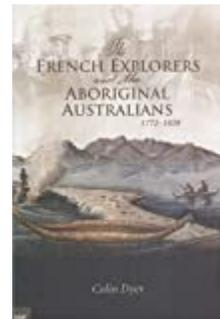


Glynnis M. Cropp, Noel R. Watts, Roger D. J. Collins, K. R. Howe, eds. *Pacific Journeys: Essays in Honour of John Dunmore*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2006. x + 232 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86473-507-2.



Colin Dyer. *The French Explorers and the Aboriginal Australians 1772-1839*. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2005. x + 240 pp. \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7022-3512-2.



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Great Journeys into the Pacific or Grands Voyage dans le Pacifique

To view the world through different languages is to view the world through different spaces—spaces constructed from a range of human beliefs, philosophies, histories, experiences and social ways of doing things; be they political, social, military, physical or indeed emotional. We in the mono-English speaking world very often forget that the rest of humanity does not see the world as we do. Our present conflict with parts of the Arab-speaking world is a classic example of two very different views of the world. In the Arab world, history is a nebulous thing informing the present, not a factual thing

of the past. When they call American, British, and Australian troops crusaders they are not talking in analogies, they are talking about a continuous thousand-year-old historical reality which is perceived to be as real and tangible today as it was when Richard the Lionheart and Saladin were alive.

One of my favorite examples of this difference in seeing the world is the thirteen-hundred-year-old temple of the Ise Shrine in Japan,[1] which is rebuilt from scratch every twenty years. This cuts to the heart of English-

language ideas of antiquity, authenticity, copy, cataloging, curatorial integrity and preservation. Another, much bleaker example of this difference in worldview, and an example much more pertinent to this present review, is the academic lie of post-colonial history. Post-colonial history only applies to those societies—such as certain countries in Africa, the Indian subcontinent and South-East Asia—where the newest arrivals have left, taking their way of doing things with them. This is not to suggest that much that was brought in or built by the newest arrivals, the colonialists and the settlers, was not left behind.

However, the term post-colonial is often applied to Australian modern history, New Zealand modern history, the Americas, Canada, and South Africa; all, ironically enough, places of predominantly English-speaking description. The only trouble is, the settlers have never left; there is no “post-” anything in these countries and to pretend otherwise is to negate the impact permanent settlement has had on the original inhabitants of these places. What complicates the situation further is that the native-born progeny of settlers and colonialists morph into Australians, white South Africans, Americans, Brazilians, New Zealanders—people as native-born as indigenous peoples.

If you doubt what I say then ask a disenfranchised Hawaiian how they like being the fiftieth state of America or how a Native American feels about being post-colonized or an Australian Aboriginal or a New Zealand Maori about how they like living in “their” multicultural, “post-colonial” nations or ask an Aztec/Mayan/Inca Indian living in the burros or the Spanish-speaking, Spanish-owned countryside of Latin America.

And it is to this difference in world views, rooted as they are in the differences in language that we now turn. France and Britain spent the latter half of the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth century fighting a number of wars for global domination. This conflict was not simply military in nature: it included science, trade, social and business organization, economics, religion, knowledge, communications and all the other attributes of proto-modernist states.

The Dutch and British had led the way into the modernist political/trading world of the secular nation state, but the Dutch fell away due to a simple lack of population, leaving the British and the French to battle for the keys to the first integrated global Empire. And the two books under review open a French window onto the last major battlefield of this war, the Pacific Ocean. By the

time Jean-Francois de Galaup, Comte de Laperouse had got himself killed on the reefs of Vanikoro Island, France had already lost the overseas power/empire war and was now desperately fighting an organizational/knowledge war and the Pacific Ocean was the last frontier. By Cook’s third voyage and the beginnings of the great Pacific voyages undertaken by the French and the British, substantial differences in technique and attitude had formed in the way these two language groups both traversed physical space and linguistically organized and described place. There was also an enormous gulf between the motivations inherent in these voyages. *Pacific Voyages* and *The French Explorers and the Aboriginal Australians 1772-1839* capture some small part of some of these differences.

A classic example of how different the worldviews had become between these two language spaces is apparent in the differences between Cook’s description of being the first European to record seeing the edge of Antarctica and Bruny D’Entrecasteaux’s description of experiencing his first night at Recherche Bay in Van Diemens Land. We need to remember always that these two men were highly experienced navel sea captains looking at the world through their own cultural/linguistic prisms far from their home cultures, yet viewing these worlds from the decks of microcosms of their own societies. Cook is phlegmatic, personal, certain, practical, exact, succinct and objective-oriented as he describes the Antarctic on January 30, 1774:

“In this field we counted Ninety Seven Ice Hills or Mountains, many of them vastly large. I will not say it was impossible anywhere to get among this Ice, but I will assert that the bare attempting of it would be a very dangerous enterprise and what I believe no man in my situation would have thought of. I whose ambition leads me not only farther than any other man has been before me, but as far as I think it is possible for man to go, was not sorry at meeting with this interruption, as it in some measure relieved us from the dangers and hardships, inseparable with the Navigation of the southern Polar regions. Since therefore we could not proceed one inch farther South, no other reason need be assigned for our Tacking and stretching back to the North, being at that time in the Latitude of 71°10’ South, Longitude 106°54’ W.” [2]

D’Entrecasteaux’s description of Recherche Bay on the evening of the 23rd April 1792 is lyrical, philosophical, expansive, universal, contemplative, descriptive, passionate and enveloping:

“I shall now attempt the vain task of conveying the

feeling I experienced at the sight of this solitary harbour, placed at the ends of the earth, and enclosed so perfectly that one could think of it as separated from the rest of the universe. Everything reflects the rustic estate of raw nature. Here one meets at every step, combined with beauties of nature left to itself, signs of its decay, trees of enormous height and corresponding width, without branches along the trunk, but crowned with foliage always green: some appear as old as the world; so interlaced and compacted as to be impenetrable, they support other trees equally large but dropping with age and fertilising the ground with debris reduced to rotteness. Nature in all its vigour, and at the same time wasting away, seems to offer the imagination something more imposing and more vivid than the sight of the same nature embellished by industry and by civilised man; wanting to conserve only the beauty, he has destroyed the charm; he has removed its unique character, that of being always ancient and always new.”[3]

Pacific Journeys: Essays in Honour of John Dunmore is a book of many interpretations, many subjects and many voices, while *The French Explorers and the Aboriginal Australians 1772-1839* is a book of many voices but one subject and one interpretative voice. Both books open an all-too-often closed window into the people and places of the Pacific, a window constructed in French where French is very much the minority worldview across a wide expanse of this Ocean. Bounded in the West as it is by the sometimes frighteningly Anglophile continent of Australia and in the East by the English usurped Spanish of the East coast Americans.

What is most interesting for an Australian, as I am, in *Pacific Journeys* is just how different the New Zealand colonial experience is to the Australian experience, as well as the closeness and academic awareness to the island cultures of the Pacific that exists in New Zealand. Although the essays included in this book are fascinating and refreshing unto themselves, and they give thought provoking insights into a range of subjects, I do have two gripes about the organization of the book. Chronologically, the book’s chapter structure tends to jump around and I feel that strength of narrative would have been helped if the book, as a whole, had followed a chronological narrative leading us through the subject matter in an orderly manner. It has the feeling of a “dipping-into” sort of book whereas it deserves to be a “read-and-absorb” book.

My second gripe is really about the choice of subject matter within the book. The opening sentence in

the introduction announces: “Where would the history of French Exploration of the Pacific be today, if John Dunmore had not sailed from England in 1950 to settle in New Zealand?” (The book incidentally is in honor of the work of John Dunmore.) Unfortunately the editors have not stuck with this incredibly strong and interesting narrative as rigorously as perhaps they could have. The contents of the book have a scattergun feel to them. One chapter concerns Captain Bligh’s ill-considered people management techniques. One deals with a French-laid garden in pre-settlement Van Diemens Land. Some of the later chapters focus on French missionaries and Maori missionaries, and then French whaling is explored; finally we are swept out into the Pacific, where issues of French Polynesia and New Caledonia are considered. I feel that the whole exercise, as insightful, relevant and as wonderful as it is, would have benefited enormously from having had a strong editorial subject narrative, rather than being published as simply a collection of almost random essays. Having been published in this way, it lessens the import of the essays contained within this idiosyncratic yet highly enjoyable collection of writings.

Colin Dyer’s *The French Explorers and the Aboriginal Australians 1772-1839*, on the other hand, is a succinct and clear-eyed window onto a view of Australia and its indigenous people as viewed from within a French viewpoint. Before exploring the book, a little background information is, I feel, called for here. Whenever talking about the British and French within an early Australian colonial context, the actual global context of Britain and France’s interminable armed and diplomatic struggle for supremacy, must be at the forefront of our investigation.

In 1770 Captain James Cook, had quite literally bumped into the fertile East Coast of Australia and claimed it, in that arrogant and quite meaningless eighteenth-century way, by raising an English flag on Proclamation Island in Torres Strait. He claimed it, without ever seeing one tenth of the claim, for the English king. Being a brilliant navigator, on his piece of paper it made sense, given the prevailing winds and the fact that land had followed him due north since he had sighted it in the south. Therefore at the present border between the states of Victoria and New South Wales, Cook deemed it worth claiming the coast back to the headwaters of the river systems, not that he had a clue where they might lie.

Little did he realize he was claiming the edge of a continent. On his return to England his discoveries were received as if he had been to the moon and found cheese.

Eighteen years later, having lost the wealth and space of their American colonies, and with the French again gaining ground after having also lost their Canadian and most of their West Indian possessions, the British, in their pragmatic and mercantile way (and having no doubt studied carefully, the results of Marion Dufresne journey into the Pacific in 1772), decided to send a settlement to this unknown great south land of Cook's.

Although the first fleet was a vast and expensive undertaking, one that no doubt kept French strategic thinkers awake at night, it was made up of the most expendable members of British society, that is, second-rate soldiers, people depicted as few foolish chancers and convict scum, the very dregs of British society. So why send these eleven ships across the ocean into the unknown, in the first place? It is highly likely that at the bottom of this undertaking was the intent to strategically thwart any French ideas of exploiting, settling, or militarizing the West Pacific. Jean-Francois de Galaup, Comte de Laprouse arrived at Botany Bay three days after the first fleet arrived, a remarkable coincidence or perhaps brilliant navigation and timing or perhaps just three days late! However, he only came as a visitor, as a voyageur. The British had come to stay, or at least to stay as long as the war continued. It allowed them to prevent the French from settling the entire west side of the Pacific and thus any land based easterly approach to India, if there was one. From this moment on the British began exploring, exploiting and settling a continent and its major off-shore islands including Norfolk Island, Van Diemens Land and New Zealand. The French, on the other hand, were forced to become itinerant visitors and observers, trying desperately to find away around this massive British strategic blocking move.

The very great tragedy of the French Pacific exploration story is not only that the British got there first and settled a continent, but that the three major Pacific expeditions sent from France after Dufresne, Laprouse, D'Entrecasteaux and Baudin all ended in disaster. In modern terms of money, loss of intellectual property, technical experience and know how and the loss of skilled personnel, these three lost expeditions would be the equivalent of three new NASA lunar missions making it to the moon, but failing to return home to tell everybody that the Chinese are already living there.

Dyer's book captures much in the difference in emphasis, outlook and motivation between the French and the British observation of Australia, particularly in regards to the indigenous people of Australia. Incidentally

it is highly unlikely that French settlement would have been any less devastating to the Aboriginal people than British settlement has been. However, the French were not looking to settle: they were in Australia to observe, record, learn and discover. To the British the Aboriginal people were/are a problem. But for the French, Aboriginal people presented a fascinating difference in human experience and therefore were worth careful observation, study and reportage. They were unknown members of *famille universelle de l'homme*.

Dyer keeps to a well-ordered narrative within his book and allows the French to build their own story by organizing the book across subject matters rather than by expeditions. For example in his first chapter he allows all the main French observers a voice in describing the Aboriginal people as they saw them. By doing this and organizing the book in this way we also begin to see from an outsider's point of view the differences that sixty-odd years of settlement has on Aboriginal people. Dyer covers all ten French expeditions which touch on Australian soil—from Dufresne in 1772 to D'Urville's second visit in 1839.

The fact that Dyer allows the French to state their case is what gives the book its presence and weight. As he says in his preface, "My aim, to use a culinary image, is to offer the ingredients and not the prepared recipe" (p. viii). This approach gives the book freshness and, in a way, neutrality, devoid of the usual political agendas that so plague much Australian historical writing when dealing with Aboriginal Australia and colonial European Australia.

Dyer manages to get the balance just right between letting the French tell their story and guiding us through the French expeditions—giving us enough background and context to know who is talking and when, and in what context. This is a fine and generous book and Colin Dyer should be applauded for cracking open the monopoly of an English-language worldview of Colonial Australia and the indigenous people of this land. We can only hope that one day someone will be able to do a similar job, using the thoughts, family and oral histories of indigenous people and tell us of their early impressions of these dangerous white-skinned invaders who stayed around and created a nation state called Australia, without asking.

Notes

[1]. Alexander Stille, *The Future of the Past: How the Information Age Threatens to Destroy our Cultural Her-*

itage (London: Picador, 2002), p. 41.

[2]. Ian Cameron, *Antarctica: The Last Continent* (London: Little, Brown and Co., 1974), p. 49.

[3]. Frank Horner, *Looking for La Perouse: D'Entrecasteaux in Australia and the South Pacific, 1792-1793* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 1995), p. 69.

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