

**Flinders' imprisonment on Mauritius:
“What mixed sensations will the remembrance of the
Isle of France excite!”**

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Introduction

Having completed his circumnavigation of Australia, Matthew Flinders left Port Jackson in September 1803. During his voyage along the south coast of New Holland, in April 1802, travelling east, he had met Nicolas Baudin, the captain commanding the French scientific expedition, travelling west. Relations were cordial, but the English and French nations were rivals in charting the coasts of New Holland. The knowledge acquired by Flinders who had already charted most of the hitherto uncharted southern coast was a bitter blow to Baudin.

In December 1803, when Flinders in the *Cumberland* arrived at the Ile de France, present-day Mauritius, then a French colony, he believed that he would be able to carry out necessary repairs and obtain supplies before continuing on his journey to England to obtain a replacement for the *Investigator*. In 1802, he had been a witness to the welcome and support given the Baudin scientific expedition by the Governor of the English colony in Port Jackson, Philip Gidley King. Flinders thus believed that because his expedition was likewise a scientific one, he would be treated with reciprocal consideration in the French colony. Instead, he was imprisoned for some six and a half years, thus delaying until 1814 the publication of the account of his circumnavigation of New Holland, and his map of the country he would name Australia.

Flinders had decided for various reasons to put in at the Ile de France, instead of at the Dutch colony at the Cape, as Governor King, his superior officer, had preferred. On the face of it, his decision was a reasonable one. He was bearing a letter from King to the Governor of Mauritius, François Louis, Comte Magallon de la Molière, as well as having a French passport for his ship. However, when he left Port Jackson in September 1803, he was unaware that the English and French were again at war.

In reality, the brief peace brought about by the Treaty of Amiens¹ had been broken in May 1803 and consequently, in mid-December when Flinders reached the Ile de France, the situation in the island and the Indian Ocean was very different from what Flinders had expected. Magallon had been replaced by General Charles Mathieu Isidore Decaen two months previously. Decaen's original task had been to retrieve the French possessions in India that had been

lost to England. When these plans were shelved because of English defiance, Decaen took over as Captain General of the region, making the island effectively a military base.

It was in this highly charged geo-political context that Flinders arrived within sight of the Ile de France, and from his ignorance of this state of affairs resulted a series of misinterpretations and misunderstandings which ultimately led to his imprisonment.

Misunderstandings and imprisonment

Flinders did not have a map of the Ile de France and the first misunderstanding occurred when, on his arrival at the Baie du Cap, he trustingly followed a French vessel, believing that it was leading him to a safe mooring. Instead, to his amazement, his “following” was interpreted by the French as “pursuing”, and seen as a hostile act. Flinders was treated with great suspicion by the area commander, Bolger.

Taken aback at this reception, Flinders nevertheless thought that the misunderstanding would be at an end when he produced his French passport. The first thing that Bolger pounced on was the fact that the passport had been issued in the name of the *Investigator*, and that the ship in which Flinders was travelling was the *Cumberland*. Flinders, who did not speak French, had attached little importance to the name of the ship in the passport. The next day, Bolger directed the *Cumberland* to sail from the Baie du Cap to Port Nord Ouest,² where Flinders was to be interviewed by Decaen.

Flinders, believing that the expedition's scientific activities were sufficient demonstration of its *bona fides*, was angry at this treatment. His annoyance was compounded when, in Port Nord Ouest, he was kept waiting until the Captain General had finished his lunch. In the meantime, the officers who were guarding him asked about the whereabouts of “*le capitaine Flindaire*”. Not recognising the French pronunciation of his name, Flinders added to their suspicions by appearing not to have heard of the English navigator.

Decaen was no friend of the English and had been hand-picked by Bonaparte for the post he occupied. Having already encountered English treachery in India, he was deeply suspicious of Flinders' explanations and motives and believed initially that he could be a spy. “Was Flinders really who he said he was?”, he asked. How was it possible for the English to have given Flinders such a small ship for an important voyage of discovery? “Vous m'en imposez, monsieur”,³ he said disparagingly. Decaen gave orders for all Flinders' logs, papers, books and maps to be confiscated.

In Flinders' diary Decaen read that, among the Englishman's reasons for calling in at the island, was his wish to find out more about the French colony that might

be of use to the English settlement in Port Jackson. However innocent this might have seemed from Flinders' point of view, as he had written the notes prior to justifying his change of plans to his superiors, Decaen had another context in which to place it. François Péron, one of the naturalists of the Baudin voyage, had during the recent stay of the expedition in the Ile de France, prepared for him a report on Port Jackson in which the naturalist detailed a plan for a French invasion of the colony. Did not Flinders' statement seem to be suggesting a similar English intention for the Ile de France? Unfortunately for Flinders, there was no-one to vouch for him or corroborate his story. Captain Nicolas Baudin had died on the island a month previously and the expeditioners in the *Géographe*, commanded by Bernard-Henri Milius, had left the island on the way back to France on the day before Flinders' arrival. Amongst Flinders' confiscated papers, the contents of which he was unaware of until some time later, were also dispatches from Governor King to Lord Hobart, describing the military needs of the English colony.

Decaen's suspicions and Flinders' haughtiness and outrage at being kept as a prisoner did not provide auspicious circumstances for a positive outcome to the interview. Nevertheless, after the initial verbal skirmish, Decaen and his wife invited Flinders to dinner, an offer that would appear to have been made as an overture to further negotiations. Flinders, however, refused on the grounds that he would not accept an invitation from a person who was holding him prisoner.

From then on, the battle lines, so to speak, were drawn. Decaen delegated Colonel Louis Monistrol to deal with Flinders' many requests and to meet with him.⁴ Monistrol, as well as other well-intentioned French people who sympathised with Flinders' plight, counselled tact and a more conciliatory attitude, but Flinders was in no mood to back down. He notes in his diary: "It was not the custom in England, when justice only was the object in view, to apply for it in the supplicating stile of a criminal, and although I was now to the east of the Cape of Good Hope, yet I retained too much of my native manners to address the captain-general as if he were an eastern monarch from whom I had favours to ask".⁵ Seemingly unable to grasp the political situation, Flinders was quite simply bewildered by Decaen's treatment of him, writing his diary of the "Bastille-like mystery" of his imprisonment.

Initially, the angry Flinders was confined with Aken, the ship's master, and Elder, his servant, in a tavern, the Café Marengo, with little opportunity for exercise or contact with others, apart from the interpreter, Joseph Bonnefoy, and the surgeon who attended to his scorbutic sores. During that time he wrote numerous letters to Decaen, railing against the injustice of his imprisonment and demanding his freedom. At his request, much of the material that had been confiscated was given back to him so that he could work on his logbooks and maps. Flinders was reassured to note that none of his charts had been removed, although his third logbook⁶ and the dispatch boxes were missing. He immediately set to work, anxious to reconstruct from memory his survey of the Gulf of Carpentaria, the maps of which had been lost in the shipwreck of the *Porpoise*.

After four months of imprisonment and unremitting, but fruitless, efforts to secure his release, he was permitted to move to the Maison Despeaux, a property called the 'Garden Prison' because it mainly housed English prisoners of war, of the rank of officer and above, awaiting exchange with French prisoners. Here he was living in a less confined space, more conducive to his work, as well as having company and the possibility of walking in the garden. Trim accompanied him there, but Flinders, fearing for the cat's welfare, gave him to a French woman as company for her little daughter. Two weeks later Trim had disappeared and Flinders surmised that he might have met his end at the hands of a hungry slave.

At the end of 1804, Flinders entrusted his general chart of *Terra Australis*, to his fellow-prisoner at the Maison Despeaux, surgeon Walter Robertson, to be delivered on the latter's arrival in England, to Sir Joseph Banks. The map reached Sir Joseph in March 1805 but was unfortunately buried in the depths of the Admiralty, awaiting Flinders' return.⁸

Flinders was becoming acquainted with a number of inhabitants of the island. He struck up a close friendship with Thomi Pitot de la Beaujardière who arranged for him, with Decaen's permission, to take up residence with Madame d'Arifat, a widow with six children.⁹ Her property, *Le Refuge*, was situated on the Wilhems Plains plateau and Flinders was on parole to go no further than two leagues outside the plantation without permission. He moved there in August 1805 and it was here that he would live for the next four and a half years, until his release.

The quest for freedom and final release

After his initial cross-questioning of Flinders and the acrimonious exchange between them, Decaen decided to put the matter of Flinders' release in the hands of Denis Decrès, the French Minister for the Navy and Colonies. He wrote to Decrès in mid-January 1804, informing him of the events surrounding Flinders' imprisonment. Meanwhile news of Flinders' detention had reached France and England and various eminent scientists and navigators such as Sir Joseph Banks and Louis-Antoine de Bougainville had made representations to the French authorities in support of Flinders. Decrès approved of Decaen's actions and decided to pass the matter of Flinders' release on to the Conseil d'Etat, which agreed on 14 July 1804 that Flinders should be freed, once the approval of Napoleon Bonaparte had been obtained. This did not happen until 19 months later, on 11 March 1806, and the news did not reach Flinders until late July 1807.

On hearing that Napoleon had agreed to his release, Flinders expected that he would soon be freed. Decaen, however, decided for various reasons that the time was not right. The Cape Colony had been annexed by the British in January 1806, and their blockading of the Ile de France was causing increasing hardship, as basic food supplies were prevented from getting through. As well, Decaen was

hoping to persuade Napoleon to attack India. Decaen wrote to Decrès saying that Flinders was “dangerous”, probably thinking that he knew too much about defences on the Ile de France. He undertook to release him at a suitable time.¹⁰

Then began another long wait for Flinders, who gradually saw his hopes fade as the months passed and other English prisoners of war came and went from the colony. Flinders thought of breaking his parole and trying to escape clandestinely on one of the cartels, but the opportunity eluded him.

Early in December 1809, Flinders received news that Hugh Hope, the commissary for prisoners, had been sent on the cartel *Harriet* by Lord Minto, the Governor-General of India, to meet Decaen, with a view to securing Flinders' release. Flinders, who had been disappointed so many times, dared not believe that Hope would be successful, but after the commissary's protracted negotiations with Decaen, Flinders finally received from Monistrol on 28 March 1810 the long-awaited letter giving him permission to depart. The conditions of his release were that he would “not serve in a hostile manner against France or its allies during the course of the present war”. By this time, the Ile de France was under almost constant blockade from the British, and invasion seemed imminent.¹¹

As the date for departure approached, Flinders' sword was restored to him, but not, as he had requested, the third logbook or his telescopes. The question of the *Cumberland* also remained in abeyance. On 13 June, Flinders left the Ile de France in the *Harriet*, bound for India, but was immediately transferred to the *Otter*, sailing to Cape Town. On arrival there, he was ordered by Vice-Admiral Albemarle Bertie, as an aid to the projected English invasion of the Ile de France, to answer in writing a series of questions on the island, including shipping movements in the French colony. Flinders left Cape Town in late August and arrived back in England on 24 October 1810.

Flinders' personal diary

The personal diary Flinders kept on the Ile de France is a valuable record of how he spent his time there. Flinders usually begins his entries by describing the weather and listing shipping movements and then lists his correspondence. He also notes the progress of his work on his charts, logbooks and other projects.¹² Likewise, Flinders documents his meetings and social engagements. Once he had moved to Madame d'Arifat's house at Wilhems Plains, we find in his diary a snapshot of the world in which he lived: the everyday social life of the plantation owners and their friends. A significant component of the diary is constituted also by his description of his thoughts and feelings over the period of his imprisonment: his frustrations and periods of depression.¹³ In parallel, he evokes his growing friendships and his new activities in the not unpleasant world in which he was forced to live.

The years in the French colony added a new dimension to Flinders' life. The anguish of his imprisonment was tempered by his embracing the opportunities that this new life afforded him. He took up seriously the study of French, under the guidance of Mme d'Arifat's daughters, Delphine and Sophie. Gradually, as his French improved, he widened his acquaintance with members of the local community and was integrated into the social and intellectual life of the island. Flinders was invited to countless dinners, picnics, hunting parties and musical soirées at which he played his flute, favouring the music of Ignaz Pleyel. He learnt to play chess and taught navigation to the young d'Arifat sons, Marc and Aristide. His portrait was painted by Toussaint Antoine de Chazal, one of his neighbours. Other neighbours of Madame d'Arifat were the Airolles who, Flinders discovered, owned the property where the explorer Lapérouse had lived for a time.¹⁴ Flinders was a great admirer of Lapérouse and persuaded the Airolles to set up a monument to him on their property.

During this period he also continued to write numerous letters in an effort to secure his release and produced a number of scientific papers. On a lighter note, he wrote the story of his cat, Trim.¹⁵ Constantly present in Flinders' mind was the colony at Port Jackson and he was on the lookout for new possibilities which might contribute to its development. He observed closely, and described in his diary various industrial practices in the French colony, such as the production of corn and indigo. In this context, he was also most interested in Madagascar and read numerous books about the island, as well as questioning the Malagasy slaves on the plantations around him.

When his mastery of French had developed sufficiently, he began increasingly to read books in French that he found in the libraries of his well-educated friends and neighbours. One of the first books he mentions reading is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*. Rousseau's introspective work on the education of the young and sensitive Emile, struck a chord with Flinders and prompted him to self-examination.¹⁶ He went on to read also many other Enlightenment works, such as Condillac's *Traité des sensations*, and voyage accounts, such as Levaillant's *Travels in Africa*. In his diary, he mentions frequently a treatise on elementary physics *Traité élémentaire de physique* by Haüy, “a favourite work with me”, he says. He also read Molière's plays, Louis-Sebastien Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*, and the novels, *Gil Blas* and *Guzman d'Alfarache*.

His mastery of French also led him to try his hand at translating his history of Trim into French. His improving language skills proved to be a mixed blessing in terms of certain social interactions. Engaging more deeply with his French friends, Flinders comments aggrievedly on their “national animosity”, and on being ridiculed and “persecuted [...] on the subject of politics and national character”.

Flinders and Baudin

Flinders continued to be keenly interested in the Baudin expedition.¹⁷ Early in his imprisonment he met Augustin Baudin, Nicolas Baudin's brother, a sea captain who lived in the Ile de France and who offered to help him in any way he could. Baudin told him of a letter he had received from his brother from Port Jackson in which he spoke of the support and help he had received from the English.¹⁸ There were other reminders of the French expedition on the island. Flinders became friendly with Jean-Antoine Capmartin who had been a sub-lieutenant on the Baudin expedition, but had remained on the island on the outward journey because of illness, and married and settled there.¹⁹ Other officers from the expedition passed through the port and Flinders was pleased to²⁰ renew his acquaintance with Moreau and to form an enduring friendship with Charles Baudin (no relation to Nicolas Baudin) whom he had met in Port Jackson²¹ and from whom he learnt further details²² of the explorations of the *Géographe* after it had left the English colony in 1802.²³ Flinders was also interested to learn news of the botanist, Théodore Leschenault, who had left the expedition at Timor in June 1803. Flinders pointedly compared his own fate at the hands of the French with that of Leschenault who had obtained help from the English to travel with his specimens to America.²⁴

Of great interest to Flinders were the publications which would result from the Baudin expedition. Seeking reasons for his imprisonment, Flinders had already surmised in February 1804 that his detention might be due to a conspiracy on the part of the French to enable the account and maps of the Baudin expedition to be published first. His anxiety in this respect increased with the passing of time.

In January 1809, he read in the *Moniteur* of the previous July a letter from Henri de Freycinet, a French officer from the Baudin expedition, indicating that the first volume of the account of the French voyage, *Voyage de découvertes aux Terres australes*,²⁵ had been published in 1807. When Flinders read that the south coast of New Holland had been named by the French *Terre Napoléon*, his worst fears were realized. The two gulfs Flinders had discovered first had been renamed the Golphes Joséphine and Bonaparte and Kangaroo Island, first named by Flinders, was called by the French, l'Ile Decrès. Flinders reflected bitterly on this, wondering whether the French Government had given instructions for this usurpation, or whether it was the author of the *Voyage*, François Péron, who was responsible.

Flinders had met Jacques Félix Emmanuel Hamelin, captain of the Baudin expedition's consort ship, the *Naturaliste*, in Port Jackson in 1802. When he learnt that the French captain was replacing Rear-Admiral Linois as head of the French naval forces in the Indian Ocean in March 1809, he hoped that the Frenchman would visit him at *Le Refuge*, perhaps with a copy of Péron's account of the Baudin expedition. Instead, Hamelin sent a message to Flinders, assuring him that honourable mention had been made of him in the account and that "the

line of separation between the French discoveries and [his] [were] marked with the most scrupulous justice.”

This, in fact, was untrue, as Flinders was later to discover. It was not until after his return to England that he was finally able to read Péron's *Voyage* when Sir Joseph Banks gave him a copy of it in 1811.²⁶ By then, various articles had appeared in the English press exposing the French imposture and after Flinders published his *General Chart of Terra australis or Australia* map in 1814, the situation was rectified and the second volume and subsequent editions of the *Voyage de découvertes* and maps displayed the correct attributions.

Conclusion

On leaving the Ile de France, Flinders did not forget the support and kindness of the friends he had made in the colony and corresponded with them regularly, both in French and English. He was particularly concerned to know how they were managing after the English occupation of the island in December 1810. Once back in London, he continued to occupy himself with the French prisoners of war who were relatives and acquaintances of his friends.

It is greatly to be regretted that the strong intellectual and emotional ties that he had forged during his imprisonment years had, because of his premature death, little time to develop more fully as he certainly hoped they would. He recorded in his diary on leaving the Ile de France “[the] wish that before a year the two nations might be united as we were at that time.”²⁸

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(website <http://sydney.edu.au/arts/research/baudin/project/>).

Notes

¹ The Paix d'Amiens lasted from 25 March 1802 to 18 May 1803. It was while the Baudin expedition was in Port Jackson that news came that there had been a cessation of hostilities between the England and France. In spite of this, suspicion of French motives was never far from Governor King's mind. After the Baudin expedition had departed from the colony in November 1802, rumours were circulating in the colony of the intention of the French to establish settlements or to attack the English colony. The Governor therefore sent Captain Robbins in the *Cumberland* to plant the English flag on King Island, shortly after the French had arrived there.

² Present-day Port Louis.

³ “Do you expect me to believe that” [my translation].

⁴ There were to be no further meetings between the two.

⁵ 27 December, 1803, *Matthew Flinders' Private Journal from 17 December 1803 at Ile de France to 10 July 1814* London, ed. Anthony J. Brown and Gillian Dooley, The Friends of the State Library of South Australia, Adelaide, 2005, p.13.

⁶ This log was begun on June 11, 1803, the last entry being on Flinders' arrival in Mauritius. It contained details of his voyages on the *Investigator* and subsequently on the *Porpoise*, and *Cumberland*, including details of his preliminary survey of Torres Strait. The log was not restored to the English until June 1825.

⁷ *Journal*, p. 53.

⁸ It was assumed that it was necessary to await Flinders' release before publishing the map so that Flinders could attach the place-names he had chosen. Mr Aken, Flinders' first mate, was granted permission to leave the Ile de France and embarked on 19 May 1805 with Flinders' charts and other papers, including a memoir to accompany his charts, if the Admiralty were to decide to publish them. Alexander Dalrymple, hydrographer of the Admiralty, sent the document as requested to Nevil Maskelyne, the Astronomer Royal, for his assessment, but nothing was done as the elderly Maskelyne was in declining health.

⁹ There were three boys and three girls in the family.

¹⁰ It is very possible that Decaen did think that Flinders, if released, would be able to give the English navy information prejudicial to the French defences.

¹¹ It was obvious that strategically, to protect their possessions in India, the conquest of the Ile de France would give the English the base they needed.

¹² Among other writings, he produced in 1805 a paper on “The use of the marine barometer for predicting changes of wind at sea”, which was conveyed to England and read before the Royal Society by Sir Joseph Banks on 27 March 1806. It was then published in the *Transactions*.

¹³ These occurred particularly after August 1806.

¹⁴ Lapérouse bought the property in 1773 and planned to live with Louise-Eléonore Broudou, who would several years later become his wife. See M. S Rivière's article attached.

¹⁵ Matthew Flinders, *Trim: Being the True Story of a Brave Seafaring Cat*. London, Collins, 1977.

¹⁶ “For these three or four days I have enjoyed a tranquillity of mind beyond what I have been accustomed to: The *Emile* of Rousseau is partly the cause of it; in looking into myself I find more reason to be satisfied with myself than when making a comparison with the general manners of the world”, 28 Jan 1807, *Journal*, p. 115.

¹⁷ Flinders left Coupang in April 1803, a month before the *Géographe* and the *Casuarina* arrived there. The *Géographe* left the Ile de France for France, the day before Flinders arrived there in December 1803.

¹⁸ “He informed me that when at Tranquebar he had received a letter from his brother the commodore dated at Port Jackson, in which the kind attention and assistance given to the commodore and his officers at Port Jackson by the governor and officers of the colony was the principal topic. One passage in it was repeated to me to be as follows: "When the *Geographe's* voyage was published it should be his first care to pay the 'debt of gratitude' to the governor and officers of the colony for their very kind treatment and liberal assistance' he had received at their hands". This letter was shown to Dr. Johnston at Madras and was afterwards published in the Madras paper in the month of December. about the 5 or 20th. Captain Baudin appeared to be fully sensible of the great difference in my treatment, and deprecated it very much [and expressed] his intention to acknowledge it in the account he would write of the voyage”, 12 August 1804, Flinders' *Journal*, p. 43.

¹⁹ Flinders was most distressed when Capmartin died of liver disease on 25 September 1809.

²⁰ Flinders also met Charles Moreau who had been in Mauritius since the journey out.

²¹ When he had been a midshipman on the *Géographe*.

²² Elder had previously reported his meeting with some unspecified person who had

given him this news.

²³ Entrusting him with yet another letter, to Denis Decrès, which would, he hoped, bring about his release during 1808. During the period of Flinders' imprisonment, Baudin served in the French navy in the Indian Ocean, successively on the *Piedmontaise* and the *Sémillante*. Flinders formed a firm friendship with him. It was to Flinders that Baudin wrote his first letter with his left hand, after losing his right arm during a naval battle in 1808.

²⁴ Leschenault had written to the *Société d'émulation* in the Ile de France, describing his travels. He had left the expedition due to illness at Timor on 2 June 1803 and returned to France in 1807, following stays in Timor, Java and Philadelphia.

²⁵ *Voyage de découvertes aux Terres australes, exécuté par ordre de sa majesté l'Empereur et Roi, sur les corvettes Le Géographe et Le Naturaliste et la goëlette pendant les années 1801, 1802, 1803, et 1804*; publié par décret impérial sous le ministère de M. de Champagny, et rédigé par M. F. Péron, naturaliste de l'expédition, correspondant de l'Institut de France, de la Société de l'Ecole de Médecine de Paris, des Sociétés philomatique et médicale de la même ville. Vol 1. Paris, 1807.

²⁶ He notes in his diary of that time that he is reading Péron's work, but makes no comment on the contents.

²⁷ He also remarks that he has been asked to provide his comments on a review of the book being prepared by an unnamed reviewer.

²⁸ *Journal*, 6 April 1810, p. 226.