

Lapérouse Museum & Monuments

Laperouse's last documents

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Laperouse to the Minister

Published in the Milet-Mureau edition.

(Mr de la Perouse, from Botany Bay, 5 February 1788)

My Lord,

I feel confident that when this letter reaches you, you will have received the journal of my navigation from Manila to Kamtchatka which I had the honour of sending you with Mr Lesepe who left the harbour of St Peter and St Paul for Paris on 1 October 1787. That part of the campaign, undoubtedly the most difficult through seas that were quite new for navigators, was nevertheless the only one where we did not meet with any misfortune, and the most frightful disaster was awaiting us in the southern hemisphere: I could only repeat here, My Lord, what you will read in greater detail in my Journal. Messrs de Langle and de Lamanon with ten others fell victim to their humaneness and if they had allowed themselves to fire on the islanders before they surrounded them, our longboats would not have been destroyed and the King would not have lost one of His navy's best officers.

Although this event considerably reduced the two frigates' complements I did not feel that I ought to alter my subsequent programme of navigation, but I was forced to explore more quickly various interesting islands in the South Sea in order to have time to build two longboats in Botany Bay and to complete the various sections of my instructions before the monsoon change that would make such an exploration impossible.

We reached New Holland without a single case of sickness in either vessel; eighteen of the twenty wounded we had when we left Mahoua had completely recovered, and Mr Lavau, senior surgeon of the *Astrolabe*, who had been trepanned, and one other sailor from that frigate leave us with no anxiety about their state of health.

Mr de Monty who was first officer with the *Vicomte de Langle* retained the command of the *Astrolabe* until they arrived at Bay; he is such a good officer I did not feel I should make any changes in the staff until our first port of call when I could not overlook Mr de Clonard's rightful claim, who has been replaced on my frigate by Mr de Monty whose zeal and ability are above all praise and whose good conduct guarantees him the warrant of *capitaine de vaisseau* which, My Lord, you had the goodness to promise him if he received favourable reports.

The English forestalled us in Botany Bay by a mere 5 days. To the most marked courtesy they joined every offer of assistance that was in their power, and we had to regret to see them leave as we arrived, for Port Jackson, fifteen miles north of Botany Bay. Commodore Philip rightly preferred that port and

left us masters and alone in this bay where our longboats are already on the stocks and I expect them to be launched at the end of this month

We are only ten miles by land from the English and consequently in a position to communicate frequently with each other. As it is possible that Commodore Philip may organise expeditions into the South Sea I felt I should give him the latitude and longitude of Mahoua Island so that his vessels may beware of the perfidious welcome the natives of that island might give them if he came upon it in the course of his navigation.

With deepest respect, I have the honour to be,

My Lord,

Your most humble and obedient servant,

Laperouse.

(On board the Boussole in Botany Bay, 5 Feb 1788)

La Perouse to Fleurieu

. Published in the Milet-Mureau edition.

(Laperouse, from Botany Bay, 7 February 1788)

It seems that I will only ever have misfortunes to tell you about, my dear Fleurieu, and my extreme prudence is continually negated by events that are impossible to foresee, but about which I have always had, in a way, a secret feeling of foreboding, and I must admit that I must blame myself for having, on that fateful day of 11 December, given in, almost in spite of myself, to the insistence, and I would even say the stubbornness, of the Vicomte de Langle who claimed that fresh water was the best antiscorbutic, and that crew would be totally affected by this sickness [scurvy] before we reached New Holland. We nevertheless got there without any sick and I am quite convinced personally that good quality water, whether it is fresh or not, is equally healthy.

You will read in my journal, my dear Fleurieu, the detailed account of this unhappy event: my feelings are too deeply affected by it for it not to be a torture to have to repeat it. You will surely find it incredible that a man of great common sense, of perfect judgment, preferred to a known and large bay, where water was excellent, a place that was uncertain, where his longboats were grounded, surrounded by eighteen hundred to two thousand Indians who cut them to pieces after killing all those who did not have time to take refuge in the boats that had remained afloat at the foot of the reefs, while our vessels were quietly bartering for food, two leagues from the shore, where admittedly we were far from foreseeing the likelihood of such an accident.

Some thirty Indians were killed ashore by the men of our longboats during that fatal day, and had I not controlled the fury of our crews who wanted to sink all the canoes that were trading safely alongside us, I could have let five hundred others be killed: but I felt that such barbarous behaviour would not undo our misfortune, and one can only allow harm to be done when it is absolutely necessary.

All I found near the length of coast where Massacre Village is situated is a bad coral ground, with a swell driving us towards the land, where I am certain our cables would not have resisted for two hours, which would have placed our frigates in the greatest peril without even being able to get within gunshot of this infernal little bay, and I did not feel that the pleasure of burning five or six huts was a sufficient reason to

lead our frigates into such imminent danger. I would however have tried if I had had any hope of recovering our longboats, but the savages had broken them up and dragged their carcasses onto the beach.

You will support me, my dear friend, in my decision that such a misfortune should not cause me to alter the later plan of the voyage, but it did prevent me from exploring thoroughly the Navigators archipelago which I believe to be larger, more populated and better provided with food than that of the Society, including O-Taity, and ten times larger than all the Friendly Islands put together. We saw their Vavao archipelago, which the Spanish pilot Morel had seen but without determining a longitude that approximated anything like reality, which would have added a new element of confusion were it not for our determinations, or rather those of Captain Cook who described the Hapae group so well that it is impossible not to identify it as Morel's Galves Islands.

You will find in my journal that I saw Pilstard Island, Norfolk Island and finally reached Botany Bay without a single sick in either vessel: minor symptoms of scurvy disappeared when we used the fresh foodstuffs I obtained at the Navigators Islands. I swear to you, my dear friend, that sea air is not the cause of this sickness rather the foul air in the tween-decks when it is not renewed, or even more the poor quality of the food. It is not possible that biscuit that is worm-eaten, and like a honeycomb, meat the substance of which is totally corroded, it is impossible, I repeat, for such foodstuffs in the long run to make up for daily losses in the

body. It follows from this that the decomposition of the humours, the blood &c. and equally extracts of cochlearoa and all remedies contained in flasks are nonsense; and that fresh food alone, animal or vegetable, can cure scurvy so radically that our crews, fed for a month on pigs bought in the Navigators Islands arrived at Botany Bay in a healthier condition than when they sailed from Brest, and yet they had only spent 24 hours ashore on the island of Mahouna. And I consider malt, spruce-beer, wine, sauer to be antiscorbutics only because these substances, liquid or solid, suffer very little deterioration, and finally are a suitable food for man; they are however insufficient to cure scurvy, but I believe they must slow its advance, and in every respect one cannot recommend them too highly, and I regard as medical subtleties the fixed air &c of English and French doctors: one could swallow bottlefuls of it that it would not do as much good to sailors as good roast beef, turtles, fish, fruit or herbs.

My theory on scurvy therefore comes down to these aphorisms which are not from Hippocrates: any type of food suitable for man and able to make up for daily losses; external air introduced as often as possible in the tween-decks and the hold; the damp caused by fog regularly countered by fumigations and even with braseros; finally, cleanliness and frequent inspections of the sailors' clothes.

I have no confidence in Captain Cook's observation on the corruption of water in barrels. I believe that what is in good condition when loaded on board, after passing through the two or three stages of decomposition known by every sailor, which cause it to smell for a few days, thereafter keeps in excellent condition, and as light as distilled water, because all the heterogeneous matter has precipitated and remains as a sediment at the bottom of the barrels, and at the moment I am writing to you, although we are quite close to a fairly good watering place, I am drinking water from Port des Francais (coast of America) which is excellent. It is caused our misfortunes at the island of Mahouna: how can one go against a captain when he assures you that all his crew will suffer from scurvy within a fortnight if he does not have an fresh water, and who gives me the most unreliable account of a bay which he alone had visited the day before without calculating that the low tide would leave him grounded?

Mr Dagelet is writing to you about his observations, and so I shall not mention them. It is enough for me to say that combining our two methods, observations of distances and the chronometers, so completely solved the problem of longitude that we sailed with less error in longitude than we had in latitude ten years ago when observations were made with wooden octants, and four times less than when we used the arrow or the ninety degree quadrant.

Mr de Langle's death led to no changes in the Astrolabe as far as astronomical observations are concerned. For close on a year, young Lauriston has been in sole charge of them; he is an officer of the highest merit who could challenge even our astronomers when it comes to accuracy; I also know that his observation register is kept in most orderly fashion.

As the English have established their settlement at Port Jackson, they have left this entire bay to us. I have had a very good retrenchment set up here in order to store our(new)longboats in safety, which are well advanced and will be usable by the end of the month. These precautions were needed against the Indians of New Holland who, although very weak and not numerous, are, like all savages, very ill-natured and would set fire to our boats if they had means of doing so. They threw spears at us one minute after receiving our present and signs of friendship. I am a hundred times more angry against the philosophers who so praise them as against the savages themselves.

Lamanon, whom they murdered, was telling me the day before he died, that these men were worth more than us. A rigid follower of the King's instructions, I have always behaved towards them with the utmost moderation; but I would not undertake another campaign of this kind without asking for different orders, and a navigator leaving Europe must consider them as enemies, very weak ones, to be honest, whom it would be dishonourable to eliminate, but whom one has the duty of forestalling if a feeling of suspicion allows it in all fairness.

I advised you, my dear friend, in the letters I wrote from Kamtschatka of my subsequent plan of campaign which I needed follow if I was to arrive in Europe in June 1789. Neither our stocks of food, nor our rigging, nor even our vessels, would allow me to lengthen my voyage which will be, I believe, the most considerable ever undertaken by a navigator, at least in respect of the length of the route. I still have some very interesting things to do, and ill-natured people to visit: I cannot guarantee that I will not fire a few guns at them, because I am quite convinced that only fear can put a stop to their evil intentions.

I shall sail on 15 March from Botany Bay, and I shall not waste my time until December, by when I hope to arrive at the Isle de France.

I append to my letter the table of my route from Kamchatka, a copy of which I am sending a duplicate to the minister at the end of my journal. Do your utmost, my dear friend, to get hold of my journal, because I can foresee that the King and even the Marechal de Castries will only have time to read extracts from it selected by you; I also beg you to correct the errors of style &c &c and to make it worthy of the public should the Court order it to be printed.

You will also find at the end of the journal the plan of six Navigators Islands. The islanders gave us the names of ten of them, and I believe that, in order to complete this archipelago one needs to add to it the island of the Beautiful Nation of Quiros and the two of Cocos and Traitors, but I am not completely certain of this: the last two are very small and of little importance, but it would not surprise me greatly if the islands of Mahouna, Oyolava had Pola had a total population of four hundred thousand people. Mahouna is very much smaller than the other two and yet we bought there in the space of 24 hours five hundred pigs and an enormous quantity of fruits.

I would have liked to include with the plan of the Navigators Islands one of the Friendly archipelago, plus the islands of Vavao, Latte &c, but much to my regret it is not finished and cannot be before we sail. Failing the plan, you will find the longitudes and latitudes of these islands in the tables; they are shown there more accurately than in my journal: although it is an historical narrative it has been written as things happened and with longitudes which had not yet undergone a final check, after which quite often they were corrected.

Mr de Clonard is now in command of the Astrolabe; Mr de Monti has taken his place in the Boussole: they are officers of the highest quality. We have lost one of even greater merit in Mr de Langle; he was gifted with great quality, and the only fault I knew in him was stubbornness, and he was so fixed in his attitude that one had to fall out with him if one wanted to continue to disagree: he tore from me rather than obtained the permission that caused his loss. I would never have given in if the report he gave me on the bay where he died had been accurate; and I shall never understand how a man who was as prudent and as enlightened as he was could have been so grossly mistaken.

You see, my dear friend, how affected I still am by that event; I come back to it time and again in spite of myself...

Laperouse.

La Perouse to the Minister

Copy. Extract published in the Milet-Mureau edition.'

(Laperouse from Botany Bay, 7 February 1788)

...I shall go up to the Friendly Islands, and will do exactly what my instructions require me to do with respect to the southern part of New Caledonia, Mendana's Island of Santa Cruz, the south coast of Surville's Arsacides, and Bougainville's land of Louisiades, endeavouring to assess if the latter forms part of New Guinea or not. I shall pass, towards the end of July, between New Guinea and New Holland, by another channel than the Endeavour's, if such exists. In September and part of October I shall visit the Gulf of Carpentaria and the entire west coast of New Holland as far as Van Diemen's Land; but in such a way as to enable me to go back north in time to reach the Isle de France in December.

Laperouse.

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