



The French Connection

AGHS Tasmania Branch

Town Hall, Ross

24th May 2025

An enthusiastic group of 55 members of AGHS gathered at the comfortable Ross Town Hall on a drizzly Saturday in late May to hear our first Winter lecture by Prue Slatyer who is an architect, landscape architect and historian as well as the current Chair of the National Management Committee of AGHS. Following morning tea and welcomes from Ann Stark and Kathleen Oakes, Prue delivered her lecture entitled:

Transmissions Across Continents: The French Connection with Tasmania



The lecture explored French connections arising from the transmission of botanical knowledge and plant materials between France and Tasmania. That process began with the arrival of the d'Entrecasteaux expedition in 1792 at Recherche Bay and the planting of a vegetable garden as well as early friendly interactions with the local Aboriginal families.

The lecture can be summarised under these headings:

Scientific advancement not colonisation

The early French explorers were motivated by the advancement of scientific knowledge rather than colonisation indicated by the name of the ship *La Recherche* (Research). Their expeditions were also to benefit indigenous populations and were 'for the benefit of Humankind' which was another Enlightenment theme.

The work of Labillardière the botanist



Labillardière named and described new plants. He gathered seeds and other plant material, mostly in the form of herbaria (dried pressed plant specimens). He had already spent 2 years in London, spending some time studying the botanical collections of Banks and Solander from Cook's expedition on the Endeavour. He studied the plants in the area of Recherche Bay and wrote detailed notes on the eucalypt forests and about a particular tree that was to become the floral emblem of Tasmania (*Eucalyptus globulus*) e.g. how specimens of *Eucalyptus globulus* (Tasmanian blue gum) had heights of 130 feet and girths of 36 feet and how they might be suitable for ships' masts. He wrote, 'We were filled with admiration at the sight of these ancient forests.'

The role of the gardener Lahaye



Lahaye was to introduce European plants to the Aboriginal people as well as to bring back to France interesting plants, especially those which were edible and medicinal. He brought with him a huge number of fruit and vegetable seeds from the seed company Vilmorin (established in 1743). His duties also included taking care of seeds and plants on board during the long voyage. The vegetable garden he planted in 1792 at Recherche Bay, as food for future explorers and for the local Aboriginal

people, was visited again in 1793 but little had survived which Prue attributes mostly to local wildlife rather than poor soil or lack of water. A rock border believed to be part of the French Garden was discovered in 2003 and was a trigger for the campaign to save the area from logging and protect it with heritage listing. Deborah Wace (artist), Bob Brown and Dick Smith were influential in the campaign which resulted in the declaration of Recherche Bay as a National Heritage site.

Re-creation of Lahaye's garden

Lahaye's garden was recreated in 2016 at Government House in Hobart, surrounded by different native grasses as a tribute to the interaction between the Aboriginal people and the French and a barrel to commemorate how the water was carried to the site. On a recent trip to France, Prue attempted to bring back seeds for this

French Garden from the Vilmorin Company but biosecurity restrictions in Melbourne limited the import to only the leafy greens.

Legacy of French place names

Altogether there were 4 French expeditions to Tasmania – Marion du Fresne in 1772, two visits by Bruni d'Entrecasteaux in 1792 and 1793 and Nicholas Baudin in 1802. Their legacy is a prolific number of French place names in South East Tasmania e.g. Bruny Island, Recherche Bay, Marion Bay, Port Esperance (now Port Hope), Cape Contrariety, Ile des Phoques, Port Cygnet, Cape Baudin, Cape Tourville, Fleurieu Point, Ile du Golfe, d'Entrecasteaux Channel.

The publication of Labillardière's work about the general flora of Australia

On their return trip to France the d'Entrecasteaux expedition called into port in Surabaya, Java, on October 28, 1793. Here the crew learned their king had been executed, a republic proclaimed, and France was at war with Holland, England, Prussia, Austria and Spain. The acting commander, d'Auribeau (d'Entrecasteaux had died) surrendered the ships to the Dutch authorities. Moreover, the Republicans (including Labillardière and Lahaye) were imprisoned but their 36 trunks of documents and plant collections were eventually placed aboard a Dutch convoy bound for Europe. These were captured by the English off the Shetland Islands. However, Labillardière pleaded with Banks for their return and in 1796 he returned the collections writing that 'although the politics of the two nations are at war, science is at peace.' Consequently, Labillardière published a 2-volume work between 1804 and 1807 entitled *Novae Hollandiae Plantarum Specimen*, the first general flora of Australia detailing 265 plants.

Introduction of Australian plants to France

Lahaye finally arrived back in Paris in 1797 and brought back an herbarium of many plants with flowers and fruits and a large collection of seeds from Tasmania most of which were given to his mentor Andre Thouin. He also kept some for himself. On his return he was appointed Chief Gardener at Versailles and later Napoleon appointed him Chief Gardener to Josephine's garden at La Malmaison. Many plants and animals collected on Baudin's expedition found their way to Malmaison, and possibly some of Lahaye's seeds were planted there too. Drawings of the garden show that casuarina and acacia were growing there with black swans, kangaroos and emus appearing in the foreground. Josephine was keen on exchanging plants and seeds and sent eucalypts to Nice. It is possible that the eucalypts found today in the French Riviera originate from seeds brought to France from Tasmania.

Following the lecture, we adjourned for French Onion Soup, baguettes and petites tartes.



After lunch we saw a film called *A Little Chaos* a somewhat fanciful account of 17th century French gardening.

The instructive day concluded at 3 pm to glimmers of sunshine as members began their homeward journeys.

Janet Sampson

Prue's references

- Secret Garden at Recherche Bay - 1792, F K Jouffroy-Gauja, J P Beaulieu, J C Donatowicz, publisher Ancient Art of the South Seas, 2016
- <https://plantspeopleplanet.au/dentrecasteau/>
For further reading about the botanical transmission between France and Tasmania
- https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Gintaras_Kantvilas/publication/280136315_L_abillardiere_and_the_beginning_of_botanical_exploration_in_Tasmania
- https://www.isfar.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/37_EDWARD-DUYKER-A-French-Garden-in-Tasmania-the-Legacy-of-Felix-Delahaye-1767-1829.pdf
- <https://deborahwace.com/deborah-wace-curriculum-vitae/>



The lucky door prize was a bottle of Brut Prestige made in Australia with Tasmanian grapes by Mumm, the French champagne house.