

Josephine Bastian, *'A Passion for Exploring New Countries': Matthew Flinders and George Bass* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2016)

I have researched the life and times of Matthew Flinders for nearly 20 years in order to raise the profile of this most important English explorer so that he might stand alongside the likes of James Cook, William Bligh, Arthur Phillip, and John Franklin. This review is written from that standpoint – with the added ingredient of including George Bass. This book, by Sydney-based teacher author and editor Josephine Bastian, is a first-class example, with some minor faults, of the history of the birth of Australia in the age of Enlightenment. It would have made a greater impact if it had been published in 2014 to coincide with the bicentenary of Flinders' passing. Nevertheless, the account is a work of scholarship based on good research in the relevant archives. It is a pleasure to read, using prose that has been written to be read rather than to impress.

However, it should be said that attempting to combine the biographies of the two men, albeit of similar background and ambition, only exacerbated the author's challenge. The book is almost a biography of Flinders, without the early years, interspersed with the occasional chapter on Bass.

Flinders and Bass arrived in Sydney in 1795. Flinders wanted to be an explorer 'second only to Cook', Bass a naturalist, another Sir Joseph Banks, and a rich Sydney trader. For eight years these two pursued their destiny. Their voyages changed the map of Australia, and Flinders gave it its name. They were ready for even greater ventures.

Then it was all over. Bass had set out on a voyage he would never finish. His life ended when he was 32 years old. At about the same time Flinders was standing bareheaded and bedraggled before the governor of Ile de France (Mauritius), who told him that his claim to be the commander of a great expedition of discovery was frankly incredible, all lies; he was thrust into prison as a spy and detained for nearly seven years. His career as an explorer ended when he was 29 years old. But a strange new adventure was just beginning.

In this work the author describes the fluctuating fortunes of this ambitious young naval hydrographer. Placed in command of *HMS Investigator*, a ship whose purposeful name hid its rotting timbers, he surveyed long stretches of uncharted Australian coastline during his circumnavigation of the continent in the early nineteenth century. At the same time his scientific companions gathered a mass of detail about the land, its flora and fauna, and its Aboriginal inhabitants. Sadly, Flinders' achievements were obscured by six years of wartime detention, at the Ile de France (Mauritius), that allowed French navigators in Australian waters to claim priority. Only after his early death were Flinders' accomplishments given belated recognition: in 1816 his chosen name, Australia, was accepted by Governor Macquarie for the continent whose outlines he had done much to reveal.

Bastian's biography of Flinders brings to life the extraordinary destiny of the young man from Donington, Lincolnshire, whose name is forever etched in the history of Australia's exploration and discovery. This is a well-researched account, which draws on an impressive array of archival sources and is informed by the latest scholarship. The singular ambition that drove Flinders to emulate the illustrious maritime explorers who preceded him, chief among whom was the immortal James Cook, is evident at every turn. There is also a welcome focus here on the scientific work undertaken by Flinders and the 'scientific gentlemen' who accompanied him on his ground-breaking circumnavigation of Australia in the *Investigator*.

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The brilliant and charismatic Bass embodied the Age of Enlightenment. He was a man of intense intellectual curiosity, of wide ranging talents and contradictions. He was a skilled surgeon but preferred exploration to medicine, he put his career as a naval surgeon on hold to seek a fortune as a trader. He virtually abandoned his wife for the life of adventure and rewards in commerce. He lived a short but remarkable life.

This is a story of triumph and tragedy, of remarkable achievements and maddening frustrations. It is a compelling tale in its own right, and a must-read for anyone interested in maritime history or in the early European exploration of Australia.

If I have any criticism, it is that the title is too long and does not roll off the tongue easily. It could have been shorter and punchier to grab the attention of potential readers: 'Flinders and Bass in Australia'. Secondly there are many quotations – too many to be included here – which are not marked as such in the narrative and do not have a reference in the endnotes. Finally, it is a matter of record that Flinders died on 19 July 1814 so it is somewhat disappointing that on the very last page and last line the author has implied that he died on 20 July 1814 (253).

The book includes 22 chapters in five parts and six maps from the period during which Flinders and Bass explored the coast of New South Wales and Van Diemens Land, between 1795 and 1799, and Flinders circumnavigated Terra Australis, between 1801 and 1803. A short Foreword by Paul Brunton is followed by a three page preface and acknowledgements. Following on from the final chapter there is a short list of abbreviations, extensive notes, a full bibliography section and a comprehensive index which make up a further 45 pages.

It was Flinders' skill, humanity and courage as a navigator that delivered those who would follow him from the dangers of unknown coastlines, rumoured cannibals ashore, shipboard sickness, leaky ships and intransigent officials. He was as much a political pawn in the maritime world of two hundred years ago as a corporate executive, or naval officer, of today. He was a fascinating study of human tenacity and frailty. Both he and Bass remain relevant in the Royal Navy and Royal Australian Navy today.

Have you seen Flinders' new statue at Euston Station, London, or Flinders University or Port Lincoln in South Australia?

Peter Ashley