

**The Uses of Adversity: Matthew Flinders' Mauritius Writings.**

**Gillian Dooley**

My work in Special Collections at the Flinders University Library has brought me into close contact with many aspects of our namesake Matthew Flinders, especially recently. Over the years my predecessors have assiduously collected every scrap of information or memorabilia on Flinders that came their way, and my current project is cataloguing this material, providing subject access via our library catalogue.<sup>1</sup> We have a few treasures, but the real value of the collection lies in its collocation of many bits and pieces from two centuries of academic and journalistic interest in Flinders. And inevitably this work has led me to follow other trails, reading some of the many excellent biographies, and his own work as well, ranging from his journals, now available in facsimile and transcript on the State Library of NSW web site,<sup>2</sup> to his monumental *Voyage to Terra Australis*, in Tim Flannery's timely abridged version<sup>3</sup> — light enough to carry on the bus — and his memoir of his devoted ship's cat Trim.

And I have discovered that Matthew Flinders was a writer of considerable ability — which is to say, I have 'discovered' the fact in the same way

---

<sup>1</sup> URL <[voyager.flinders.edu.au](http://voyager.flinders.edu.au)>

<sup>2</sup> The *Private Journal* is also about to be published by Crawford House in an edition by Anthony J. Brown.

that Flinders ‘discovered’ Port Lincoln and Kangaroo Island. Others have been there before me: T.M. Perry wrote a short appreciation in the issue of *Overland* in which ‘Trim’ first appeared,<sup>4</sup> K. A. Austin wrote an article in 1966 for the SA Branch of the Royal Geographical Society, titled ‘Matthew Flinders as an author’,<sup>5</sup> and Noel Purdon drew attention to Flinders’ literary skills in a splendid brace of articles written for the *Adelaide Review* in 1986 and 1987 when Geoffrey Ingleton’s biography first appeared.<sup>6</sup> Noel makes the comparison which has always tempted me — between Flinders and Jane Austen. After all, they are virtually exact contemporaries. Austen was born one year after Flinders, and survived him by only three, she was a clergyman’s daughter, just as Flinders’ wife Ann was, and her grandfather was a surgeon, as Flinders’ father was. Two of Jane’s brothers were naval men — and in his journal Flinders recorded, in unfortunately concise terms, a couple of days in April 1812 spent with Charles Austen at Sheerness on magnetism experiments. A short flight of fancy is all that is necessary to imagine Charles telling his sister about his intrepid colleague, and Jane’s imagination taking hold of some aspects of Flinders’ character and feeding them into her next novel, the naval one, *Persuasion*, started in

---

<sup>3</sup>Matthew Flinders, *Terra Australis: Matthew Flinders’ Great Adventures in the Circumnavigation of Australia*, ed. Tim Flannery (Melbourne: Text, 2000).

<sup>4</sup>T. M. Perry, ‘Matt’s Cat,’ *Overland* Winter 1973: 2-3.

<sup>5</sup>K. A. Austin, ‘Matthew Flinders as an Author,’ *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (S.A. Branch)* 67 (1965-66): 39-46.

1814. However Jane Austen herself had plenty of the ‘fine naval fervour’ she attributed to Louisa Musgrove,<sup>7</sup> and no doubt needed no encouragement beyond her brothers’ example to inspire her to write about handsome naval officers, so I shall rein in my imagination and concentrate on a reading of a couple of samples of Flinders’ writing from the dreadful dead time of his life when he was held captive on Mauritius, one a particularly long diary entry, and the other his memoir of Trim.

Flinders’ journal fascinates me. For whom was he writing? I think he knew he was a remarkable man. Was it for us — for posterity: did he realise that 200 years later we would be poring over his innermost thoughts? Was the habit of journal-writing inculcated by the Navy so ingrained that he continued in it as a matter of discipline, whether he thought anyone would read it or not? Or was he filling in time, or recording his thoughts and activities for his own later reference? The entry for 18<sup>th</sup> August 1805 is particularly long — over 2,000 words. He is about to be moved from his confinement to the house and grounds at the Maison Despaux in Port Louis to a more civilized arrangement, staying in the country with the respectable Madame D’Arifat and her family,

---

<sup>6</sup>Noel Purdon, ‘Travels with Flinders,’ *Adelaide Review* December 1986: 13; ‘Matthew Flinders: the Investigator of Himself,’ *Adelaide Review* January 1987: 10-11.

<sup>7</sup>Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933) 167.

although he is not yet certain of this — he has been disappointed so many times in the last two years that he will believe it only when it happens.

This journal entry has the entertaining inconsequentiality which often characterises such writing, but it is more than telegraphic in this case. It is a ‘day in the life’ done in slightly self-conscious stream-of-consciousness:

Rose at half past six. Slipped on my shoes and morning gown, and went down to walk in the garden. Met the serjeant and bid him bonjour. Think the old man looks a little melancholy at the prospect of his last prisoner leaving the house, for he will lose his situation. The dogs came running after me, and seemed more attentive than when there were more prisoners in the house: suppose they are a little pinched for food. The grass being wet with a shower that had fallen at daybreak, confined myself to the walk at the head of the garden, where the gentlemen had cut it down. Meditated during my walk upon the extreme folly of general De Caën keeping me a prisoner here, for it can answer no one good purpose either to him or the French government; and some expense, and probably odium, must be incurred by it. The injury that it is to me is almost incalculable:— but this will not bear to be

dwelt upon, it leads almost to madness. Got up into the tall almond tree to see if there was any ship off: none to be seen.<sup>8</sup>

And so it continues — Learian angst, tree-climbing, General DeCaën, the weather, his ablutions and the activities of his servants all jostling together. Disarmingly he describes stripping himself naked and washing ‘from head to foot in the little tub’. He originally continued ‘Called Smith to bring me’, but crossed that out, and wrote ‘Put on my clothes. Called Smith to bring me ...’ Mustn’t let the diary think he let the servants see him naked.

Next he describes the book he’s reading. It is an account of a voyage down the Amazon. He makes some acute hydrological comments, which he interrupts with ‘Elder not returned from the Bazar yet. Can’t think what keeps him.’ This must surely have been written as the day went on. It’s not a summary of a day, it’s an account as it proceeds. ‘Took three pinches of snuff, whilst I sat thinking of my wife and friends in England.’ What a desolate, romantic picture! but he goes on, ‘Mem. Must not take so much snuff when I return for it makes me spit about the rooms.’ This is an observation worthy of Leopold Bloom, and makes me certain that this diary wasn’t intended for publication, but was a way of talking to himself in his isolation. It almost seems as if, on this day at any rate, he

---

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Flinders, *Private Journal 1803-1814*, James Fairfax Matthew Flinders Archive, State

is writing to keep himself occupied and sane, and perhaps out of a solitary habit built up over the years. The Matthew Flinders who manifests himself to me through his writing is capable of strong friendships but is not particularly easy in the company of strangers — more of a Mr Darcy than a Captain Wentworth, perhaps! He had been befriended by Thomas Pitot, a Mauritius merchant, but he writes, ‘Do not wish my friend Pitot to give me introductions to more than two or three families when I go into the country. In applying myself to the French language then, must not wholly neglect the continuation of the accounts of my voyage.’ He doesn’t want an active social life interfering with his life’s work, which he gets on with as well as he can under the circumstances. His career is always on his mind, even though he knows dwelling upon the interruption to his ambitions will lead to madness. He wonders if he might get a promotion to Post-Captain in his absence, considers whether he would go out as governor to a settlement in north-west Australia if he were offered the post, asserts his wish to finish his exploration of the whole coast before he does anything else, and to explore inland as well. It is no wonder that he felt ill — he had headaches, which he mentions several times on this day — better at first, then growing worse during the day as his worries prey upon him. For a man who had been so untrammelled in many ways — taking risks, directing the fortunes of nearly 100 people on

board ship, naming islands and capes by the dozen, getting things done in spectacular fashion — but who was also so definite about what he wanted to achieve, this abrupt confinement, however pleasant the surroundings, would have caused untold stress, on top of any physical malady he might have had. He wrote to Ann, ‘I shall learn patience in this island, which will perhaps counteract the insolence acquired by having had unlimited command over my fellow men.’<sup>9</sup> A salutary lesson no doubt, but not conducive to either mental or physical health.

Finally, after a day of frustrated pottering, he goes to bed and lies awake thinking about ‘the causes of the trade and westwardly winds, especially upon the earths revolution round its axis ... Must have some kind of trap sent for that rat, which comes disturbing me every night.’ Finally he sleeps and dreams ‘that general De Caën was setting a lion upon me to devour me, and that he eat me up. Was surprised to find devouring so easy to be borne, and that after death I had the consciousness of existence.’

The literary gift that Flinders shows in this journal entry is that of detachment — of considering his experience and making rational observations on it. His habit of mind was scientific: just on this one day

---

<sup>9</sup>Matthew Flinders, ‘To Ann Flinders,’ 31st December 1804, *Matthew Flinders: Personal Letters from*

he records having given thought to the currents of the Amazon, and the likelihood of a ‘great opening’ on the north-west coast of Australia that he missed on his circumnavigation; having read and commented on the articles on Meteorology, Weather and Wind in the Encyclopedia Britannica; and having criticised a theory of the effect of the moon on the weather. Even in his dream he describes detached surprise, rather than terror, at the experience of being eaten by a lion. He cannot help dwelling on that dreadful incident with De Caën which resulted in his captivity. Nearly two years later, he is still explaining to himself that his ‘conduct must have originated in unjust suspicion, been prosecuted in revenge, his dignity being injured at my refusing to dine with him, and continued from obstinacy and pride.’ How many times must he have repeated that little formula to himself over the years — but nevertheless he doesn’t indulge in self-pity, he makes what use he can of his time, and writes down this narrative to try to soothe and control his feelings of frustration. I believe that this journal was an exercise in narrative therapy, as well as a memorandum to his future self, full of things to remember on that happy day when his life could resume.

That marvellous 18<sup>th</sup> century poise which characterises his writing in the journal, where brevity is of the essence, is allowed more room to expand

---

*an Extraordinary Life*, ed. Paul Brunton (Sydney: Hordern House, 2002) 122.

in his 'Biographical Tribute to the Memory of Trim,' written in Mauritius in 1809, the year before he was released. T. M. Perry sees the Biographical Tribute as 'evidence that, despite imprisonment, the human qualities of the man endured.'<sup>10</sup> They may even, as he forecast to Ann, have developed. The weary returned wanderer of 36 must have been different in many ways from the determined 27 year old who set out on his great exploration in 1801: it is easy to believe that in 1801 he would have had neither the inclination nor the time to write a *jeu d'esprit* like this.

I am using the text as it appeared in *Overland* in 1973, since I have discovered that the book version published by Collins in 1977 is actually quite extensively abridged, presumably to make it more palatable as a children's book. It leaves out an important clue to Flinders' literary influences, which others more acute than myself might have observed already, in the name of the hero of this tale: 'From his gentleness and the innate goodness of his heart,' Flinders writes, 'I gave him the name of my uncle Toby's honest, kind-hearted, humble companion.'<sup>11</sup> Of course the gentle whimsy of the piece is utterly Sternian, although it uses none of *Tristram Shandy's* dazzling narrative jokes. It would be very unfair to

---

<sup>10</sup> Perry, 'Matt's Cat' 3.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Flinders, 'Biographical Tribute to the Memory of Trim: Isle of France, 1809, *Overland* Winter 1973: 4.

criticise Flinders for lacking originality in his literary endeavour: it was after all fairly low on his own list of ambitions and achievements which, when you think about it, is quite startling: brilliant navigator and cartographer, astronomer and physicist — he made a lasting contribution to the science of navigation by identifying the effect of magnetism on a ship's compass — meteorologist, manager and administrator, amateur musician and, on Mauritius, linguist and teacher — he taught English and Mathematics to some of the young people in the families he knew — and, of course, writer of scientific and business documents. Jane Austen complained that her naval brothers 'write so even, so clear, both in style and penmanship, so much to the point, and give so much intelligence, that it is enough to kill one.'<sup>12</sup> In Flinders's case, at least, this long discipline of economy and pertinence combined with the example of the best prose writing of the 18th century, of which he had read at least the major works, to give his writing by this time real flexibility and power. The feline elegance and aplomb of his prose is perfect for this little essay. He allows his sentences room to develop: T.M. Perry cautions that we have to remember 'that it was written in the age of grand-scale verbosity',<sup>13</sup> but if it is verbose, it is the most delicious verbosity:

---

<sup>12</sup>Jane Austen, 'To Francis Austen,' 25 September 1813, letter 90 of *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 229.

<sup>13</sup>Perry, 'Matt's Cat' 2.

Trim, though vain as we have seen, was not like those young men who, being assured of an independence, spend their youth in idle trifling, and consider all serious application as pedantic and derogatory, or at least to be useless: He was, on the contrary, animated with a noble zeal for the improvement of his faculties. ... He was taught to lie flat upon the deck on his back, with his four feet stretched out like one dead; and in this posture he would remain until a signal was given him to rise, whilst his preceptor resumed his walk backwards and forwards: if, however, he was kept in this position, which it must be confessed was not very agreeable to a quadruped, a slight motion of the end of his tail denoted the commencement of impatience, and his friends never pushed their lesson further. (5)

One feels in this little piece the full force of Flinders' longing for everything he had been denied, all embodied in this delightful animal. Trim may even have been an idealised version of himself, or how he would like to think of himself. He was brave, daring, useful, affectionate, and courteous, although he was not used to living in houses on dry land:

Your delicat town-bred cats go mincing in amongst cup and sawcers without touching them; but Trim! If he spied a mouse there he dashed at it like a man of war, through thick and thin: the splinters flew in all directions. (9)

One can easily read into this his own impatience with the genteel confinement he was subjected to on Mauritius. Reading his journal from those years between 1805 and 1810 when he was staying with Madame D'Arifat, we can see that he was living among people whom he could regard as friends — some remained friends for the rest of his life — and that in many ways his life was not unpleasant, except for the obdurate fact that he could not leave. The history of his imprisonment is narrated from Trim's point of view:

The Minikin [otherwise, the Cumberland — a very small ship] being very leaky, was obliged to stop at the Isle of France; and there poor Trim, his master and few followers were all made prisoners; under the pretext that they had come to spy out the nakedness of the land; though it was clear as day, that they knew nothing of the war that had taken place a few months before. Trim was confined in a room with his master and another officer; and as he possessed more philosophy than we did, he contributed by his gay humour to soften our strait captivity. (10)

Alas, Trim, having been sent to live with a little girl and her mother, escaped and was never seen again: Flinders suspected he had been caught and 'eaten by some hungry black slave' (10). It is typical of Flinders that he attributes hunger to the slave, rather than something more sinister. Even in his journal entry you can see a considerate habit of mind —

sympathising with the old sergeant who is about to lose his job, and even with the dogs who are 'pinched for food' because there are fewer prisoners.

At the end of his Biographical Tribute, Flinders composes an Epitaph for Trim which in its grace, whimsy and elegance is as moving a piece of writing as one could desire:

To the memory of

Trim

The best and most illustrious of his Race, -

The most affectionate of friends, -

Faithful of servants,

And best of creatures.

He made the Tour of the Globe, and a voyage to Australia,

Which he circumnavigated, and was ever the

Delight and pleasure of his fellow voyagers.

Returning to Europe in 1803, he was shipwrecked in the Great Equinoxial

Ocean;

This danger escaped, he sought refuge and assistance

At the Isle of France, where

He was made prisoner, contrary to the laws of

Justice, of Humanity and of

French National Faith;

And where, alas! He terminated his useful

Career, by an untimely death,

Being devoured by the Catophagi of

That island.

Many a time have I beheld his little merriments with delight,

And his superior intelligence with surprise:

Never will his like be seen again!

Trim was born in the Southern Indian Ocean, in the

Year 1799, and

Perished as above at the Isle of France

In 1804.

Peace be to his shade, and

Honour to his memory. (11)

I can scarcely read Trim's epitaph dry-eyed, and this is, I am sure, the result of Flinders' embodiment of all his own disappointed hopes and thwarted ambitions in this 'best of creatures'. In hindsight, it is impossible to resist carrying the comparison even further. After all, Flinders himself was within a few short years to 'terminate his useful career by an untimely death'.

I do not subscribe to the thesis of Sidney Baker in his book *My Own Destroyer*,<sup>14</sup> where he tries to prove psychoanalytically that Flinders' personality defects were the cause of all his woes. There is no doubt that Flinders' detention on Mauritius, with the consequent ruin of his health and his hopes for further advancement in his career, was a crippling and disproportionate punishment, even if he had been high-handed and arrogant in his initial dealings with General De Caën. However, there is a small but priceless dividend from his agony in these pieces which he would never have allowed himself the leisure to write if he had been free to do anything else. And if he had not written them, our knowledge of Flinders as a man, a friend and an artist would have been so much the poorer. I would be the last to insist on the duty of the artist to suffer to produce works of art, but we can at least rejoice that such unsought adversity can result in such gems.

**Note: An edited version of this essay was published in *Australian Book Review*, March 2002, and the copyright in that version is retained by ABR.**

---

<sup>14</sup>Sidney Baker, *My Own Destroyer* (Sydney: Currawong, 1962).