

Exploration or Espionage? Flinders and the French

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Abstract: The heroic status of Matthew Flinders as the maritime explorer who circumnavigated the Great South Land and gave it the name Australia has deflected attention from allegations against him of spying. During Flinders's return voyage to England in 1803, he was forced to land at Isle de France (Mauritius) where he was detained for over six years as a spy. This article shows that the high-flown rhetoric of French and British authorities about the objectivity and neutrality of scientific voyages sometimes camouflaged more pressing demands for military intelligence and espionage.

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Wars and rumours of war between the British and the French characterize the exploration and settlement of Australia in the early years of the nineteenth century. The British had established their settlement at Port Jackson on the south-east coast and reports varied about its viability. Fired by Napoleonic ambitions, French navigators and scientists were sent to explore what they could of this southern land, both in the interests of "objective" science and in the political interests of their country. The almost simultaneous voyages of Matthew Flinders and Nicolas Baudin, and their interactions, reflect some of the tensions and ironies of these times and highlight the personal tragedies of the two men.

Baudin reached Australia before Flinders in May 1801, but their ships met subsequently at Encounter Bay on April 8, 1802. Flinders' journal records this first encounter both graphically and symbolically from the *Investigator*:

At half-past five, the land being then five miles distant to the north-eastward, I hove to; and learned, as the stranger passed to leeward with a free wind, that it was the French national ship *Le Géographe*, under the command of Captain Nicolas Baudin. We veered round as *Le Géographe* was passing, so as to keep our broadside to her, lest the flag of truce should be a deception...
(Flinders, *A voyage*, vol 1, 188)

Despite the temporary cessation of hostilities between the British and French, their representatives were cautious, curious and sometimes overtly hostile towards each other.

It is sometimes argued, in universities and academies especially, that the knowledges associated with the arts and sciences transcend the narrower concerns of politics and nationalism. Such claims for knowledge that transcends personal and national interests seem especially prevalent when imperialist ambitions are high, as they were for both France and Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In these contexts, natural scientists and philosophers were held up as exponents of a “higher knowledge”; both the natural sciences and *les sciences humaines* gained high prestige and were called upon to spread their influence by increasing knowledge and understanding in the wider international sphere. In this spirit of altruistic endeavour, both Britain and France officially approved a number of scientific expeditions. At the same time, participants in these grand knowledge adventures, like the captains of the *Investigator* and *Géographe*, were continually aware of the undercurrents of international rivalry and power play, and of the scope for double-dealing and deception.

While Flinders' focus was on mapping coastlines, Baudin's expedition sought to study “nature” in Australi—the fauna and flora of this “undiscovered” land. The officially expressed ambitions of such voyages were grand, as the Institut National of France reveals in its letter to Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society of London in May 1800:

The Institut National of France is desirous that several distant voyages useful to the progress of human knowledge should begin without delay. Its wishes have been endorsed by our Government which has just issued orders for the preparation as soon as possible of expeditions led by skilful navigators as well as enlightened men of science, and will approach the Government of your country for the necessary passports or safe-conducts for our vessels. The Institut National considers that it is precisely at the moment when war still burdens the world that the friends of humanity should work for it, by advancing the limits of science and of useful arts...
(Cited in De Beer, 238).

Grand intentions are admirable but they can sometimes mask ulterior motives. While there seems little reason to doubt Captain Baudin's sincerity in attempting to fulfil the goals of scientific exploration, it appears that at least two members of his crew, Francois Péron and Louis de Freycinet, were engaged in espionage activities in the service of a possible French invasion of British settlements on the south-east coast of Australia.

According to Péron, the high rhetoric of the Institut National de France provided cover for Napoleon's more serious concerns:

Always vigilant to whatever may humiliate the eternal rival of our nation, the First Consul ... decided upon our expedition. His real object was such that it was indispensable to conceal it from the Governments of Europe, and especially from the Court of St James. We must have their unanimous consent; and that we might obtain this, it was necessary that, strangers in appearance to

all political designs, we should occupy ourselves only with natural history collections ... It was far from being the case, however, that our true purpose had to be confined to that class of work.

(Péron, 437-38; see also Marchant, 105, who disputes Péron's contention that Napoleon sent the mission.)

Indeed, Péron was an assiduous gatherer of general and strategic intelligence, as his 1802 report to General Charles Decaen, Governor and Captain-General of Ile-de-France (now Mauritius) demonstrates. Péron assures the general that he "neglected no opportunity" to collect ideas and information of interest to the French government. As a scientist, he asserts, he could ask questions "which would have been indiscreet on the part of another, especially on military matters" (Brown, 276). To Decaen, he asserts that the natural history collections were "merely a pretext" for the higher duty of providing intelligence on the infant colony to his government with a view to its invasion at some future point by French forces.

Péron's contribution to human intelligence—or "humint" in present day terms—is arguable. He would not be the first, or last spy to attempt to ingratiate himself with his superiors by exaggerating his information, insights and achievements, which Peron indicates were corroborated by further materials in a sealed chest. Yet his report to Decaen reveals some of the vulnerabilities of early settlement in Australia to foreign invasion and therefore potential opportunities for the French.

Of special interest is Péron's identification of the Irish prisoners at Port Jackson as potential allies in the event of a French invasion. Péron has no doubt that "at the mere mention of the French name every Irish arm would be raised" in their support (Péron, 454-6). Péron's identification of the Irish as natural allies is corroborated by other accounts. The case of William Maum, a young Irish teacher of Latin and Greek is instructive. Maum, a political prisoner, was twenty-one when he arrived in the colony in January 1800. After uncovering an Irish conspiracy later that year, Governor King described Maum as a "depraved character" and an "incendiary" (see Rusden, 86-89). When sent to Norfolk Island from the mainland in 1804, Maum wrote to Governor King with details of French attempts to get him to spy for them in 1802. Maum says he complied with the French request up to a point but provided what might today be called "chicken feed" intelligence. When the French returned and requested more useful military intelligence, according to Maum, they specified what they had in mind:

the population of the colony—their general opinions—how they endured slavery—how many English—how were their sentiments—the Irishmen's sentiments he was assured of—and particularly whether the English in general were seamen or soldiers, who had been transported for any offence after their discharges, as they were easily worked on (Rusden, cited in Brown, 277).

Maum says he was assured by the French that, as soon as the First Consul learned of "the great number of persons in this colony who were desirous of Innovation, and change of

condition”, he would launch an attack—“first taking Sydney, and procuring all the prisoners to enter the French service” (Brown, 277) The value of this intelligence volunteered by Maum is difficult to assess. Governor King's response is not recorded.

Francois Péron's report to General Decaen at French naval headquarters in Mauritius was complemented by an unsigned report by de Freycinet containing the results of his espionage. This latter report was much stronger in the specific detail required for a military invasion than Péron's report. As Péron indicated, Lieutenant de Freycinet had worked in tandem with Péron but occupied himself particularly with “examining all the points on the coast in the neighbourhood of Port Jackson that are favourable for the debarkation of troops” (Péron, 464). Historian Ernest Scott notes how the two French spies worked together:

Péron, under the guise of a man of science collecting facts about butterflies and grasshoppers, exploited his hosts for information of a political and military nature; whilst Freycinet, ostensibly examining the harbour in the interest of navigation, made plans of places suitable for landing troops. (Scott, 259).

While absolving Baudin on the available evidence from involvement in the espionage of Péron and Freycinet, Scott steps beyond the historian's traditionally objective demeanour and condemns the pair with almost melodramatic scorn for their “singular turpitude” in “pursuing nefarious designs of their own and plotting to rend the breast that fed them”. Their “ignoble treachery and ungrateful baseness” was all the more despicable, Scott argues, in light of the generous and humane treatment shown to them by Governor King and other British officers (Scott, 262).

In 1814, Governor Lachlan Macquarie reflected on these events and their significance:

It has been generally supposed that the *Geographe* and *Naturalist*, French ships of war under Capt. Baudin ... came solely for the purpose of ascertaining how far it might prove expedient for the then ruler of France to establish a Colony on some part of New Holland, to counteract the views of the British Government in this country; and I have no doubt Bonaparte would long since have prosecuted his views in this respect, had his more important Engagements in Europe admitted of his sending out a sufficient Force for the Conquest of this Colony. (*Historical Records of Australia*, series 1, vol. 8,241)

But while Macquarie was writing these words on 30 April 1814, Napoleon was bound for exile on the Isle of Elba. His era of dominance was over; and under Macquarie the Australian colony was developing strongly.

It would be naïve to imagine that the only spies in and around Australia in the early nineteenth century were the French with designs on British possessions. A complementary British readiness to spy on the French and disrupt their activities became evident after the French left Port Jackson in November 1802. Governor King caught wind of a rumour that

the French officers, while in port, had spoken of a French plan to colonize part of Van Diemen's Land. King promptly sent Captain Charles Robbins in an English schooner, the *Cumberland*—later to become the ill-fated vessel of Flinders' attempted return to England—to intercept the French. When he caught up with the French, Robbins boarded the *Naturaliste* and informed its captain, Charles Hamelin, that they had been sent by Governor King to prepare for the establishment of a British settlement in D'Entrecasteaux Channel. History shows that the English did subsequently form a settlement in 1803. At this stage, however, it was simply a ruse. King's disinformation was designed to pre-empt any plans the French might have for colonising Van Diemen's Land.

The British officers also boarded Baudin's ship. Baudin records the event:

I was quite surprised when an officer of the English navy was shown in, accompanied by a geographer whom I had met at Port Jackson ... Mr Robbins handed me a letter from Mr King, the governor of Port Jackson, and soon after, his instructions on what he had to do ... The contents of Mr King's letter provided enough clarification for me to see the reason for his voyage – its sole purpose was to keep watch on us. (Cited in Fornasiero et al, 220)

A striking feature of these encounters is their air of decorum and urbanity, the iron fist in a velvet glove. King's letter to his friend Baudin is a masterpiece of English formality and restraint:

You will no doubt be surprised to see s ship follow you so closely. You were aware of my intention to establish a settlement in the south, but this has been brought forward because of the information communicated to me immediately after your departure. This information is that the French wish to set up an establishment in Storm Bay Passage... It is also said that these are your orders from the French republic. (Fornasiero et al, 221-2)

The attempt to mitigate suspicions continued: King went on to assure Baudin, with whom he had established an apparently genuine affinity, that he gave no credence to these rumours and would certainly have mentioned them to him if he had heard about them before Baudin left Port Jackson. Both men had entered the dangerous border zone between personal friendship and international enmity, yet they could still apparently consider each other as friends.

Francois Péron, though a fierce critic of his countryman Baudin, considered Flinders as a far more dangerous foe. Accusing the Englishman of being a spy, Péron suggested that Flinders' rival mission to that of Baudin was one of "traversing the Pacific looking for strategic points from which the British could launch an attack on Spanish America", France's ally (Toft, 267). Moreover, this "dangerous" man Flinders, according to Péron, could be engaged in extending his country's influence in another direction too, towards Mauritius.

The reports written by Péron and Freycinet for General Charles Decaen, the Governor of Mauritius, in 1803 had devastating consequences for Matthew Flinders. Flinders had set sail for his return trip to England on the *Cumberland*, which had previously been used to intercept the French at Van Diemen's Land. The schooner proved unfit for service, needing almost constant pumping to keep her afloat and Flinders decided to seek assistance in Mauritius in accordance with his understanding of his French passport. Unfortunately for him, war with France had broken out again. Hearing of Flinders' arrival on Isle de France, and in receipt of Péron's damning report on the British in New Holland, and Flinders in particular as a rival, Governor Decaen had the Englishman arrested and imprisoned as a spy.

Not surprisingly, patriotic supporters of the British cause, following Flinders himself, have insisted on his innocence. But what is the truth of the situation? Decaen's high-handed assumptions of superiority and Flinders' disrespectful and apparently insolent response to the General—so different from the affable interactions of Governor King and Baudin at Port Jackson—heightened the tensions between them. But did Flinders have a case to answer?

In the first place, the French passport held by Flinders was for the *Investigator*, the ship on which he had arrived in Australia, and not for the *Cumberland*. In effect he was carrying the wrong warrant of safe passage for the ship he commanded. Second, he had no scientist on board. Third, and most perilously for Flinders, he was carrying secret despatches from Governor King to the British Admiralty. In these despatches King requested more troops in order to, amongst other purposes, defend Port Jackson if attacked by Decaen. In this sense, Flinders might be considered a courier of secret documents for the British cause against the French; and that he had thereby broken the terms of his French passport. In Flinders' defence, it is unlikely that his visit to Isle de France, under the duress of his sinking ship, could be reasonably construed as an attempt to spy on the island for the British by, for example, mapping fortifications or suitable landing points for an invasion force. For his part, though, Decaen seems to have sincerely believed that Flinders was implicated in "British military designs" on the island for which he was responsible (see Fornasiero, 279). Moreover, war had started up again while Flinders was at sea and he did not know that Britain and France were again at each other's throats. "I found myself considered in the light of a spy" wrote Flinders in his journal (Flinders, vol 2,367).

At first, Flinders seethed at his disrespectful treatment as a prisoner of state:

the injustice, the haughtiness and the Bastille-like mystery with which I am treated. I am kept from my voyage of discovery, from my country, from my family ... this is indeed some return for the hospitality and assistance which the French ships received at Port Jackson. (cited in Toft, 269).

The sensations raised by this violation of justice, of humanity and of the faith of his own government ... will be readily felt by every Englishman who has been

subjected, were it only for a day, to French revolutionary power. (Flinders, vol 2, 368).

Governor Decaen responded to Flinders' anger by accusing him of "overstepping all the bounds of civility" and ceased all further correspondence with him (Flinders, vol 2, 374).

Could there have been other reasons for Flinders' imprisonment on Mauritius? Flinders wrote to his brother: "Some odd opinions were started relative to the real cause of my confinement ... in matters of discovery, I should think that he kept me here to give time for Cpt. Baudin's voyage to be published before mine, and as no probable reason has yet been given for my detainer it may possibly be so". Flinders here refers to one of the less altruistic uses of scientific and other knowledge—to compete for public recognition and private preferment (Private Journal, 9 February 1803). Certainly Péron, who took over and completed the history of Baudin's voyage after the latter's death on Mauritius in September 1803—two months before Flinders arrived there in the *Cumberland*—gained greatly by Flinders' extended imprisonment. Péron's history, published in 1807, gave primacy to the role of French navigators and scientists in discovering "Terre Napoléon". As well as beating Flinders and the British to publication, he managed to virtually erase his captain, Nicolas Baudin, from this historical account of his voyages. Péron was a master of the payback; but he remained both a respected scientist and a patriot of revolutionary France.

While Flinders continued to harbour some resentment at the injustice of his treatment on Isle de France, over time he achieved a degree of equanimity. Over these years, he also became a more skilful and gracious writer. Like Christopher Smart and some twentieth century poets such as T. S. Eliot and Peter Porter, Flinders found cats a fit subject for his writings. In Flinders' case, his cat Trim had accompanied him on voyages and then in imprisonment on Mauritius until he mysteriously disappeared on the island—perhaps, Flinders conjectured, to be caught and eaten by "some hungry black slave". Trim became a literary ornament in Flinders' private journal and an imaginary friend. As Gillian Dooley remarks, Flinders used the journal in part as "narrative therapy, as well as a memorandum to his future, liberated self" (46). He also found ways to send letters to his wife and friends in England.

The circumstances of Flinders' captivity on Mauritius improved when he was granted parole and he was moved to the countryside in August 1805. His facility in French improved dramatically and his memoir and letters show an interest in the social life, agriculture and commerce of the besieged island. Having arrived in Mauritius when he was 29 and eventually leaving in June 1810 when he was 36, Flinders had spent as much time as a prisoner on Mauritius as he had spent navigating the coasts of Australia. He became friendly with a number of the planters and their families who lent him books and music (see Hitchcock). Early in his imprisonment, Flinders recorded movements of shipping at Port Louis, including British ships captured by the French. Having imprisoned Flinders as a suspected spy, the French must have known that he would become a repository of valuable information about Isle de France in the event of a British invasion. Perhaps this was one of

General Decaen's reasons for delaying Flinders' release until well after he had received permission from Napoleon in 1806 to do so.

Miriam Estensen's biography of Flinders details her subject's many frustrations and humiliations as a "prisonnier de guerre" on Isle de France. But she also shows sufficient cause, apart from personal antipathy, for General Decaen's initial and continuing suspicions that Flinders was a spy and enemy agent who would continue to carry out subversive activity. Chief among Decaen's reasons were the secret dispatches which Flinders had carried on the *Cumberland* from Governor King to Lord Hobart in London in which King requested troops for Port Jackson to "annoy" Spanish America in the event of renewal of war with France. Although Flinders said he knew nothing of the contents of these dispatches, carrying them (and not throwing them into the sea when he had a chance to do so) clearly breached his passport for French territory. Although Flinders may have been naïve in certain respects, he was also a patriot. Decaen also became aware of Flinders' secret correspondence that he smuggled out of Isle de France to friends in Britain and elsewhere. Moreover, despite signing a parole document on his release that he would not act in any service hostile to France or its allies, Flinders was fairly quickly persuaded by his British superiors in Cape Town to provide them with useful intelligence for use in forthcoming attacks on Isle de France.

Britain began its blockade of Mauritius in June 1809. A year later, in June 1810, Flinders was released and allowed to leave Mauritius after six and a half years there. The reasons for the timing of Flinders' release are a matter of conjecture. If Flinders were left on Isle de France, could his presence there provide extra incentive to the British to attack and make a hero of him? In the event of possible British invasion and capture of the island, would Flinders' continued detention there beyond the date when he could have been released be used as grounds for more punitive action by the British? Whatever Decaen's reasons for finally releasing Flinders, he did so in June 1810, placing him "on parole". Almost two months later, from 20-27 August 1810, a major naval battle occurred between squadrons of frigates of the British Royal Navy and the French Navy over possession of the harbour of Grand Port. In this battle, the French triumphed and the British navy suffered their worst defeat of the entire war.

Matthew Flinders was fortunate to have left Mauritius before the Battle of Grand Port. By this time, he had embarked on a merchant ship on his way to London via Cape Town. After a voyage of 26 days, Flinders arrived at Simon's Bay on 11 July. No journal was kept during the voyage but it was resumed for seven weeks at the Cape. The day after Flinders' arrival, Admiral Albermarle Bertie, a chief strategist in British attempts to recapture Mauritius, sent for Flinders and requested him to provide information on the island he was preparing to attack. Flinders had some qualms about doing this as it would be breaking the terms of his parole: after six and a half years on the island, and having made some firm friends there he was evidently reluctant to provide information that could contribute to their demise. But he concurred.

Spying for one's own country is usually (but not always) more straightforward than spying for a designated enemy. Having been accused of being an impostor and spy by General Decaen, a charge which he had vigorously denied, Flinders had no desire to become a spy, even for his own country, so soon after his release. Continued exposure to the "enemy" on Isle de France had led to some genuine friendships. However, with Admiral Bertie's insistence and considering his own future when he returned to England, Flinders decided he would disregard the terms of the parole he had given to the French government in Mauritius. In this way, Flinders became a "reluctant" spy for the British (see Fornasiero et al, 382), but a knowledgeable, experienced and useful one. He compiled four quarto pages of answers to questions on Mauritius, put to him by Admiral Bertie. He prepared charts and a plan of Port Napoleon and, using his journal, drew up a list of shipping in the port between January and June 1810. Most significantly, he recommended suitable landing places for a British invasion force (Duyker, 306, Estensen 421).

The value of Flinders' intelligence and the uses to which it was put by the British Navy have never been established. On the one hand, he was not accused of providing false or misleading intelligence. Nor was he singled out for praise for intelligence that may have contributed to the successful British invasion of Mauritius two months later in November 1810. Such are the often invisible contributions of spies and intelligence agents. Flinders had arrived safely back in England on 24 October 1810. In the short period of life left to him, Flinders saw a daughter born and his *A Voyage to Terra Australis* published on 18 July 1814. But he died the next day at the age of 40. While the race to publish first had been lost to the French, Flinders' contribution to the mapping of Australia's coasts would not be forgotten. And the name he proposed for the continent would outlast Péron's Terre Napoléon.

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