THROUGH TOO MANY generations of bad school teaching, Australian explorers have suffered the fate of national indifference and boredom. This indignity adds insult to the injuries and even the ultimate fate — death itself — that so many of these toilers sustained in their efforts, sometimes futile, sometimes magnificent, to know and to understand the extraordinary, perverse and challenging continent we call Australia. Tim Flannery suggests that fashion has had much to do with this tradition of indifference and forgetting. In his view, Australia’s exploration history has been ‘bowdlerised, debased and made insipid’, its wonder diminished, by those with particular political and social agendas. The snail-trails of journeys that children once drew in colours on their template maps of Australia became barren exercises of obligation, not understanding. Recalling his own schooldays under ‘the stern Miss Conway’ in Melbourne in the 1960s, Flannery has lamented the loss of the subtlety, the excitement and the wonder of exploration.

Through the efforts of scholars and writers such as Flannery himself, Ray Eriksen and Tim Bonyhady, of painters such as Nolan and Tucker, and of composers such as Richard Meale, that situation is changing. Australian land and maritime exploration — as epic and violation, as enterprise and achievement, as courage and foolhardiness — is gradually being restored to us. Adding to this redress and accumulation is this quietly handsome volume of a selection of 110 of the personal letters of Matthew Flinders (1774–1814), navigator, hydrographer and scientist. Superbly edited by Paul Brunton, one of the reigning doyens of Australian manuscript curatorship, the letters have been published as the inaugural volume in a publishing partnership between the Sydney antiquarian booksellers Hordern House and the State Library of New South Wales.

With flair, elegance and deep respect and affection for his subject, Brunton has provided an excellent short biography of Flinders and a thoughtful introduction to the letters themselves. To these he has added an impeccable apparatus of notes, illustrations and a bibliography. Brunton’s scholarship is of a high order. In his publisher, he has been well served: the book is a pleasure to read and to handle. Brunton’s authority is enhanced by the design, choice of paper and typefaces. Each of these features combines with the letters to bring a vivid and affectionate realisation of the cool head and warm heart, the anguish and the tragedy, the successes and the short-lived triumph that was the lot in life of Matthew Flinders.
promises to be more than commonly active and intelligent.’ He came to his manhood during the great age of sensibility. But death came too soon. At forty, he was gone.

The central achievement of Flinders’s short life was his circumnavigation of the Australian continent made between the years 1801 and 1803. His journey, on *HMS Investigator*, was a precarious one, the dangers immense. Off Timor, in March 1803, he wrote to his wife, his beloved Ann: ‘the poor ship is worn out, she is decayed and rotten in both skin and bone.’ Still, he persisted and, with skill, infinite patience and determination, completed his scientific work. Ambition to succeed burned strong within him. He nursed his frail craft through a charting of the south and western shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria. With the greatest reluctance, he was forced to abandon his survey. He journeyed down the west coast, rounded Cape Leeuwin and then, in the depth of winter, confronted the perils of the Great Australian Bight. In June 1803 he brought *Investigator* safely into the sanctuary of Port Jackson. Laconically, matter-of-factly, he wrote to his mother: ‘We arrived here yesterday from having circumnavigated New Holland.’ But for Flinders that precious achievement was overwhelmed by family news waiting for him at Sydney: ‘the death of so kind a father … so excellent a man.’ Like many sons, faced with the loss of a parent, he pondered the possibilities of moral guilt, the sense of words left unsaid: ‘Oh my dearest, kindest father, how much I loved and reverenced you, you cannot now know.’

Flinders’s published account of his Australian circumnavigation, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, was to be long delayed, first while he languished under house arrest on the French-ruled island of Mauritius, and, later, while he worked on his manuscript at home in England. The account of his voyages and its accompanying volume of charts — the summary of a life’s work — finally appeared in London in July 1814, the day before his death. In 1804 he had drawn the map that delineated for the first time the full shape and form of the Australian continent, known previously as two possibly separate land masses: New Holland in the west and New South Wales in the east. To his new map, Flinders affixed the title ‘Australia or Terra Australis’. Subsequently, at the time of publication, this rational preference for the naming was set aside: to Flinders’s dismay, the title was reversed. Logic, vision and an essential modernity were at once discarded. In a letter to his patron Sir Joseph Banks in 1813, Flinders put his view that ‘Australia was a proper name for the Continent’. ‘It wants,’ he said, ‘a collective name.’ History long since has vindicated that judgment.

In these letters of Flinders, we see at firsthand the rich and varied sensibility of a man we might view now as a proto-Australian. They are letters that reflect a young man’s intense ambition, his hopes and fears, his reversals and triumphs, his relationships with friends and loved ones. The self-portrait unwittingly drawn in letters is on the whole a beguiling one. Present also is a snobbery and a wilfulness, and the obstinacy for which, on Mauritius, he would pay so dearly. A magnificant inclusion is the letter he wrote to his friend and collaborator George Bass on 15 February 1800, and which has only recently been purchased by the Mitchell Library. While giving a vivid glimpse of the scientific mariner at his work, this letter is a frank and moving testimony to Flinders’s instinct for friendship, his mature capacity for self-examination and self-reflection, and his loyal indebtedness to another’s generosity of spirit. ‘My mind has often called you its Socrates. You have partly taught me to know my own good and bad qualities; from you I have learned to judge of mankind more accurately. You have been the touchstone, to which I have brought all those, whose abilities or rather whose strength of mind I wished to form a judgement.’ It is one of the many tragedies, large and small, in the life of Flinders that this letter was never read by George Bass.