

Chapter 5 The Arrival of the French

5.1 Lt. Pierre Milius of the scientific vessel the Naturaliste.

Western Port, April 1802

The two small ship's boats, with both crews aboard, bumped sides alarmingly and constantly in the unsettled water, mixed by wind and tide. Apart from the bow and stern hands all crew kept their hands inboard.

"Congratulations, Midshipman Brevedent! By rowing around that land you have just given France the opportunity to name an Island, in the middle of a Port claimed by the English."

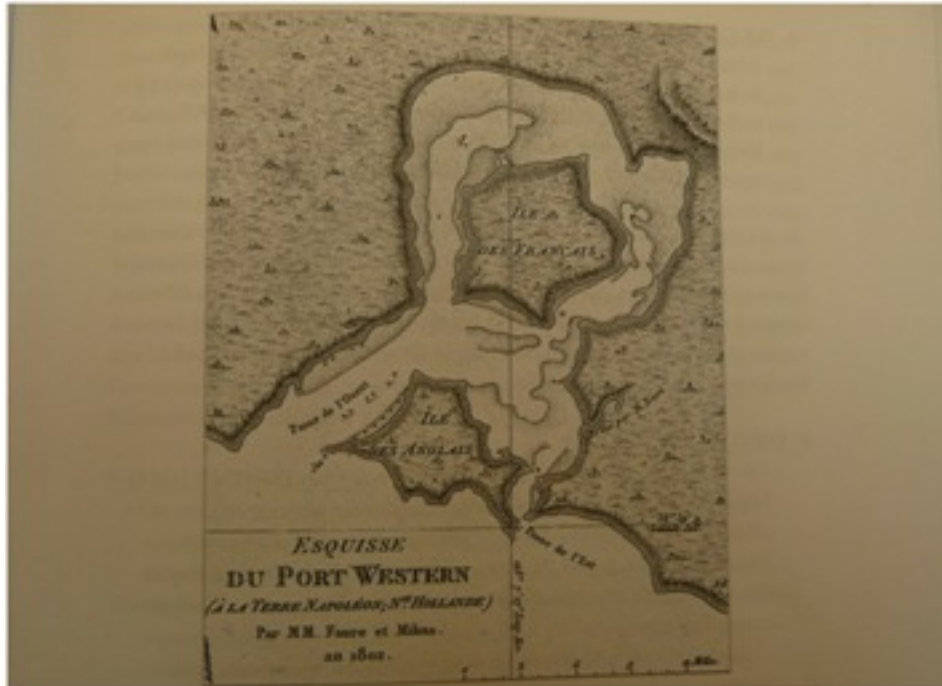
"Thank you, Lieutenant Milius, sir! When you sent me into what looked like an eastern arm, hoping I could rejoin you in this western arm, I didn't realise how hard it would be. I have proved it creates an island. The tide runs out very fast and strong. Many, many mud and sand flats appear well before low tide, with lots of blind little channels that simply cease to exist. We rowed along way up a channel to find it stops, then we had to row back towards where we started, then start again with another and another. This we repeated many times. Sometimes wind helped, other times the wind was off no help.

"Sir, at dead low tide by my calculations, we were nearly at the north-eastern tip of this island, and lucky to find a small channel, with only a covering of water that took us in a westerly curve through the mudflats. This was the time we realised this land is an Island. At times I rowed with my men. I am glad that we had the smallest ship's dingy."

While Brevedent and crew were exploring the eastern arm for a day and a night, we set up a campsite. My crew and I had been carrying out small exploring trips, sometimes sheltering in this small channel between two large sandbanks that appeared to run roughly north to south. We found a small creek on the western side of the land that, we thought, Brevedent would circumnavigate. I had occasionally been able to send a lookout up the small mast to view the water and land to our north-east, hoping to sight Mr Brevedent's boat.

"Mr Brevedent, have your men pull for that shore over there, then you can give Mr Faure, our cartographer, your drawings, bearings and depth soundings."

Our crews pulled for our small camp, which was up a small creek on the western side of the bight that contained the small island. The creek looks like it might run up to the base of some hills. I must explore those hills and see if the site would be any good as a Fort. I expect our naturalist, Louis Leschenault, has been busy with a crewman gathering queer samples of any of the bird or marine life in this area, so that he can study and write scientific reports on them. The objects he finds are also to be sent to France for other scientists to evaluate. The other crewman had orders to keep our fire going and, if he found anything that looked edible, to put it into a big pot and boil it up for food. It is April and the nights are getting very cold.



Sketch of Western Port by French geographer Pierre Faure and naval lieutenant Pierre Milius, 1802. W.W.

What are we doing in this Port? As a naval officer I feel a little detached from our expedition of scientific endeavour. We are inundated with scientific personnel and their helpers. Far too many for our two ships, the *Géographe*, commanded by Nicolas Baudin, the expedition's overall Commander, and the *Naturaliste*, commanded by Emmanuel Hamelin.

Scientific persons in Paris obtained the ear of our First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte, and his authorisation for this very long expedition. Our First Consul does have a scientific interest in many of nature's and man's creations. He even encouraged scientific research while he was with our army in Egypt, fighting the Spanish and the English.

Our problem is twofold. We set sail with far too many junior officers, a result of influential persons manoeuvring to have relatives included in such a prestigious undertaking. Then too many scientists with a lack of understanding of safety at sea or knowledge of tides, wind and weather, as well as eating and drinking our supplies. This is causing serious dissention in both ships and the health problem of scurvy. Several officers left the ships at

Isle de France and Timor. Crew members are sick and dying, and less and less sailors are available to properly man the ships.

Both vessels left France from Le Havre, sailed to the Canary Islands then on to Isle de France off the south-eastern shores of South Africa and from there to the coast of New Holland. We reached Cape Leeuwin before going on to Timor, then back to the coast of New Holland. We then set sail for Van Diemen's Land before heading north again and arriving here at Western Port in Bass Strait.

Numerous adventures, difficulties, and problems have occurred in this lengthy voyage. We on the *Naturaliste* have now lost contact with the *Géographe*. Commander Hamelin, after reviewing and discussing the overall timetable for our expedition, decided to continue exploring and sailed eastwards.

At Wilson's Promontory and from its coastline to Western Port we would carry out surveying and mapping. Hopefully then we would make our way to the English colony at Port Jackson on the eastern coast of New South Wales. We hoped that our Passport, signed by Mr Evan Nepean on behalf of the Commissioners for executing the Office of Lord High Admiral of Great Britain and Ireland, would grant us immunity if we were still at war with the English.

Because we had lost two anchors due to mishaps while exploring the coastline to the west, the ship could not be trusted to hold at an anchorage with only our two remaining anchors. Therefore Captain Hamelin decided to drop two boats and their crews at Wilson's Promontory to establish its latitude and longitude, then survey the coastline westwards towards the port. Mr Boullanger from the *Géographe* was in charge.

Commander Baudin had previously ordered Mr Boullanger, with a midshipman and small boat crew, to chart an island in the Bass Strait. Due to bad weather they lost contact with the *Géographe*. Several days later they

signalled a passing English ship, the *Harrington*, by starting a brush fire. The ship was on its way from Bengal to Port Jackson. The *Harrington's* Captain offered to take Boullanger and his crew to Port Jackson; however, he declined the offer, hoping the *Géographe* would find them. The next day our ship sighted the *Harrington* and took on board Mr Boullanger and the crew.

I went on board the *Harrington* and had a lengthy discussion about the geography of Bass's Strait and the islands in it. I reported the information to Captain Hamelin, who decided to continue exploring to our timetable.

After leaving Wilson's Promontory, Captain Hamelin then sailed westwards and dropped two others boats with myself in charge to survey Western Port, while he cruised around the area of the opening of the Port at sea for the week he had allocated us to complete our tasks. We hoped that would allow Mr Boullanger enough time to rejoin the ship.

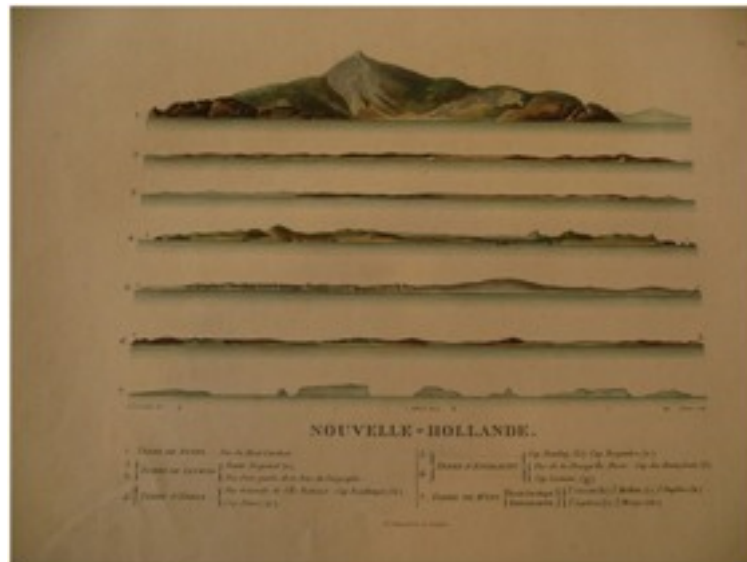
Our First Consul and his Government have ordered us to accurately survey and chart any land or port that may be of strategic interest to the new France- regardless of whether the Spanish, Dutch or English have claimed the land.

We French have a well-deserved reputation for exploring the Pacific Ocean and other seas. Men such as Antoine de Bougainville, who circumnavigated the world and still serves France in an advisory capacity, La Pérouse, Marion-Dufresne and d'Entrecasteaux spring to mind. In fact Hyacinthe de Bougainville, the eldest son of Antoine, is a midshipman on board the *Géographe*.

However, it was the Englishman Cook who completed the map of the Pacific, by dispelling the myth of the Great South Land where there would exist a culture of learning and great wealth, and temperatures similar to those of Europe. In other words, a duplication of our own societies. Cook eliminated the doubt by sailing the Pacific Ocean to the extremes of human endurance.

His first and second voyages gave him the knowledge and confidence to sail into the frozen areas of the north and the south.

Cook's charting and navigation left only so much of the world yet to be explored and charted-but a great deal still to be learned. The French nation must be part of that inquiry!



French topographical charting of part of Australia. SLV.



Sea forms, from a French drawing. SLV.