

French anthropology in Australia, a prelude: the encounters between Aboriginal Tasmanians and the expedition of Bruny d'Entrecasteaux, 1793

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Encounters between Indigenous Australians and French explorers in the late eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth are a well-documented but not particularly well-known facet of Indigenous and Australian history. The accounts of these encounters open, however one-sidedly and scantily, a window onto Indigenous cultures at the time of European contact. In terms of French intellectual history, they are also significant for the construction of anthropological knowledge, both biological and ethnographic, in France during the nineteenth century. There are a number of important French voyages between 1791 and 1840 that deserve to be examined from this perspective.¹ My concern in this two-part article is to examine the first two of these expeditions: that of Bruny d'Entrecasteaux (1791-1793) in the first part and in the second part Nicolas Baudin's (1800-1804). From both expeditions a reasonable amount of anthropological material was amassed which, for Tasmanian society, has been most usefully collated by NJB Plomley.² The d'Entrecasteaux expedition's sojourn in Van Diemen's Land was a model of engagement in a brief encounter across cultures. Baudin's expedition was less successful in terms of cross-cultural interaction but more complex in its anthropological dimension.

Enlightenment and exploration

There are two interrelated domains in which to situate the early voyages that I shall refer to: that of the Enlightenment and that of two outstanding Enlightenment voyagers, Bougainville and Cook. Without ascribing a homogeneous intellectual framework to what is termed the Enlightenment, I think that the voyages of d'Entrecasteaux and Baudin can be placed in what is paradigmatically thought of as the spirit of the Enlight-

1. French voyage accounts that describe encounters with Indigenous Australians come out of the expeditions of Bruny d'Entrecasteaux in Tasmania in 1793, Baudin at Shark Bay in 1801 and in Tasmania in 1802, Louis de Freycinet in Western Australia and Port Jackson in 1818 and 1819, Louis-Isidore Duperrey's officers Dumont d'Urville and RP Lesson in 1824 in the Blue Mountains, Hyacinthe de Bougainville at Port Jackson in 1825, and Dumont d'Urville on the first Pacific voyage under his command at King George Sound, Jervis Bay and Port Jackson in 1826.

2. Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993 and Plomley 1983.

enment: a voracious scientific appetite for knowing the natural world, including human beings, as part of nature even if they were still dedicated to God, and the view, partly because the divine perspective still held sway, that human beings though different in different climes, were one. Belief in a universal human nature and a universal human rationality prevailed.³ Nonetheless to consider the study of human beings as the natural history of man, as a branch of zoology, was already to look at them in a fundamentally different way. It was to consider humans, not each one in themselves in their divine uniqueness but as a species, part of a taxonomic system.⁴

At this time voyages to the Pacific were widening knowledge about different peoples. Bougainville's voyage is famous as the source of the myth of the South Seas paradise and Bougainville brought back the Tahitian Aotouru to France where he was feted by Parisian society. Cook brought back Omai, and in France as in England his voyages aroused tremendous popular interest. The voyage accounts were quickly translated into French. France and Britain were imperial rivals but Cook's voyages made for scientific rivalry as well. Contemporaneous with hardening imperial ambitions, by the early part of the nineteenth century human others were no longer necessarily thought of as less advanced or even degenerate brothers and sisters, yet siblings nonetheless, but were being classified by European scientists into hierarchical racial groupings. By this time, too, there was a history of closer acquaintance with Pacific peoples through voyaging, colonisation and trading that from a European perspective increasingly called into question the natural goodness of the noble savage.⁵ Cook had been killed in Hawaii, Marion du Fresne and some of his party had been attacked and killed by Maori in the Bay of Islands in 1772, La Pérouse's expedition had suffered the loss of a number of crew members to Samoan attack before its mysterious disappearance in the Pacific after leaving Botany Bay in 1788.

The scale of the scientific operations the voyages entailed was immense in terms of the range of subjects to be studied, recording and collecting, and later publication of the results: the aim was to note, measure, describe and classify this new part of the world in its entirety.⁶ The task of contributing to the 'accroissement des connoissances humaines' is highlighted in the instructions to d'Entrecasteaux,⁷ as is the pride in the new instruments embarked to assist in it.⁸ Baudin's expedition was exemplary. It brought back a prodigious number of specimens of plants and animals, and discovered, according to Cuvier's report, 2500 new species.⁹ The empirical passion is exemplified in the observatories the scientists would set up on the beaches as a base from which to make their observations of natural phenomena. If indigenous people were encountered — and no doubt they often themselves observed the strangers unseen — short stays on a beach typically produced descriptions of their physical appearance in the way that animal species would be described.

3. Williams 1983, ch. 1.

4. Gusdorf 1972: 358, 364-70.

5. Smith 1969: 99-105.

6. *Ibid.*: 256.

7. Rossel 1808: xx.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Péron and Freycinet 1807-1816, vol. 1: xv; Faivre 1953: 175.

What was much more problematic under such circumstances was acquiring ethnographic information of any value. This was the domain not then known as the ethnographic but as the 'moral' which embraced customs and character as opposed to anatomy and physiology or the 'physical'. Time and language were the main constraints, but in a vast continent such as Australia of which so little was known, as the blank map of the continent produced by Baudin's cartographers shows so graphically,¹⁰ the geographical setting of predominantly beachside meetings was severely limiting as well. Furthermore, since the responsibility for observing and recording was that of scientists or scientifically trained naval officers, it is not surprising that what was characterised as the moral domain was not uppermost. In fact it was sometimes the artists on board who showed a better grasp of intercultural communication.

D'Entrecasteaux's expedition

D'Entrecasteaux had a twofold mission: to find out what had happened to La Pérouse and his ships and if possible rescue them, and at the same to undertake 'un voyage de recherches et de découvertes'.¹¹ It was instigated by the Society of Natural History.¹² While it had the distinction of being the first French expedition to refer to 'anthropology', Baudin's was not the first to specify the study of human groups as part of the task of the scientists. La Pérouse's instructions had contained brief mention of this and the same instructions were then issued to d'Entrecasteaux. Observations about indigenous peoples came under the heading 'Operations related to Astronomy, Geography, Navigation, Physics and the various branches of Natural History'. The Captain was instructed that at landfalls observations were to be made on 'the genius, character, customs and ways, temperament, language, diet and the number of inhabitants'.¹³ Natural objects were to be collected and catalogued and note taken of the use made of them by the inhabitants: Cultural artefacts were to be dealt with in the same way: 'clothing, weapons, decoration, furniture, tools, musical instruments and all the implements used by the different peoples he will visit'.¹⁴ The artists were to draw not only sites and land profiles, and natural history specimens, but also portraits of indigenous inhabitants, their dress, ceremonies, games, buildings, sea-going vessels. The relations to be conducted with indigenous peoples were spelled out. Every attempt was to be made to establish friendly relations while exercising caution, objects were not to be obtained under duress, trade was to be conducted and the commander was to bring fruits and vegetables cultivated in Europe to the natives and instruct them in their cultivation. Particular concern was expressed that force should be used only as a last resort.¹⁵

D'Entrecasteaux's expedition embarked in 1791 in the wake of the French Revolution. The Société d'Histoire Naturelle prepared various memoirs for the expedition. The Académie des Sciences sent d'Entrecasteaux a copy and a summary of La Pérouse's instructions plus an additional memoir.¹⁶ The Société Royale de Médecine issued a

¹⁰ Péron and Freycinet 1807-1816, atlas, vol 1.

¹¹ Rossel 1808: xx.

¹² Of which La Billardière, the expedition's botanist and author of Australia's first study of flora, was a founding member (Horner 1995: xii, 38).

¹³ Dunmore and Brossard 1985: 35.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 37

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 38.

memoir to the surgeons concerning indigenous diseases and their remedies, indicating the possibility that information obtained about savage society might be able to profit the knowledge of savants at home.¹⁷

The French expeditions preceding d'Entrecasteaux's that touched on the shores of New Holland, those of Marion du Fresne and La Pérouse, had suffered catastrophe. Despite its geographic discoveries and scientific achievements, that of d'Entrecasteaux had its own share of disaster. The officers and crew on the *Recherche* and the *Espérance* were divided between republican and royalist sympathies and d'Entrecasteaux reputedly suffered from depression caused by the divisions between his men. His health broke down and he died in 1793 not far from Surabaya where the new political situation in France and strained relations with the Dutch led to the break-up of the expedition. Political considerations aside, the first purpose of the mission could not be fulfilled. No trace of La Pérouse was found by d'Entrecasteaux, and early in the expedition he had followed what turned out to be a wild goose chase diverting him from his route. As well, relations with indigenous groups in the Pacific were a source of concern and ultimately bitter disillusionment to d'Entrecasteaux. The interlude in Van Diemen's Land stands out from the difficulties and disappointments of the rest of the voyage.

The meetings that occurred between d'Entrecasteaux's crew and Tasmanians – Lyluequonny people at Recherche Bay and Nuenonne people of Bruny Island¹⁸ in February 1793 – are usually seen as fulfilling for the French a Rousseauesque ideal of life in the state of nature. This appears to be particularly valid when viewed against later less idyllic encounters. But while the crew may have been predisposed to seeing indigenous people in such a light and their instructions spoke of the need to use gentleness and humanity,¹⁹ things might have gone differently as they had for Marion du Fresne's expedition twenty years before when initially friendly relations turned sour, the French returning an attack of stones and weapons with gunfire, resulting in the death of a Tasmanian man.

But in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel in 1793 goodwill on both sides seemed to flourish. What happened there is instructive in terms of certain themes that would recur in later voyages but also for its contrast with them. There are a number of accounts of the encounters which comprised several meetings over about a week at Recherche Bay and one on Bruny Island. Plomley has summarised the anthropological information obtained – important because of the subsequent fate of Tasmanian culture and more detailed than the description given by Cook from his Third Voyage in 1777²⁰ – concerning such things as dwellings, tools and foods.²¹

From the perspective of the French it was a wholly positive experience. There is a tone of gaiety and delight, even joy, a word used several times in the reports, about the meetings that is quite rare in expedition narratives. The crew had found shelters but

16. Richard 1986: 31.

17. *Ibid.*: 144.

18. I have used the band names of Aboriginal groups given by Lyndall Ryan for these districts (1981: 16). Horton (1994) refers to both of these groups as the Nuenonne.

19. Dunmore and Brossard 1985: 38.

20. Cook 1999: 446–50.

21. Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 264–79.

had barely sighted the Van Diemen's Land inhabitants on their first call the previous year²² so after the first shore party had made contact they were extremely curious to encounter the inhabitants at close hand.²³ Meetings took place with mixed groups and children. At one point between 150 and 200 men had come from the ships on to the beach to see a group of only six Tasmanians who were seemingly unconcerned by being so hugely outnumbered.²⁴

The voyagers were initially impressed by what they saw as the innate goodness of the people because some of the Tasmanian men conveyed to them that they had come across members of the shore party sleeping and had left them undisturbed.²⁵ The good impression remained. There are reports of great solicitousness on the part of the Aborigines as they guided a group through the bush, of sailors and Aborigines linking arms, of a young Aboriginal man playing a joke on one of the sailors. One of the men went on board ship to the delight of those with him and, it is reported, his own wonderment.²⁶ The Aborigines are referred to as 'our good friends'.²⁷

Most surprise was shown by both groups for the other's behaviour in the area of relations between men and women. The Tasmanians were amazed about something that was quite unremarkable to the French, namely the absence of any women among them.²⁸ They very actively investigated the more smooth-faced young men to see if this was indeed the case.²⁹ For their part the French were aghast that the women of Recherche Bay seemed to be the sole providers of food, which they obtained by diving for shell fish. The diarists wonder in shocked tones how it could be that it was the weaker sex who was condemned to this drudgery. Had the voyagers been able to spend more time with the Aborigines they may have formed a different view about the division of labour and the composition of the diet. They did assume, though, from the kangaroo skins worn as cloaks by some of the inhabitants, that kangaroos were hunted or trapped.³⁰ What the French observed of Tasmanian society was limited to what they could see from the beach.

Both groups were fascinated by each others' bodies. Nicolas Ladroux, one of the sailors, wrote in his journal that 'we stayed five hours examining them, men and women alike, and then they for their part did just the same'.³¹ D'Hesmivy d'Auribeau,

22. See Rossel 1808: 55-6. Rossel (p. 60) reports an interview one of the shore party claimed to have with an Aboriginal man but there seemed some doubt as to its veracity.

23. Rossel 1808, vol. 1: 233.

24. Raoul in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 306-7.

25. Rossel 1808, vol. 1: 232. Rossel's account of the second stay of the expedition in Tasmania has been translated in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 307-12. Rossel edited d'Entrecasteaux's journal for publication so that what appear to be comments by Rossel are more likely those of d'Entrecasteaux himself.

26. D'Auribeau in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 284.

27. Rossel in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 311.

28. Although in fact the steward was a woman travelling with the expedition disguised as a man, with the consent of the captain. Some of the crew were, however, suspicious. See Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993 34-5.

29. D'Auribeau in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 283.

30. D'Auribeau and Ventenat in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 282, 359.

31. 'Nous avons rester environ cinq heure d'orloge à les examiné, tant homme que femme; et puis eux de leur cotté qui n'ent fasses pas moins' (Ladroux in Richard 1986: 338).

first lieutenant on the *Recherche*, writes in his account that he 'took advantage of their patience and natural gentleness in order to measure the principal dimensions of a man and a woman', recording measurements such as height, length of ears, width of shoulders and so on.³² The physical appearance of the Aborigines was described in detail: skin colour, hair texture and style, body markings, deformities. On the basis of the accounts of very early explorers, Buffon (whose complete works formed part of the naturalists' library)³³ had described the natives of New Holland in his 'Varieties of the human species' as being 'extremely ugly and disgusting' and 'without a single feature that is agreeable'.³⁴ Similarly, in later voyage accounts, starting with Péron's narrative of the Baudin expedition,³⁵ the Aborigines are described as 'hideux', or 'repulsively ugly', an aesthetic judgment that both reinforced and influenced racialist notions of indigenous peoples' primitivity and moral worth. But this was not the case in the d'Entrecasteaux expedition accounts. Thus d'Auribeau's description, while exhibiting explicit racial comparisons to a European standard, and to Africans, shows a positive response to the appearance of the Tasmanians. He writes:

The men whom we saw all had an agreeable countenance, gentle expression and small, deep-set eyes with less white than ours. Their nose is not flat, it is broad; the nostrils are large and flared. The teeth are small, regular, not particularly white, but not too dirty. The lower half of their face being much more prominent than ours, they wear a fairly long beard which completes the face to perfection. Only the men had their features totally blackened with charcoal [...]. This deep black contrasted greatly with the natural colour of the rest of their body, which is lighter than that of the African negroes and which one can compare to slightly dark copper. Their hair is short and completely woolly.³⁶

And La Billardière's physical description of the Recherche Bay people³⁷ which states that protrusion of the upper jaw is marked in the children but scarcely present in adults is seen by Douglas as an implicit critique of Camper's theory of differing facial angles between human groups which came to be interpreted as an index of primitivity.³⁸

The visitors unfailingly comment on the nudity of men and women which at the level of visible cultural difference was no doubt the thing that most immediately startled Europeans. The modesty of women concerned them and the way women sat to conceal their genitals was a matter for comment in several journals. These and later French voyagers would consistently mention the slender limbs of the Indigenous Australians they met. The Recherche Bay people for their part were reported to have felt the sailors' calves in amazement.³⁹

The observers made a count of the people they saw distributed by age and sex. They attempted to work out family structure, though their descriptions of how they tried to gather this information by means of 'expressive signs',⁴⁰ does not inspire confi-

32. D'Auribeau in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 280-1.

33. Richard 1986: 69.

34. Buffon 1866: 260-1.

35. See Part 2 of this article in *Aboriginal History*, forthcoming.

36. D'Auribeau in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 282.

37. La Billardière in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 290.

38. Douglas 1999: 77-8.

39. Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 282, 300.

dence that the Tasmanians necessarily knew what the visitors were asking. There was not a unanimous view as to whether the society practised polygyny.⁴¹ It was assumed that the horde was the political group and that there were no chiefs since no man was seen to exercise authority over the others.⁴² Wives, however, showed 'great subordination' to their husbands and children to their parents.⁴³ The diarists were touched by the signs of maternal solicitude⁴⁴ and some commented on the gentle admonition of children by their father.⁴⁵ Child-rearing was a matter of intense medical and pedagogical concern in France at this time. It was thought that in this regard the practices of indigenous peoples might show if what was assumed to be the reflection of nature could serve as a model for civilised society.⁴⁶

Exchanges

Particularly striking in the reports of these meetings, and tragic in the light of future events,⁴⁷ is the character of the attempts at communication that occur on both sides. The tone of the accounts is often patronising but it is unrealistic and anachronistic to expect more than goodwill and an openness to experience and difference on the part of a French crew in 1793. The openness on the part of the Aborigines is more remarkable, especially given the experience with Marion du Fresne in 1772, not long enough ago to have been forgotten.

The effort to establish communication involved different kinds of gifts and exchanges – of materials, plants and animals and symbols (women it seems were not exchanged or offered, although one sailor claimed to have been well received by one of the women⁴⁸). In a pattern reproduced elsewhere, the French showered trinkets on the Aborigines who showed a keen interest in some items, but displayed no lasting desire to acquire the material goods the French could provide. One thing they did want was red material⁴⁹ which had been loaded up on the expedition as the colour of the Revolution.⁵⁰ As Cook recorded too,⁵¹ the people steadfastly refused any food that was offered. When children were given sweets their mothers took the food out of their mouths.⁵² But while food was refused, commensality was not. The French were present at the meal of one group which passed in a relaxed atmosphere. Thinking to advance the inhabitants' means of subsistence, they showed them the use of various implements – fish hooks, axes – and enjoyed impressing their hosts with explosions of gunpow-

40. Rossel, p. 309, and d'Auribeau: 283, in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993.

41. D'Auribeau, p. 283, La Motte du Portail, p. 303, and Ventenat, p. 365, in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993.

42. La Billardièrre in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 295.

43. *Ibid.*

44. La Motte du Portail, p. 300, and La Billardièrre, p. 294, in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993.

45. Rossel, pp. 308-9, and La Billardièrre, p. 292, in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993.

46. Morel 1980.

47. Because they may have influenced Baudin's expedition to spend time in Van Diemen's Land which in turn aroused the suspicion of Governor King who immediately the French had left Port Jackson sent a party to claim King Island.

48. La Billardièrre in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 296.

49. D'Auribeau in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 285.

50. Marchant 1982: 84.

51. Apart from birds. See Cook 1999: 447.

52. La Billardièrre in Plomley and Bernier 1993: 292.

der. When La Billardière, the botanist, went to check on the state of various plants the expedition gardener had planted the year before, he noted that the man who accompanied him could identify every introduced plant at once. The garden was not thriving and there was nothing to suggest that the Aborigines had used any of it.⁵³

In small ways each offered something of their culture. At one meeting, one of the crew took up his violin but the Tasmanians indicated that the music was hurting their ears.⁵⁴ The Tasmanians for their part sang for their guests during one long walk. La Billardière describes the modulation of their tunes as very like those of the Arabs of Asia Minor. He continues: 'Two of them frequently sang the same air together; but one constantly a third above the other, forming this harmony with the greatest exactness'.⁵⁵ On one occasion the artist Piron presented himself to be powdered black like the Tasmanians who darkened their skin with charcoal.

Words were exchanged too, not in ways that could allow anything but the most superficial understanding of meaning, but in an atmosphere of linguistic experiment by members of both groups that shows a recognition of the mutual value of each other's language. Different officers compiled word lists, invaluable as a record for what they are but sadly limited in scope.⁵⁶ One of the Tasmanians repeated the officers' names with almost flawless pronunciation. Aboriginal people generally seemed much more adept at picking up European languages than vice versa.⁵⁷ D'Auribeau concluded that the Aborigines lacked the sound 'f' without the relativistic perspective or linguistic knowledge to analyse phonemic distinctions made in the Recherche Bay language that did not exist in French. On the other hand, and this contrasted with later views about the primitiveness and unpleasantness of Aboriginal languages, in line with biological ones about physical differences, he writes that: 'For the rest, there is nothing disagreeable in their pronunciation — it is crisp and lively'.⁵⁸

There is poignancy when La Billardière reports that a young girl accompanying his group as they walked talked to them gaily non-stop although she must have realised that they could not understand her. He acknowledges that 'we doubtless lost a great deal by not understanding the language of these natives'.⁵⁹ D'Auribeau was more specific about this, concluding — and here again it was not a conclusion that those who assumed Aboriginal peoples to be without religious beliefs would later come to — that the party had spent 'too short a time with these good natives to be able to discover any religious beliefs'. '[M]etaphysical ideas', he maintains, 'are not transmitted with the same ease as are physical ones and ... it is only after a long sojourn among a people that one can determine something in that connection'.⁶⁰

53. La Billardière in Plomley and Bernier 1993: 291.

54. D'Auribeau in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 281.

55. La Billardière in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 293.

56. Plomley has assembled a single vocabulary out of a number of separate word lists compiled by officers and crew members, most of which are only available in manuscript form. It contains words such as body parts, plants, some basic verbs and pronouns (Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 312-17).

57. See Reynolds 1987: 103-4.

58. D'Auribeau in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 280.

59. La Billardière in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 293.

60. D'Auribeau in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 283.

The following paragraph from the official account of the voyage epitomises the dichotomy opposing the virtues of the state of nature to the pitfalls of civilisation that runs through the expedition accounts, but which was particularly marked in d'Entrecasteaux's entries:

We never noticed among them the least sign of temper or anger. They did not ever behave in a way which disappointed us and were always thoughtful of our regard. They seemed to live in great harmony with each other. We did not notice anything, either in their behaviour or in their customs, which could make us deviate from the good opinion in which we had held them from the first. Oh! should not we blush with shame for having, the previous year, suspected them of eating human flesh! They are interesting people in many respects and I wish we had been able to spend with them every minute of our stay at this anchorage.

The people we had observed seem to offer the most perfect image of the initial state of society when people were not yet agitated by passions or corrupted by the vices sometimes met with in civilised society.⁶¹

One young officer on the *Espérance*, La Motte du Portail, makes explicit reference to Rousseau in his journal:

One would have difficulty in finding a people who are less far from that of the primitive state of nature, and seen at first hand by a judicious observer they offer strong proof in support of the idea which the immortal J. J. Rousseau has developed in his discourse on the origin of inequality of conditions, and which could be the cause by which the inhabitants of this immense island have remained so far from full civilisation, while their neighbours of New Zealand ... have taken towards it, steps which have astonished the first navigators who visited them.⁶²

But despite the power of a noble savage image that derived from Bougainville as much as the *philosophes*, it is unlikely that d'Entrecasteaux's officers were so imbued with an idealised view about the state of nature that they found goodness wherever they looked. We saw that they were extremely perturbed by watching the women repeatedly dive for shellfish to feed their families. And they would have been very keenly aware of the fate of some previous explorers at the hands of indigenous peoples.⁶³ Most basically most of what they saw in Recherche Bay society interested and pleased them.

But more than that, I think there is a dimension to this encounter that was lacking in others. That dimension is not just the positive response of the French to the Tasmanians but the perceived positive response of the Tasmanians to them. In Bakhtinian terms this was a dialogic encounter. Bakhtin tells us that we ourselves cannot complete our own lives being absent from its entire span from before our birth until after the moment of our death.⁶⁴ We cannot even physically see ourselves as a whole person in the way that anyone else looking at us can.⁶⁵ We need other people to supply this overarching perspective.⁶⁶ This is especially true for the traveller who is removed from the tacit cultural recognition that operates at home. Each of us travelling has had positive or nega-

61. Rossel in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 311.

62. La Motte du Portail in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 302.

63. See Richard 1986: 134.

64. Bakhtin 1990: 104.

65. *Ibid.*: 39.

66. *Ibid.*: 106.

tive experiences according to our sense of whether, despite obstacles of language and cultural difference, communication has still sparked. These particular French voyagers seemed to need the Van Diemeners to complete them, a sentiment articulated by d'Auribeau after the first meeting: 'Their eagerness in coming to find us is a most positive assurance that they were infinitely satisfied with us – a thought as sweet as it is pleasant'.⁶⁷ La Motte du Portail expressed the same sense of satisfaction: 'The kindness and gentleness which seemed to be the basis of their character, gave to our meetings rather the air of a reunion of friends than a meeting of individuals who were quite different in every way'.⁶⁸

The French felt that there was communication, even communion, between them and their hosts – phrases such as 'perfect understanding', 'utmost cordiality', recur in different accounts – despite the fact that neither knew the other's language. They felt that they were friends, that the Aborigines gained pleasure from them being there, and their descriptions of Aboriginal reactions – curiosity, animation, hospitality – suggest that they did. An immediate impression of the nature of the encounter can be gained from the artist Piron's tableau called 'Savages of Van Diemen's Land preparing their meal' which appeared in La Billardière's *Voyage*. Several of the voyagers are seen conversing animatedly with the Tasmanians as activity takes place around the campfires. One of the sailors is holding up a chubby baby, illustrating the utter trust the French felt the inhabitants had in them.

Lest I convey too idyllic a picture of these meetings, a reading of the various accounts contains elements that leave no doubt as to the Europeans' conviction of their superiority despite their preparedness to find things to admire in Van Diemen's Land culture. They are surprised and say so when they see signs of intelligence in the inhabitants as if they expected to find none, and some of them are disgusted when they see parents grooming their children and eating the lice⁶⁹ – La Billardière remarking that the same habit is found in monkeys.⁷⁰ The enthusiasms of the Tasmanians for the objects they were shown or in their excited shouts when they see the French is depicted as childlike or naively trusting. The descriptions of the people as the closest that may be found to the state of nature though proffered with a measure of admiration – the term 'brutish' would be used by later voyagers but only appears in one journal⁷¹ – have the same tone.⁷² But the worst that may have resulted from this encounter was unwitting. Plomley reports that his examination of the expedition's medical records showed that contagious diseases such as smallpox and tuberculosis were present among the ships' crews and suggests that the contact they had with Aborigines in Tasmania may have been sufficient to transmit infection causing epidemic disease in these very early days of contact.⁷³

What the Van Diemeners made of the French can only be a matter of conjecture. Bronwen Douglas describes Aboriginal motivations as now 'irretrievably obscure'.⁷⁴ It

67. D'Auribeau in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 284.

68. La Motte du Portail in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 299.

69. La Motte du Portail in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 300.

70. La Billardière in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 294.

71. The botanist Deschamps in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 378.

72. La Billardière, La Motte du Portail and Rossel in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 300, 311.

73. Plomley 1966: 109.

is puzzling that on the first visit the Tasmanians clearly avoided all contact with the expedition at their landfalls even though they knew they were there, but seem to have embraced encounters a year later. Even then they stayed out of sight for two weeks.⁷⁵ But there is no denying the convivial tone of the meetings reported in all the accounts. We can assume that no taboos were infringed and that for the time they were there the French were not perceived as constituting a threat either to food and water resources since they stayed on the beach and had their own provisions or, by their restrained behaviour, to women despite the hordes of unpartnered men that must have seemed to spill from the ships. We can assume, too, that this may have changed if the French had looked like staying. The meeting with Nuenonne people near Adventure Bay certainly showed that there was an area into which the Tasmanians did not want the foreigners to stray but it was not clear whether this was because it was the hiding place for their weapons or held religious significance or for some other reason.⁷⁶ They showed hesitation, too, about accompanying the visitors to their camp — there were no women and children with them — and in fact the French decided to return to their ship to set sail.⁷⁷

If Van Diemen's Land was a happy interlude for the members of the d'Entrecasteaux expedition in a troubled voyage, looking back on it now in the light of the history 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. At the very least it showed that engagement could occur and that racial disparagement was not the only attitude that Europeans could exhibit towards Aboriginal people. It seems significant, too, that it happened at a moment just before anthropology began to be conceived as a discrete field of study, before human others who looked different physically and were different culturally came to be viewed scientifically as objects of measurement, comparison and observation. As we shall see in the second part of this article (to be published in vol. 25 of *Aboriginal History*), it was less than a decade later that field anthropology, both physical and ethnographic, was born with the departure of the Baudin expedition from Le Havre on 19 October 1800. Anthropological observation was added to the roster of scientific duties undertaken during expeditions. As a result, encounters between Europeans and Indigenous people would take on a new dimension.

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74. Douglas 1999: 79.

75. Horner 1995: 128.

76. D'Auribeau, pp 285-6; La Billardièrre, pp 297-8, and Rossel, p. 310 in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993.

77. La Billardièrre in Plomley and Piard-Bernier 1993: 286.

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