French anthropology in Australia, the first fieldwork report: François Péron's ‘Maria Island — anthropological observations’

Stephanie Anderson

For those who are interested in French Pacific exploration as it relates to anthropology, Nicolas Baudin’s *Voyage de découvertes aux mers australes* as it was officially called, marks the beginning of field anthropology in a number of ways. First, Baudin was issued with specific instructions concerning both physical anthropology and ethnography, though these were not then known by these terms. The term anthropologist was, however, used in connection with this voyage and, it seems, for the first time in a sense implying an active scientific role. It was François Péron, a young enthusiast in the field of natural science who, with himself in mind, petitioned for the inclusion of ‘anthropologistes’ in Baudin’s complement of scientists in a memoir presented at the Institut de France. During the voyage Baudin asked Péron, actually recruited as a zoologist, to prepare a report on the inhabitants of Maria Island off Van Diemen’s Land. As perhaps the first ever commissioned anthropological fieldwork report, Péron’s document is worthy of attention. The crews of the *Géographe* and the *Naturaliste* spent several weeks in Van Diemen’s Land. Their interactions with Tasmanians were more fraught than those of d’Entrecasteaux’s officers and sailors. The general tone of both Péron’s and Baudin’s accounts is of encounters that began with mutual pleasure and interest turning, over the period of their sojourn, to distrust and misunderstanding. Nevertheless, in the artwork produced by Nicolas-Martin Petit and Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, the ethnographic contribution of the later voyage was significantly richer.

The subject of this article is Péron’s report ‘Maria Island: anthropological observations’. I attempt to situate the report in the context of the intellectual climate in which Baudin’s voyage took place, in the context of the French/Tasmanian encounters during the stay of Baudin’s expedition in Van Diemen’s Land in 1802 and in the context of Péron’s particular background. In providing this backdrop I aim to bring out the ambi-

---

1. See Part 1 of this article, Anderson 2000.
2. Jones 1988 provides an ethnographically and historically detailed analysis of the artwork, the voyagers and the Tasmanians which is sensitive to the particular nuances of cross-cultural communication involved in these encounters. Hamy 1891 provides an annotated description of the published and unpublished anthropological drawings from Baudin’s voyage.
guities and difficulties surrounding the possible practice of ethnography in that place at that time. Péron himself was aware of these.

Péron’s remarks about Aborigines, especially in his published *Voyage*, are racially pejorative. Revisiting this material is important: we need to be aware of the genealogy of racial stereotypes of Aborigines, which extends back to the earliest history of European/Aboriginal contact. Historians such as Bronwen Douglas and Nicholas Thomas are concerned to provide readings of early cross-cultural encounters that reveal the complexities of time, place, people and cultures obliquely recorded in exploration narratives. In providing a rich historical and ethnographic context in which to consider official voyage accounts, such readings begin to restore the balance in the representation of indigenous/European encounters. The formula ‘European explorer is to indigenous inhabitant as subject is to object as active is to passive’ no longer holds. Treating voyage material in this way is an ever-expanding project. Here I only make a start with some of the material that remains from Péron’s contribution to Baudin’s expedition. Because this material, even though it is incomplete, is available to be consulted, whereas Aboriginal sources are not, the interpretation is inevitably still much weighted to the French perspective.

**The Society of Observers of Man**

In its anthropological dimension Baudin’s voyage must inevitably be linked to the Société des Observateurs de l’Homme formed in 1799. The Society gave institutional proof to the burgeoning interest in ‘man’ (to use the eighteenth century terminology) as an object of study along with the rest of nature; that is, man in all his facets and in all his human variety. Cabanis stated in his *Rapports du physique et moral de l’homme* that ‘physiology, the analysis of ideas and the moral are only three branches of the same science, which can justifiably be called, the science of man’. In this vein Louis-François Jauffret, the Society’s secretary, defined the task of its members as ‘to observe man in his different physical, intellectual and moral relationships’. The range of enterprises this would entail and the different kinds of specialists who might contribute to it were stated by a contemporary of the Observers, Millin. He wrote in his *Magasin encyclopédique* that to pursue its observations towards a science of man the Society had called upon:

... the true friends of philosophy and ethics, the deep-thinking metaphysician and the practising doctor, the historian and the traveller, as well as he who studies the genius of languages and he who directs and protects the first developments of childhood.

And indeed the members of the Society were both diverse and prominent in their fields. There was the Ideologue and linguist Destutt de Tracy, whose intellectual program was directed to the study of what we now term human cognition. Along with Cabanis there was Pinel, a researcher into mental illness; explorers, among them Bougainville, Baudin and the African explorer Levallant; the historian Volney; and the

---

7. Quoted by Hervé 1909: 474.
naturalists Cuvier and Jussieu, leading figures in scientific circles in Paris in the early
nineteenth century, whose names feature in the official reports made on Pacific voy-
age. Despite its array of intellectual talent the Society only lasted into the first decade
of the new century.8

The Observers ventured into unexpected human territory, that we now see as a
fascination with the Other. Their studies included a report on the appearance, language
and manners of Tchong A-Sam, a Cantonese prisoner of war found in a hospital in
Paris, and research on a wild boy named Victor known as ‘le sauvage d’Aveyron’. Their
most extraordinary project, which is unlikely to have been realised, was to select a
group of children and rear them in isolation from birth to adolescence in order to study
their physical, intellectual and moral development. This interest in those who were for-
eign or who were raised without language and culture, shows the Observers grappling
with questions about nature and culture in the way humans become what they are.
What is innate and what comes from the social environment? Is life in society essential
to being human?

In terms of the physical/moral dichotomy, the weight of Degérando’s memoir
Considerations about the different methods to be followed in the observation of savage peoples9
lies on the moral side. It transposed questions about nature and culture to savage soci-
ety and in this sense reflected the dichotomy between barbarism and civilization that
exercised eighteenth-century minds and is marked in Péron’s researches in New Hol-
lend. Degérando drafted the memoir to serve as instructions to his fellow member
Nicolas Baudin for anthropological study as he set out for his voyage into the southern
hemisphere. It is remarkable for the program it outlined for ethnographic study exactly
two hundred years ago.

Degérando is acute in his criticisms of previous reports of indigenous people. He
singles out their lack of completeness because of the brevity of the visits on which they
are based; their lack of systematisation; their concentration on individuals over social
groups; the minute focus on physical details to the detriment of observations about
social life; attention to the superficial appearance of the cultural phenomena of a people
rather than the deeper ideational and ethical aspect.10 He criticises the tendency of
explorers to judge indigenous customs by inappropriate European analogies.11 He dis-

cusses how the nature of the reception of visitors can influence observations about
other peoples.12 He notes why the sudden presence of strangers might arouse less than
welcoming reactions.13

Degérando criticised previous travellers’ failure to learn indigenous languages.
His suggestions for participant observation premised on knowledge of the other’s lan-
guage seem especially contemporary: ‘The first means to the proper knowledge of

8. It seems that political considerations played their part. The end of the Society coincided with
the beginning of Napoleon’s imperium. See Hervé 1909: 475; Moore 1969: 47–48; Stocking
1964: 137.
Savages, is to become after a fashion like them: and it is by learning their language that
we shall become their fellow citizens.14 But the complexity of the linguistic research he
recommended15 was impossible to carry out during voyages of exploration that only
stopped on the coast for short periods. The curse of linguistic incomprehension had
profound effects on nineteenth century anthropology: how could it purport to rank and
classify non-European people if its practitioners could not even converse with them?

The guide to explorers is arranged under headings as a series of questions. These
questions are numerous but mostly fit into what are now conventional categories to
describe social organisation: the family, political organisation, economic, legal and reli-
gious institutions. But the priority and prominence given to the analysis of ideas is
quite striking, reflecting the influence of the new discipline of Ideology.16

Baudin received two other sets of instructions from the Society, one about physical
anthropology by the naturalist Baron Cuvier, and the other by Jauffret setting out his
advice for collecting objects for a proposed museum of mankind. The different empha-
ses of Degérando's and Cuvier's memoirs are held to symbolise the transition from an
Enlightenment humanism to the scientifically grounded physical anthropology that
predominated in the nineteenth century.17 Jauffret's thoughts on a museum,18 although
not acted upon at the time, herald another essential strand of French anthropology —
the museological — which embraced both the physical and the social.19 His brief 'Con-
siderations' covers the gamut of material evidence about human existence from
skeletons to implements, weapons, clothing, art, and religion.

Cuvier's memoir20 is an instruction to collect skeletal material so that anatomists
may pursue their studies into racial difference. It is noteworthy that Cuvier already
uses the term 'race' in his title. Where Degérando's interest lies foremost in the symbolic
and communicative side of human behaviour, and he assumes a common link between
all human beings despite different levels of material progress and institutional develop-
ment, Cuvier is interested in what information human bodies can deliver to scientists.
He sought data about the bodies of remote human groups in the form of 'true' pictorial
representations by expedition artists, and skulls and skeletons gathered at any
opportunity.

Baudin's expedition

Of all the French voyages that visited Australia, Baudin's ill-starred expedition has
received the most attention. His mission was to complete the mapping of the coastline
of New Holland, and to study the sciences and the arts.21 The Géographe and the Natu-

16. cf. Degérando 1969 [1800?]: 83, 'Our ideas are nothing more than elaborated sensations'.
18. Reprinted in French in Copans and Jamin (1977) and in English translation as an appendix in
19. Anatomical and ethnographic collections at the Muséum d'Histoire naturelle, the Louvre and
the Trocadéro Museum, established in 1878, gave to physical anthropology a stock of material
for study and to ethnography a concrete focus in the absence of any firm institutional founda-
tion until the establishment of the Institut d'Ethnographie in Paris in 1926.
raliste, aptly named for this ambitious scientific endeavour, set off from Le Havre in October 1800. The Géographe limped back to France in May 1804 without its captain. He had died, probably of tuberculosis, in the Ile de France. It fell to François Péron, who had clashed with Baudin throughout the expedition, to produce the official account of the voyage. Péron in turn died from tuberculosis in 1810 having completed the first volume of the Voyage. Louis de Freycinet, future commander of the next French expedition, completed the task.

Péron was a medical student who had followed courses at the Muséum d’Histoire naturelle and was a student of Cuvier’s. He was ambitious and bumptious and had an insatiable appetite for scientific information of all kinds. Péron too had prepared a memoir for the expedition in the hope of being recruited. It was entitled: ‘Observations on anthropology or the natural history of man, the need to look to the advancement of this science, and the importance of the inclusion on the fleet of Captain Baudin of one or several naturalists, given special responsibility for undertaking investigations on this subject’.

In defining anthropology as the natural history of man, Péron’s title makes it clear that his conception of an anthropologist’s task was closer to Cuvier’s idea of the study of human beings than to Degérando’s. In considering Péron’s harsh racial judgements, which resurface throughout his official account, we need to remember that he was familiar with the anatomist Johan Blumenbach’s scheme of racial classification according to five distinct physical categories. The memoir exhibits Péron’s medical interests and is constructed on an opposition between savage and civilised peoples in relation to their state of health. Péron declares savages, described in extremely racially derogatory terms, to be healthier than city dwellers. He concludes with two questions which suggest a hypothesis about the inverse relationship between moral and physical perfection. He attributes physical perfection to the savage and moral perfection to the civilised man. The physical perfection of the savage, he surmises, excludes moral as well as physical sensitivity — the savage will be brutalised in every sense:

1. Does not moral perfection stand in an inverse relationship to physical perfection?
2. Does not this physical perfection exclude not only moral sensitivity, but even physical sensitivity?

Péron concludes his memoir with a short address to the professors of the School of Medicine asking them to make representations to the Institut national to enlist ‘one or several young students of medicine with special responsibility under the title of anthropologists’, to make observations that will advance medical knowledge. This is one of the earliest recorded uses of the term ‘anthropologist’, but its conception is firmly grounded in medical science rather than a drive to acquire ethnographic information.

21. See Faivre (1953: 109–113) for the argument that Baudin’s mission was also covertly political. Certainly Péron carried out extensive reconnaissance activities while the expedition was in Port Jackson for several months.
Péron’s anthropological field report from Maria Island

Péron did find a place on the expedition at the last minute, as a zoologist. What kind of anthropologist did he turn out to be? A number of historians who have examined the Baudin voyage material have formed a poor opinion of Péron’s contribution to the new field of learning that he wanted to embrace. They compare him unfavourably to Baudin who, as captain, was not responsible for making anthropological observations but did so incidentally. They see Péron as judgmental, ethnocentric, prone to fanciful speculation and negligent about recording basic and obvious information. Péron’s formal piece of anthropological reporting was produced during the voyage at the request of Baudin. These anthropological observations from Maria Island in Tasmania are the earliest commissioned anthropological fieldwork report. It was based on a short stay on Maria Island from 19 February until 27 February 1802. The manuscript of the report is held at the Muséum d’Histoire naturelle at Le Havre.

To assess Péron from the perspective of a now well established human science is unrealistic. It is more profitable, and fairer on Péron, to look at what his report reveals about the shifting sands of cross-cultural contact and the ambivalent feelings and attitudes it can engender. Even so, attempting an historical interpretation of the report is difficult and mimics the kinds of intellectual problems that Péron faced in trying to interpret the behaviour of the Tasmanians. How can we understand Péron? How can we cast our thinking about human difference and behaviour back into a late eighteenth century mould? How can we situate ourselves in Péron’s place on the Géographe with his particular disposition, life experience, education and beliefs? How can we construct a reasonable interpretation on the basis of scant and incomplete information?

Baudin asked Péron to prepare a report on the inhabitants of Maria Island, the Tyreddeme people, because part of his instructions stipulated that observations were to be made about indigenous people in the places visited. We can also assume that he was mindful of Degérando’s memoir as a fellow Observer, and indeed as one of the explorers, with Levalliant, for whom it was drafted. The expedition spent almost two months in southeastern Tasmania and its stay there offered the French scientists the greatest opportunity yet to make sustained anthropological observations. But the report is incomplete. We do not know if it was the final version or a draft. Fourteen of its 49 pages are missing. It only exists in published form in English translation. Péron’s official account of the voyage complements the report but that account was written after the return of the expedition, at the very least more than two years after the sojourn at Maria Island. While the report was addressed to Baudin, the Voyage was written for a wide audience that included Péron’s scientific patrons and peers in Paris. Other vital papers belonging to Péron have been lost, his shipboard journal being the most crucial of the missing items. The information upon which historians might judge his anthropology is incomplete, just as the conditions under which Péron attempted to do

29. I have used the band name given by Lyndall Ryan for this district (1981: 16).
fieldwork, constrained by shortage of time and differences of language, culture and experience were inadequate to his task.

The report is nonetheless fascinating as a document both about Péron himself and about the encounters between his party and the Tyreddeme people. If it was meant to have been modelled on Degérando’s blueprint for collecting anthropological information, it fell far short. Péron does not refer to Degérando, but his remarks indicate that he was perceptive enough to see that what Degérando called for could not be achieved. In introducing his subject Péron reflects on the demands of ethnographic fieldwork and his own failings in this respect. All his comments to Baudin in these first pages suggest a substantial degree of reflection about what, ideally, anthropological practice might be. It is frustrating that two handwritten pages that close the introduction are missing.

Péron starts by explaining why the study of ‘Natural Man’, now presented to his eyes in the form of these inhabitants of Maria Island, is so important:

Never perhaps has so immense a quarry been opened up for philosophy. Everything is curious in such a being, everything interesting: his antiquity, his origin, the changes in his affairs and his traditions in this regard, his customs, his language, his feelings, his ideas, his physical constitution, his increase in numbers, his infirmities, his longevity, his relationship to the climate, etc., etc, ... This is the story of Nature and all mankind. Faithful trustee for the fundamental rights of the human species, he preserves them intact in their basic completeness. 33

The savage/civilised dichotomy is an Enlightenment theme, a subject close to the hearts of the Observers, and of passionate concern to Péron.34 All of his comments about the differences between Aboriginal and French society are a reflection of it. Baudin is now praised for his more objective accounts of Aborigines, but as a less partisan observer — he had no thesis to prove or disprove about savage society — he did not have the same ideological investment in his cross-cultural experiences as Péron.

Péron goes on to state the difficulties facing the observer who undertakes anthropological study. These are: ‘The want of time and favourable opportunity, the prejudices of the natives, their distrust, their fears, their threats, even the dangers.’35 Péron lacked the self-reflexivity to see his own observer’s prejudices, distrust. But given the sense of fear he expressed later in the report when the Tyreddeme men acted in ways that he found menacing and unpredictable, his statement here can be interpreted as implying this reversal as well.

The qualities needed by the fieldworker, whose lack is a ‘formidable obstacle’, are: ‘a habit of observation, a rigour of judgment, a delicacy of feeling, a maturity of thought which only too rarely are to be found united with the diversity of knowledge which an interest in the subject demands’. The conditions that the fieldworker must establish to be successful are ones that Péron felt were beyond his ability to achieve:

33. Péron 1983: 82.
34. Jones 1992 develops this theme in relation to the evolution of Péron’s thinking in the course of the expedition.
I did not therefore think it my duty to try to establish with the natives that multiplicity of associations and that continuity of communication which are indispensable if one is to obtain coherent and interesting results.  

It is difficult to think of a more succinct description of conditions under which anthropological interaction might flourish than establishing a ‘multiplicity of associations’ and a ‘continuity of communication’.

Finally Péron refers to the degree of ethnographic engagement required:

I have always been strongly convinced that an undertaking of this kind was so difficult that it must engross every faculty and the whole time of anyone who wanted to devote himself to it in a special way, and that this was the only way of doing it properly.  

This is reminiscent of Degérando’s comments about becoming like one’s informants, a sense of the need for total immersion in the host culture if not quite total identification with it. Péron goes on to excuse himself here due to pressure of other work. He was one of five zoologists originally recruited for the voyage, but two left the expedition at the Ile de France with other disaffected scientists, and two died subsequently. Péron was left with responsibility for the zoological observations and collections. Aided by Lesueur he performed his duties superbly.

The substance of the report contains a narrative of what happened in the encounters with the Maria Island Aborigines and reflections on why it happened, speculation about differences between civilised and savage man, and other brief pieces of information and description of how it was gathered. The subtitle of the report suggests that the most detailed descriptions were about burial structures found independently by Péron and the botanist Leschenault. Here again pages are missing.

Péron relates the meeting between his small shore party and a group of fourteen Aborigines who invite them to sit down at their fire. He starts with a subject that, as a young man on a long sea voyage who had recently had his marriage proposal rejected by the woman he loved, undoubtedly preoccupied him.

But it was also one on which he would have been expected to collect data, namely the ‘frequency and continuity of desire’. On rather flimsy evidence — the Aborigines’ delighted and astonished reactions on seeing the erection of a young sailor whom they had insisted on undressing — Péron concludes that sexual desire is much less frequent in ‘natural man’ because of the rigours of life in the state of nature.

Physical descriptions follow, then a description of how rapport was established between the two groups of men with the artist Petit and Rouget performing tricks. Petit draws one of the men while Péron gathers words for his vocabulary, building on that of

43. Péron 1983: 84.
Labillardiére. At this point things are going well and Péron gains a favourable impression of the Tyreddeme men. With echoes of the d'Entrecasteaux expedition encounters, he writes: ‘It was then that our interview became truly affecting. Intermingled around the remains of their fire, we all seemed equally pleased with one another.’ In collecting words Péron finds the men both ‘very intelligent’ and good-natured in teaching him the correct pronunciation of their language. The vocabulary arouses another disquisition on a sexual theme why the Van Diemeners have no word for kissing and caressing and seem unaware of these gestures. Péron embellishes the themes of the mechanism of sensation and the benefits of civilisation.

The indigenous response to the giving of trinkets frequently puzzled explorers. Péron saw his own rules of reciprocity confounded by the Tasmanians — his prestations were not rewarded with thanks but ingratitude and suspicion. The explanation that for him accorded with this unexpected behaviour was not a cultural one — there was no Mauss to guide him about the cultural ramifications of gift giving — but an environmental one. The philosopher Helvetius proposed, he says, that ‘ferocity and ingratitude’ are associated with a way of life dictated by ‘physical needs’ while ‘humanity and gratitude are the result of social organisation and are the happy result of civilisation.’ Rousseau is an ever present but unnamed intellectual adversary in Péron’s reflections on civilisation’s advantages over the state of nature.

When the Naturaliste is sighted offshore the pleasant encounter quickly turns tense. The Van Diemeners become restless and suspicious. One man seems to demand Péron’s jacket. Péron in turn points at Rouget’s gun and says the word mata meaning ‘dead’. Another man pulls Péron’s earring from his ear. This is not an opportune moment to carry out anatomical measurements but Péron gets out his dynamometer, a device invented by Regnier to measure the strength of the limbs in populations in France. The device arouses great interest but the elder of the group is now highly wary and speaks in such a way that the others do not touch it again. Péron deduces that the old man had quickly grasped the purpose of the instrument and did not want the information used against his men. More likely he was suspicious of it from his knowledge of the power of firearms, another European instrument. Péron then resolves never again to make the purpose of the dynamometer clear when using it and instead make allowance for the fact that the subjects do not know what they are doing when he is testing them. If he realises that this would weaken any data obtained he does not say so. The whole incident generates a sustained outburst that eloquently expresses the difficulty of achieving cross-cultural understanding in the context of a voyage of exploration:

Oh! how difficult it is to overcome their bias and prejudices against us! Time alone could produce this result, and time is precisely what we lack most. We are seeing these men at a time when all the faculties of their being are magnified. Our ships, the noise of our guns and their terrible effect, the colour of our skin, our clothing, our form, our gifts, everything we possess, everything that surrounds us, our gait, our action, all are such marvels to them. Moreover they do not know what our

44. Péron 1983: 86.
intentions may be towards them or what perhaps is the object of our visit, and they can form no idea of these matters. They can only think that our intentions are hostile. Our presents, our kindness towards them, our protestation of friendship, all are suspect for them. They seek to interpret our looks. They observe us closely. Everything they see us do they suppose to be something mysterious, and always their suspicions of us are unfavourable. They redouble their vigilance against us, and they surround themselves with sentries in advanced positions who, from the tops of hills and even high in very tall trees, keep a watch on all that takes place in the vicinity. Every boat they see coming towards their shore excites in them new fears and redoubles their suspicions and distrust. And how, amidst all the sensations which agitate them by turns, to distinguish those which belong more particularly to their natural disposition? In admiration and surprise they appear stupid; insane in the expression of their joy, they are austere and taciturn when suspicious and frightened; savage when confident and threatening, they are fierce in anger and in its expression. But perhaps each of these states is normal for them, whence it follows that the characteristics of their physiognomy are extremely difficult to determine. When one wishes to study these with exactness, it is of particular interest to consider the influence of all the peculiar circumstances which modify their mental state and the nature of their feelings with regard to the observer. The most trivial events must be taken into account. What is of no importance to us is exceedingly important to them. The most innocent act in our eyes is often an act of open hostility in theirs. The use I wanted to make of the dynamometer furnishes a prime example of this …

Péron’s tone in this passage, at once disturbed and culturally sensitised, and the conclusions he reaches about Tasmanian behaviour, are very different from those of his far better known Voyage written with the security provided by distance in time and his return to familiar surroundings. This is the corresponding passage in the Voyage:

I have given all the particulars of this long interview with the natives, that the reader may be the better enabled to judge, how many difficulties and dangers are experienced by voyagers in their communications with the people belonging to these savage nations, and how impossible it is to conquer the natural ferocity of their character, and their prejudice against us.

The relativisation of perception is gone. Péron’s alertness to the Aborigines’ fears and doubts, together with the oblique expression of his own, has evaporated. The mystery of the ‘natural disposition’ under the stress induced by the presence of an alien observer is now translated into ‘the natural ferocity of their character’. The dynamometer experiment had collapsed but in the Voyage he confidently sets out his results that show British subjects as the strongest of his test groups and Tasmanians the weakest. And he uses the data he had obtained to refute the ‘dangerous opinion’ ‘that the physical degeneration of man is in proportion to his state of civilisation’.

Having placated the Aborigines with some more gifts, the French make a second ill-advised move. Petit and Péron make exchanges in order to obtain spears and a waddy. Petit gets his spear but Péron only manages to obtain a waddy for some buttons and makes signs that he wants the spear as well. When the man reacts by brandishing

---

49. Péron 1975 [1809]: 223.
the weapon and the others raise theirs as well, Péron realises how misjudged this action was. The French have no recourse but to retreat and return to their boat, Rouget bringing up the rear with his gun. Péron follows his Aborigines until they see more boats from the Naturaliste and then take off into the forest. Péron says that he is grieved by their disappearance, he had hoped that another meeting might have quelled their fears. There is more than a hint in this that he wanted to sustain dialogue not for professional reasons but because he was already personally engaged by the encounter.

This appears to complete the narrative of the ‘interview’. A quarter of the report is then missing. Some of those pages are devoted to a description of burial structures found by Péron and independently by Leschenault, as the extant pages of the report resume with closing remarks on this subject. Péron concludes with some brief information about the possible population of the island, the inhabitants’ age range, discussion of the similarity between them and the mainland people, and their physiques, throwing ability and agility.

Péron’s narrative of the time the French spent in Van Diemen’s Land is also available in English. Péron writes with awareness that his account should be an engaging narrative, and he had himself been an avid reader of voyage accounts. He is always enthusiastic, at times rapturous, about natural beauty and natural phenomena. In his descriptions of Aborigines he is given to the use of superlative statements about blackness, ugliness, brutishness, primitiveness and perfidy. It is not to make excuses for Péron to point out that the finished reflection about the moral and physical state of Tasmanian Aborigines in the voyage narrative that reads so offensively today does not square with the hesitation, bewilderment and fearfulness — and also desire for communication — that can be detected in the report written close to the encounters. His first reaction to Tasmanian actions and behaviour — those of men like him, but men whose meanings he could not unambiguously decipher — has been ironed out in the finished Voyage.

Péron’s legacy to his contemporary French readers in promoting a particular view of New Holland and Tasmanian societies can be seen in Deleuze’s éloge published at the end of the official account. This is what Deleuze has taken from Péron’s pages of description:

The portrait of the peoples scattered over New Holland and of those who inhabit Van Diemen’s Land acquaints us with two races of savages of dreadful ferocity, and presents to us the bottom rung of misery and of degradation of the human species.

The preceding discussion of his Maria Island report has shown that while this telescoped summary matched the views that Péron later arrived at back home it does not represent his changing states of mind and belief in Tasmania. There he wanted to

---

53. To date only one of the two volumes of the narrative contained in the Voyage have been published in translation (Péron 1975 [1809]). A deeper understanding of Péron’s text requires a contemporary annotated translation.
engage with Aborigines as he describes in the early part of the Tasmanian narrative in the Voyage. When he did not he was disappointed at the failure in cross-cultural communication. Nor does it capture the contradiction of his attitudes. The Tasmanians of the Voyage are fickle, ugly and physically weak, yet particular Aborigines and situations had impressed Péron greatly: the charm and vivacity of Ouré-Ouré,\(^56\) the intelligence and language skills of his language informants,\(^57\) the power of an old man to command obedience by presence and words alone, the mischievous playfulness of the children,\(^58\) the expressive features and pleasing manner of one young man whose curiosity in examining their longboat particularly struck him.\(^59\) It is hard to see any of these individuals occupying Deleuze's ‘bottom rung of misery and degradation of the human species’. Deleuze had not been a careful reader of Péron's account.

It is ironic given Péron's own desire to be an anthropologist that the core of what constitutes anthropological understanding, namely the communication of meanings across cultures, was, inevitably, so imperfect in Van Diemen's Land. Péron was conscious that the Tasmanians did not understand the meaning that certain gestures had for him as a Frenchman.\(^60\) He seemed less alert to the possibility that there was a web of Tasmanian cultural rules that remained invisible to him despite the emphasis in Degérando's memoir on signs and language. More simply, although Péron had attempted to gain his passage as an anthropologist, his expedition narrative and the diverse memoirs he produced in the course of the voyage\(^61\) reveal how the things that fascinated him most were natural not cultural phenomena. His training in natural history and his appointment as a zoologist were of course entirely consonant with this, but his interest was much more than merely professional. The phenomena in the new seas and lands he traversed constantly aroused his wonder and delight. And these were phenomena that, however wonderful, could be grasped intellectually. He could observe plants and animals and record and collect specimens and have them drawn. Substantial results could be and were achieved without the time needed to establish ‘a continuity of communication’ with those who were culturally different.

Yet Péron planned, after he had completed the voyage narrative, to produce a study of different human groups with whom he had first-hand acquaintance, the New Hollanders, Tasmanians and Timorese, and he planned more travels to supplement this with descriptions of other groups. It was to be called Histoire philosophique des divers peu-

---

\(^{56}\) Péron 1975 [1809]: 175.

\(^{57}\) Péron (1983: 87) describes the vocabulary collecting: ‘In general, they seemed to me to be very intelligent and they easily grasped the meaning of all my gestures and seemed to understand both their object and their purpose. They repeated willingly the words which I had not been able to grasp readily on the first attempt, and they laughed heartily when, attempting to repeat them myself, I made mistakes or pronounced them badly’.

\(^{58}\) This prompted the reflection, unexceptional for his time, that women and children are similar everywhere: ‘they are less affected by the influence of climates, physical causes, or the improvement of society’ (Péron 1975 [1809]: 179).

\(^{59}\) Péron 1975 [1809]: 173-74.

\(^{60}\) In relation to his first meeting with the Tasmanians, for example, Péron describes the reaction of one of the men to being embraced: ‘M. Freycinet having embraced him, I followed his example, but the air of indifference with which he received this testimony of good will and friendship, made us easily perceive that to him it had no meaning’ (Péron 1975 [1809]: 173).

\(^{61}\) See Wallace 1984: 168-69, for a listing of these.
This ambitious undertaking was surely the only comparative study in Péron's time to propose basing its data on the fieldwork of its author.

Even though his scientific mentors — men such as Cuvier — were leading anthropology towards a racially-based interpretation of human difference, it is interesting that Péron had still intended to study les rapports moraux in tandem with les rapports physiques, the cultural with the physical. But if we follow the transition in his views from those he expressed in his Maria Island report — to which his personal diary would have added more insights — to those we find in the finished narrative of the Voyage, it seems most likely that Péron would only have strengthened the kind of racial classification and evaluation that he was beginning to establish with his dynamometer experiments. As it is the Voyage, largely unsympathetic and at times hostile to Australian Aborigines, set the tone for future French voyagers' accounts of Aboriginal groups. These accounts and the secondary literature they generated later became part of the intellectual climate in which physical anthropology flourished in France in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Tasmanians, followed by the Australian Aborigines, were typically placed at the bottom of French anthropology's racial hierarchies.

References


Péron and Freycinet 1807–1816: 449.


— 1975 [1809], A voyage of discovery to the Southern Hemisphere, performed by order of the Emperor Napoleon, during the years 1801, 1802, 1803, and 1804. Translated from the French, Melbourne.


Ryan, Lyndall 1981, The Aboriginal Tasmanians, St Lucia, Queensland.

