also recalled that two years earlier Louis de Freycinet had been 'seized with astonishment at the sight of a print of this nature' found in Shark Bay (Péron and Freycinet 145-6). With these earlier examples in mind Péron, as a learned naturalist, acknowledged that the eye-witnesses' claims seemed 'extravagant', but still held that:

These various close encounters did not fail to be given credence by the believers in marvels (for there were a few of them among us) and seemed to them to offer, along with the double report of our fishermen, if not rigorous demonstrations, at least very strong probabilities in support of the existence of a race of giants on these shores (145-6).

Determining that no matter how 'extravagant such assertions [about giants] might seem, it was still necessary to obtain precise information on the matter', Baudin assembled a party, to be led by Lieutenant-Commander François-Michel Ronsard and including Péron, to go ashore and find the natives, giant or otherwise, and 'become acquainted with them' (Péron and Freycinet 134; Baudin 506). However, upon arriving on the same shore visited by the ill-fated fishermen, Ronsard and his men 'found not a single one of these so-called giants', even after exploring 'all of the environs' and 'hunt[ing] in all the bushes'. Their only discovery that day was 'twelve to fifteen huts', so 'Hunting no longer for the fantastic giants of Eendracht Land', Péron decided to turn his attentions to more scientifically commendable pursuits; he ended his day collecting the tantalising

'brilliant shells', extolled by Dampier over a century earlier, whose study would add 'to the glory of the nation' (Péron and Freycinet 134-6).

## Explaining giants

The scientific aims and achievements of the Baudin expedition, combined with the recent scholarly desire to rehabilitate it from obscurity, has resulted in the historiography portraying these explorers with a modern, rational, empirical sensibility completely divorced from the medieval or early-modern past. This a priori assumption obviously impacts on some historians' examination of the Baudin expeditions' brief dalliance with the fantastic: they simply excised it from the historical record. For example, Colin Dyer, in his *The French Explorers and the Aboriginal Australians* (2005) says of the aforementioned sailors' altercation with the giants that 'the French experienced the usual hostile reception extended in this region. Two fishing boats were prevented from going ashore by "a band of natives, all ... armed with spears, clubs and shields"' (113). Similarly, Jean Fornasiero, Peter Monteath, and John West-Sooby in their *Encountering Terra Australis: The Australian Voyages of Nicolas Baudin and Matthew Flinders* (2004) state that 'The six-day stay at Shark Bay was most notable for an encounter with a large group of Aborigines ... whose hostile attitude put great fear in the hearts of a French shore party and prevented them from landing' (258).

Edward Duyker, on the other hand, in his *François Péron: An Impetuous Life* (2006) does acknowledge the reference to giants by claiming that 'Péron considered his most significant anthropological finding of the visit to have been the dismissal of the notion (going back to de Vlamingh's 1697 report of gigantic human footprints) that the local inhabitants were a race of giants'. Duyker does not mention the sailors' hysterical allegation that they had witnessed the giants themselves, instead simply stating that they had 'encountered a group of a hundred formidable indigenous inhabitants intent on resisting their landing'. Nor does he acknowledge that Péron had decided to go ashore with the specific aim of discovering this mythic race of giants (183-8). Finally, Anthony Brown examines this episode in the greatest detail in a section of his book *Ill-Starred Captains: Flinders and Baudin* (rev'd 2004) titled 'The Giants of Shark Bay'. His text is an innovative history combining conventional historical accounts of the voyage interspersed with his own imagined recreations, and it is only in one of these interludes that he describes the frightening encounter with giants (354-7). Unfortunately he does not subject this episode to any analysis or discussion, nor does he consider this incident within the historical context of western conceptions of the fantastic.

Although the Baudin expedition only entertained the notion that a race of giants existed on these shores for a brief period, the complete omission or drastic underplaying of this episode in the historiography is significant because it

suggests a somewhat teleological approach to the text. In reading the extraordinary accounts of the inhabitants of the unexplored beaches and interior of what was then called Eendracht's Land, the scholars anticipate the ordinary reality of Shark Bay and its known indigenous inhabitants, thereby expunging the fantastic from Australia's history. At the very least, the scholars adopt an anachronistic interpretation of the sources, for while the erudite naturalists were sceptical about their existence they did not share today's resolute belief that giants are entirely fictitious (Stephens, *Giants in Those Days* 5). Walter Stephens posits that it was only in the twentieth century that giants became purely conceived of as 'creatures of fable and fairy tale' for he states that prior to that western cultures have defined giants as 'special races distinct from the rest of mankind', with biblical scholars positing that some antediluvian giants may have escaped the Great Flood and still be lurking in the uncharted peripheries (1-2). As late as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, archaeological discoveries were credulously interpreted and displayed as the bones of giants, though they were received with scepticism by scientific communities.

Giants also figured in the extensive history of the south land, which as Robert Holden argues, was believed populated with 'a bizarre menagerie of creatures as well as fantastic races of people' (Holden 46). In fact there were claims in the late eighteenth century that a giant had been brought from Australia to England. A theatre handbill announced that on the 29 November 1789, less than two years after the establishment of the first colony, 'a wonderful large WILD MAN, or monstrous GIANT, BROUGHT FROM BOTANY BAY' had arrived in London on the Rover (Anon). Such stories of the fabulous down under were popular; Maria Nugent reports that numerous versions of this handbill exist, all citing different dates and ships, illustrating not only the contemporary beliefs in the fantastic but also reflecting long-held notions of the antipodes as a 'world upside down' (Nugent 19-22). The idea of 'antipodean inversion' pervaded European perceptions of Australia, for, as Ross Gibson states, 'On the upside-down face of the world, perversity could be perceived to be the rule'. So given the other perversities which marked the south land such as black swans, rivers which ran inland, wood that did not float, and birds which failed to sing or fly (Gibson 10), it was not utterly implausible that the inhabitants would be perversely gigantic.

It is not only their possible survival and prodigious size which defined giants. With the exception of Rabelais' good giants, Gargantua and Pantagruel, who were 'a burlesque of all the other giant-lore' (Stephens, 'Giants' 101), Stephens notes that in both the folklore and the 'erudite giantology' explored by theologians and secular philosophers alike, giants were usually 'distinguished from ordinary human beings because they were dedicatedly, unremittingly evil' (Stephens, *Giants in Those Days* 3). Referring to Hayden White he also states that with few exceptions, 'the figure of the giant "designated an area of

subhumanity that was characterised by everything [societies] hoped they were not''' (66). Victor Scherb concurs, observing in his study of the enduring myth of Gog and Magog that in the medieval romances the infamous characters indulged in transgressive and barbaric behaviours such as cannibalism, incest and free love. Scherb states that Gog and Magog, who first appeared in the Book of Ezekiel but are best known as the English giant goemagog after Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, frequently serve to unite and strengthen a group's identity against an 'alien force'. This helped to forge 'a western identity in the face of barbarian invasions and ... create a sense of solidarity within a civilised European community' (Scherb 63). Most importantly, he points out that giants demarcated a cultural boundary for they were purported to inhabit the unexplored margins, places that were conceived of as simultaneously remote and menacing, much like the uncharted and unexplored inland of Australia in 1803.

Evidently the French sailors' sighting of giants followed a long history of giant references within early travel narratives, exemplified by the claims first made during Magellan's visit to Patagonia, and even as late as 1764 when John Byron echoed the belief that Patagonia was inhabited by a race of giants, claiming that these people 'in size come the nearest to Giants I believe of any People in the World'. John Hawkesworth memorialised this claim in his edition of Byron's journal writing that the Patagonian chief 'was of a gigantic stature, and seemed to realise the tales of monsters in human shape... I did not measure him, but if I may judge of his height by the proportion of his stature to my own, it could not be much less than seven feet' (Sturtevant 332).

In 'Measuring the Marvelous: Science and the Exotic in William Dampier', Geraldine Barnes and Adrian Mitchell contend that William Dampier 'rides the boundary between medieval and modern ways of comprehending the cosmos' because he is a 'traveller who is sceptical of the marvellous, but whose narrative discloses vestiges of such bygone notions as monstrous races and the terrestrial paradise' (Barnes and Mitchell 47). I believe that despite the Enlightenment's rationality and empiricism, this sentiment applied over a century later to Baudin and his men. Such an episode illustrates that while this does not necessarily seem to be a radical proposition, it does challenge the prevailing ideas about the Enlightenment. For instance, Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park are convinced that the Enlightenment had banished beliefs in the marvellous. They will only concede that some key thinkers embraced the marvellous in a very tempered way: Buffon still included an entry on monsters in his *Histoire Naturelle*, but 'his uncharacteristic brevity is still louder testimony that they had been banished to the margins of natural history and natural philosophy' (Daston and Park 359).

The long history of the fantastic weighed heavily on the French sailors, bolstering their faith that they had indeed witnessed a race of giants charging towards them 'like furies' on the shores of Shark Bay. In contrast to what has been written

in the aforementioned teleological and rationalist historiography, the French naturalists did not immediately dismiss the story as bogus. And despite their failure to find any giants on their first day of searching, the next day they renewed their investigations, and again set out to hunt the mysterious giants of Eendracht's land.

## Giant hunting at Shark Bay

The day after the first campaign to find Shark Bay's 'fantastic giants' another, smaller, party, including Péron, artist Nicolas-Martin Petit and mineralogist Antoine Guichenot, was sent ashore to conduct a more leisurely survey of the land and search for the natives, giant or otherwise. Though they did not meet anyone at the landing site, the environment indicated the inhabitants' nearby presence: a mass of human footprints, a smouldering fire, and some huts, which appeared to Péron as 'the most finished examples that [they] had occasion to observe in New Holland' (Péron and Freycinet 137-8). Péron was also intrigued to find some caverns that were clearly used as shelters, for they had ledges carved out of the walls to store 'household utensils', and were 'carpeted with a thick layer of seaweed'. But anxiety concerning his isolation from the longboat, and 'the approaching night' prevented Péron from examining more than one of these refuges (138). Once back in the sunlight, the naturalists' sense of disquiet was alleviated by the discovery of their other highly sought after quarry, the beautiful shells adorning the waters off the eastern coast of the peninsula.

Péron, Petit, and Guichenot waded knee-deep in the waters, marvelling at the shells which could be simply plucked from the sandy bottom, as well as the 'shoals of fish' swimming fearlessly around them: wrasse, chætonon, balistes, mackerel, rays, and globe-fish (144). But this pacific interlude was disturbed by the arrival of 'several large sharks', one of which suddenly veered towards Petit's naked ankles, frightening him into 'fir[ing] at the creature'. The shot not only alarmed the fish, but also Petit's companions, for Péron, perhaps remembering their still unseen giants, feared that the noise would draw them towards the vulnerably half-dressed naturalists. Still not knowing where the Aborigines or giants might be lurking, Péron and Guichenot hurried out of the water to 'fetch their clothes and hide in the bushes', but the 'foolhardy' Petit jeered at their barely contained hysteria, or as Péron prefers to describe it, 'prudence', and remained in the water. However, Péron notes that Petit's 'rash sense of security soon gave way to terror' (144).

Before Péron and Guichenot had even finished dressing they suddenly heard 'fearsome cries' and saw 'a troop of natives running down to the shore from the top of a dune'. Despite the fact that the *raison d'être* of the expedition was to meet the natives, upon 'the sight of them', the Frenchmen, including the formerly brave Petit, raced half-naked around a nearby point, and once hidden, evaluated their defences: 'a musket and two pistols'. Crouching down, the frightened men

loaded their weapons and planned their strategy, 'solemnly promising not to fire, except as a last resort', and even then, due to their limited ammunitions, only 'at point blank range' (144). At this point the Aboriginal men swiftly negotiated the promontory, and ran towards the hapless naturalists, shrieking 'terrible, menacing cries'. Realising that the natives were only men and not formidable giants, the Frenchmen speculated that another panicky retreat would only 'embolden' the hostile men, so the explorers decided instead to approach them in a masquerade of confidence.

This unexpected action disconcerted the Aboriginal men, momentarily 'halt[ing]' the group, and leading the tallest to come forward and seemingly invite one of the Frenchmen to come and parley with them. Despite the fact that this was the goal of their expedition ashore, Péron considered their position too vulnerable, as they were isolated from the *Géographe* and could expect that the 'number of natives would increase at any minute', so he decided that it was imperative to 'avoid' 'an interview of this nature' (145). With a resolute air, the naturalists kept together and resumed their deliberate approach towards the Aboriginal men, who again appeared perturbed by this tactic. And, to the disappointment of the modern reader, after some discussion, the Aboriginal men simply 'turned their backs and headed towards the point of the coast whence they had come' (145).

Having circumvented a serious altercation, the explorers could finally relax, and evaluate their encounter in a more rational manner. Péron dismissed the charge that the men of this coast were giants because to his eye, the tallest of the group, the one who appeared the boldest, and had 'particularly harangued' them, 'appeared to be 5 feet 4 or 5 inches tall'.<sup>2</sup> The others were thought to be 'of ordinary height—even small', and the French could 'plainly detect in them that spindliness of limb and slenderness of form which [Péron believed to] characterise the various peoples of New Holland' (146). By surviving their potentially dangerous encounter with the natives and realising that they were merely ordinary men, the explorers believed that they had now banished the myth of the 'existence of these new giants of the south' (146). With this claim Péron perhaps felt that that they had penetrated the unfamiliar margin, former home of giants, and by rendering the unknown known, cast off the vestiges of his pre-modern faith in the fantastic.

## Conclusion

Although this incident concerning the search for giants on the shores of Eendracht's Land is only a minor incident in Australian history it is worthy of scholarly attention because it can bring into conversation two disciplinary approaches to historical conceptions of *terra australis*/Australia – the sweepingly theoretical approaches of cultural studies, and the evidentiary focus of history.

Drawing on a kaleidoscope of genres, periods, and texts, cultural theorists such as Ross Gibson have broadly articulated the 'image of Australia [as] oddly doubled'. He claims that

on the one hand, Australia is demonstrably a 'European' society with exhaustive documentation available concerning its colonial inception and development. Yet on the other hand, because the society and its habitat have also been understood (for much longer than two hundred years) in the West as fantastic and other worldly (Gibson x).

Such an approach thrills with its possibilities in acknowledging a multilayered imagining of Australia, but it also frustrates the reader because of its elusive evidence and sweeping generalisations. Yet, historians can be too focussed on their evidence and too measured in their interpretation, and, as in the historiography outlined above, can produce work that lacks imagination. By portraying such incidents in a sentence or two as little more than a cultural encounter between European explorers intent on making scientific discoveries and Aboriginal Australians defending their land, the historians have elided the broader historical and textual contexts of this Shark Bay incident. Further, the historians' approach is teleological, retrospectively projecting the prosaic reality of Australia onto historical conceptions of the mythical *terra australis*, and ignoring the fact that throughout millennia of western mythmaking the Great South Land was conceived of as a site for fantastic possibilities.

Moreover, this scholarship also takes for granted the inevitability of the west's confident appropriation of the south. The Baudin expedition's experiences in Shark Bay illustrate the anxieties of liminality experienced by European explorers. Caught between the security of their ship, a floating laboratory dedicated to the emerging taxonomic sciences, and the unfamiliar landscape of the southern continent they charted, these men were constantly allaying their fears about the unknown—be it the strange flora and fauna that both tantalised and repulsed, or the frightening spectre of the native inhabitants charging towards them from the unseen interior. Moreover, the Aboriginal men were not simply pushed into a defensive response to the coming of the Europeans, as the historiography suggests, but displayed varying attitudes to the white strangers, including curiosity and indifference. They were not simply colonial subalterns in waiting, but active agents in a cross-cultural extra-colonial encounter which may have unfolded in any number of ways. It is disingenuous to ignore the historical accounts of the explorers' trepidation and wonder towards the new land and its people, and only depict their modern, rationalist, and empirical views of the land as a potential site for mercantile and intellectual imperialism.

Consequently, this little story of giant hunting in Shark Bay in 1803, which is so rich in potential for revealing competing ideas about Australia and the *terra australis*, demonstrates that the different disciplines need to come into

conversation with each other, borrowing from each other in approach, evidence, rigour, and imagination.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately for the modern reader, Vlamingh's original journal has been lost to time, and the extant English translations do not include Péron's assertion (Vlamingh).

<sup>2</sup> Given that a French foot was 32.48cm (Dyer 50-1) this height converts to approximately 173-176 cm.