Chapter 4: Botanising

During the eighteenth century, the Linnaean classification of flora enabled botany to be systematised and provided with a global reference. Linnaean taxonomy and nomenclature expedited the reduction of plants to specimens, numbers and names. Once a specimen was so identified, it represented that plant type no matter where it was found. In the heart of Paris, the Jardin du Roi was a central powerhouse for organising research which could benefit both science and the nation. Closely allied with the navy, its botanists encouraged the collection of plants from overseas.

Global botany and the economic utilisation of newly found plants became national goals. By the time of the d’Entrecasteaux expedition there existed some 1,600 botanical gardens in Europe. They connected scientific discovery and identification with experimentation in transferred plants and acclimatisation. The best known example in the British Empire of transplanting in imperial economic interests is William Bligh’s breadfruit laden HMS Bounty. Gardener Delahaye also was to successfully transfer breadfruit from the Pacific to Ile de France. As Schiebinger and Swan wrote recently in Colonial Botany: ‘The story of colonial botany is as much a story of transplanting nature as it is one of transferring knowledge.’

When Labillardière stepped ashore in Tasmania, he was a senior French botanist trained in the Linnaean tradition, having studied at the Jardin du Roi. He was a dedicated scientist, seeking to enlarge knowledge of global flora, but equally, he was concerned to find plants that had economic or commercial potential. Eyewitness to scurvy’s scourge, it is hardly surprising that he was alert to edible plants that could serve as food at sea. He accumulated one of the largest herbarium collections of that era.

Labillardière’s experience and reputation made him the foremost botanist until that time to enter an Australian forest. Imbued with Rousseauesque sentiments concerning nature and man, he immediately was stimulated by the vista of cool temperate rainforest. ‘The eye is astonished,’ he enthused, ‘in contemplating the prodigious size of these trees … whose tufted summits were crowned with an ever verdant foliage: others, loosened by age from their roots, were supported by neighbouring trees, whilst, as they gradually decayed, they were incorporated … with the parent-earth … a striking picture of the operations of nature, who, left to herself, never destroys but that she may again create.’

D’Entrecasteaux was equally enlivened by the romantic landscape: ‘It will be difficult,’ he exclaimed, ‘to describe my feelings at the sight of this solitary harbour at the extremities of the world, so perfectly enclosed that one feels separated from the rest of the universe. Everything is influenced by the
wilderness of the rugged landscape. With each step, one encounters the beauties of unspoilt nature.4

Most of their botanising task took place during 1792 on, or north of, the north-eastern peninsula opposite their anchorage. To this were added the 1793 collections on the harbour’s western and southern rim, but in this discussion both visits are linked. The dense rainforest seen by the French was depleted following the establishment in 1884 of the Leprena sawmill. Fortunately, harvesting methods of that era did not involve total devastation. There are still impressive stands which recall the French wonderment, while on the peninsula timber regrowth is sufficient to suggest that green forested vision of two centuries ago. From the heritage viewpoint comes another consideration. Should modern invasive technological timber harvesting take place, the type localities of the many plant species collected here will be ravaged, apart from the destruction of archaeological evidence.

During Labillardière’s first afternoon ashore on the peninsula where so much of his research took place, he reported that he gathered several eucalypt species. By the time that they sailed, during the 33 days available for land-based exploration (minus about eight days lost preparing specimens aboard), Louis Ventenat claimed that they had collected some 5,000 specimens (presumably including leaves, flowers, fruit and seeds). According to Ventenat, these represented up to 500 species and 30 genera, probably including the 1793 collections.5 As Edward Duyker points out, labelling or memory confusion mixed into this total some specimens collected in Western Australia. Making allowances for generous counting by Ventenat and for labelling errors, the botanists still made a very impressive collection during their periods on shore. Their Tasmanian floral collections are admirably presented in The General.6

When the botanists explored, they took with them the only artist on the voyage. Piron is little known, but Labillardière fortunately mentions him in passing. On one occasion he made ‘several drawings of the landscape,’ and on another he instructed Piron to draw specimens that they had collected.7 Unfortunately, most of Piron’s invaluable drawings were lost and only 15 engraved plates based upon his sketches were included in Labillardière’s publications.8 Recent research by Edward Duyker has established that his given name was Jean and that he was a Belgian who probably never returned to Europe.9

Through his strenuous activities Labillardière established one of the largest herbariums of those times, while he published the first major general description of Australian flora. His two-volume Novae Hollandiae Plantarum Specimen, which was published between 1804 and 1807, contained 265 copperplate engravings of Australian species. British reports on limited subjects preceded this publication, but France has the honour of precedence for the first major study. It represented an exceptional exercise in scientific analysis, description and
illustration. Recherche Bay was endowed with international significance through its contribution to the identification of Australian flora and its association with a distinguished European botanist.

Type specimen of *Eucalyptus globulus* (blue gum).

To judge from Labillardiére’s own account, 6 May 1792 was a day of considerable satisfaction, for this was his most noteworthy discovery, when he had a blue gum felled to collect flowers. He named, described and illustrated *Eucalyptus globulus* in his 1800 publication. Its great height proved a source of wonderment, but satisfaction also, for its tall straight trunk appeared to hold potential for ship building. To his delight, the carpenters found blue gum timbers the most suitable for providing planks to raise the gunwales on the oared boats.  

Labillardiére could hardly have anticipated the great commercial advantages of his discovery: that it was introduced rapidly around the world as a cultivar, becoming the species by which the genus *Eucalyptus* became internationally known; that by 1905 four million feet of its timber would be supplied to the British Admiralty for wharf piles; that today more than 1.3 million hectares of *E. globulus* are planted outside Australia and 0.4 million hectares of plantation within Australia; or that Tasmania would adopt it as its State floral emblem.  

In addition to blue gum, Labillardiére collected six of the 29 eucalypt species now known to be native to Tasmania. These included *Eucalyptus cordata* (Tasmanian silver gum), *E. ovata* (swamp gum), *E. viminalis* (ribbon gum) and *E. amygdalina* (black peppermint). He also collected *E. pulchella* (white peppermint), but this was not described until after his death. He also attributed another plant to *Eucalyptus resinifera* (red mahogany), which he incorrectly believed had been described by John White at Sydney (actually J. E. Smith described it for White). Labillardiére was wrong, because this species does not grow in Tasmania. However, as he observed that *E. globulus* closely resembled *E. resinifera*, his confusion seems understandable.  

Edward Duyker, in his detailed biography of *Citizen Labillardiére*, discussed the many other plants collected and named by his hero. Some plants had been found previously, so they lacked priority, or were incorrectly identified; these were in the minority. Some notable discoveries included the evergreen native cherry, whose nut resembled the cashew. Labillardiére recognised it as a new genus, naming it *Exocarpus cupressiformis*. Other botanical finds included four species of heath (*Epacris*), including *Epacris impressa*. The latter became Victoria’s floral emblem, so both Victoria and Tasmania chose floral emblems collected and named by Labillardiére, surely a special association between person and place of collection. Further plants credited to him included four orchid species, flag iris (*Diplarrena moraea*), Christmas bells (*Blandfordia punicea*) and the sedge, *Gahnia*.  

One plant which provided significant but temporary ‘bush tucker’ was *Apium prostratum*, ‘sea celery’. Labillardiére tasted it and found it good to eat, so quantities were gathered and taken aboard as welcome fresh vegetable ‘greens’. On a later excursion some species of plantago (*Plantago muelleri*) were tried and eaten with ‘relish’. Possibly because the botanists only met Aboriginal people
at the end of their Recherche Bay visit, they were unable to profit from their knowledge of plant foods. Reference was made to the Aboriginal people eating plants but nobody seems to have followed this up by tasting such food items. Some food sources such as seaweed and roots of rushes may have seemed too unattractive, even though they saw them cooked and eaten on several occasions. Labillardière, Ventenat and Delahaye merit credit for the discomfort that they accepted on their land excursions. The first deterrent was the inconvenience and hunger from the meagre and monotonous rations provided by their ships. Significantly, this restricted the time they could be absent from shipboard meals. Occasionally they shot birds and collected shellfish, but the bush supplied only a small proportion of their diet. Their camping equipment was minimal. Despite the cold and frequent rain, their only protection was the brush shelters they erected, while sleeping on beds of fern. They huddled near large fires because generally the weather during autumn 1792 proved ‘very sharp’; even during their summertime visit in 1793, the cold proved ‘very piercing’.

Then there were the insects in this unfamiliar land. A bad night resulted from ‘the fury of the mosquitoes,’ while Ventenat was assaulted by ferocious ants when he slipped upon a huge fallen trunk which proved rotten. Not only did the fall cut his lips and tongue, but he lost a tooth, while the ants ‘swarmed over me in their thousands’. ‘[W]e were plagued by very large flies,’ complained D’Entrecasteaux. ‘In general the flies are much more amazing … than in our climates.’ Perhaps these were March flies, as their ‘buzzing is very loud and troublesome’.

During 1793 the botanists adventured into the wilderness. On one occasion they followed what probably was an Aboriginal track from Cockle Creek to South Cape Bay. Passing a night there, Delahaye complained that ‘we had never previously felt so cold’. The snow covered peak of Mt La Pérouse beckoned, for in the clear air it seemed deceptively close, while nearer ranges were concealed by the vegetation. On 31 January 1793, an expedition of 11 men set out for the mountains with food for four days. To judge from Labillardière’s account they spent a gruelling time penetrating the forest, walking above ground upon wet and rotten fallen vegetation. They ascended a hill with great exertion, possibly Mt Leillateah, and were daunted by the forested distance remaining to their mountainous objective. They turned back, because rations would not last the time required, as ‘these forests … afforded nothing’ to eat, which added prudence to the adverse wet and cold conditions.

Half the party headed towards the southern coast, while the remainder returned to base. On their south-eastern journey towards South Cape Bay, they noticed a thin seam of coal, the first record made of coal in Tasmania. They slept that night in the brush shelter that they had constructed on their recent visit. They continued collecting plant specimens with some difficulty because the sailors
carrying their specimen boxes could not get through the rocks and forest blocking access. ‘We were obliged to collect plants in our handkerchiefs,’ Delahaye remarked in irritation. Amongst their finds were two new lobelia species and, floating on two large pools, they collected the bladderwort *Utricularia dichotoma*. They arrived back on board to learn that gunner Boucher had died. Because their food supply had been inadequate, Delahaye reported that they returned with a ‘ferocious appetite’. 

**The Garden**

During this exploration era it became a common practice for visiting vessels in newly discovered lands to plant European flora and release domestic animals. It was hoped that the animals would breed and that the plants would spread, thereby providing sustenance for future crews or castaways. A secondary expectation was that the animals and plants would prove useful to Aboriginal inhabitants and so induce them to become ‘civilised’. ‘Maybe one day,’ reflected La Motte du Portail, ‘the natives will give thanks to the French for having provided them with a substantial source of food.’

William Bligh planted fruit trees at Adventure Bay, Bruny Island, during his HMS *Bounty* visit in 1788 and his HMS *Providence* stopover in 1792. When d’Entrecasteaux anchored there a few months later, Delahaye found that one of the seven trees planted that year had died, and he pruned the rest. An apple tree, presumably planted during 1788, was almost two metres high, but was in a ‘very bad state’. He pruned it, but was unable to find any other planting.

It is an agreeable conceit to credit Bligh as the father of Tasmania’s apple industry, with input from France, though there is no evidence that his trees prospered. Certainly, republican Labillardiè re gave Bligh no praise, reporting the following undemocratic notice nailed to a tree:

> Near this tree Captain William Bligh planted seven fruit trees, 1792.
> Messrs. S. and W. Botanists.

Labillardiè re remarked in disgust that this and similar inscriptions ‘all displayed the same marks of deference which the English botanists paid the commander of their ship, by putting only the initial letters of their own names, and expressing that the Captain himself had sowed and planted … I am much inclined to doubt, whether Bligh was very sensible to the honour.’

Delahaye commenced gardening immediately upon their arrival in 1792, planting cress, which germinated after three days, presumably a crop intended for crew meals. According to the *Recherche* Log, he and two men were instructed to prepare a garden on 10 May. As the site of this garden is disputed today — hardly surprising since no archaeological investigation has been attempted at the time of writing — it is important to present the existing evidence.
Significantly, the log entry reports that ‘the place they select will be shown on the chart of the bay,’\textsuperscript{26} and on the meticulous map prepared by Beauforts-Beauprê the garden was 1.3 kilometres NNE of Bennetts Point and 70 metres in from Coal Pit Bight.

It is appropriate to begin with Delahaye’s own account, in which he makes clear that this was not the only scene of horticultural activities.

two men and myself tilled with great difficulty, a piece of land measuring 28 feet square. I sowed plants suitable for the season, which are celery, chervil, chicory, cabbages, grey romaine lettuce, different kinds of turnip, white onion, radishes, sorrel, peas, black salsify and potatoes. I had large quantities sewn everywhere in the woods, in the more open spaces and where the soil was more friable. It was not possible to sow any more in the soil which is very difficult to cultivate, and in the season which did not allow it. I sowed mixed seeds everywhere thrown at random, where I believed they could succeed.\textsuperscript{27}

Historians are indebted to Maryse Duyker for this recent translation from Delahaye’s difficult manuscript in archaic regional dialect and almost indecipherable writing. It adds considerably to our knowledge of the number and variety of species of seeds planted and to other plantings. From Labillardière we learn that the garden measured nine metres by seven metres, that it was divided into four sections and that he judged the soil as unsuitable because it consisted largely of clay,\textsuperscript{28} so the area in Delahaye’s note quoted above may be in error. It is important to observe that Delahaye sowed seeds elsewhere, and du Portail in 1793 also cleared ‘a small square of garden’. Such sites may yet be discovered.\textsuperscript{29} One such garden was prepared somewhere in the Cockle Creek area while Labillardière and Delahaye were absent attempting mountaineering. Labillardière had hoped to plant in fertile soil, but ‘I saw with regret that a very dry and very sandy spot, pretty near the head of the bay, had been dug up and sown’.\textsuperscript{30}

Upon the expedition’s return in 1793, Delahaye and Labillardière landed on the peninsula where they had collected the previous year. On 6 February they collected further plants, intending to revisit the garden site. The following morning they set out early each with a pruning-knife and handkerchief to carry specimens. It was then that they first made contact with Aboriginal people. Despite early tension, the meeting went well, but the garden was visited in company with a number of men. Perhaps these preoccupations resulted in a cursory inspection, because Delahaye simply recorded: ‘All the seeds had nearly sprouted, but remained with their first leaves’; it was ‘in a very poor state’.\textsuperscript{31} He blamed the drought.
The ‘garden’ in 2003, outlined by rocks.

The ‘garden’ in 2003 outlined by rocks, approx. 9 x 7m. John Mulvaney.
D’Entrecasteaux was interested in the fate of garden and, to judge from his journal, Delahaye returned for another inspection: ‘M. La Haye inspected it with more care than on the first occasion; he found a few chicory plants, cabbages, sorrel, radishes, cress and a few potatoes had grown, but had only produced the first two seminal leaves.’ Delahaye now blamed the lack of success on ‘the seeds having been sown in too advanced a season’. Labillardière blamed the lack of water and expressed surprise that at least some cress had not been planted closer to a nearby stream.

Whatever the explanation for the garden’s failure, apart from Bligh’s incipient orchard, this was the first attempt to cultivate vegetables in Tasmania. As it is well documented and located on a chart, it is important to establish the credentials of the feature discovered early in 2003. It should be noted that the size of the garden on Beautemps-Beaupré’s chart is much larger in area. Possibly it was surveyed from the sea, with its location on the map only indicative. With stones carefully laid to define an area some nine by seven metres, it suggests that this historic garden has been identified over two centuries since it was dug and planted. As Tasmania’s first garden (like Bligh’s token orchard) it holds an honourable place in the history of gardening in Australia. As Tasmania’s Botany Bay, Recherche Bay is the type site for many Australian plants.

ENDNOTES

1 Schiebinger and Swan, Colonial botany, 2005: 5-17.
2 Ibid.: 17.
3 Labillardière, Voyage in search of La Pérouse, 1800: 96.
4 Duyker and Duyker (eds and trans), Bruny d’Entrecasteaux: voyage to Australia and the Pacific, 2001: 32.
7 Labillardière, Voyage in search of La Pérouse, 1800: 101, 113.
8 Duyker, Citizen Labillardière, 2003: 231.
10 Labillardière, Voyage in search of La Pérouse, 1800: 111-112, 118.
15 Labillardière, Voyage in search of La Pérouse, 1800: 113.
16 Ibid.: 105, 287.
17 Duyker, Citizen Labillardière, 2003: 143.
18 Labillardière, Voyage in search of La Pérouse, 1800: 103, 286.
21 Labillardière, Voyage in search of La Pérouse, 1800: 290.
22 Ibid.: 291.
‘The axe had never sounded’

28 Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 118.
30 Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 293.