‘Today - the one hundred and fifty first anniversary of the birth of Matthew Flinders, the Discoverer of South Australia - is a fitting occasion for a short appreciation of his character and work, and, since character exceeded achievement, I propose to present the man rather than his famous voyages, which have hitherto a little overlaid and obscured a personality of singular strength and charm.’

This is a quotation from an article by W.H. Langham in the Adelaide Register, Monday 16 March 1925, titled ‘Matthew Flinders: The Indefatigable’. [1] Flinders’ 240th birthday fell in 2014, as well as the bicentenary of his death, and I echo Langham’s sentiment.

Matthew Flinders’ most obvious claim to fame is that he captained the Investigator, the first ship to circumnavigate Australia, charting the sections of the coast which were unknown at the time. He is an established member of the Australian canon of the great, and the unveiling of a statue of him in Euston Station, London in July 2014 might perhaps raise his profile in his native country.

His was a life of action and achievement thwarted by a run of bad luck in 1803 and cut short by his early death in 1814. About 10 years ago I co-edited (with Anthony J. Brown) his Private Journal, written between these years. At the time I was interviewed for a West Australian regional radio station. It was a live interview and I forget many of the details, but I do remember that I was asked what Flinders was like. I immediately reeled off a long list of qualities. During the three years or so that I had spent working on the edition I had built up what felt like a fairly rounded picture of the man, almost as if I knew him personally.

So when I was invited to give this lecture, I decided to use these qualities as the structure of my talk. I have already written about Flinders’ achievements. I have written about him as a reader, as a writer, even as a musician. He is someone I admire deeply, but of course he was not perfect. He has been worshipped as a hero across the years, often by Australians wishing to recruit him for the national pantheon. For example, Ernest Scott, in the Preface to his 1914 biography, wrote, ‘He was … a downright Englishman of exceptionally high character, proud of his service and unsparing of himself in the pursuit of his duty.’ [2] An article in the Melbourne Argus in 1925, announcing the unveiling of the Melbourne statue of Flinders concludes, ‘He was a great and good man, an able and accomplished scientist, an inspired navigator. No one since Cook has left such an indelible mark upon the annals of this country.’ [3]
To counterbalance this, there has more recently been a trend towards iconoclasm - calling Flinders arrogant and inexperienced. For example, Sidney Baker, whose 1962 book My Own Destroyer takes a psychoanalytical approach: 'The flaw in Flinders's character was a tendency to underestimate authority together with a rigidity of outlook that neither understood impulsive generosity nor deemed it worthy of personal pursuit.'[4] Geoffrey Ingleton sums up his character thus: 'Flinders’ failing was vanity and arrogance - usual with British naval officers of that period - and these two unfortunate traits were responsible for most of his tribulations. He was, in some ways, his own worst enemy. His brother Samuel judged him a fatally-clever man, who, confiding in his own discernment, too easily believed that no branch of knowledge was beyond his reach.'[5] Even Miriam Estensen, in her admirable biography, writes, 'There was in Flinders a vein of self-importance amounting at times to arrogance.'[6]

I shall indulge in neither hagiography nor character assassination, but will try to give my impression of this young man, dead at 40 and stymied before his 30th birthday by what he himself called 'a train of ills', mostly caused by sheer bad luck magnified by risky decisions which, if they had succeeded, would have made him even more of a hero. As he himself wrote to Sir Joseph Banks, 'After a misfortune has taken place we all see very well the proper steps that ought to have been taken to avoid it.'[7] Prudence and caution were not part of his make-up, at least until he had spent some time as a prisoner of the French. My portrait of him is built up from his own letters and journals and some precious accounts of him from contemporaries.

Against the Wishes of My Friends

The first quality I will mention is determination, or stubbornness. There is much mythmaking about Flinders’ boyhood - including, perhaps, his own statement in later life that he had been ‘induced to go to sea against the wishes of friends from reading Robinson Crusoe’[8] - ‘friends’, in this case, meaning what we used to call our ‘elders and betters’, and almost certainly, in this case, his father. What is undisputed is that his father wanted him to follow in his own profession of surgeon and apothecary, and, according to his journal, on 26 April, the month after his 16th birthday, Matthew went to Lincoln and ‘agreed with Mr Dell, who is to give him 10 guineas per Annum’. [9] Joseph Dell was a surgeon and apothecary and Matthew was presumably to be his assistant. However, less than three weeks later, on 14 May 1790, a momentous heading appears in Matthew Flinders Senior's journal: 'Matthew going to Sea.' He recounts going with his son ‘to Spalding to take the Coach for London, thence to Rochester to Commodore Pasley’s, to embark in the Scipio.[10] It has long been his Choice, not mine. ... [P]ray God it may be to his advantage. ... I shall heavily miss him.'[11]

Presumably he made the agreement with Mr Dell because he despaired of ever getting a chance to go to sea, but then, almost immediately, received the offer of a midshipman’s berth on the Scipio with his cousin Henrietta’s employer, Commodore Pasley. Henrietta was a governess in his household. One can only imagine the tense and excited atmosphere in the Flinders’ Donington household for the intervening two and a half weeks. Matthew junior knew what he wanted, but he was not by nature one to rebel against authority. Later, when, returning to Port
Jackson from his circumnavigation of New Holland in 1803, he received news of his father’s death, his reaction is tinged with regret and even guilt: ‘The duty I owed him and which I had now a prospect of paying with the warmest affection and gratitude, had made me look forward to the time of our return with increased ardour. I had laid such a plan of comfort for him as would have tended to make his latter days the most delightful of his life. ... Oh, my dearest, kindest father, how much I loved and reverenced you, you cannot now know.’ This is from a copy of a letter to his stepmother in his letter-book: he crossed out the following continuation - he is still apostrophising his dead father: ‘Everything that I have ever said or done that was displeasing to you now strikes upon my mind like moral guilt. I had indeed a strong propensity to independence of mind, of thought and action, and did not attend as I ought to gratify you by my words and actions. I thought indeed that I was certainly not acting wrong, in anything I did, but I was, in not making your ease and happiness the first rule of my ... conduct I have not acted right.’[12]

Here we have evidence of stubbornness: from his father, when he says, ‘it has long been his choice, not mine’, and from himself. But here we can also see his propensity, evident throughout his letters and private journal, to see things from the other side. I will come back to that.

I have too much ambition ...

He was determined, stubborn, and ambitious: I hardly feel I need to prove his ambition. A young man in Flinders’ position could hardly have stumbled blindly into the career he pursued: for this son of an obscure Lincolnshire family to get ahead, it took activity, planning, determination and assiduous attention to everything that would promote it. If we needed documentary evidence, we have it from his own letter to Sir Joseph Banks, written from Mauritius in 1804:

‘I have too much ambition to rest in the unnoticed middle order of mankind, and since neither birth nor fortune have favoured me, my actions shall speak to the world. In the regular service of the navy there are too many competitors for fame: I have therefore chosen a branch which, though less rewarded by rank and fortune, is yet little less in celebrity.’

Note the date: he had already circumnavigated Australia and he had charted all the coastlines he would ever chart by this time. The fact that we are honouring him with lectures and monuments 210 years later is witness to his success, but he had not yet achieved his aims. His letter continues: ‘If adverse fortune does not oppose me, I will succeed; and although I cannot rival the immortalized name of Cook, yet if persevering industry joined to what ability I may possess, can accomplish it, then I will secure the second place.’[13]
Fine words, but what follows might fall on modern ears less happily: ‘The hitherto obscure name of Flinders may thus become a light by which even the illustrious character of Sir Joseph Banks may one day receive an additional ray of glory: as a satellite of Jove I may reflect back splendour to the gracious primary who, by shining upon me, shall give lustre to my yet unradiated name.’ Flinders was child of the Romantic movement as much as of the Enlightenment. Purple prose is not uncommon in the letters he wrote to his wife and family, but this, addressed to his patron, sounds sycophantic. In contrast, his friend George Bass’s communications with those in authority are business-like and almost brusque.[14] Banks, however, doesn’t seem to have minded. He was assiduous in his efforts to obtain Flinders’ liberty from a captivity that he noted in 1807 had been ‘supported with manly fortitude’. [15]

Ambition is certainly at the root of much of Flinders’ behaviour. Ambition made him disobey his father and flatter his patron. Ambition made him leave his new bride behind in England, with the deadly words, ‘I shall give up the wife for the voyage of discovery’. [16] He had planned to take her on the voyage, which was strictly speaking contrary to naval regulations, the Admiralty found out and he told he would lose his command if he kept her on board. That choice cost both him and his wife agonies which they were still suffering years later, magnified because ambition had made him reckless in September 1803.

Desperate to get back to England to replace his rotten ship Investigator and continue his explorations, and already thwarted by the shipwreck of the Porpoise, he set off in a tiny schooner, the Cumberland, built in the colony and never designed for such a long voyage. He later admitted himself that ‘some ambition of being the first to undertake so long a voyage in such a small vessel’[17] was one of the factors that induced him to accept Philip Gidley King’s offer of the ship.

Ambition, of course, is nothing without resourcefulness and intelligence. Flinders had an inquisitive mind and read widely - we know this from his letters to his wife, Ann Flinders, from the Investigator as well as his Private Journal on Mauritius. His father kept a good library, continually recording the purchase of new books and the sale of old ones in his journal, and one assumes that reading was a habit Flinders began in childhood, and not only with Robinson Crusoe. Miriam Estensen writes, 'Tradition holds that on his own Matthew mastered John Robertson’s The Elements of Navigation and John Hamilton Moore’s The New Practical Navigator, but it is doubtful that even a clever fifteen-year-old could have done so without help.'[18] This is one of those legends which is difficult to track to its source. However, Flinders certainly came to his first ship well-prepared to profit from the education a good captain would provide to his junior officers, so that when he ‘expressed a desire’ in 1791 for a long voyage his patron Commodore Pasley was happy to get him ‘the situation with Capt. Bligh’ on the Providence, as his father records in his journal. He goes on, ‘He has made much improvement in his knowledge of Navigation. … If he is Successful this Voyage may be a great means to promotion.’[19] William Bligh, for all his faults, taught Flinders the navigation and charting skills he learned from James Cook. Ingleton established that ‘Flinders drew at least, seven plans and one chart, while onboard (sic) the Providence’. [20]

**Overlooking obstacles**

Flinders had the essential quality of the successful person: he actively pursued his goals with resourcefulness and tenacity – and he had what James Mack calls ‘nerve’. [21] As we have seen, he did this in his teenage years. Later in life it became a habit which for some time served him well. He wrote to Henry Waterhouse in 1794 putting himself forward as master’s mate for the voyage to New South Wales on the Reliance. Then, once he was in New South Wales, he offered himself to Governor Hunter as an explorer of the rivers around Sydney, with his friend George Bass, in an eight-foot boat which they called...
the Tom Thumb. He and Bass continued their exploring when they could, culminating in the circumnavigation of Tasmania in 1798-99. As he wrote, 'the furor of discovery, upon whatever scale it is, is perhaps as strong, and can overlook obstacles, as well as most other kinds of mania.'[22]

Then, having gained that experience as an explorer and chart-maker during the four or five years he was based in Sydney in the last years of the eighteenth century, he had the confidence, brashness, or effrontery to write to the most influential man in the world of scientific investigation, the President of the Royal Society, Sir Joseph Banks, on the subject of a proposed expedition to New Holland. T.M. Perry has shown that this letter was not written out of the blue. Banks and Flinders had already met, and Banks already had Flinders in mind to command the expedition, though there was to be another man included ‘to undertake the exploration of the interior’. [23]

However, Flinders certainly felt that he was pushing the boundaries of propriety: he excused himself, somewhat jocularly (and surely disingenuously), for 'any informality there may be in thus addressing him, that almost constant employment abroad, and an education among the unpolished inhabitants of the Lincolnshire fens, have prevented me from learning better.'[24] Banks did not seem to have been offended by this slight upon their shared county of origin, and promptly used his influence to have Flinders appointed to command the expedition.

The honest indignation of oppressed innocence

It could be argued that this quality of taking bold action to make things happen, which had got him so far in his career, caused things to go disastrously wrong when he landed on Mauritius in December 1803 and encountered Governor Decaen. Unlike Pasley, Governors Hunter and King, and Banks, Decaen was a figure of authority who had no use for Flinders' talents and was not impressed by him; he was suspicious of his motives and doubted his identity. Baudin, who would have spoken well of him, was dead. Pierre Bernard Milius, would have been a useful friend to have, had sailed from Mauritius the day before Flinders arrived, in command of the Geographe in Baudin's place: the previous year, Milius had written in his journal:

> 'During his time in Sydney, Captain Flinders had often had us to dinner on board his ship. He seemed to be a most distinguished officer and to be very well educated. He has already made several voyages along this coast and we were grateful to him for some very useful information for the next stage of our trip.' [25]

But in this new situation his friends in high places were powerless. He had, by a combination of bad luck and miscalculation, been forced to take the Cumberland into port to make urgent repairs. He had no way of knowing that Britain was again at war with France, and even if he had, he was confident that the passport issued by the French government would be honoured, even though technically it applied to the Investigator rather than the Cumberland. As we know, he was in a hurry: he wanted to get back to England, find a replacement for the unseaworthy Investigator and go on with his unfinished task of mapping the Australian coastline. So when Decaen stood in his way he was not diplomatic. Apparently he failed to remove his hat, which was a gross insult that the Captain General recalled years later.[26]

There is a sad irony in the fact that upon his earlier, significant encounter with a Frenchman, off the South Australian coast, he had shown his respect to Captain Baudin by taking off his hat, which, as Jean
Fornasiero et al. remarked, 'set the scene for the meeting that was about to take place between these explorers between two rival nations.'[27] The language of headwear was potent indeed in those days - it was the absence of a bonnet on the head of Ann Flinders which alerted the Admiralty to the fact that she was living on the Investigator rather than just visiting in May 1801, causing them to suspect that Flinders was planning to take her with him on the voyage.

Flinders described the encounter with Decaen in a letter to his brother Samuel: 'They formed erroneous opinions of me on my arrival, - they imprisoned me, - I remonstrated, - they were enraged that a prisoner should accuse them of injustice, and determined to punish me. I was too obstinate to sacrifice one tittle to them either of the honour of my country or myself, and therefore prepared myself to suffer.'[28] And suffer he did, but not in silence. The stream of indignant letters and messages to Decaen only made things worse. In response to his request for an audience in early February 1804, Decaen replied via an intermediary, 'Captain Flinders might have known that I did not wish to see him by not giving an answer to his note some days since. It is needless for me to see him, for the conversation will probably be such as to oblige me to send him to the tower.'[29] Neither man softened his stance towards the other, and they never met again, although in November 1807 he happened to encounter Decaen on the road with another general and a large retinue: 'I stood a little on one side whilst they passed, and saluted the generals which was returned by the whole party.'[30] On the anniversary of his arrival in Mauritius, he wrote another letter to Decaen, and made the following entry in his journal:

> ‘In writing this letter it was necessary to be very cautious. To urge every argument to induce the general to comply with my request, and yet not to sacrifice any thing of my own honour or that of my country; not to give up one tittle of the justice of my cause and yet not hurt his pride by telling him of his injustice. In short to demand justice without offending the oppressor; to beg without lowering the dignity of my cause. I found this a difficult task, and wrote the letter four times over without being able to please myself in the composition; perhaps I never wrote a worse letter where any consideration had been bestowed upon it.[31] So difficult is it to express what the heart does not feel. The honest indignation of oppressed innocence, which might have given energy to my expression, it was necessary to suppress, and the letter is consequently without spirit, and almost hypocritical. It is likely I may be accused of wanting the spirit that I had before shewn — of an Englishman, by having suffered something for it. It may be said that I ought to have set my oppressor at defiance all together, and not have spared him. Perhaps this is very true, but of what advantage would it have been? My letter indeed does not carry accusations, but then I have not flattered my oppressor, or ask for my right as for an indulgence. I have only omitted telling him what would be offensive, but have not at all gone to the opposite extreme. — I have suffered a years imprisonment — am debilitated in health — kept back from my promotion, and the credit arising from my exertions and risks in prosecuting discovery — remain in ignorance of the state of my fortune and family both of which have suffered some late material alterations —
and, oh above all, am kept from the arms of a beloved wife. Let any one reflect whether to reverse all these things, he would make the sacrifice of omitting offensive expressions in a letter to his foe and oppressor? — I have done no more.’[32]

I’ve quoted this passage at length because it is so revealing. Flinders is not apologising for his arrogance or his obstinacy; rather the opposite. He is ashamed of being less offensive than he thinks Decaen deserves. Flinders was a British Naval officer. He was proud of that and objected to anything that threatened it. When he was threatened with having to give up his sword, he attached a label to it with a high-flown message, beginning, ‘Farewell, thou faithful companion! Thou guardian of my honour, Farewell!’[33] There was in him, especially in moments of emotional stress, a melodramatic streak not uncommon at the time.

Flinders was independent as well as proud. He disliked receiving favours and feeling himself placed under obligation. From on board the Cumberland he wrote a letter to the Governor of New South Wales, Philip Gidley King:

‘It is part of my disposition to avoid receiving obligations as much as possible, but when from peculiar circumstances I am brought under the yoke, few retain a stronger sense of them or more desirous of making returns. To balance this, I am but little given to conferring kindnesses. Upon the whole I am more guided by justice than generosity for an act of the latter never escapes me from natural impulse: it is upon mature deliberation if I am ever generous. This is saying but little for myself, but I wish to be known by the few whom I would have for my friends.’[34]

When he did regard himself under obligation, he was very generous with his time and attention. An outstanding example of this is his efforts on behalf of French prisoners, once he was back in England, recounted in detail in his Private Journal.

**My earliest friend**

Perhaps he hardly knew it himself, but one of Flinders’ most endearing attributes is his gift for friendship. Within weeks of his detention he found that members of the French community in Port Louis were inclined to befriend him, and he responded by making of some of them friends for life, even though his country was at war with theirs. His friendship with George Bass was tinged with hero-worship: it wasn’t the kind of affectionate mutual bond which he formed with many other people, both men and women. He kept up an affectionate correspondence with two friends from his days on the Providence with Bligh.

When he was eventually allowed to move to a country residence in the south-western part of Mauritius for the good of his health he befriended the eldest daughter of his hostess. Delphine D’Arifat clearly attracted him a good deal: ‘She is indeed an extraordinary young lady, possessing a strength of mind, a resolution, and a degree of penetration which few men can boast of, and to these are joined activity, industry and a
desire for information,’ he wrote in his Private Journal. But in case you were thinking that this was a romantic attachment, he went on, ‘Tis pity she had not been born a man.’[35] Later there was a falling out that caused him pain, but it is not clear why.

His relationship with Delphine and with her sisters and brothers was partly a pedagogical one. He taught the younger d’Arifat boys mathematics and navigation: as a naval captain, he would have done the same for his junior officers, one of whom, the famous polar explorer John Franklin, called him ‘my earliest friend’.[36] He taught the young women English while they taught him French. About two months after their lessons started, he wrote, modestly, ‘I am satisfied that one if not both of them make a better progress in English than I do in French’.[37] He made excellent progress in French, however, and was soon quite fluent and able to participate in the Francophone society as well as reading French books lent to him by his new friends. It had been brought home to him how important it would be to learn the language when attending a dinner party in Port Louis in August 1805, just before travelling to his new quarters on Madame d’Arifat’s estate:

‘The post of honour, that of conducting the lady of the house to table was assigned to me; and which as I understood so little French and spoke less, and have moreover been little accustomed to female society, embarrassed me not a little.’[38]

It was equally important to accustom himself to female society, as he was to spend a good deal of time with Madame d’Arifat and her daughters and their female neighbours, but this seems to have come even more easily than learning French. In October, he was able to describe a typical day, consisting of much time spent with the ‘ladies’, walking round the plantation, learning French, reading, conversing, or playing cards. He often found these ‘employments’ so ‘agreeable … as to prevent me from sleeping.’[39] And although he made friends among the menfolk of Mauritius, he was often uneasy in their company: in December 1805 he noted that ‘they made no scruple to avow circumstances which an Englishman generally thinks it better to keep secret; yet these young men are not libertines, or did they think themselves so.’[40] Three years later, two of his very best friends, Thomy Pitot and Charles Baudin, made him uncomfortable:

‘Persecuted a little upon the subject of politics and national character. These gentlemen and most other Frenchmen that I have seen, take a great pleasure in depreciating the English character; which is ungenerous in the presence of an Englishman and a prisoner. This is done by pleasantries generally, which it is best to answer by reprisals in the same way. … I attribute this to their desire of shewing their wit, joined to a little envy and perhaps hatred, rather than to any want of consideration.’[41]
like smell will leave me, must, I believe, as well as my clothes, undergo a good boiling in a large kettle.’[42]
You can almost hear him chuckling when he reports the effect on Governor Decaen of an act of disobedience by one of his subjects in his journal in November 1808, ‘It is said His Excellency was obliged to make use of a warm bath to prevent his anger from having an effect upon his health.’[43] More evidence of his capacity for humour is his Biographical Tribute to the Memory of Trim - now well known among Flinders fans, but then merely intended as a French exercise: he wrote in his journal in January 1807, ’I have lately employed myself, either in correcting my narrative ... — in reading Grants history of the Isle of France and making notes upon it, — or in translating into French the history of my cat Trim, which I wrote out for the purpose.’[44] The whole tone of this delightful essay is so playful and affectionate that it’s difficult to pick out just one extract. Here is one short passage:

‘There are some men so inconsiderate as to be talking when they should be eating, who keep their meat suspended in mid-air till a semi-colon in the discourse gives an opportunity of taking their mouthful without interrupting their story. Guests of this description were a dead mark for Trim: when a short pause left them time to take the prepared mouthful, they were often surprised to find their meat gone, they could not tell how.’[45]

His essay on Trim, as well as being a superb piece of writing, is an illustration of another of Flinders’ most attractive traits, his fair-mindedness. It seemed to be an ingrained habit to see things from the other point of view. When Trim disappeared from the Port Louis household where he was staying while Flinders was still imprisoned there, Flinders wrote, ‘My sorrow may be better conceived than described,’ but he went on, ‘it is but too probable that this excellent unsuspecting animal was stewed and eaten by some hungry black slave.’[46] Not a wicked slave or a cruel slave: a hungry slave. He even attempts to understand Decaen’s conduct which, he thought ‘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.’[47] When he wrote the words to a song and sent them to Ann from Mauritius, they were all about her feelings at his abandonment of her, and written from her point of view. And in his Voyage, he commented on the behaviour of the Australian Aborigines. Around Port Lincoln, they had observed signs of habitation, without encountering anybody:

‘I had always found the natives of this country to avoid those who seemed anxious for communication; whereas, when left entirely alone, they would usually come down after having watched us for a few days. Nor does this conduct seem to be unnatural; for what, in such case, would be the conduct of any people, ourselves for instance, were we living in a state of nature, frequently at war with our neighbours, and ignorant of the existence of any other nation?’[48]

Note the phrase, ‘Ourselves for instance.’ I will not say that Flinders was blameless in his dealings with the Aborigines. There was a very unpleasant incident at Cape Barrow in the Gulf of Carpentaria the following January, when a shore party was attacked and retaliated by shooting at least two Aborigines. Flinders wrote in the Voyage, ‘I was much concerned at what had happened, and greatly displeased with the
master for having acted so contrary to my orders,[49] but he does not appear to have disciplined the men responsible for the deaths in any significant way, and John Aken, the master, remained a trusted colleague throughout the rest of the Investigator voyage and was his second in command on the Cumberland.

The received usages

Another trait which we nowadays might regard as less than admirable is his conventional streak. There were slaves on Mauritius. He never records an objection to slavery. He often went hunting with his male friends - he didn’t much object to animal cruelty. In October 1806 he and his servant, John Elder, heard a dog howling on a neighbouring plantation. Elder investigated and found that ‘the proprietor of a small habitation … tyed a dog in his field of Indian corn for the purpose of frightening the monkies (sic): in order to make him cry continually, he gives him nothing to eat; so that he cries for two or three days and then dies of hunger and fatigue.’ Elder wanted to ‘cut the dog loose, being shocked at such cruelty; but I forbid him, preferring to mention it to some one (sic) who knew better than we did the consistence of such proceeding with the received usages.’[50]

Perhaps this was part of the caution he had had to learn from three years of detention; but I believe that a certain conservatism was part of his nature. He might be bold and adventurous but he was never a rebel: he was patriotic and generally respectful of those in authority, and his ambition was to be useful to the society he belonged to, rather than change it. He thought of himself as quite broadminded, however. He recounts a few months later a ‘conversation on religion’ in which ‘I found sentiments of tolerance pushed further even than mine. I believe, that Voltaire is pretty generally read amongst the married ladies here as well as in France.’[51]

An unvaried line of peace and comfort

What can one say to sum up a life which ended so prematurely two hundred years ago? No-one remains unchanged by their experiences, and the impetuous, imperious naval captain of 1803 did indeed, as he foretold in a letter to Ann, ‘learn patience in this island, which will perhaps counteract the insolence acquired by having had unlimited command over my fellow men.’[52] He apparently carried that patience over into his married life during the short years he and Ann finally spent together. Ernest Scott quotes a letter she wrote to a close friend, during those years, about the happiness of their life together: ‘Day after day, month after month passes, and I neither experience an angry look nor a dissatisfied word. Our domestic life is an unvaried line of peace and comfort.’[53] This is impressive, given the irritations Flinders was subject to during these last years in London: battling an indifferent Admiralty for recognition, working day and night to get his Voyage finished, moving house no fewer than six times during those three and a half years - and Ann herself was often in poor health.

Oddly enough, I think that despite his adventurousness and ambition, he relished domestic life. He was introspective and somewhat of an introvert, ill at ease in large social gatherings. There is more I could say about this complex and fascinating man, but I will let his cousin, John Franklin, have the last word, to remind us of the reasons for Flinders’ enduring fame. In 1842 Franklin, by then the Governor of Tasmania, wrote to Ann:

“I have long been desirous of giving you the full particulars of the monument which I am about to erect on Stamford Hill above Port Lincoln to the memory of your deeply lamented husband – and my earliest friend – not that his undying
fame needed such a memento for he must live in the grateful remembrance of every friend of Hydrographical Science and especially of those who navigate the shores of Australia.'[54]


[38] Flinders, Private Journal 79.


[45] Matthew Flinders, A Biographical Tribute to the Memory of Trim (Sydney: John Ferguson, 1985) 24.


[53] Scott, 298.


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