A Tangled Web. The Search for LaPérouse

John Milsom

Introduction

In June 1785 Louis XVI, then king of France, appointed Jean François de Galaup de LaPérouse to the command of an expedition of global exploration. On 1 August of that year the frigates *Astrolabe* and *Boussole* left Brest and spent two and a half years exploring the coasts of the Pacific. They anchored in Botany Bay on 26 January 1789, just days after the arrival there of the British 'First Fleet' with its convicts and colonists. On 10 March LaPérouse put to sea again and disappeared. On 28 September 1791 the king despatched another two-ship expedition under the command of Bruny d'Entrecasteaux to search for them but was deposed and executed before they returned. It is said that as he was being taken to the guillotine in January 1793 he asked, 'Is there any news of LaPérouse?'

One possible opportunity for bringing back such news had already been missed. On 13 August 1791 Edward Edwards, commanding the frigate *Pandora* that had been pursuing the Bounty mutineers, saw smoke rising from fires on the island of Vanikoro, in the far south-east of today's independent Solomon Islands. It is possible that they were signals lighted by survivors from the *Boussole*, but the single-minded and unimaginative Edwards, certain that mutineers would be unlikely to draw attention to themselves and being uninterested in rescuing anyone else, sailed on.[1]

Another opportunity passed unnoticed two years later, when d'Entrecasteaux came achingly close to success in the frigate *Recherche*. In May 1793, during passage from New Caledonia to the Solomons, he sighted three small islands, one of which he thought had not previously been reported. He wrote in his diary[2] that 'We called it the lIe de la Recherche, but we saw it at such a distance that we could not place it on our chart with precision.' He did, however, make an estimate of its position and from that it seems almost certain that the island he saw was the one he had been looking for. He was, however, seriously ill and chose not to investigate, and he died two months later.

After that, with France almost excluded from the high seas during the Napoleonic wars, interest waned. Neither the Baudin expedition of 1800–1803, nor the Freycinet expedition of 1817–20, nor the Duperrey expedition of 1822–25 made any attempt to search for signs of the missing vessels. Then, in 1826, Dumont d'Urville, who had taken part in the Duperrey expedition and was dissatisfied with the results, persuaded the Minister of the Navy to give him command of a new expedition in the corvette *Astrolabe* (Duperrey's *Coquille*

[1] Although these fires are now widely interpreted as having been lighted to attract attention, there is nothing in the *Pandora's* papers (Thomson, HMS *Pandora*) to suggest this. There is simply a brief comment on p.140 that 'On the 13th of August, we discovered another island to the north west. It is mountainous, and covered with wood to the very summit. We saw no inhabitants, but smoke in many different parts of it, from which it may be presumed it is inhabited. This we called Pitt's Island.'

[2] Hogg, *D'Entrecasteau*x, p. 64.

renamed). The avowed aims were scientific, but on this occasion the search for traces of LaPérouse was also an objective, although a secondary one.[3] Why this sudden renewal of interest, after so many years?

Manby

For any student of the final decades of exploration under sail, the French *Bulletin de la Société de géographie* (*BSg*) is a treasure trove of information. Its contents include formal notes of proceedings, extended accounts of the travels of some of its contributors and brief notes that are often summaries of information obtained from foreign sources. One such entry appeared in August 1825. In translation[4] it read:

> INFORMATION ON THE END OF LA PEYROUSE. The English Admiral MANBY, recently arrived in Paris, brings news supported by strong presumptive proofs that the place in the Ocean where the brave La Peyrouse perished nearly 40 years ago is now known. An English whaling vessel has discovered a long and low island surrounded by innumerable reefs between New Caledonia and New Guinea, and about equidistant from both. The inhabitants came on board, and one of the chiefs wore, as an ornament in one of his ears, a cross of Saint-Louis: other natives had swords on which the word 'Paris' could be read and held in their hands medallions of Louis XVI. When asked how they had obtained these objects, one of the chiefs, aged about 50 years, replied that in his youth a large vessel was wrecked on a coral reef in a violent storm and all on board perished. The sea cast ashore on their island some cases containing the cross of St. Louis and many other items. During his voyage round the world Admiral Manby saw several medals of the kind that La Peyrouse had distributed among the natives of California, and as he had declared that after leaving Botany Bay he intended to sail for the northern part of New Holland and explore those numerous islands, there is every reason to believe that it was these reefs that destroyed this great seaman and his intrepid crew.[5]

It is almost certain that the objects had indeed come from LaPérouse's ships, since Vanikoro might be said to lie half-way between New Caledonia and New Guinea, although only on a route no sane sea captain would dream of taking. A report of this sort could hardly fail to attract popular attention, and in October a further note appeared:

> In France the Government has just ordered an expedition full of expectation. M. d'Urville is charged with exploring the coasts of New Guinea, and will have under his command only one vessel, the Coquille, renamed the Astrolabe. Does not this name, borne by the vessel on which the unfortunate Lapeyrouse perished, suggest that one of the aims of the enterprise will be to discover whether the information

[3] For this and other quoted information on d'Urville's life, see Duyker, *Dumont d'Urville.*

[4] Except where otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.

[5] *BSg,* v.28 (August 1825), pp. 86-7. An English translation appeared in the *Asiatic Review*, v. 20 (October 1825), p. 435.

published by the newspapers on the place where this illustrious navigator was shipwrecked is accurate? [6]

Dumont d'Urville

In selecting d'Urville to captain this new expedition, the Minister had chosen a man with an already high reputation who would become one of France's foremost explorers. Born in 1790, he had seen no action in the Napoleonic wars but had subsequently achieved fame by securing the Venus de Milo for France. The picture that emerges from his own copious writings and those of his contemporaries is of a dedicated and very competent captain and commandant; his professional achievements were remarkable and his five-volume account of this, his first voyage in the *Astrolabe,* is a classic of its kind. However, although he was regarded everywhere with admiration and respect, it was his predecessor in France's long-distance voyaging, the more erratic but in many ways more human Louis de Freycinet, who was able to inspire affection, and even love. An outstanding example of such feelings is provided by Joseph-Paul Gaimard, the surgeon on the *Astrolabe,* who had been assistant surgeon on Freycinet's *Uranie*.[7]

Gaimard

For Gaimard, there seems to have been something lacking in sailing with d'Urville, and in the first of the long letters he sent to his former commander during the voyage he wrote that 'All is well and very well on board; our expedition is very agreeable to us; but, very dear commander, we talk all the time about what we hope to do again with you'.[8] This letter and those that followed were lightly edited by de Freycinet and forwarded to the *BSg*, where they were promptly published. Coming from such a source and appearing in such a well-respected journal, they would have been accepted as full and fair descriptions of events, but the emotional Gaimard was not a critical observer. He was at his best when describing near-disasters such as those encountered in mapping of the coasts of New Zealand, but once ashore he would uncritically relay any gossip that was circulating within the very small number of people he actually met, which would then appear in Paris long before the publication of d'Urville's more measured accounts.

'A reprobate English captain'

The *Astrolabe* left Toulon on 22 April 1826, and less than a month later there was a further fortuitous discovery. Peter Dillon, a South Seas islands trader on his way to Calcutta from Valparaiso, came ashore on the Polynesian island of Tikopia, and while there saw and acquired a number of items he thought could only have come from the ships of LaPérouse.

Unlike d'Urville, Dillon has not had a good press, and the description that heads this chapter[9] is not untypical, although almost every item in the paragraph from which it is taken is wrong. Dillon. who was not English but Irish and born on Martinique, was no reprobate,

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[6] *BSg,* v.XXX, pp. 206-7, October1825.

[7] Page references to Gaimard's *Uranie* diary are to the Hakluyt Society's annotated translation.

[8] *BSg,* v7. 48/47, pp. 207, October1827.

[9] Clode, *Voyages*, p. 216.

nor was he, as claimed, 'incompetent as a navigator'. Had he been either, the East India Company would hardly have entrusted him with the command of their survey vessel, the *Research*. That they did so is all the more telling because he was not, as stated, in their employ when he visited Tikopia but in command of his own vessel, the *Saint Patrick*. There is not even a hint in the book of the fact that he was the first European to land on Vanikoro and find there positive proofs of its being the island on which the ships of LaPérouse were wrecked, the one correct statement being that he was imprisoned briefly in Hobart, in a bizarre sequence of events that is described below.

A more sympathetic approach to this complex character was provided by James Davidson,[10] who necessarily relied heavily on Dillon's own accounts of his life and actions.[11] Both books cover not only the story of the discovery of the place where LaPérouse came to grief, but also the dramatic tale of the events that led up to it. These began in 1813, when Dillon was an officer in the Calcutta-based *Hunter*, sailing to Fiji for sandalwood. It was a disastrous voyage, culminating in a quarrel with the Fijians that led to bloodshed and deaths on both sides. Dillon barely escaped with his life, but while doing so he also rescued 'a man named Martin Bushart (a native of Stettin in Prussia, who had been on the island)', [12] along with Bushart's Fijian wife and a lascar known as Joe. All three were subsequently put ashore on Tikopia, at their own request.

Twelve years later, Dillon, finding himself close to Tikopia, decided to see how Bushart had fared. For what followed, Dillon's own account is supplemented by a first-hand account written by the third officer on the *Saint Patrick*, the eighteen-year-old George Bayly.[13]

Bayly

Of all the people involved in this story, it was probably Bayly who knew Dillon best, because among his other duties he acted as a secretary to the captain, taking dictation from him as he paced the cabin. He provided this description.

> Few men were possessed of greater natural ability than Captain Peter Dillon, though I believe he was chiefly self-taught. His own logbook was a sort of phonetic curiosity. Whenever the letter 'q' occurred, in any word, he invariably wrote 'ru' after it; thus, in squally weather, the oft - repeated word was spelt 'sqrually'. Yet, with hands behind his back, he would pace the cabin and dictate an admirable letter on any subject. He was a very shrewd navigator by dead reckoning, worked the chronometers, but never troubled himself to obtain the longitude by lunar observations. He exacted the most implicit obedience from all on board, was

[10] Davidson, *Dillon.*

[11] Dillon, *Narrative.* The book runs to two volumes and a total of 800 pages. As a historical record it has to be treated with caution, as disputed events are described from a very personal point of view, but it also includes the texts of letters and documents that Davidson found to be accurate except in one specific case.

[12] Dillon, *Narrative*, v.1, p.38. Almost everyone involved seems to have a different spelling of this name, and these are retained in direct quotations. Elsewhere, the Bushart variant is used, as it was by Dillon, as being the most common present-day version.

[13] Bayly, *Sea life*

> impatient of the slightest deviation from his orders, and if such a thing did by any chance occur, would sometimes give way to a fit of ungovernable passion, when it was best to give him a wide berth if possible.[14]

From this and other descriptions in the book a picture emerges of a man of considerable intelligence and great competence, with a real feeling and respect for the islanders with whom he traded and whom he often employed on his own vessels, but with a character marred by lapses into ungovernable, but thankfully usually short-lived, rage. A voyage with such a man was bound to be stressful and when the *Saint Patrick* reached Calcutta in September 1826 Bayly was thankful to find a berth on a ship on which …

> … the officers were kind, my messmates sociable, the crew respectable, and their language free from the horrid blasphemy which continually assailed one's ears in the St. Patrick. Everything around made me feel happiness to which I had long been a stranger.[15]

Tikopia

Bayly's memoir is valuable not only for his descriptions of Dillon's character, but also for his account of the visit to Tikopia during which the relics of the LaPérouse expedition were first identified. He wrote:

> Several canoes were launched as soon as we were seen; the captain eagerly watched them as they approached. When the headmost one drew near, he exclaimed, 'There's the Lascar, standing up in the bow.' It was not for him, however, that Peter was nervously looking out, but for his old companion in the struggle for life at the Fiji Islands. Soon an excited exclamation escaped him; for at the stern of the third canoe sat Martin Buchert, looking stout and hearty, tattooed and clothed like the natives.[16]

Bushart and the lascar had, they learned, been welcomed by the islanders, and Bushart had even been honoured as a chief because of improvements he had made in their way of life. He said that he had seen no Europeans until twelve years after his arrival, when an English whaler had called at the island and remained in its vicinity for a month, employing him on board. If this was the whaler mentioned by Manby, Bushart's count would have had to be out by a year, but it would have been difficult to be accurate on an island where the seasons pass almost unmarked.

The visitors noticed almost immediately that the lascar had an old-fashioned silver sword-guard suspended by a string round his neck and that several of the other islanders had ornaments of European manufacture, and they learned from Bushart that these had come from an island that he wrote as Mallicolo but which was actually Vanikoro, about two days by canoe leeward of Tikopia.[17] For a few fishhooks the lascar sold the sword-guard to the *Saint Patrick*'s armourer, and Bayly then obtained it, for 'a jorum of grog', on his captain's behalf.

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[14] Ibid, p. 79

[15] Ibid, p. 196

[16] Ibid, p. 149

[17] Ibid, p.152.

After a short stay, and having persuaded Bushart to come with him, Dillon took his ship to Vanikoro but bad weather prevented him from landing and, short of provisions and in a vessel that was requiring the pumps to be in almost continual use just to remain afloat, he abandoned the attempt and continued to Calcutta.

Figure 1. The inscription on the sword-guard recovered from Tikopia. Dillon managed to convince himself that the monogram was that of LaPérouse himself, this seems improbable. Image from original of Gaimard's letter from Hobart to Louis de Freycinet. National Library of Australia MS Acc11.151, Letter 05

The *Research*

Once in Calcutta, Dillon lost no time in reporting his discovery. On the 13th he sent a letter to the Chief Secretary of the Government of Bengal that he ended by saying he was willing to return to the island to investigate further as soon as the *Saint Patrick* had been repaired. After some consideration, however, the HEIC decided to place him in command of their own survey ship, the teak-built *Research,* which had just returned from seeing action in the Anglo-Burmese war.[18] This decision was minuted in the *Proceedings of the Council of the HEIC* on 16 November 1826, which, unfortunately, also included the following:

> 7. The Vice-President in Council fully concurs in opinion with the Marine Board, that an officer should be attached to the expedition in the capacity of naturalist and mineralogist, as likewise to afford medical aid to those engaged in it; and, accordingly his Lordship in Council is pleased to resolve that Dr. R. Tytler, a surgeon on this establishment, who has, with a spirit of enterprize highly creditable to himself, volunteered his services on the occasion, shall be attached to the expedition in the above capacity.[19]

Combining the duties of a ship's surgeon with those of an expedition scientist was by no means unusual at the time, and had become standard practice in the French navy following a

[18] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HCS_Research_(1823). Accessed 23 January 2025

[19] Dillon, *Narrative*, v.1, pp. 56-7.

disastrous experience with professional scientists during the 1800–1803 Baudin expedition.[20] A letter of the same date to Tytler should have left him in no doubt as to his position on board. It concluded:

> In performance of the duties thus assigned to you, it is the wish of Government that you shall clearly understand that you are, in common with every other officer attached to the expedition, placed under the general command of Captain Dillon; and his Lordship in Council does not doubt that your cordial and most zealous endeavours will be exerted, to aid that officer in the final and successful accomplishment of the important object which has led to the undertaking.[21]

A further letter to Dillon from the Marine Board dated 23 December introduced another consideration, in the light of news that had only just been received. It stated that:

> 18. Since writing the above, the Board have been furnished by Government with a communication from Captain Cordier, the chief of the French establishments in Bengal, from which there is reason to believe that the French corvette l'Astrolabe was despatched in April last from Toulon, for the purpose of exploring the coasts of New Guinea and those of New Zealand, with a view to discover the spot where the Count de la Perouse perished.
>
> 19. You will very likely fall in with this vessel at sea, or at some of the ports or places at which you may touch, in which case you are desired to make the commander acquainted with the object and destination of the Research, and with the grounds for your supposing that the French frigates under the command of the Count de la Perouse were wrecked on or in the vicinity of the Mannicolo islands.[22]

This instruction can hardly have been welcomed by Dillon, who hoped for great things if he should be recognised as LaPérouse's discoverer, but the record shows that he did make some effort to comply. Unfortunately, the same letter also introduced a fatal ambiguity into the chain of command. In dealing with the possibility that no evidence of shipwreck would be found on Vanikoro, it stated that:

> … before you proceed to act on any information which may tend to delay your return to this port after an unsuccessful search of the Mannicolos, you will call a meeting, composed of Dr. Tytler, M. Chaigneau, the French officer who accompanies the expedition,[23] and your chief officer, at which the probability of success is to be discussed, and the whole subject maturely considered, and you will consider yourself

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[20] Benoit-Guyod, *Marine en bois*, p. 13

[21] Dillon, *Narrative,* v.1, p. 60.

[22] Dillon, *Narrative,* v.1, p. 74.

[23] Chaigneau (Eugène, not his more famous uncle, Jean-Baptiste) was fortuitously in Calcutta, returning to France after an unsuccessful attempt to be accredited as French consul in Vietnam (Laplace, *Voyage,* Salles, *Chaigneau*). He later held a junior post as a French consul in the Philippines, where his superior was married to the daughter of the Admiral Manby whose reports first sparked the renewed interest in France in the fate of LaPérouse.

> bound to abide by the decision of the meeting ; which decision, with the reasons on which it is grounded, is to be recorded in writing at full length, and communicated to the Board for the information. Should the voices be equal, you will of course have the casting vote, leaving the dissentient members the option of recording the reasons of their dissent.[24]

This also must have been a clause that irked Dillon, used as he was to total command of his own ships, but it applied only in a very specific circumstance and with tact and forbearance on all sides it need not have caused any problems. Unfortunately, as subsequent events were to show, neither Dillon nor Tytler were either tactful or forebearing. Their relationship began badly when, while still in Calcutta, Tytler treated Dillon for a cold and concluded he was insane, despite which he was still prepared to accompany him on a voyage likely to take the best part of a year, for much of that time in poorly charted and dangerous waters.

On 23 January the *Research* sailed from Calcutta, and just one week later d'Urville, having been resupplied in Sydney, set sail across the Tasman to begin charting the coasts of New Zealand. He had almost completed his work there by the time the *Research* arrived in Hobart, but Dillon's voyage had not been a happy one. Early on, he noted that:

> Being much annoyed for some time by the offensive odour intruding from Doctor Tytler's cabin into mine, which was separated from it by a thin Venetian only, I discovered that the scent was occasioned by the Doctor, his son, a tailor, a dhoby (or washerman), and one khansaman (or butler), in all five persons, with their personal baggage, &c. sleeping in the same apartment, which was only nine feet nine inches long by eight feet four inches wide.[25]

Also on board this crowded vessel were the first and second officers, the Prussian Bushart, the Frenchman Chaigneau, Tytler's assistant Helmick, a draughtsman named John Russell, seventy-three crewmen of various races and, as a passenger, a captain in the Bengal army named Speck. These were not conditions that would make for a happy ship, and relations between Dillon and Tytler deteriorated to such an extent that Tytler wrote a confidential letter to the first officer repeating his claim that Dillon was mad and urging that he be replaced. The second officer became aware of this letter and informed Dillon of its contents, but only after both the original and a copy made by Russell had been destroyed. Dillon then arrested Tytler and confined him temporarily to his cabin.

A Trial in Hobart

On 5 April the *Research* anchored off Hobart, with each party accusing the other, but it was Tytler and not Dillon who gained the ear of John Lewes Pedder, the Chief Justice of the colony, and for Dillon things went from bad to worse. Tytler's complaint of assault and false imprisonment went to trial, with testimony from Tytler, Helmick and the first officer on the one side, none of whom could be considered unbiased witnesses, and Dillon and the second

[24] Dillon, *Narrative.* v.1, p. 70.
[25] Dillon, *Narrative*, v.2, p. 111.

officer, Dudman, on the other.[26] For the key evidence, Tytler's letter to the first officer, the court had to rely on its author's verbal account but even so it should have ended the case in Dillon's favour, because it clearly showed Tytler intriguing to have Dillon removed from command. Even on a merchant ship, that would have been more than sufficient reason for a captain to take the sort of action that Dillon had taken. Bizarrely, Pedder described Dudman's reporting the existence of the letter to Dillon as 'wicked', but a judge more familiar with nautical matters might have considered it had been his duty to do so.

Pedder's conduct of the case was so bizarre that it is hard not to conclude that class played a part. Tytler, from a prominent and well-respected family of Edinburgh doctors and lawyers,[27] he would surely have regarded as 'one of us', whereas Dillon, a seaman from childhood, plying his trade in the essentially lawless South Pacific, was very definitely not. His summing up left little doubt that he was recommending a guilty verdict, and the jury duly convicted. Dillon was fined fifty pounds and was sentenced to two months imprisonment.

What happened next was as extraordinary as the verdict. After ten days Dillon was released and, despite the court having effectively found him either mad or incompetent, was restored to command of the *Research*. Ten days later he sailed from Hobart, without Tytler, who had simply abandoned his post and left the town, but with both Russell and Chagneau, who evidently thought Dillon sane enough to be entrusted with their lives.

D'Urville: an opportunity lost

When Dillon was leaving Hobart, d'Urville was in Tonga and about to sail for Fiji. Had he taken the most direct route for his planned circuit of Australia via the Bismarck Sea, he might have sighted Vanikoro and become the first European to set foot there since the loss of the *Recherche* and the *Boussole*. He had, however, very explicit instructions as to the places he was to visit, even to the dates on which he was expected to be there,[28] and these including improving the maps of the Loyalty Islands before heading north. It was pointed out that after doing that he would be crossing 'a little-known stretch of sea, in which it is to be presumed that there may be reefs or islands that have not yet been discovered', and he may have hoped that in doing so he would encounter the island described by Manby. It was not to be.

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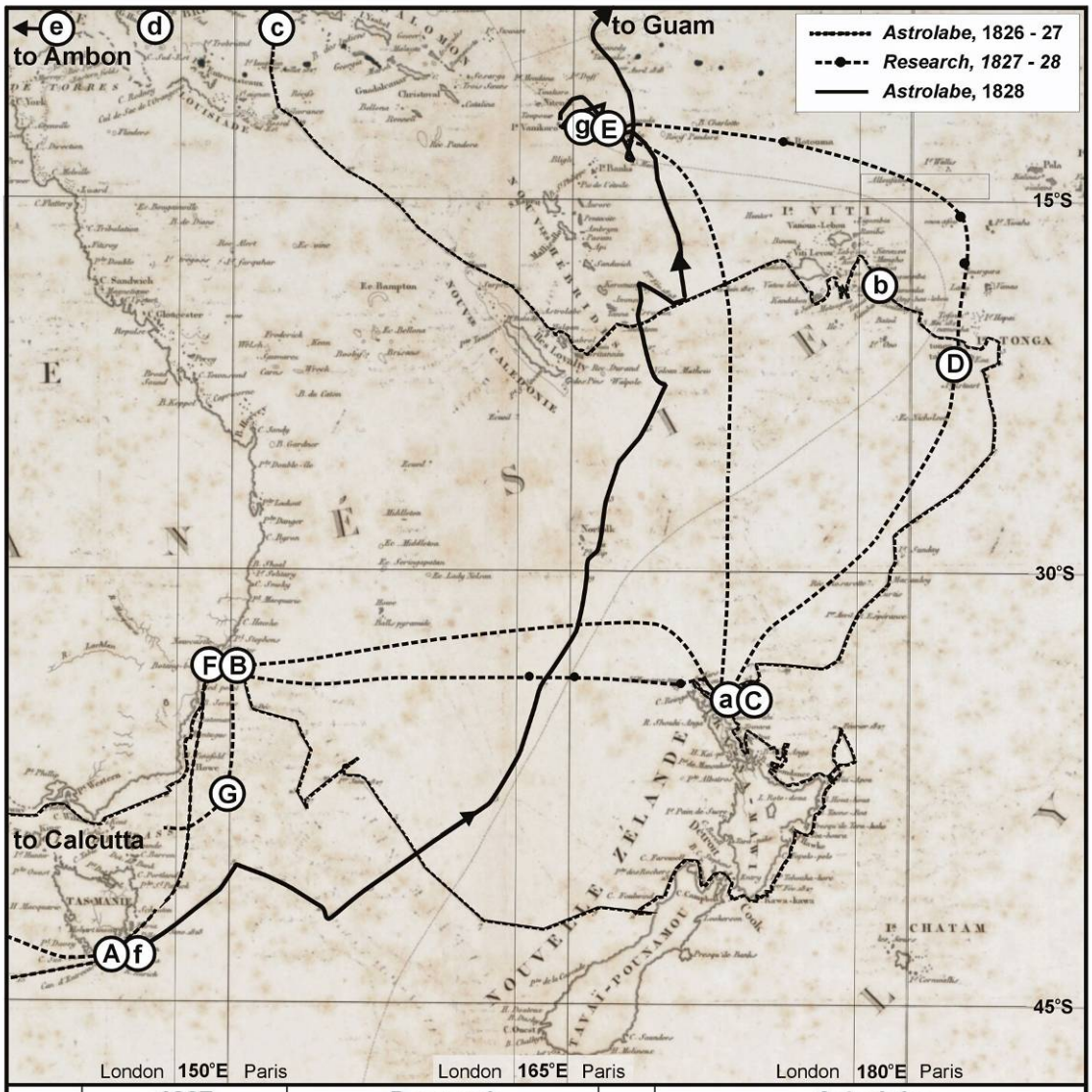
[26] Details of the trial can be found in newspaper reports reproduced by Dillon (*Narrative*, v.2, pp. 408-27), although Davidson notes (*Peter Dillon*, p. 221) that in at least one case he slightly modified the newspaper account in his favour. For an extended discussion of the case, but one that largely ignores the flaws in the prosecution, see Bourke & Lucadou-Wells (*King v Dillon*). See also 'A Kangaroo court', https://johnmilsom.online/

[27] Tytler's father's cousin Alexander had been appointed a Lord of Session in the Scottish Courts in 1802 under the judicial title of Lord Woodhouselee and his younger brother, John, who followed him to India, had a distinguished career as both a doctor and a scholar.

[28] d'Urville, *Voyage*, v.1, pp. lxvii-lxviii.



	1827	*Research*		*Astrolabe*
A	5 April	Arrives off Hobart	a	In Bay of Islands
B	4 June	Leaves Botany Bay	b	In sight of Moala Island, Fiji
C	24 July	Leaves Bay of Islands	c	Off Cape Orford, New Britain
D	15 August	Arrives off Tongatapu	d	Bismarck Sea, Papua New Guinea
E	8 October	Leaves Vanikoro	e	Off Ambon, Moluccas
	1828			
F	4 January	In Watson's Bay, Sydney	f	Leaves Hobart
G	22 February	En route to Calcutta	g	Arrives off Vanikoro

Figure 2. The routes taken by the Astrolabe and the Research in searching for traces of LaPérouse. Base map and route of the Astrolabe from the Carte de la partie de l'Ocean Pacifique: parcourue par la Corvette l'Astrolabe prepared by Dumont d'Urville and Victor Charles Lottin (National Library of Australia MAP NK 2456/74). The route of the Research is estimated from information available in Dillon's 'Narrative', with black circles indicating recorded estimates of position. Simultaneous locations of the Astrolabe and the Research at key moments in the years 1827–28 are indicated by, respectively, lower-case and upper-case letters. Longitude lines are shown for both the London and Paris prime meridians.

Dillon: a detour and a puzzle

It took Dillon much longer than might have been expected to reach Vanikoro. He sailed first to Sydney, where he was much better received than in Hobart and was able to take on more supplies, but after leaving Botany Bay on 4 Juhe 1827 he discovered that, thanks to neglect by his former first officer, he had insufficient water on board for the voyage he intended. He was also becoming increasingly concerned with the bevaviour of the Europeans in his crew, who had been selected by the HEIC and not by him. To remedy the situation, he went first to the Bay of Islands, in the extreme north of New Zealand, where a small European settlement was coalescing around an outpost extablished by Britain's Church Missionary Society and where he could certainly obtain water and possibly also interpreters and additional crew. So unsatisfactory was the state of affairs on board when he arrived that he wrote a letter to his lawyer in Hobart that was interpreted there as suggesting he was contemplating abandoning the search. This letter was circulated in Hobart as further evidence of his unreliability, and its contents were described to d'Urville in some detail when he visited the town.

Vanikoro

Whatever Dillon's state of mind when he arrived in the Bay of Islands, after a stay of three weeks he continued north, calling briefly at Tonga, where he received news of a disastrous visit by d'Urville,[29] and by 5 September 1827 he was off Tikopia, where he took interpreters on board. Three days later he anchored off Vanikoro, and then spent a month recovering fragments of the wrecked vessels, questioning the islanders and trading with them for items of salvage. He then left but, as d'Urville in his turn was to discover, the island was an unhealthy place for Europeans, and with barely sufficient crewmen fit enough to work the ship, he headed directly back to the Bay of Islands, the nearest place where the invalids might recover. He arrived there on 5 November.

By sailing directly to New Zealand from Vanikoro, Dillon was in danger of breaking his promise to return Bushart and the interpreters to Tikopia. Happily, however, in the Bay of Islands he found a trading brig, the *Governor Macquarie*, about to leave for Sydney and was able to persuade her captain, for the enormous sum of five hundred pounds sterling, to make the enormous loop north needed to take Bushart and the interpreters home.[30]

The news reaches Europe

When the *Governor Macquarie* left the Bay of Islands, it carried not only the passengers for Tikopia but also the draughtsman, John Russell, who had chosen this method of returning to Sydney. It was a long way round but perhaps he, like Bayly before him, had found prolonged close contact with Dillon unendurable. With him he took a letter he had written to his uncle, Sir William Betham, an antiquarian and occupant of the heraldic post of Ulster King of Arms. Dated New Zealand, Nov. 7, 1827, it read as follows:

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[29] He fell out with the Tongans and at one stage used his cannon against them. There were deaths on both sides (d'Urville, *Voyage*, v.1, chap. XXIII).

[30] Dillon, *Narrative*, v.2, p. 339.

My dear Sir William,

We have just arrived here after a voyage in search of la Pérouse, and I think we have been successful. Both his ships were wrecked the same night on a reef off the Mannicolo Island, which is situated in latitude 11 deg. 40 min. south, longitude 170 deg. east.* One ship sunk in deep water immediately after striking, and all on board perished; the other was thrown on the reef, and some of the crew escaped, who saved sufficient materials from the wreck to build a small vessel, in which, with the exception of two men who continued on the island, and those who were killed by the natives, they left the place about five months after their ship wreck; their ultimate fate is still unknown. Of the two men who remained, one quitted the island in a canoe, the other died about three years since.

We have obtained clear proof that the ships wrecked were French, having found and secured many pieces of silver and copper stamped with the fleur-de-lis. We have also two bells, one having on it an inscription—BAZIN M'A FAIT; on the other are the royal arms of France.

We have also found a part of a plated candlestick, on which is engraved a shield with the following arms: – Azure a saltire; in chief a mullet, and in base a crescent or. Supporters two lions rampant regardant. The shield is surmounted with a viscount's coronet. We have searched all the neighbouring islands, to ascertain the fate of the small vessel and her crew, if perchance any of them might still exist, but without success.

*The latitude of our anchorage at Mannicolo was 11°41′S., and the longitude 167°5′E.

Betham received the letter on 9 March 1828 and, despite living in Dublin, succeeded in circulating its contents promptly and widely, and in the same month a generally accurate translation was published in Paris.[31] This was very probably the first news of the discovery to reach France, but if it was not proof enough of Dillon's success, a further note appeared in the *BSg* a few months later.[32]

News of La Pérouse.

The Sydney Gazette informs us that the vessel Research, Captain Dillon, employed by the East India Company for exploration, arrived last January in New South Wales from the Malicolo Islands, where she had been sent eighteen months earlier to ascertain as far as possible the fate of the unfortunate and celebrated La Pérouse. Captain Dillon appears to have made numerous discoveries; and he is said to have in his possession various proofs of the tragic fate of this French sailor and his companions.

[31] The report appeared in the *BSg,* v.59, pp. 161-2, March1828. The version given here is the original English one, as recorded in Dillon (*Narrative*, v.2, pp. 401-2))

[32] *BSg,* v.64/65, pp.136-7, August/September 1828.

> Although the Research is moored a great distance from the city, she is visited daily by people eager to see and examine the wreckage of the two French vessels. Captain Dillon has set these precious objects out in a special place, which, as soon as they are seen, leave no doubt as to their origin. Of all the items that primarily attracted attention, it was the varnished part of the stern that seemed the most interesting. The wood of this part of the ship bears the marks of the time it was built. The fleurs-de-lis are very well preserved; and it is certain that this piece was part of the ornate work on the stern of one of the vessels, although the gilding could not withstand the effects of time for nearly half a century.
>
> We have a small fragment of this relic, which we took the liberty of taking in order to classify it among other curiosities that will adorn the Colonial Museum as soon as it is established. We hope that Captain Dillon will forgive us this theft in view of the motive that led us to commit it. It is a piece of fir, which must have served only as an ornament. We also intend to enrich the museum's collection with a bell bearing the inscription: BAZIN M'A FAIT. The fragment of the porcelain tableware is of an antique shape and thickness, the like of which we have not previously seen. If we had seen La Pérouse ourselves, we could be no more convinced than we are that these objects were aboard the vessels he commanded. The candlestick base, the sword, the silver saucer and the Spanish dollar are irrefutable proof of the fate of the late navigator. We have learned from the Frenchman aboard the Research that Captain Dillon deserves the highest praise for the coolness and intrepidity he displayed on the island of Malicolo and the skill he showed in avoiding the reefs surrounding that island.

Following publication of these two letters, there should have been no doubt in anyone's mind that Dillon had actually been to the place where LaPérouse had been wrecked, and that he was the first European to do so. The final sentence of the report is especially significant, with Chaigneau bearing independent witness to the fact that, whatever his personality problems, Dillon, far from being mad, was an extremely competent navigator.

D'Urville in Hobart

When Dillon landed on Vanikoro, d'Urville was far away in Ambon, and it was not until he reached Hobart, on 19 December 1827, that he received news of the *Research*, initially from the pilot who came on board to take him up the Derwent.

> The pilot Mansfield, having learned that our mission was to make discoveries and explorations in the South Sea, asked me if I had had any news of M. de Lapérouse. On my negative reply, he informed me in a confused fashion that the captain of an English ship had recently found the remains of M. de Lapérouse's vessel on one of the islands of the Pacific Ocean, that he had brought back some of the debris, and even that he had brought back one of the sailors of this expedition, who was of Prussian origin. He added that this merchant captain, sent back there by the governor

of Bengal to look for the other shipwrecked men, had anchored off Hobart Town six months before my arrival, and that the Prussian in question was still on board.

This story, told rather incoherently, seemed to me at first to be nothing more than a tale made up for fun and fit only to be relegated to the rank of all those others that, for about forty years, have succeeded one another concerning M. de Lapérouse. However, the confident tone of the pilot led me to question M. Kelly[33] on this subject. This officer, who had formerly commanded merchant ships, and who did not lack expertise in his profession, took up the pilot's story in a clearer and more positive manner.

I then learned that M. Dillon, captain of a small merchant ship, had indeed found reliable information on Tikopia of the wrecking of LaPérouse at Vanikoro, and that he had brought back a sword hilt which he thought had belonged to the captain. On his arrival in Calcutta, M. Dillon had reported this to the governor of the colony, who had sent him back with a ship fitted out at the expense of the East India Company, to visit the exact place of the wreck and rescue any Frenchmen who might have survived. M. Kelly added that he knew M. Dillon personally, and that he had full and entire confidence in his statements.

You can imagine with how much interest I listened to these reports. The veil had finally been lifted which had so long covered the tragic fate of LaPérouse and his companions. A happy chance had unexpectedly put an obscure Englishman in the way of this important discovery, and at that very moment he would, according to all appearances, be at the scene of this great catastrophe. How much I envied his good fortune! How I deplored the fate that had not allowed me, in the course of my voyage, any knowledge of M. Dillon's discoveries on Tikopia! On the other hand, none of my traveling companions believed these reports, and they hardly spoke of them except in jest, as if they were a completely imagined tale.

19th - We received an early visit from M. Franckland, aide-de-camp to the governor.[34] This young officer, who spoke very good French, came to present to me the compliments of Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur, governor of the colony, and at the same time his offers of service, assuring me that he was willing to obtain for me everything I might need. In my turn, I sent M. Lottin to the governor to present my compliments to him and to discuss security. This officer received a very honest reception.

I had hastened to question M. Franckland about M. Dillon's mission. He answered me, laughingly, that he was a madman, an adventurer, that his alleged discovery was a mere fabrication, and that he had been involved, during his time in the colony, in a very dishonourable affair, for which he had been legally condemned and imprisoned.

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[33] James Kelly (1791-1859) had gone to sea at an early age and, having made a number of sealing voyages, was appointed harbourmaster in Hobart in 1819 (ADoB).

[34] George Frankland (1800-38) was at this time surveyor-general to the Tasmania colony and himself a controversial figure, generally respected but possessed of 'a sensitivity and a pride amounting almost to arrogance' (ADoB).

> This version singularly dampened my hopes, but M. Kelly brought me the newspaper in which M. Dillon's report of his discovery in 1827 at Tikopia was set out at length. It is this same report that appeared in December in the newspapers of Europe, and which M. Dillon has reproduced in the account of his voyage.
>
> After having read this report carefully, and having carefully assessed its contents, it appeared to me to possess, in its details, a character of sincerity which led me to think that it could not be devoid of all foundation. Consequently, from that moment on, my decision was definitely taken. I would abandon my further projects in New Zealand and take the *Astrolabe* immediately to Vanikoro, which was still for us only M. Dillon's Mallicolo. I was convinced that it was essential for the glory of our mission, for the honour of the navy and even of the French nation, to ascertain what was true in these reports or even establish their falsity.
>
> I faced a difficulty. M. Dillon had intentionally omitted, no doubt for fear of being forestalled, the true position of Vanikoro and even the direction he had followed to go there from Tikopia. He did, however, state that it was only two days' journey from Tikopia in a canoe under sail, which put me on the way. The winds in this part of the Pacific Ocean usually blow from SE or NE, and Vanikoro could therefore be only forty or fifty leagues to either the NW or the SW of Tikopia. In the first case, the island must belong to the Santa Cruz group; in the second, to the Banks group. These two groups, almost as unknown as each other, were also along the route that Lapérouse would have taken in going from the Friendly Isles[35] to the coasts of New Guinea. I could also hope that by going first to Tikopia, the inhabitants of this island would give me the information needed to get me to Vanikoro.[36]

If d'Urville had any doubts as to whether he should himself go to Vanikoro, these contradictory opinions would have convinced him of its necessity. Frankland's scepticism and his statement that Dillon had been imprisoned in Hobart as a consequence of *'a very dishonourable affair'* would have given him pause, but the fact that Kelly, unlike Frankland an experienced sailor, had no doubts would have inclined him to believe that the report was essentially correct. Then, just a few days later, he had another meeting that muddied the waters still further. He …

> … received a visit from Captain Welsch and Dr Ross, publisher and editor of the Hobart Town Gazette, who gave me most of the latest issues of his newspaper; allowing me to quickly catch up on the news of the day. He asked me for information concerning the voyage of the Astrolabe, and I asked M. Gaimard to provide this, as a means of quickly and reliably conveying news of the expedition to France. A hundred days are commonly enough to keep London abreast of happenings in the colony. A piece of the news given to me by M. Ross keenly

[35] Tonga.
[36] d'Urville, *Voyage*, v.5, 8-12.

excited my full attention. Rumour had it that M. Gellibrand[37] had just received, via a ship arriving yesterday from New Zealand, a letter from M. Dillon, dated from the Bay of Islands, informing him that he is obliged to abandon his voyage and return to Calcutta. M. Welsch, seeing the great interest I had in confirming this rumour, was kind enough to take me to M. Gellibrand, who had been M. Dillon's lawyer in his suit against Dr Tytler, and who was still his attorney in Hobart. He received me with the greatest politeness and was kind enough to communicate to me the entire part of the letter in question that related to the Research's mission. It was dated July 18 and had truly been written from the Bay of Islands. In essence, M. Dillon reported that he had been unable to obtain the naturalist he intended to embark in Sydney, and that he had been surprised and dismayed to find that the water used in Hobart Town had not been replaced. He complained strongly of the conduct of M. Blake, his former second in command, and of the crew in general, and concluded by declaring that the season being late and the adverse monsoon no longer allowing him to go to Tikopia, he was being forced to return immediately to Bengal.

Although I had myself a low opinion of M. Dillon's talents, based on the information I could gather in the colony, this last assertion on his part seemed to me so absurd that I conceived doubts about the origin of the letter. Indeed, anyone who has sailed in this portion of the Pacific Ocean knows that there is no kind of monsoon that can prevent a ship from going from New Zealand to Tikopia. I therefore asked M. Gellibrand if this letter was really from M. Dillon; he replied that the writing was not his, since he could hardly write, but that the signature was indeed his, and that he had no doubt about the authenticity of the news it contained. Thereupon, Captain Welsch, who had not yet formally given his opinion of the merits of this navigator, joked that M. Dillon was indeed too ignorant to have forged the accounts he had circulated of his discoveries at Tikopia, and that this, more than anything else, led him to place some confidence in them. M. Gellibrand, who had had the opportunity, more than anyone else in the colony, to study M. Dillon's character, did not hesitate to believe his depositions to be based on truth, with the exception of a few dubious exaggerations. The reader can imagine the singular position in which I was placed by such contradictory opinions. Sometimes full of hope, I saw myself already on the scene of a great tragedy and called upon to give to the souls of our unfortunate compatriots the last testimonies of the sorrow of all France. Sometimes, abandoning these high hopes, I came to see M. Dillon's stories as so much nonsense, and myself as running the risk of abandoning a glorious work to devote myself to a quest as pointless as it was perilous. I may add that all my traveling companions adopted, without exception, the second of these opinions, and that they mentioned Tikopia and Vanikoro only in jest.[38]

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[37] Joseph Gellibrand had been Tasmania's first Attorney-General, but was removed from office after criticising the government of the colony (DoAB). He had not only unsuccessfully defended Dillon against Tytler's law suit, but had continued to act as his legal representative.

[38] d'Urville, *Voyage*, v.5, 20-23.

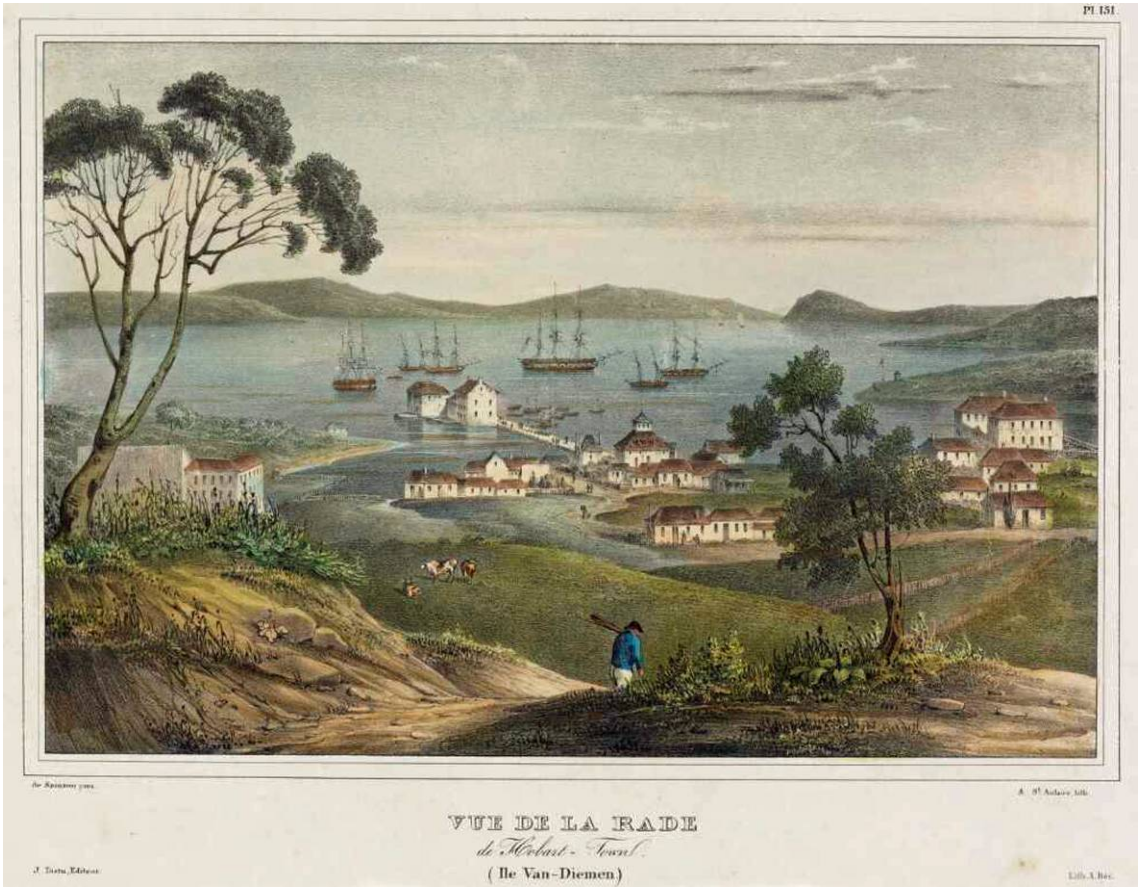

Figure 3. Hobart roads, viewed from above the town. Hand-coloured engraving by Achille StAulaire, based on an 1828 drawing by Louis Auguste de Sainson. National Library of Australia, PIC Volume 578 #U1860 NK3340.

The letter was the one that Dillon had sent from New Zealand before he went north to Vanikoro, and what Gellibrand told d'Urville of his problems with water and his crew corresponds sufficiently closely with what Dillon himself reported[39] to confirm that it was genuine. It is, however, simply not credible that, having come so far, Dillon would have ever considered returning to Calcutta without having made a very serious attempt to land on Vanikoro. Did Gellibrand misunderstand or misrepresent the contents of the letter, which d'Urville evidently did not himself see? That seems unlikely, and the possibility that it was deliberately intended to mislead has to be considered, but if so, who? Not d'Urville, surely? Dillon might well have been concerned that the *Astrolabe*, which he knew had headed north from the Bay of Islands three months before he got there, might visit Vanikoro by pure chance, but he would also have known that there was nothing he could do to prevent that happening.

There is one clear possibility. The letter might have been intended to mislead Dillon's enemies. He might have worried that there were some in Hobart who thought his report at least worth investigating and that, because of the delays he had suffered and might yet have to suffer, might have been able to overtake him if they left quickly and went direct. It was in

[39] Dillon, *Narrative*, v.1, Chap. VI.

his interest that anyone who might be considering a visit to Vanikoro would also assume that there was no need to hurry.

Gaimard in Hobart

Among those on the *Astrolabe* who 'hardly spoke of Tikopia and Vanikoro except in jest' was Joseph-Paul Gaimard, whose letters to Louis de Freycinet were promptly forwarded to the *BSg*. They were often the first news publicly available in France of the progress of the *Astrolabe*. Just one letter was sent from Hobart, on Christmas Day 1827, and in it, after a vivid description of the dangers encountered by the *Astrolabe* while surveying the coasts of New Zealand, and a brief description of Hobart (a pretty township on the west bank of the North River), Gaimard summarised the new information of the search for LaPérouse. The letter was published in full in the *BSg* the following October and would have been accepted in France as a full and fair account but unfortunately, at least as far as Dillon was concerned, it was neither of these things.

> It had been M. d'Urville's intention to complete the survey of New Zealand on his way north and then take on supplies in Port Jackson before going to the Torres Strait, but documents we have seen here concerning the place where LaPérouse must have perished, and the hope of finding some survivors, is prompting him to by-pass New Zealand and go directly to the Espiritu Santo islands. We are sure this information about LaPérouse is new to you, but since there was enough evidence to make the English East India Company send a ship from Calcutta, we must believe that the facts are not in doubt. Captain Dillon brought to Calcutta a man who had known two elderly Frenchmen on Tikopia or Malicolo who had escaped the sinking and the massacre of the two crews, and he planned to bring back a sword bearing the inscription shown. This decided two sensible Frenchmen, Dr. Tytler and M. Chaigneau, to take part in Captain Dillon's expedition. Unfortunately, some things the captain did made him appear almost mad. For example, he so much abused and maltreated Dr. Tytler, who was appointed by the company as the chronicler of this humanitarian expedition, that when he reached Hobart he was sentenced by a civil court to two months in prison and fined fifty louis. What we tell you here we have seen published and rely, moreover, on the Chief Justice. Dr Tytler has disembarked, and Captain Dillon, having finally arrived in New Zealand, does not know what to do next. He has written that because the monsoon does not allow him to go to the islands, he will return to Calcutta.[40]

Tytler, who was, of course, English (or Scottish), not French, had indeed disembarked and disappeared. The letter to which Gaimard referred was the overly pessimistic one Dillon wrote on his way to Vanikoro. Coincidentally, he was indeed in New Zealand in December 1927, but on his way back to Sydney.

[40] *BSg,* v.59, pp. 161-2, March 1828.

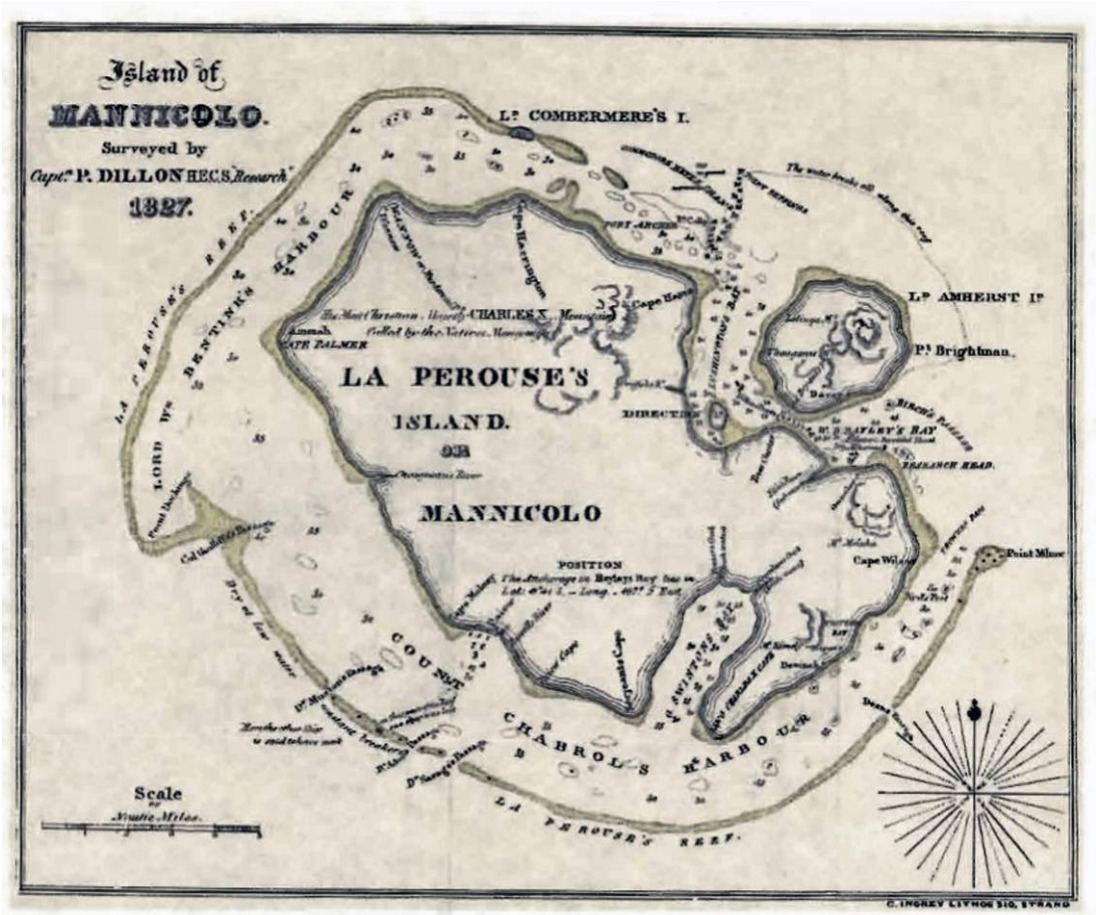

Figure 4. Dillon's map of Vanikoro (insert between pages 172 and 173 of Dillon, Narrative, v.2). The ships of LaPérouse were wrecked in the passages through the reef off the south-west coast.

Gaimard on Vanikoro

Gaimard's next letter was sent from Port-Louis on Mauritius (the *Ile de France*), and covered the whole of the month spent on Vanikoro, providing a more concise but less detailed account than that given by d'Urville.[41] Sickness spread rapidly on the *Astrolabe* during the stay, prompting d'Urville to abandon all further exploration and head directly for Guam, which, like the Bay of Islands, was a place where there was some prospect that those on board who were seriously ill might recover.

> We must tell you, dear Commandant, about the work done by the Astrolabe since her departure from the Terre de Diémen, up to her arrival off the Ile de France. Leaving Hobart-Town on the 5th of January, M. d'Urville sailed directly for Tikopia, following Captain Dillon's rather vague instructions. He was taken with the idea of accurately determining the location of the Ile Matthieu[42], which lies at 22°30.5′S, 169°25.5′E and is just a volcanic rock, with smoke everywhere.

[41] The period covered by Gaimard in eight manuscript pages occupies the whole of Chapters XXXIII- XXXVI (pp. 97-286) and the notes on pp. 303-362 (mainly written by Jean-René Quoy) of D'Urville, *Astrolabe*, v.5.

[42] Matthew Island is one of two volcanic islands on the Hunter subduction zone (the other is Hunter Island, some 70 km to the east). D'Urville did indeed pass this island, on 26 January 1828, and the description he provided has been accepted as evidence of an eruption being actually in progress.

We sighted the small Mitre Island, then Chery, and finally Tikopia, where we hoped to obtain information on the island where LaPérouse was shipwrecked. As soon as we were near enough, the Prussian Blucher[43] was one of the first people to come on board, having arrived just ten days before from New Zealand on a ship chartered by Captain Dillon expressly to return him there. At first he offered to come with us to the island where the ships were wrecked, which the inhabitants of Tikopia call Vanikoro, but then, after having returned ashore for his wife and belongings, he changed his mind. The only information the Commandant had from him was the direction of the island that we were looking for, that it was one day's sailing from Tikopia, that Dillon had found it extremely difficult to effect a passage through the reefs and that many of his crew became ill. Two Englishmen who were on Tikopia, having arrived there in some unknown fashion,[44] came with us, and also five of the islanders.[45]

The island is quite high, less than 30 miles in circumference and without harbours. There are about 500 inhabitants, of the true handsome Polynesian race, which is to say the same people found on New Zealand, Tonga and the Sandwich Islands. We also saw the lascar mentioned by Captain Dillon. Nothing could persuade him to come with us, leaving an island where, it seems, he had found peace. His information about the two possible survivors of the LaPérouse expedition was very vague. He gave the Commandant a letter that had been left by Captain Dillon when he had visited Tikopia and taken Blucher on board to help him find the island where the ships had been wrecked. All it contained was an indication of the route he was going to take. Do not suppose that this letter was the expression of an unselfish desire to help us in this generous enterprise; it was simply a precaution taken by a man who feared finding himself stranded in a place where an experienced navigator had been shipwrecked, and who wanted to leave some information behind. The proof of this is that, after having succeeded and no longer fearing any danger, M. Dillon was careful not to make his actions known to M. d'Urville via Blucher, whom he had sent back to Tikopia.[46] We cannot make his petty and mercenary conduct sufficiently widely known. They were certainly not the instructions he would have received from the Honourable East India Company, which financed his mission. Because of this we had effectively to find for ourselves the island and the harbour we were seeking. The

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[43] Gaimard's very personal spelling, Perhaps, remembering Waterloo, he thought that would be a more correct version for a Prussian. It is, in fact, a name most common in the German south.

[44] According to d'Urville (*Voyage*, v.5, pp. 113-4), there were three English sailors on Tikopia, who had arrived on the island since Dillon's visit. He described them as deserters from the whaler *Harriet* but according to the Whaling History website (https://whalinghistory.org/?s=BV040230) they had been left behind by accident. Two of them, named James Williams and Thomas Hamilton (which d'Urville wrote as Hambilton) joined the crew of the *Astrolabe*. The *Harriet* had made an earlier visit to the area and may well have been the whaler mentioned by Bushart and the source of Manby's report published in the BSg.

[45] These were islanders from Vanikoro, returning home.

[46] Bushart had returned to Tikopia at his own request and not because he had been 'sent' there by Dillon. He seems to have been less than helpful to d'Urville, but that could not have been due to any prompting by Dillon, who was already on his way back to Calcutta from Sydney.

> island we sailed towards, which is surrounded by reefs that extend far offshore, was the one named Pitt by Captain Edwards, and is also the one seen by d'Entrecasteaux. The two tribes that inhabit it belong to the Negro race. Far from being communicative like the Polynesians, they are on the contrary very mistrustful and do not come out to any ships that they see: we therefore had to go ashore in our own boats. This was how we learned from the villagers that the place we where we had just arrived was where Captain Dillon had anchored and that this Ile de la Recherche was also the island of the shipwreck.

Yet again, Gaimard was doing Dillon less than justice, and quite outrageously so. The letter left on Tikopia may have been vague, but was written before the Irishman had set foot on Vanikoro, at a time when he knew scarcely more about the island than did d'Urville; on his previous visit he had seen it only from a distance. After departing Vanikoro he had no opportunity to leave a more informative letter on Tikopia, because he had a ship full of very sick sailors he was taking to New Zealand's healthier climate as quickly as possible. It was not only its surrounding reefs that made Vanikoro a potentially lethal place for Europeans to visit, as Gaimard noted in the continuation of his letter.

> The Astrolabe then entered a broad bay, which was unsheltered and where she could have been wrecked in bad weather. We had to secure her before we began our search, and to do this we had to pick our way along narrow winding channels through the reefs. This difficult feat, accomplished under a blazing sun, took several days. The place where the two ships had been wrecked was at the far side of the island, at a distance of about six leagues, necessitating wearisome and repeated journeys by boat.
>
> There are actually two islands, almost touching and one smaller than the other. Together they are about twelve leagues in circumference, and are surrounded at a distance of two or three miles by reefs on which the sea breaks heavily. The inhabitants are black, with frizzy hair and remarkable flattened temples. They may number a thousand in all, divided into seven or eight tribes that are constantly at war with each other. They are pitiable, and barely cultivate even what nature provides for them. They have no particular name for their Island; their ideas do not extend to a collective name, and they know nothing of districts. Vanikoli is the name of one village and that was enough for their neighbours, the Tikopians, to apply to the whole island. It was only by dint of presents that we obtained any information about the places where the French ships were wrecked, and we needed all the help of our English interpreters.
>
> Our first concern was to ask whether there were any surviving castaways: the answer was negative and the hopes that we had held in that respect were shattered. The oldest islanders barely remembered seeing white men and their memories of the shipwreck were confused.
>
> One of the ships was lost in a narrow passage between the reefs three miles from the shore off the Païou district. There seems to be nothing left of the wooden parts of the

ship, but the metal objects that make up a ship's armament, including the lead pigs that served as ballast, the anchors and the cannon, were all close together, which seemed to indicate that the ship was not wrecked in a storm. Among the objects we recovered were a cannon, some shot and a large anchor that could only be brought on board the corvette with difficulty. We obtained from the islanders all the small items they had collected, among which were parts of scientific instruments for testing physical properties, but we were not fortunate enough to find more than one example of the French coat of arms, although we are all morally convinced that the canons and especially, from their weights, that the shot came from our arsenals. We would have continued our search in the hope of obtaining more satisfactory results if disease and continuous rain had not forced us to leave this dangerous island.

It seems from the information we obtained that one of LaPérouse's ships sank on the reefs and was lost with all hands, and that the second was also lost a short distance away but that some of its crew might have swum ashore. These would be the men who later dispersed among the neighbouring islands. It is also likely that many would have been killed coming ashore, and that depression and disease destroyed those who remained on Vanikoro.

From our examination of the area, we can make the following two suggestions concerning the fate of La Pérouse. First, that one of the ships struck a reef in bad weather while signalling a warning to the second, and that the second had gone too far to have any hope of safety except by entering the passage and was lost there; or secondly, that the second ship might have voluntarily entered the gap in the reef In the hope of helping those on the first, and run aground. The first idea seems the more likely. We saw no debris from the second ship, and perhaps there is none, if it sank beyond the line of the breakers.

Thus ended that most unlucky of all the expeditions, which a fatal destiny seemed to pursue across the seas, ending in appalling catastrophe. It seems that this fate was shared by all who took part. How many died on D'Entrecasteaux's expedition! Dillon had many sick, and as for us, our Commander-in-Chief, the officers and the crew were afflicted with terrible fevers, to which several later succumbed.

Nonetheless, before leaving this land of tribulation, we raised with our weakened hands a simple monument to the memory of LaPérouse and his companions, who died as true martyrs to science. It was dedicated with the volley of musketry and a 21-gun salute. Woe to any whaling ship that, lured by the hope of some profit, is attracted to Vanikoro to salvage debris from the ships of LaPérouse. By staying there, such ships, which have small crews, will risk also succumbing to the effects of disease, which will quickly place them at the mercy of the hostile inhabitants.

To escape we had to find an easier passage than the one by which we had entered, and after staying there for twenty-eight days we finally left Vanikoro. We gained there the certainty that the island of Tomago[47] (where he anchored with his

[47] Taumako, the largest of the Duff Islands, about 200 km north of Vanikoro. It is not clear who the 'he' who anchored there was.

> squadron), actually exists. Several inhabitants of Vanikoro who had been there told us about the geography of the Island, which for a long time we had taken to be Rotuma.
>
> M. d'Urville, our commandant, had intended to go to Port Jackson to take on provisions and then return to the Torres Strait but, faced with headwinds and a crew so ill that there were often only five men on deck, including the officer of the watch, he decided to head for the most suitable place for them to recover and sailed for the Marianas. As we were passing through the Carolines, the weather allowed us to complete the mapping of the island of Hogoleu.[48]

The erecting of a memorial to LaPérouse on Vanikoro (which probably never even occurred to Dillon) may be one of the many reasons for d'Urville still sometimes being credited with the discovery of the place where the *Boussole* and *Astrolabe* were wrecked. It is surprising that Gaimard said nothing in his letters about his own role, because he spent some time ashore probing the memories of the islanders. That this was not an entirely unwelcome chore is suggested by a passage in the *Mémoires* of his colleague, Jean-René Quoy.

> When I was seasick, which was quite often, I dictated, stretched out in my cabin, to friend Gaimard in his. No longer having the islanders' womenfolk to pursue, he became a conscientious worker. Our whimsical artist Sainson has prepared a most delightful erotic album on this subject.[49]

It is a great pity that this album seems not to have survived, and Gaimard suffered for his enthusiasm, being too ill to go with the *Astrolabe* when she left Mauritius. He travelled to France some weeks later on a ship that did not stop for science on the way, and arrived before d'Urville, who reached Marseille on 25 March 1829.

Aftermath

On 7 April 1828 the *Research* arrived back in a Calcutta to which, coincidentally, Bayly had returned just in time to see the ship coming up the Hooghly. He immediately 'jumped into the dinghy and proceeded on board the Research, where I was warmly received by Captain and Mrs. Dillon, and spent the evening listening to the details of the expedition'.[50] These details were also, of course, provided to the expedition's sponsors, and by 10 May it had been decided that Dillon should go to London, taking with him his trophies from Vanikoro and Tikopia. He was in England by 26 October and on 6 February 1829 he was in Paris, where he was greeted as a celebrity. On 2 March he had an audience with the king, Charles X, was knighted and was inducted into the order of the Legion of Honour, but in the eyes of many Frenchmen his visit was eclipsed by the return of *Astrolabe*, which moored in the roads of Marseille just three weeks later. He was to spend much of the rest of his life counteracting the rumours, which had begun to circulate even before his visit to Paris, that it was d'Urville , not

[48] Usually identified with Chuuk, although at the beginning of the 19th century Chuuk and Ponape were often confused, and the positions shown on contemporary maps suggest Ponape.

[49] Quoy, *Mémoires*, pp. 168–9.

[50] Bayly, *Sea-life*, p. 203

he, who had first located the wrecks. A translation from a Paris paper dated 12 January that appeared in the London *Morning Chronicle* on 15 January began:

> La Pérouse.— Captain Dumont d'Urville, commanding the Astrolabe, who was sent to look after the remains of the expedition under Perouse, appears to have found out the spot where he was shipwrecked. It was on the south coast of the island of Vanekoro, and not Malicolo, that both ships were lost on the rocks, during a very dark night.

In his book, Dillon wrote of this :

> I was surprised and grieved at the tenour of this communication, from which it certainly appeared that M. d'Urville was to be held up as the first discoverer of la Pérouse's fate, and of the evidences of the place of his shipwreck, and that no share in the credit of these 'glorious toils' was to be allowed to myself or to the Government of India, whose successful exertions, and my previous visit to the same spot, and discovery of still more conclusive proofs, were thus entirely passed over.
>
> But what had chiefly contributed to confirm me in the impression under which the above letter was written, was my knowledge of the efforts that had been made by those at Van Diemen's Land, who were envious of the fame I had acquired, to create a belief that the accounts I had given of la Pérouse's island were a fiction.
>
> The consequence was, that I retorted on Captain d'Urville as the supposed author of the paragraph, who I then understood was at Toulon. I have subsequently learnt, however, that Captain d'Urville had not yet returned to France, and was ignorant of the newspaper account in question. That, so far from endeavouring by such paragraphs to assume for himself the sole credit of the discovery at my expense, he had in all his correspondence with the minister of Marine candidly acknowledged my services, and my having been at Mannicolo six months prior to himself; and that, in consequence of this favourable opinion of my exertions, he had even, in compliment, named a cape on his chart after me.
>
> As such courtesy on his part merited a different return from me than that which the course pursued by the newspaper paragraph had unfortunately called forth, I gladly embrace this opportunity of doing justice to this enterprising navigator, whose labours have been the means of adducing the strongest corroborative proofs of the truth of my discovery of the actual fate of la Pérouse.[51]

That should have been the end of the matter, but it was not. Dillon's hopes of advancement in the service of France were shattered when, in July 1830, Charles X was summarily ejected from the throne of France, to be replaced by the Duke of Orléans ruling as Louis Philippe I. Like every explorer who has sailed away beyond the horizon and never been heard from again, LaPérouse had become a figure of myth and high romance. Inevitably, it seemed to the French public only fitting that the eventual discoverer of his fate should be someone equally

[51] Dilon, *Narrative*, v.2, p. 405-6.

romantic, a national hero who had taken his ships further south than anyone before him and had returned safely, only to suffer a tragic death in Paris.[52] An almost accidental discovery by an undistinguished trader with a criminal record, who was, moreover, a foreigner, was simply unacceptable to some, and the myth has been perpetuated alongside the truth for a hundred years. It even appears in the august pages of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.[53]

A final twist to the story was recorded by Gaimard in a letter sent to Louis de Freycinet on 7 August 1830 from a Paris in the throes of revolution.

> M. d'Urville has arranged for two American vessels that were at LeHavre to go to Cherbourg to be at the disposal of the royal family. Their destination is not known.[54]

D'Urville did rather more than merely arrange the transport. An engraving by Joseph Decembre and Edmond Allonier published in the 1864 *Dictionnaire populaire illustré* shows him personally ushering the royal couple aboard. When they left for England, Dillon's hopes of employment and advancement left with them.

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Note: The initials ADoB denote information extracted from the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (1967), which was placed online in 1967 and was accessed on 6 April 2025.

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[52] D'Urville died with his wife and children in France's first rail accident. They were on a train that caught fire and were unable to escape because the carriage doors were locked.

[53] Entry for LaPérouse, *ADoB* .

[54] The original letter, which notes some changes in the Ministry of the Navy and was marked by Gaimard as 'very urgent', is now held by the National Library in Canberra and is available online at https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-3224006894/view?partId=nla.obj-3226707713#page/n34/mode/1up (viewed 4 April 2025).

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