

Book Reviews

From Hudson Bay to Botany Bay: The Lost Frigates of Lapérouse, by Russell C. Shelton. Toronto: NC Press, 1987. Pp. 228; 60 illus.

In January 1788, the French frigates *Boussole* and *Astrolabe* entered Botany Bay, a week after the "First Fleet" under Arthur Phillip had arrived. The French ships were under the command of Jean François Galaup, Count of La Pérouse. After refitting his ships he put to sea and disappeared. The first traces of the ships were found thirty-eight years later in the islands of Vanuatu. The evidence suggested, and later research has confirmed, that the ships had been wrecked on the reef surrounding the island of Vanikoro.

La Pérouse's account of the voyage which ended on the reefs, as well as the story of his life, has been published. Less well known is the story of the salvage efforts starting in 1958, which produced many artifacts and elucidated the history of the wreck. Shelton has brought all these subjects together in his book, illustrated by pictures and maps he has assembled from many sources. The book covers the birth and education of Lapérouse (the orthography chosen by the author for the explorer's name) and his career as a naval officer from 1756 to the time he set out on his last voyage. One episode in this career was his 1782 raid on the forts in Hudson Bay owned by the Hudson's Bay Company.

Lapérouse's journals of his Pacific voyage were sent to France — some from Kamchatka, carried across Siberia by the expedition's Russian interpreter; some from Macao; and the rest from Botany Bay. The journals were published in France and translated into English in 1797. Shelton has summarized and paraphrased Lapérouse's narrative to produce an easily readable story of the voyage — a voyage which filled in many blanks in the map of the Pacific.

While visiting Melanesia in 1826, an Irish sea captain, Peter Dillon, heard stories and saw evidence of two ships that had been wrecked many

years earlier. The following year he landed on Vanikoro, recovered some wreckage, and saw the remains of one of the ships on the bottom. Other expeditions followed, confirming that this was the place where Lapérouse was wrecked. There were stories of survivors living for years on Vanikoro and neighbouring islands, but all had died before Dillon's first visit.

In 1958, what is now Vanuatu was called the New Hebrides, governed by a French-British condominium. An expatriate New Zealander named Reece Discombe lived in Vila, where he conducted a salvage business, having become one of the pioneers of free diving with the recently developed "aqualung." Discombe promoted and participated in a diving expedition organized by Pierre Antonioz, the French Resident Commissioner. This was the first of a number of expeditions that have identified the wrecks and recovered many artifacts.

Shelton has used published sources for that part of his book dealing with the eighteenth century. His acquaintance with Discombe has given him the material for the somewhat sketchy account of the discoveries since 1958. His choice of material from Lapérouse's journal has produced a rounded account, although it cannot be all things to all people. For example, readers interested in ethnology will need to go to the original. He is not well acquainted with European history. He describes Louis XVI as the son rather than the grandson of Louis XV, and he speaks of the Duke of Wellington as "reigning supreme" in England in 1828. In fact Wellington's tenure as Prime Minister lasted only two years before he was forced out of office because of his refusal to introduce a Reform Bill.

Although there is a bibliography in the book, Shelton does not footnote his sources, even when they are direct quotations. This can be puzzling. His quotation of Lapérouse's low opinion of the natives in Alaska does not appear in the 1797 English translation of the explorer's journal and is at variance with it. Of course, Lapérouse might have saved his real thoughts for his correspondence. Still, one would like to know whether this is so and, if it is, whether there are other discrepancies.

Shelton quotes Lapérouse as saying, "Let care be taken not to commit the compilation of [the journal] to a man of letters." Shelton is not a man of letters, but he has recorded two remarkable feats: the voyage itself and the uncovering of the evidence of Lapérouse's fate. He has done this in a way that should appeal to general readers, and goes some way in presenting the tale (again to quote Shelton quoting Lapérouse) "in such a manner as I myself [Lapérouse] would have wished to do."