Foreword

Aerial view of northern area of Recherche Bay, 2005.

Northern Recherche Bay from the air. D’Entrecasteaux River at bottom; Leprena mill site near beach at right. In 1792 ships anchored in the last embayment before the harbour entrance. Photograph by Senator Bob Brown, 2005

Recherche Bay, at the southern tip of Tasmania, combines exquisite natural beauty with a rich, exciting human history.

In 1792, French Vice-Admiral Bruny d’Entrecasteaux brought his two ships Recherche and Espérance to anchor in the bay. ‘It will be difficult to describe my feelings at the sight of the solitary harbour situated at the extremes of the world, so perfectly enclosed that one feels separated from the rest of the universe,’ he wrote.

After their storm-tossed journey from Brest via Cape Town, the ships and the 219 seamen, officers and scientists aboard recovered from scurvy and distemper at Recherche Bay. It provided fish, greens, fresh water, timber for repairs and an intriguing natural environment to study. A year later, after circumnavigating Australia, the d’Entrecasteaux expedition returned to Recherche Bay and this time met up with local Aboriginal people. The French diaries record the unfolding, friendly investigation of each other by these totally different peoples from opposite ends of the globe.

The two centuries since d’Entrecasteaux anchored in Recherche Bay have seen British colonisation, whaling stations, sawmills, coal mines, pubs and piracy all
come and go. Yet as the twenty-first century dawned, the naturalness of its setting remained remarkably unchanged. Suddenly, after 2000, Tasmania’s rapidly expanding export woodchip industry threatened the forest on Recherche Bay’s north-east peninsula which had helped sustain the Aborigines, which had safely enfolded the French frigates in 1792, and which inspired d’Entrecasteaux’s rhapsodic description.

By 2003, Recherche Bay itself needed rescue. In a race against time and government indifference, the local people, including historians, raised the alarm. Soon there were protest rallies in Hobart and a rising chorus of national and international concern.

Into the centre of this growing storm stepped Emeritus Professor John Mulvaney, Founding Professor of Prehistory at The Australian National University, and a world-renowned authority on Indigenous and cultural heritage. He had been a champion of the Franklin River and its World Heritage wilderness and archaeological sites that, against the odds, were saved from damming in 1983. His arrival at Recherche Bay lifted everyone’s morale and contributed to Recherche Bay’s listing as National Heritage. John Mulvaney helped trigger the vital intervention by philanthropists Dick and Pip Smith that made possible the purchase of the peninsula. That guaranteed the forest’s survival as a centrepiece of the Recherche Bay region. Recherche Bay should now be incorporated into Tasmania’s Wilderness World Heritage Area, which includes the Franklin River.

In The axe had never sounded, John Mulvaney has written the galvanising story of Recherche Bay, its Aboriginal people, the extraordinary French visits and the remarkable people and events which have followed. The book is also a tribute to John Mulvaney himself. His devotion to Australia’s humanity and history was pivotal in converting the impending tragedy of Recherche Bay into a triumph for all concerned.

Senator Bob Brown
Senator for Tasmania
Leader of the Australian Greens
Recherche Bay, north-eastern peninsula from the air, 2005.
The north-eastern peninsula. Observatory (Bennetts) Point at bottom right; Blackswan Lagoon centre; Southport Lagoon top left, the area in which the first contact was made in 1792. Photograph by Senator Bob Brown, 2005
‘The axe had never sounded’

Map 1: South-eastern Tasmania.
Map 2: Recherche Bay, showing places mentioned in the text.