Chapter 7: Meeting the Tasmanians

When Labillardiè re and other savants disembarked at Recherche Bay for the second time, the date was 24 January 1793. The frigates were anchored in Rocky Bay, unknown to the British at Sydney. In two days time Sydney Cove would celebrate five years of occupation. The prompt publication and English translation of Labillardiè re’s account in 1800 made an important contribution towards humanising the Tasmanians. Unfortunately that information and the sympathetic attempt at cross-cultural understanding exerted no influence upon Risdon Cove’s settlers in 1803. Ironically, that settlement was largely made because of unnecessary concern for French territorial intentions following the d’Entrecasteaux and Baudin explorations in Tasmanian waters.

According to the Recherche log, it was on 6 February that Labillardiè re and Delahaye led a party of four on an overnight excursion to the familiar north-eastern peninsula, returning to their 1792 main botanising field. Labillardiè re’s book gives the date as 8 February, but the log entry is to be preferred. This is corroborated by Delahaye’s brief journal.1

There is some difficulty in interpreting Labillardiè re’s account, following their departure from the Recherche at 5am. He states that they landed at the mouth of the harbour on its western side. As they later had to cross what must be the D’Entrecasteaux River from its west bank, possibly they landed in the vicinity of Ryans Point. As this is a rocky area and they collected oysters, it is a contender. If so, they traversed over three kilometres through the bush, in the vicinity of the future Leprena track, before reaching the ‘head of the harbour’ presumably at the mouth of the D’Entrecasteaux River. They probably followed a well-trodden Aboriginal trackway which ran from the south coast to Southport Lagoon.2 They continued up the riverside but were unable to cross it until well upstream, where they crossed on a fallen log. They then headed north-east and after at least another three kilometres they reached ‘the great lake,’ also described by Delahaye as ‘a large lake’. This must be Southport Lagoon and they then walked around its southern margin to the sea.

If this was indeed their day’s outing, it was a strenuous one, and they faced a long hike back on the peninsula to reach their collection point, somewhere near the garden (which they visited) on Coal Pit Bight. Little wonder that when evening came Delahaye reported that they were too tired to construct a bough shelter. They simply lay in the open by a fire. Upon that cool summer’s night the party passed an untroubled sleep.3

While botanising on the following morning, the scientists left the two seamen asleep in camp. When in the bush, armed only with their specimen collecting pruning knives, they heard voices. They prudently returned to camp where the
men had muskets. Labillardière’s account is calm, but Delahaye’s version has them running away ‘as fast as we could’. Armed with loaded muskets they then set out to trace the source of the voices.  

There was no need for arms and no fear of attack. Labillardière says that he approached the group of men, women and children holding out a biscuit (part of the meagre rations about which he grumbled) to an older man. He accepted it with a ‘very good grace’ and peaceful race relations were initiated.

This long desired meeting with Tasmanians had at last taken place but, unfortunately, less than a week before the frigates were to sail. The amount of what may be termed observant participation during those few days is remarkable and so, also, is the agreement in the different accounts provided by officers and scientists. Although some of it must have been communicated by Labillardière (d’Entrecasteaux, for example, only mingled with the people once), the independent version by d’Auribeau is testimony to their attempts at objectivity. Resulting from this first week’s encounter on the Tasmanian mainland between inhabitants and Europeans is a precious record of Aboriginal culture only 10 years before British settlement overwhelmed traditional ways.

There were 42 persons at this first encounter, seven men, eight women and their children, so at least half a band was present, possibly constituting seven families. They appeared fearless and eager to communicate. One piece of intelligence conveyed in mime eased the visitors’ concerns and demonstrated the peaceful nature of these presumed savages. During the night, while the French slumbered nearby, the Tasmanians visited, leaving them to sleep soundly. Neither then nor upon any other occasion were objects stolen, a virtue stressed by the French. Simple gifts were exchanged — a neckcloth and a handkerchief added to the biscuit, while a shell necklace was offered in return. Clothing then followed, presumably a form of charity, because the French could not understand survival in that climate without clothes and they wore plenty because of the chill nights, but were burdened with them during the warm days. Although some people, including women, wore a wallaby or kangaroo skin on their shoulders, their lower body was naked. Nakedness was a feature emphasised by all diarists. Labillardière was amused to see seven girls watching events safely perched high above him on a branch; Delahaye was interested to note that they rejected offers of food and, not surprisingly, ‘were surprised to see hot water’. Labillardière made several careful ethnographic observations concerning their beards and ‘woolly’ hair; skin colour made darker with charcoal powder; and impressive cicatrices, incised, he later learned, with the edge of a mussel shell. He also used his knowledge of exploration journals to remark that unlike those New Hollanders reported to knock out their upper front teeth, they did not follow that custom.

The men had hidden their long spears, retrieving them when the French prepared to leave. According to Delahaye, this was only to entrust them to the women to
carry away. The unarmed men escorted the party by the shortest track to the boat station. Before they left, however, Labillardiè re initiated the earliest episode in Tasmanian ethnographic technology. He encouraged a man to demonstrate spear throwing. The man threw his spear at an indicated target on several occasions with what the French judged to be impressive accuracy. Labillardiè re’s important observation was that the man held the spear high and horizontal, drawing it back three times ‘with a jerk, which gave it a very perceptible tremulous movement at each extremity,’ when it flew almost 100 paces. The tremulous movement, he believed, accelerated its pace and prolonged its flight. When aimed at the indicated target, his accuracy was impressive, and Delahaye paid tribute to his ‘great dexterity at a great distance’.6

On their return walk, ‘the attentions lavished on us by the savages astonished us,’ exclaimed the grateful Labillardiè re. They cleared the track by removing dead branches or breaking off obstructions — perhaps a normal procedure for keeping paths open? Somewhat to the visitors’ irritation they also took them by the arm in slippery areas, as they guided them to the beach. The whole group went on arm-in-arm singing.

When the French and their guides reached the harbour shore, the rowing boat was not waiting. So they decided to visit the 1792 garden, which was close by. Another lesson in Tasmanian comprehension followed. The two botanists left the sailors hoping that they would detain the Aborigines, so they would not harm the prospective vegetable crop (as though they had not visited there previously!). One man, however, insisted on accompanying them. Of course there was no crop, but Labillardiè re believed that the man distinguished those struggling European plants from native flora. Whatever the meaning of the mime, it is relevant that Labillardiè re favoured an interpretation that stressed the intelligence and inquisitiveness of the Tasmanian, just as the spear throwing demonstration showed skill.7

These sentiments characterised all the French diarists. Their material existence may have been thought primitive, but they had fully sentient minds. As they returned to the ship following an enlightening day, the Tasmanians strode off equally pleased with events, having declined invitations to board the oared boat.

On the following morning a larger party set out to meet the people; fortunately Piron the artist was amongst them. This time they rowed along the shore beyond the port and met the welcoming people on higher land, possibly near Blackswan Lagoon. There were 19 people present, eating shellfish beside three fires.

This extraordinary encounter of racial harmony was eternalised by Piron, whose realistic sketch of the occasion was possibly spoiled by the Paris engraver’s emphasis upon classical artistic forms, which exaggerated Piron’s classicism. Given the ethnographic accuracy in this image, the background hills and totally unrealistic vegetation must also be the imaginative work of the engraver. Note, however, that the area is clear of brush in marked contrast to the whole of the peninsula today. Presumably this resulted from regular Aboriginal firing.

While classical ideals of bodily stature prevail, there is a remarkable degree of realism in the scene. The setting includes three hearths with crayfish broiling and in the foreground are depicted fine examples of basketry and seaweed water containers. 17 Tasmanians are identifiable, although the sex of some is indeterminate. The probable tally is seven men, five women and five children. Some women are seated with one foot concealing their genital area, a characteristic commented upon by most diarists, so this sketch represents keen ethnographic accuracy.

It is possible to suggest tentative identifications of the French participants, following reading of diaries to ascertain who could have been present. To begin
with the figure standing in the rear wearing a naval tricorn hat: D’Auribeau did not attend this meeting, but Ventenat was an enlisted man present, so he would wear a uniform. Before him is a well-dressed figure holding an object in an awkward fashion. He could be whittling wood, demonstrating the use of a knife, as diarists recorded this activity at other times. Surely, however, this is Saint-Aignan playing his violin, even though to identify the object as a violin is questionable. He was there and played to the people, a sound that ‘did not please them at all,’ remarked La Motte du Portail. He also commented that Saint-Aignan ‘can be considered a very good amateur player.’ While on Buka Island some months before, his violin had proved popular, so ‘at the indifference shown to his performance here,’ Labillardière thought Saint-Aignan was mortified. Ventenat played his flute with greater success in audience reaction.

It may seem special pleading, but possibly the Parisian engraver was unaware that it was a violin that Saint-Aignan held, so he modified the object. A violin in this setting was unusual.

There is a well-dressed man wearing a brimmed beaver hat standing to the left of the group, in friendly stance with a statuesque Tasmanian. This probably is Labillardière. Also in this group is a figure in cap and pantaloons. Is he French or Tasmanian? Labillardière provides the likely answer. He recounted that Piron expressed a ‘wish of having his skin covered like theirs with the powder of charcoal’. His body was soon blackened by an obliging man, who even blew dust from Piron’s eyes. Much to the delight of the charcoal artist, ‘Piron was presently as black as a New-Hollander,’ so Piron surely placed himself by his friend Labillardière and his new-found body painter, whose hand appears blackened from his labour.

Such carefree fraternisation indicates the degree of informality and equality that typified the humanising spirit of the occasion. So too does the fact that a nursing mother allowed various Frenchmen to hold her baby. This incident also is included by Piron. A man holds a baby aloft. As sailors were present, it may be a crew member. On the other hand his clothing and cap look superior to a common seaman’s. As Riche was present, he seems a likely candidate for Piron’s eye. Riche was tubercular, so is this portrayal symbolic of the transmission of deadly diseases, which, by 1831, according to George Augustus Robinson, had reduced the populations of Bruny Island and south-eastern Tasmania to a handful? In 1793 there probably were 150 inhabitants. What then of the remaining well-dressed figure on one knee to the right of the scene? In a letter to Zélie, La Motte du Portail described the meeting, so he is the likely person. With his gaze upon a woman with whom he is conversing, Zélie might feel displeased, had she been told.
'Tasmanians preparing a meal from the sea’, [‘Peche des sauvages du Cap de Diemen’], Jean Piron, 1793.


At the next meeting Piron again used his artistic skills to picture an incident that illustrates Tasmanian economic and social life. The occasion probably took place in Quiet Cove, then another open area. Gathered around 10 fires, according to witnesses, were 10 men, 14 women and 24 children, 12 of each sex. This tally of 48 people was common to both Labillardière’s and du Portail’s accounts. It suggested to them that each monogamous family had its own hearth. Saint-Aignan again played his violin to an even less appreciative audience, who placed their hands over their ears. D’Auribeau was present at this gathering and offered the comment on Piron’s sketch of the scene: that ‘the drawing … of each particular individual, the whole meeting during the meal, the fishing etc — the truth, the naturalness that this clever artist has had the talent to achieve in every respect’.

The special attraction was the preparation and eating of a meal. Food freshness was the keynote, because the women dived for crayfish, shellfish and edible seaweed, placed them on the coals and soon all were consumed. The women also maintained the fires. As the female divers stayed under the cool water for twice the time that the French thought possible, then had to prepare the meal, many attempts were made to influence the men to help, but to no avail. This visual
and written account of the female role in food procurement was detailed, more
so than most nineteenth-century observers, who stressed the male hunting role
in mainland society. The women’s activities, in contrast with the men, who
simply waited for the food to be caught and cooked, shocked the mores of French
culture. ‘We witnessed a frightful scene,’ Joseph Raoul and du Portail reported.\(^{15}\)
He simply deplored the women diving to catch the meal, then having to cook
it, while the men sat and waited. Nothing frightful had transpired.

Quiet Cove, 2006.

Quiet Cove, where the sea food harvesting may have taken place, as rocks are depicted in Piron’s sketch.
Note the thin band of rocks and the dense vegetation cover, whereas in Piron’s image the land is open.
Was this due to Aboriginal firing practices? Photograph by John Mulvaney, 2006.

Piron’s humans observe classical statuesque proportions, although these features
possibly were exaggerated by the engraver for their publication. They also
reflect the virtues held by the French republicans of the era when Piron left
France. To quote Bernard Smith’s categories of virtue: ‘Simple in his needs and
desires, self-disciplined, courageous, and with great capacity for endurance,’\(^{16}\)
symbols of freedom and romantic perfectibility. Piron’s Tasmanians exemplified
hard primitivism, as opposed to the soft, languorous, sensuous Polynesians
depicted in the art and literature of the Cook era. Piron’s people were described
by Bernard Smith as ‘dry, wiry natives’. All the diarists appear to support such
characterisation and, unlike Polynesia, there were no abandoned sexual liaisons.
Piron’s art is one further cultural factor in the Recherche Bay situation. These
people were type specimens of noble savages in the state of hard primitivism.
His females in this cross section of activities preparing this one meal are frozen
in time, as they catch and cook shellfish and crayfish. An archaeological midden may be visualised accumulating from the ashes mixed with discarded shells and food debris.

Most diarists emphasised the desire shown by the Tasmanians to know the sex of each visitor, because the male imbalance worried them. Consequently sailors were emboldened to exhibit their gender, with Tasmanians concentrating upon young and beardless sailors. They were disturbed to find that they were males also. La Motte du Portail, evidently no longer in doubt concerning her gender, could not resist a sneer that had Louis Girardin dared to come ashore for inspection, ‘they would have come across what they wished to find’.17

In the midst of such amicable relations, only one incident appears to have jarred feelings. Three sailors attempted to gain sexual favours from two girls, but they fled onto rocks to escape. D’Entrecasteaux was pleased to conclude at the end of their visit that ‘no indiscretion was committed’. This probably was correct, as only one sailor, who was disbelieved, claimed to have had sex. It was a remarkable record of restraint amongst 200 men, contrasting greatly with contemporary mores in Polynesia. D’Auribau made a special point of acknowledging the crew’s behaviour, though ‘surrounded by naked women and enjoying great freedom’.18 Gregory Dening’s reflections on the meetings between European sailors and Polynesians are appropriate to these first encounters in Tasmania:

> the marginal space between prehistory and history where the encounters between indigenous people and intruding empires created what I have since called the ethnographic moment, that moment in which confrontation with otherness leads to depiction not only of the other but of self.19

All observers emphasised the family as the focus of life. Considerable discussion ensued as to whether polygamy was the rule (as philosophically expected in a ‘primitive’ society), but the evidence suggested monogamy, the strength of ‘marriage’ and the devotion of parents to their children. D’Auribeau took this matter so seriously that, ‘I asked several officers from the two frigates to study the matter carefully … but most of the observers saw no sign at all of polygamy … I merely report the result of my observations and those of almost all the officers.’ It is interesting to note that he did not trust republican opinion by asking the advice of savants, but otherwise his objectivity is impressive.20

The more the two races became acquainted, the greater the emphasis on the essential humanity of the Tasmanians and their loving treatment of children, the sharing of food and their good humour. ‘We never saw in them a trace of bad temper,’ d’Entrecasteaux reflected. He went on to recount ‘a roguish trick’ played by a young man, who took away and hid a bag of shellfish collected by
a sailor. After he had searched for it in vain, it was returned, to be found in its
original place. This ‘waggish trick’ created much merriment for the perpetrator,
Labillardière reported. He also told of a talkative young girl who walked with
him babbling incomprehensible things, but everyone was happy.21

The objectivity of these observers, even when they were puzzled by actions,
added a significant collection to the meagre store of ethnographical knowledge
of contact period Tasmanians. While d’Auribeau appears to have been unpopular
with Labillardière and du Portail, what he drew from his limited meetings with
the Tasmanians is impressive, both for its scope and its sympathy. As with the
monogamy question, d’Auribeau verified his information. Collecting a word list,
he tested the data:22 ‘we carefully compared’ and repeated words to informants,
‘and they understood most of the words very well’. He realised that French
pronunciation must have proved difficult to comprehend, just as a Frenchman
who reads English may not be understood in conversation with an Englishman.
He found that Tasmanians could not articulate ‘f’ and substituted ‘p’. On the
other hand, Ventenat concluded: ‘there are very few consonants and the sounds
T and F are unknown, it being difficult to pronounce them’.23

D’Auribeau provided a sensible account of physical anthropology. He made 14
measurements to describe male and female subjects and estimated the ages of
the 48 people whom they met. Two men he judged to be older than 70 and four
women were between 50 and 60. All the rest were younger than 50. He found
that they expressed a definite preference for red cloth over white or blue cloth
as presents. Wisely, he concluded that ‘we spent too short a time with these
good natives to be able to discover any religious beliefs. Moreover I hold that
metaphysical ideas are not transmitted with the same ease as are physical ones
and that it is only after a long sojourn among a people that one can determine
something in that connection.’24

It was a potential loss for the history of anthropology that this thoughtful man
died within the year. Had he survived to write an account of his voyage and
the ‘natural goodness’ of these people, it could have assisted dispelling much
nonsense later written about Tasmanians.

The French were deeply impressed with the bearing and intelligence of Mara,
the sole Tasmanian they enticed aboard Recherche.25 It must have proved a
traumatic experience for Mara as he toured the frigate, and sat in the Captain’s
cabin in the presence of a local ethnographic collection. He was presented with
a cock. (Had he not indicated that he would kill and eat it, d’Entrecasteaux also
would have supplied a breeding hen). The crew later took their pet monkey and
a kid goat ashore to the amusement and wonderment of the people, who preferred
the kid’s company to that of the monkey. Of all the sailors, the one they made
a fuss about was a ‘negro’, presumably a black African, whom they greeted
warmly.26
With all these informal harmonious happenings, Stephanie Anderson is correct to conclude that, ‘looking back on it now in the light of indigenous / settler relations in Australia, it is hard not to romanticise it as a moment in time when an encounter across European and Aboriginal culture succeeded’. 27

The French made strenuous efforts to establish a word list. Labillardière’s vocabulary included 83 words. However, Plomley and Piard-Bernier consolidated a vocabulary of 155 words from all the French diarists. Words were carefully obtained, as d’Entrecasteaux explained: ‘We have made them repeat the same word several times; and after they had repeated it, they would designate the object we had requested them to name. We have asked the same question of several of them; and we have used the same means to ensure that the pronunciation was correct.’ 28

Joseph Raoul, the second pilot on Recherche, produced a reliable word list, which he gave to d’Auribeau. Upon meeting the same people for a second time, he related, ‘I profited by their willingness to correct some of the words I had collected from them … and to gather some more. Because I had an opportunity to check the meaning I am sure that they are accurate; and I have only recorded words which I heard clearly and were repeated several times.’ 29

D’Auribeau thought that their speech was ‘crisp and lively,’ but found that some words which he pronounced distinctly, Tasmanians could not repeat — ‘français and d’Entrecasteaux were among them. They said anglais extremely well, likewise the names of almost all the officers. It seemed to me that they were unable to articulate the f and that they substituted p for it.’ 30

Collecting words was not all plain sailing. La Motte du Portail regretted that, ‘because of the rapidity with which they pronounced their words and because of their general lack of concentration I was often obliged to shake them by the arm … so as to make them remember that I was with them’. D’Auribeau also commented on the many distractions that made it difficult to maintain an interview. 31

Ventenat, priest and flautist, was interested in their song and dance. At one of the meetings he observed:

Their dance consists of raising one foot behind them, touching the head with the hand, then they bend the body down and straighten up in turn, the movements being made quite violently. Their voice is sonorous, pleasant and agreeable. When they sing they only have two tones, which are pitched between B and G. 32

Ventenat was realistic in his approach to language and the ease of misunderstanding a meaning based upon signs. ‘They articulate in the throat and speak very rapidly,’ he concluded.
Some of the vocabularies may have been derived through songs, for both the French and Tasmanians sang, the former lustily. Labillardière ‘was singularly struck’ with the modulation of their singing. He drew an analogy with the tunes of Arab music, with which he would have been familiar from his time botanising in Syria. ‘Several times two of [the girls] sung the same tune at once, but always one a third above the other, forming a concord.’ \(^3^3\) La Motte du Portail thought that ‘the women often sang among themselves, but also very softly and in a very sad manner’. ‘As for our songs,’ he reported, ‘they seemed to listen to them with pleasure.’ \(^3^4\)

Whatever the linguistic merits of this combined vocabulary, it was a sizeable list from a single area, a commendable attempt by eighteenth century standards. When they anchored at Adventure Bay in 1793, the explorers found that the Bruny Islanders understood their words, which they correctly concluded not only established their common language, but that it proved that their words had real meaning. \(^3^5\) This pioneer vocabulary is not referred in the linguistic survey by Bob Dixon (1980). Until the vocabulary was consolidated by Plomley, however, the words made a less impressive list, notwithstanding the trouble taken to collect them. Thanks to the general care taken by officers and savants to observe the Tasmanians with objectivity and sympathy, a remarkable corpus of information resulted from this cultural encounter.

It is time to reflect upon this momentous and friendly encounter for human history. Since their arrival in southern Tasmania at least 35,000 years ago, the Tasmanians had been isolated from all outside human contact for a period of between 10,000 and possibly 14,000 years. Yet their bearing surely reflected those values that are the criteria of humanity. It is not unreasonable to conclude that their ancestors brought this culture with them on their long migration. They spoke fluently and in lively manner, communicating meaning to the French newcomers. They sang, danced and showed their trust, affection and consideration when they grasped the visitors’ arms. The French already had inferred that they had solicitude (or fear) for deceased kin in the form of cremating their dead. These were hardly the characteristics of sub-human and unintelligent savages. These distinguishing traits of conversational jollity and adaptability stamped these remote people for their French observers as fully sentient *Homo sapiens*, whereas many later colonists assumed otherwise.

The limitations of time and comprehension were understood by d’Entrecasteaux, who ‘regretted that we have only met up with them at the end of our sojourn’. \(^3^6\) He was not to know that within 40 years the Recherche Bay and Bruny Island communities would have virtually ceased to exist.
ENDNOTES

6 Labillardièré, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 301.
9 Labillardièré, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 308.
27 Ibid.: 140.