Exploring Terra

Peter Montefiore recalls what happened when two explorers, whose nations were battling for supremacy, met on the other side of the world.

Two centuries ago Napoleon Bonaparte laid waste to Europe in his bid to conquer the world. He was not, however, as a military commander and then as First Consul, Napoleon had also elevated France to a formidable military power and placed it on the peak of its power. He was engaged in a deadly and embittered battle for continental, not global, dominance. In the midst of this bitter rivalry, Napoleon approved the sending of a royal voyage to the other side of the world to explore the still largely uncharted waters of Terra Australis.

The French had a colony at Port Jackson (near modern-day Sydney), and the bones of French convicts in the region, decided to do the same. If the two expeditions sailed from Europe alone, they would be embittered in a world of scientific rivalry and competition of exploration. But there was a problem: the port of La Perouse in the Pacific had become a rendezvous for both expeditions. When the ships left the harbor in October 1788, there were 132 men on board, including 12 French scientists. The most influential of these scientists was Joseph Banks, who brought with him the rocks and plants, animals and birds, and the natural history of New South Wales. They were accompanied by Captain Phillip, whose assignment was to chart the coast of New Holland and to search for Terra Australis. To achieve this goal, he had to find the southern continent and explore its uncharted waters.

Bank had two 350-ton vessels at his disposal, which he had gifted to the nation of England and the nation of France to undertake the expedition. The expedition was led by Captain Phillip, who had been appointed to command the expedition by King George III. Phillip was a skilled sailor and navigator, and he was determined to find Terra Australis.

Phillip was accompanied by his crew, including 80 sailors and 40 soldiers. The expedition was well equipped with scientific instruments, including a telescope, a sextant, and a barometer. The expedition was also equipped with a large number of provisions, including food, water, and clothing.

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The British expedition was the achievement of two exceptional individuals above all others. One of them was a young officer in the Royal Navy by the name of Matthew Flinders (1774-1814), a Lieutenant in the navy, and the other was a French scientist, Joseph Banks. Matthew Flinders was a brilliant officer and a skilled navigator, and he was determined to complete the mission of the expedition. Joseph Banks was a brilliant scientist, and he was determined to explore the Southern Ocean and the continent of Australia.

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When the opportunity presented itself again, Flinders returned to his own nation - the exploration of the South Sea. He sailed to the newly discovered British colony of Port Jackson in 1795, and from there undertook a series of ambitious voyages of exploration to the north and the south. Together with his great friend and fellow Lieutenant, George Bass, he was able to prove the inaccessibility of Van Diemen's land - now Tasmania - by circumnavigating it in 1796. But he was aware that much more was to be done, if only he could be supported with the command of a fully equipped expedition.
a complement of eighty-six. On January 3rd, 1801, but numerous problems delayed sailing until July 21st. Among those on board were the eminent cartographer, James Cook. Liverpool's most preferred term was scientific gentleman. These included the navigator James Cook (1728-1779), who was on his way to establish a reputation as one of the leading cartographers of the eighteenth century. He was accompanied by the naturalist Robert Brown (1773-1858), who was known for his contributions to the field of botany.

Flinders had been commissioned by the Admiralty to explore the south-western coast of Australia. He had chosen the route to the east, as it was considered more straightforward. Flinders decided that the season was too advanced for such a journey. Instead, he chose to follow the coast to the north, making landings at a bay known as the Entrance. From there, he sailed north, making several landings, including at the Entrance and at the Bay of Isles. He continued north to strengthen his position, and then sailed to a place known as Swan River, where he found a suitable anchorage.

As he sailed on the coast, he met with numerous challenges, including storms and rough seas. However, he continued his voyage, making several important discoveries. He discovered the Entrance, which was later named in his honor, and explored the coast north of Swan River. He continued north, making several landings, including at the Entrance and at the Bay of Isles. From there, he sailed north to strengthen his position, and then sailed to a place known as Swan River, where he found a suitable anchorage.

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The location of the meeting, appropriately named Encounter Bay, marks the dividing point between the section of the unknown coast that was shaped by the French expedition and that surveyed by the British. This was in much the same place, a fact which seems to have offered some comfort to Flinders, who also noted, with evident self-satisfaction, that the French section was still unexplored. The French, too, were aware that they had fulfilled much of their ambition in locating a new route for exploration. After several months, however, the French officers of the Bonhomme Richard, at least, were somewhat surprised to find how much of the coastline was still unknown to them. The French, too, were aware that they had fulfilled much of their ambition in locating a new route for exploration.

Le Grapillon and La Napoleone, the two vessels with which Baudin set out from France. He was continually harassed by the storms and droughts of the Bass Strait. English claims to the unknown coast became Terre Napoleone, Kangaroo Island was Tahiti, Spencer Gulf was Golf de Bonaparte, and the Gulf of St Vincent was Golf de Josephine. It was a disat-

charting of the Gulf of St Vincent, Spencer Gulf and the north coast of Kangaroo Island. It effectively forecasted all potential French claims to that part of the continent, and more concreted the British claim by providing the newly explored coast with a basis of distinctively English names. On the western coast of Spencer Gulf he named numerous places for his native Lincolnshire - Dieppe,Flinders Point, Plemont, Durlston, Bisseker Point, Range and Burton Island - all named from Flinders’Lincolnshire.

The process of mapping, gauging, naming was very much a part of taking an imperial claim, and in this regard the French were little different. If anything, Flinders was more generous, since in his maps he clearly acknowledged the prior French exploration of the coast east of Encounter Bay and named the rocks of which he had been warned ‘Baudin’s Rocks’. But those who drew the original French maps of the formerly unknown coast - and they did not include the bay then decreed Bassin - willfully overlooked the

reliable charts of the entire coast. As soon as he could he set sail for England as a passenger aboard the For-

pito, with the aim of procuring a new vessel to continue his surveys. But the Apollon was wrecked on the Coral Sea off the Barrier Reef, and only an outstretched act of clemency by Flinders, sailing an open boat back to Port Jackson, entered a rescue mission to retrieve the survivors of the wreck. Flinders, in contrast, had headed north from Port Jackson, supervising the coast as he went, and correcting the inaccuracies in the charts of his great rival James Cook. But the future
development of the Bass Strait region grew worse in the tropics, and an inspection of the
case was determined by the time the Grapillon made its way to Port Jack-

son. It had the appearance of a ghost ship, with barely enough healthy crew to sail into harbour. There was no final agreement on the extent of the Bass Strait. Confusion ensued with the questionable, which had made its way there from Tasmania. In its officers and sailors were enjoying the hospitality of the then Governor of New South Wales, Philip Gidley King, who was to purchase from the recently arrived vessel and its sickly crew. The Grapillon, too, was in harbour, enabling a second and more pro-

tected encounter between the two expeditions. In July Flinders and Baudin parted company for good, though their lives were to follow similarly fruitful trajectories. Bassin sent the Naturel

hove back to France, loaded with a great weight of specimens of Australian flora and fauna. As his new passport he purchased from Govern-


to the Bass Strait, Kangaroo Island, the previously unknown coast and the west coast of Western Australia. It was Bassin’s intention

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Mauritius proved as difficult for Flinders as it had for Bassin. One might have thought that, even in peace, the French would have returned the hospitality they showed their countrymen in Port Jackson. The French Governor of Mauritius, General Decaz, however, did not think in the same generous terms as his New South Wales correspondent Philip Gidley King. On arrival in Mauritius, Flinders, still in generation of a passport for safe passage from the French government, dutifully presen-

ted the documents, but no prize - it was made for the Apollon - and no promise was made to return the Cowabella, and what kind of explorer would be undertaking such a major voyage to such an inhospitable land? Decaz’s suspicious mind wondered whether the chary aged ace of military espionage was at work. Moreover, Flinders was discovered to be carrying dispatches from Governor to the home government, and these found to have some

A French map of the "Terre Napoleone", 1803, showing Gofs Bonaparte (or Spencer Gulf) and Golf Josephine (Gulf of St Vincent), and Adelaide.

Januar 1805 Hebron Town

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The French transported to Europe a formidable collection of some 200,000 botanical and zoological specimens: seeds, shells, insects and the like. Their greatest achievement was in zoology—the Paris Museum is even able to report the arrival of some 3,000 zoological species, about half of them new to science. In addition, the expedition's artist, Nicolas-Marie Prist and Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, brought back an exquisite range of Australian images, the highlights of which are arguably those of marine life.

The Illustrator's Robots: Brown supervised the return of some 3,000 specimens to London, among them Kangaroo, a platypus and a fish which reportedly "bounced in the ground whenever it had the opportunity, and covered itself in the earth with surprising quickness." Eventually, in 1816, Brown was able to publish the scientific results of his Australian expedition in his Prodromus Fauna Novae Hollandiae et Insulae Van-Diemen, once described by the British botanist Joseph Dalton Hooker as "the greatest botanical work that has ever appeared." Not only did it identify about a thousand species of plants and 466 genera, it helped to ornament the established Linnean system of botanical taxonomy. In the Linnean system, used almost exclusively in Britain until Brown's day, classification of plants was based on the numbers and the arrangement of sexual organs. As a result of this, the Australian experience, however, Brown came out firmly in favor of the "natural system" of botanical classification advocated by the French writer Bernard de Jussieu (1699-1777), which rejected the rigidity of the Linnean system by taking into account as many attributes of the plant in question, not just the flower and its sexual system. It was a paradigm shift which encountered criticism but which helped to revolutionize botanical science.

Brown's colleague Ferdinand Bauer was so impressed by the reputation of the greatest natural history draughtsman of all time, that in good part because of his work in Australia, he excelled in the intricately detailed drawings and later painting of plant life. His companion, William Westall, painted some fine coastal profiles and executed his brief to include the first recordings of Aborigines and rare paintings of animals and plants from northern Australia.

While the scientific and artistic achievements of the expedition are far-reaching, it is striking how different historians have treated the two stacks of the mission. Though not accorded the recognition he deserved in his own time, Flinders was destined to become—at least in the country he had shaped and named—an explorer here of similar mythical proportions. Statues of him were erected in the major cities, and the name Flinders' appears on many features of the Australian map, coastal and inland.

Poor Baudin, on the hand, a

A general view of King George Sound, on the western coast of what is now Western Australia. The artist William Westall was just 19 years old when selected for the voyage. Baudin has been recorded shabbily in comparison. The name 'Baudin' occurs at just two locations on the Australian map—Baudin's Rocks, as named by Flinders (though even they have been officially renamed Godfrey Shoal), and Baudin Island, a tiny feature within Shark Bay in Western Australia. Disappointing for Baudin's reputation, the task of writing the official account of the voyage fell to none other than those who held him in the greatest contempt—the scientific François Péron and, after Péron died, the officer Louis de Freycinet. Their troubled relationship with the commander, which marked the expedition from the beginning to its end, was of such intensity that it could not be left to rest with Baudin himself. The officers performed the remarkable feat of completing their work without mentioning their captain by name, except to record his painted demise. Baudin's reputation has never recovered.

Two hundred years later, and a world removed from the international and the intercontinental realities of the day, it is appropriate to recall how remarkable the achievements of Flinders and Baudin were. Their encounter off the "unknown coast" created not only to their particular qualities, but also to the place in history of a "commonwealth of learning" which transcended the world of politics and war. There is no need to repress Flinders' place upon pedestals around the country, but perhaps eager research could be found on his great French rival and kindred spirit.