

## IV

### The Voyage of La Pérouse: Part I From Brest to Monterey Bay

From the outset, the reader must take into consideration that the voyage of La Pérouse, sailing from Brest at the beginning of August, 1785, would end in shipwreck, presumably in the summer of 1788 in the western Pacific. His final port of call had been Botany Bay (Australia) from which he had sailed on 10 March 1788, never to be seen again. The original manuscript of his journal, obviously a fundamental document for the record of the voyage, was lost with him; as were the principal studies, the daily notes, and the major part of the collections made by the botanists and the gardener.

The reader may also recall that André Thouin, in his instructions for the gardener that had been delivered to La Pérouse, emphasized the wisdom of sending to Paris packets of seeds and herbarium specimens from any European outposts visited during the long voyage. He called it a precaution in the tacit knowledge that no extended venture into uncharted waters could be guaranteed a happy ending. It is unlikely that La Pérouse, a veteran of perilous seas, needed the reminder; and he would take every opportunity at ports of call up to Botany Bay to send back *copied* portions of his journal to France, along with letters, maps, drawings, seeds, and plants.

Catherine Gaziello, who examined the copied journal in manuscript, noted that some of the corrections on the pages had been made in La Pérouse's hand, but not all, leaving room for doubt that he had seen such corrections. It also seemed apparent that not all the material presumably shipped had reached its destination. Even so, she was impressed most favorably by the evident integrity with which baron de Milet-Mureau had edited the surviving portion of the journal, especially as he had been a military rather than a naval officer, thus implying the reliability of the published text. It is a pity that other journals, those of the scientists in particular, were not similarly shipped in installments; but, as La Pérouse once reminded his gardener, such documents were to be reserved for the king's eyes alone.<sup>44</sup>

Jean-François Galaup de La Pérouse was born near Albi in 1741, descendant of an eminent and prosperous Languedocian family. His parents bought the domain of La Pérouse for him, giving him seigneurial status; but the family was bourgeois. The title *comte*, usually attributed to him, is incorrect, so that his name should



44. Gaziello. 1984. *L'Expédition de La Pérouse*, pp. 19-20, 216-218.

more properly be rendered Galaup-La Pérouse no matter the customary use of the participle. He had entered the naval school at Brest at a very young age, emerging as a commissioned garde de la marine on 19 November 1756: a “blue” officer, that is, wearing the blue uniform of officers of common origin. The “red” officers wore the red uniforms reserved for men of aristocratic origin, and this traditional distinction had been prejudicial to the advancement of “blue” officers.

After the maréchal de Castries took control of the ministry of the marine in 1780, he abolished the distinction by establishing formal equality in advancement between nobles and commoners in an attempt to attract the talented to naval service. However enlightened the reform may have been, the traditional bias in favor of aristocrats did not totally disappear in practice as the choicest posts tended to be given to them. A more conclusive end to this caste system would only come with the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen on 27 August 1789.<sup>45</sup> It seems probable that La Pérouse benefited from Castries’ reform. His promotion had been slow despite a substantial service record, until he was promoted to the rank of captain in 1780 and given command of a frigate.

The following year, the government developed a plan to destroy the English posts on Hudson’s Bay. The mission was confided to La Pérouse, and he was given command of a 74-gun warship supported by two frigates of 36 guns each. He slipped out of Santo Domingo in great secrecy in the late spring of 1782. Passing Resolution Island, he met ice and storms in Hudson Strait and could not pass into the bay until 17 July 1782. During the first weeks of August, he took three English posts on the western side of Hudson’s Bay: Fort Prince of Wales on the Churchill River; Fort Williams on the Nelson River; and Fort Severn on the Severn River. In all instances, troops were put ashore under cover but in difficult terrain. They would block the fort from the land side to prevent retreat, while the ships would then appear off shore with obvious artillery superiority. The fort would then surrender when initially summoned to do so, in the rational, honorable tradition of the 18th century. There were no casualties.

The forts, to be sure, were then burned, but not before removing the stores and furs; and the governors of each post were taken prisoner. Because of the approach of cold weather and danger from Indians, La Pérouse left provisions and arms for the English troops so that they might make a successful retreat to another English post. The gesture won him a reputation as a humane and generous man. Beyond which, his bold exploits in 1782, at a time when French naval fortunes were at low ebb, gave him national distinction at home.<sup>46</sup>



45. Horner. 1995. *Looking for La Pérouse*, p. 34.

46. Milet-Mureau. 1797. *Voyage de La Pérouse*. 1: xxxiii-xxviii; and Dunmore. 1965. *French Explorers in the Pacific*. 1: 254-255.

His record, in short, indicated he would be well-suited to command the expedition in 1785, and his friendship with Claret de Fleurieu meant that he would not be overlooked. After the peace of 1783, however, and with 18 campaigns behind him, La Pérouse had been entitled to an easier existence. His acceptance of what could only be a most demanding and perilous assignment was given after appeals to his sense of duty and as an obligation to the king. Two frigates were assigned to him as commander-in-chief, and he was given the appropriate latitude to select naval personnel in whom he had confidence. For *La Boussole*, the frigate on which he would establish his own headquarters, he chose the chevalier Sutton de Clonard as captain. For *L'Astrolabe*, he named Paul-Antoine-Marie Fleuriot de Langle, who had been with La Pérouse in Hudson's Bay, as captain. His naval surgeons remain remarkably obscure considering the fame of the voyage. A Dr. Rollin would serve as chief-surgeon on *La Boussole*, while on board *L'Astrolabe* a Dr. Lavaux would be chief-surgeon assisted by Dr. Jean Guillon.

La Pérouse accepted the scientific personnel as recommended by the appropriate academicians in Paris. His plea that some consideration be given to congeniality in addition to professional competence does not seem to have been given much weight. Yet, a warning about such matters had been published by James Cook. During his second voyage, Cook had had the botanist Johann-Reinhold Forster on board, whose unsociable character had rendered the atmosphere difficult during the entire voyage. On land, or in the academy, we can find in space the necessary defense against the noxious personality; but what is one to do when confined for 3 to 4 years on a ship perhaps 120' by 30'? Such perils of sea travel have rarely been adequately delineated.

Joseph Boissieu de Lamartinière was the senior botanist on the expedition. He was on board *L'Astrolabe*, but precious little is known about him. He had been born in Saint-Marcellin (now Isère) sometime between 1750 and 1755. After achieving a master of arts in 1776, he enrolled that September as a medical student at Montpellier. His subsequent activity as a botanist remains obscure, but his correspondence with André Thouin at the time of his appointment suggests great familiarity, and we know that he was recommended for the voyage by Antoine-Laurent de Jussieu.<sup>47</sup> The letters suggest a healthy, confident young professional, very practical, impatient with dreamers and pessimists.

Nicolas Collignon, the gardener for the expedition, was born in Metz. Judged by Thouin to be active and intelligent, Collignon was only 24 at the time Thouin made the recommendation. He had only worked under Thouin's direction. The



47. Henri Cordier. 1916. "Deux compagnons de Lapérouse." *Bulletin de la Section de géographie (Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques)*. 31: 55-56.

detailed instructions Thouin provided were his way to continue to instruct and guide him. It is clear that Thouin did not want Collignon to become subordinate to the botanist, but to remain independent to carry out the duties defined in his instructions. He was authorized (to occupy his time) to assist the other naturalists in seeking and preparing their plants so long as that did not interfere with his principal mission. Consequently, when Collignon reached Brest, he asked to be assigned to a ship different from Lamartinière's. Whereas, Lamartinière, with some reason, argued that the gardener ought to be subordinate to the botanist.<sup>48</sup> La Pérouse resolved the dispute in Collignon's favor, assigning him to *La Boussole*, and the issue would remain a point of friction between commander-in-chief and botanist.

As each ship necessarily had a chaplain on board, La Pérouse selected two who could occupy free time usefully as assistants in natural history. Father Jean-André Mongez (sometimes Mongès), a canon of Sainte-Geneviève, became chaplain on *La Boussole*. Father Claude-François-Joseph Receveur, of the Minimes Order, although sometimes identified as a Franciscan, served as chaplain-naturalist on *L'Astrolabe*. While it might appear from this that La Pérouse did not expect the spiritual requirements of his crews to be burdensome, he was consistently careful in selecting naval personnel to prefer men with multiple skills as a measure of efficiency.

The painter on board *L'Astrolabe*, at the botanist's disposition for drawing plants, was Guillaume Prévost, known on the expedition as the uncle. His nephew, Jean-Louis-Robert Prévost, a very young man, was on board *La Boussole* as the illustrator. Both remain obscure figures today. Another painter, Gaspard Duché de Vancy, was engaged primarily for drawing figures and landscapes, sailing on *La Boussole*. For reasons not entirely clear, Lamartinière did not find his illustrator to his liking, perhaps because Guillaume Prévost was said to be of a melancholic disposition, and this want of congeniality was evident even before they left Brest. All told, the situation within the botanical team did not augur well for the success of that aspect of the voyage.<sup>49</sup>

At the beginning of August, 1785, while waiting for favorable winds to leave the port of Brest, six sailors and one soldier on board were detected as infected with venereal disease, having escaped prior examinations by the surgeons, and were immediately put ashore before departure.<sup>50</sup> Otherwise, the first leg of the journey to Madeira and the Canary Islands was uneventful.



48. Lamartinière to Thouin, Brest, 4 July 1785. Ibid. pp. 56-58.

49. Gaziello. 1984. *L'Expédition de La Pérouse*, pp. 138, 142-144, 149.

50. La Pérouse. 1797. *Journal*. 2: 12. The form of this citation is meant to signal La Pérouse's own narrative as distinct from the editorial material produced by Milet-Mureau.

At Santa Cruz de Tenerife, the naturalists' main objective was to climb the great volcanic peak on the island. The botanist's task, Lamartinière wrote to Castries, went beyond simply collecting large numbers of plants for arrangement in a herbarium and making a catalogue of them. He must examine the soils, note down exposures and temperatures, in order, finally, to determine by analogy which of the local productions would be suitable for propagation in France and thereby render an important service to the nation.

He had encountered, he continued, a number of plants that should do very well if cultivated in Languedoc and would be sending him the seeds for seven or eight species that he believed would benefit the economy of that province: some to improve pasturage, some to provide new woodlands where there is a great shortage. In particular, he cited *Spartium supranulium* Masson, a large shrub that served the islanders as a forage for goats. *Asparagus declinatus* L., a charming shrub, and *Cistus villosus* L. [= *C. incana* L.]. Finally, *Euphorbia canariensis* L., used generally for fuel. He emphasized its formidable growth: one trunk can produce more than 150 branches as thick as a man's arm and 12' in length, enough wood to provide heat for one person all winter.

As *Euphorbia canariensis* grows in dry, rocky areas, Lamartinière recommended experimenting with it in those waste lands called *garrigues* around the village of Montferrier just north of Montpellier. He was inclined to believe that all these plants would do well in that soil, recommending that Antoine Gouan, under whom he had studied for the medical degree at Montpellier, be put in charge of such experiments.<sup>51</sup> The recommendation was appropriate as Gouan had been experimenting with the introduction of exotic plants as the best method to replace vegetation lost to excessive timbering.<sup>52</sup>

In a letter written the following day, Lamartinière exposed even more explicitly his practical disposition. He reported to Thouin that he had seen a good many plants, but all of them were described species. Yet, the absence of novelties seemed to distress him not at all as he expressed little interest in finding new genera and species. He emphasized that his collection of seeds could be useful to Thouin. There remains a short list in the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, dated May 1786, indicating that the seeds sent from Teneriffe had been planted in the Jardin du roi in Paris, as well as redistributed to Antoine Gouan and Pierre-Joseph Amoureux in Montpellier; the abbé Rozier and Claret de La



51. Lamartinière to Minister of the Marine, 29 August 1785. Milet-Mureau. 1797. *Voyage de La Pérouse*. 4: 247-250

52. See Antoine Gouan. 1796. *Herborisations des environs de Montpellier, ou Guide botanique à l'usage des élèves de l'Ecole de santé*. Montpellier: G. Izer & A. Ricord.

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