

## II

### Royal Instructions for Scientific Exploration

Of the three overseas expeditions that we shall examine in greater detail below, only the two major ones were sponsored by the royal régime and, therefore, guided by extensive instructions that specified the scientific information desired by both government and the premier academic societies in Paris. Charles-Pierre Claret de Fleurieu, the naval officer who was the chief architect of the instructions, drew upon three major sources of information: the recommendations that Commerson had made at the time of the Bougainville expedition; the records of prior voyages, most notably the observations by the naturalist William Anderson, who accompanied the second Cook voyage as surgeon, 1772-1775; and voluminous recommendations that Fleurieu solicited from the Parisian academies. Louis XVI, it must be added, took a pronounced personal interest in promoting such expeditions, as he had a passion for geographical knowledge. He made occasional recommendations of his own, and his personal interest meant generous financial support.

The three expeditions had in common an affiliation with the first of them, the voyage of La Pérouse, which sailed from Brest in 1785 and would be lost at sea in 1788. The second expedition, organized to search for La Pérouse and to fulfill his scientific mission, was commanded by Entrecasteaux, departing in 1791. The third voyage, led by Dupetit-Thouars, was a privately-financed venture in search of La Pérouse and botanical knowledge, sailing in 1792.<sup>22</sup>

The scientific relationship of the La Pérouse and the Entrecasteaux voyages becomes transparent from their official instructions. Each set of instructions differed in its assigned route for the evident reason that La Pérouse was to travel around the world; Entrecasteaux was to go to La Pérouse's last known location and then follow his presumed route. But the remaining segments of the instructions, directing various aspects of the scientific mission, were identical for both voyages.



22. As the French Revolution would intrude upon members of several of these expeditions, forcing a change in the spelling of aristocratic or seigneurial names, I have elected to use the post-revolutionary spelling unless the individual died before the Revolution.

The king's participation in the preparation of scientific expeditions had been stimulated in particular by the great interest he had taken in reading James Cook's *Voyages*. He had been moved to have a special edition on South Sea voyages prepared for the education of the dauphin. The account of Cook's third voyage inspired him to plan what came to be the La Pérouse voyage, which he hoped would impart a special character to his reign.<sup>23</sup>

His own character may be seen in his personal directive to La Pérouse: "At all times, le sieur de La Pérouse will deal with the different peoples he will visit in the course of his voyage with great kindness and humanity, and will devote himself with zeal and interest to every means that can improve their condition by providing their countries with the legumes, the fruits, and other useful trees from Europe; and by teaching them the way to seed and cultivate them. By making known the uses they must make of these presents, the goal is to increase, on their own soils, the necessary productions of those peoples who draw their nourishment from the earth."<sup>24</sup>

Even though Fleurieu had valuable sources available to him when preparing the instructions for an expedition, he was a man of considerable experience as an hydrographic engineer, a naval captain, and a naval administrator. His writing testified to his knowledge of the sciences of his day, but he knew himself to be more at home in matters of navigation, astronomy, and foreign policy than in the biological sciences. He acknowledged that he had *l'esprit mécanique*, essentially meaning *l'esprit astronomique*, and tended to appreciate the observations of his naval naturalists for their usefulness in the practice of navigation. What did the presence of certain plants, birds, or shells indicate about landing conditions? or surface currents? or geographical positions?

That priority should not cause us to overlook formative instruction he had received when still young in Lyon. Fleurieu had originally been destined for a clerical career. Along with his brother, he had been tutored by the Benedictine Dom Antoine-Joseph Pernetty, whose true passion was botany. Pernetty's influence must have been substantial. The older brother, Marc-Antoine Claret de la Tourette (later de Fleurieu), although going on into law, devoted himself to botany in Lyon, becoming a close colleague of the eminent agronome, abbé Jean-François Rozier. Given the fact that Pernetty would later leave the Benedictine order, having served as a chaplain for the Bougainville expedition, one must suspect that



23. Bernard William Smith. 1985. *European Vision and the South Pacific, 1768-1850*, 2nd ed. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, p. 137.

24. Yvonne Letouzey, ed. 1989. *Le Jardin des Plantes à la croisée des chemins avec André Thouin, 1747-1824*. Paris: Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, p. 198.

he could have nudged Charles-Pierre toward a career in the world, especially in the navy. In any case, Fleurieu certainly had had instruction in botany.<sup>25</sup>

Fleurieu's correspondence with the king by 1785 clearly indicated that overseas expeditions would serve both French commercial interest (notably the fur trade) and scientific discoveries. But Fleurieu also emphasized that the commercial interest would only be an *accessory* to a campaign of discoveries. They could be complementary objectives, but absolute priority was reserved for science. The instructions for those scientific objectives revealed that, in Fleurieu's mind, the nautical sciences, leading to a new cartography, were given clear priority over the physical, natural, and human sciences, hardly surprising given his background. Jean-Nicolas Buache de la Neuville, first geographer to the king, was given the responsibility for preparing an inventory of previous expeditions to accompany the instructions for La Pérouse, along with maps of some use, imprecise though they were and in need of perfection: a major objective of the voyage.<sup>26</sup>

La Pérouse's route was prescribed in Part I of his instructions, which revealed the French desire to complete the work of James Cook by exploring places Cook had been unable to cover: namely, islands in the South Atlantic, previously reported but not verified; the northwest coast of America from Monterey to Mt. St. Elias (an important source for furs); the northeast coast of Asia from Korea to Japan and Siberia; the Solomon Islands; and the king added the southern coast of Australia as a region unknown.<sup>27</sup>

Catherine Gaziello, in her excellent reference work on all aspects of the La Pérouse campaign, directly confronted the charge, made by some scholars, that the route suggested that the heralded scientific objectives of the voyage had merely been a screen to conceal the real goals of the expedition so as not to awaken the suspicions of the anti-colonialist party in France.<sup>28</sup> Yet the entirety of Part II in the instructions quite openly spoke of seeking trading opportunities for French merchants abroad but as a side effect of the expedition.<sup>29</sup> Louis XVI himself had made scientific discovery the primary motive for the expedition. Most convincing of all would be the conduct of La Pérouse during the voyage, which would clearly point to the primacy of intellectual inquiry.



25. Pierre M. Niauxat. 1989. "Fleurieu et les naturalistes de son temps." Ulane Bonnel, ed. *Fleurieu et la marine de son temps*. Paris: Economica, pp. 162-164.

26. Jean Bourgoin. 1989. "Fleurieu et le voyage de Lapérouse." *Ibid.*, pp. 64-66, 82.

27. The details may be found in Louis-Antoine Destouff, baron de Milet-Mureau, ed. 1797. *Voyage de La Pérouse autour du monde*, 5 vols. Paris: Imprimerie de la République. 1: 14-29.

28. Gaziello. 1984. *L'Expédition de Lapérouse 1785-1788*, pp. 54-55, 61.

29. Milet-Mureau. 1797. *Voyage de La Pérouse*. 1: 30-42.

Gaziello had also studied material on La Pérouse's private life, not published until a century after his death, which convinced her of his well-developed humanitarian sensibilities. Before the departure of the expedition, he had seriously pondered what should be the European's proper conduct in the presence of aborigines, revealing profoundly philanthropic instincts. It had been known, moreover, that he had earlier demonstrated those instincts in his treatment of defeated British troops during his campaign in Hudson's Bay.<sup>30</sup> It strains credibility to suppose that such a man would have been chosen to command a clandestine operation meant to subvert the independence of aboriginal peoples, or that he would have accepted such an assignment.

On the contrary: everything regarding the selection of personnel for both the La Pérouse and Entrecasteaux voyages indicates scrupulous concern to provide professional personnel qualified both mentally and physically to fulfill those missions stated in the instructions. On the two ships under La Pérouse's command, there would be 10 scientists and artists, along with a gardener, horologist, 2 hydrographic engineers, and a Russian interpreter. If the 15 were fewer in number than the naval officers (19) on the two ships, they remained an important group on each ship whose needs required the attention of the commander-in-chief.

He did not select the scientific staff. That was left to the Académie des sciences; but he did urge that, beyond their scientific competence, the candidates' youth, enthusiasm, and compatibility should be taken into account, especially the latter quality given the probable length of the voyage under confined circumstances.<sup>31</sup> As anyone who has recruited personnel with rigorous care can testify, a prior assurance of compatibility will infrequently square with later performance. In the case of the gardener, choice was delegated to André Thouin, the chief horticulturalist at the Jardin du roi, as well as the task of providing his instructions. It would be the first important official expedition for which Thouin helped with arrangements, occupying him during May and June of 1785.<sup>32</sup>

We turn next to extracts from those documents within the instructions prepared for both La Pérouse and Entrecasteaux that described their assignments in both botanical and human sciences, as well as the conduct recommended to them in dealing with aboriginal or native peoples met en route. It must be understood that their instructions covered other intellectual fields as well, but which are beyond the province of this book.

30. Gaziello. 1984. *L'Expédition de La Pérouse*, p. 81.

31. *Ibid.* p. 138.

32. Letouzey. 1989. *Le Jardin des plantes*, p. 198. Emma C Spary. 2000. *Utopia's Garden: French Natural History From Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago: University Press), published after the completion of this trilogy, provides an account of Thouin's vast horticultural correspondence with French botanists.

(1)

Letter from the secretary of state for the Navy, Charles-Eugène-Gabriel de La Croix, marquis de Castries, maréchal de France, to the marquis de Condorcet, permanent secretary of the Académie des sciences.

Versailles, March 1785

Following the king's decision to dedicate two frigates for a voyage that will be useful both for his service and to provide an extended means of perfecting the knowledge and the description of the terrestrial globe, the minister would like the Académie des sciences to prepare a memoir recommending in some detail which physical, astronomical, geographic, and any other observations that are appropriate and important to be made, whether at sea when navigating, or on lands or islands that might be visited. In circumnavigating the globe, the itinerary will range between the 60th parallels north and south. Consequently, the Académie may include nearly the entirety of known coasts and islands in its speculation, as well as the entire ocean surface between the great land masses that form the continents.

The king is greatly interested in the work you are asked to do, and you may be sure that he will give the closest attention to the observations or experiments you will recommend to him. His Majesty will be pleased, moreover, to see the luminaries of the Académie des sciences manifesting the same zeal and love of glory that animates the officers of the Navy, promising the greatest benefits for the advancement of the sciences from an expedition whose principal goal is to favor their progress.<sup>33</sup>

(2)

**Mémoire par l'Académie des Sciences, pour servir aux Savans  
embarquées sous les orders of M. de La Pérouse**

[ca. May-June 1785]

[Their report was divided into sections produced by the various scientific specialists within the Académie: Geometry, Astronomy, Mechanics, Physics, Chemistry, Mineralogy, and the two sections below germane to our study. No section was specifically entitled Natural History.]

The attention and curiosity of those who have undertaken major voyages were quite naturally drawn to the diverse varieties of the human species. Most of them seem to have been fixed upon observing and describing external characters



33. Milet-Mureau. 1797. *Le Voyage de La Pérouse*. 1: 155-156.

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