

Péron in Tasmania

By

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François Péron, French scientist and explorer, was the first man to write, after direct contact, an accurate account of the Tasmanian aborigines. His record of their vanished race is a monument of careful and truthful observation. Supplemented by the modern anthropologists' wider knowledge of the origin of Tasmania's earliest inhabitants, the French naturalist's description merits close examination.

Professor Wood-Jones and others have analysed the evidence proving that the Tasmanians belong to the Melanesian Negroid stock nearly related to the New Caledonians, the Philippinos and Fijians—a race distinct from the Australian natives—and that Tasmania's aborigines came by sea from their Melanesian island home; a fact which, however, does not preclude inter-relations with those of the mainland. Wood-Jones tells the story of the race after contact with European voyagers and from the date of the Risdon settlement; physical and social characteristics are excellently described. The burden of his conclusions, identical with those of other Tasmanian historians who quote from the earlier parts of Péron, is that the cheerful, laughter-loving people, 'living happy lives in their native forests, languished under the régime of the kindly, but misguided catechist, the military, and the impressive administration of British justice'. Now, to what extent were the Fathers of the Church in Tasmania and the Old Flag to blame?

Péron's recorded observations are so frequently referred to that it is pertinent to examine them more closely with a view to determining whether the work of the brilliant French scientist, trained as he was by Cuvier, Laplace, Lacépède, and other world-renowned members of the Institut de France, justifies the words 'cheerful, friendly, laughter-loving and happy', as applied to Tasmanian aborigines with whom Péron consorted during the stay of some months in southern and eastern Tasmania and on the islands of Bass Strait. Did he see them through rose-tinted glasses as perfect children of Nature and draw of them pictures coloured by the doctrines of Rousseau and so let his enthusiasm outrun scientific accuracy?

By reading the French text I discovered that the modern anthropologist's attitude to aborigines may be akin to Rousseau's towards the noble savage running wild in woods (which made Voltaire want to walk on all fours and of which Dryden had known something). Péron, however, at the end of the only volume that he himself wrote of his voyages, after many native contacts made by him and other members of the Baudin expedition sent out by Napoleon (1800-04) just before the British settlement at Risdon and the massacre, flatly denounced Rousseau's worship of the uncivilised state and warned other travellers. Péron was early disabused of his first impressions during a chance encounter with a Tasmanian family.

François Péron has been the subject of several French memoirs. An excellent account of him was also given by the late Sir Ernest Scott in 'Terre Napoléon', in spite of some mistranslation from the original documents. Born in 1775, Péron fought in the revolutionary army on the Rhine, was wounded and taken prisoner. Exchanged in 1794 and suffering the loss of an eye, he devoted himself to medicine and to comparative anatomy. Lacépède encouraged the student to read a paper before the Institute. His biographer affirms that Péron was disappointed in love at the time (some women prefer a two-eyed man) and that his main theme, the desirability of having a trained anthropologist with Baudin's expedition, was also not unreasonable from a personal point of view. The Institute convinced the Minister of Marine: Péron, with detailed programmes suggested by Cuvier and Lacépède, joined 'Le Géographe' just before she sailed on her purely scientific exploration, ultimately rich in zoological and botanical results, but poor in geographical gains. So bad was the map-drawing of the French navigators that Scott had little difficulty in demolishing the charge that they had copied from Flinders whilst the latter was imprisoned on Mauritius. However, Captain Baudin's chief cartographer, Freycinet, who completed Péron's history of the expedition, used information volunteered by Flinders. The latter's 'Investigator' carried a midshipman by name John Franklin, when British and French met in Port Jackson during 1802. Fifty leagues of charted coast was the full extent of Terre Napoléon. Péron wrote in glowing terms of the prosperous young colony of New South Wales and of British hospitality to an enemy, for, despite the long and bitter naval warfare of the years leading to Trafalgar, the Admiralty had made out passports promising safe conduct to Baudin's ships. True science, like philosophy, music, art, and literature, is often super-national.

Péron's biological specimens were classified and discussed between 1804 and the year of his death, 1810. By order of Napoleon, the first part of the historical account was published at the Imperial Press in 1807; the second, mainly by Louis Freycinet, in 1816. Atlases and a series of excellent coloured engravings were also issued, these depicting aboriginals, native weapons, adornments, baskets, canoes, huts, and tombs observed on the southern and eastern shores of Tasmania and on some of the islands in Bass Strait. The title of the finely printed and well-preserved volumes in the library of the Royal Society of Tasmania and in the Tasmanian State Library is 'Voyages de découvertes aux Terres australes, exécutés par ordre de sa majesté l'Empereur et Roi, sur les corvettes Le Géographe et le Naturaliste—pendant les années 1800, 1801, 1802, 1803, et 1804'.

The scientific equipment of Baudin's expedition was lavish; but Péron and Freycinet have little to say in his favour as a navigator. Food supplies were bad after Mauritius and the journey to the West Australian coast took 220 days. The charts made of the north-west coast were ill-defined and inaccurate, whilst Port Darwin, like Port Phillip later, was missed altogether. Scott mentions the interesting detail that when Péron came to write his account in Paris during October, 1805, he named a small island off the broken coast of the Kimberley division 'Isle of Lucas', in honour of the captain of the 'Redoubtable' from whose mizzen-top a shot had fatally wounded Nelson. Scourged by scurvy and separated from the 'Naturaliste', Péron's ship made Timor for water and fresh fruit; thence she turned and stayed in Tasmanian waters for three months. This was the longest stay of any white navigators during the time of unchallenged aboriginal possession.

No steps were at any time taken towards a French settlement. Renewed scurvy and heavy storms compelled the expedition to sail for Port Jackson. The crew were in such a plight when they stood outside the heads that a party of blue-jackets

by a violent attack on their part. As a matter of fact, Monsieur Petit had made a sketch of several of the natives, when one of them, as our party was getting ready to return to the ship, threw himself on the artist and tried to snatch from him the sketches that he had just finished. On being resisted, the infuriated savage seized a log and would have killed our weak messmate if the others had not rushed to his aid. However, and far from trying to avenge such an insult, they took pleasure in loading the aggressor with fresh presents, doubtlessly in the hope of calming his fury with such generosity and of winning his goodwill and that of his fellow countrymen. Yet hardly had these sullen savages seen our men engaged in re-embarking when they themselves again made for the woods. A moment later a hail of stones fell; one stone struck the commander on the lower part of the back and caused a large, severe bruise. In spite of such baseness our comrades still persisted in their generosity. In vain the savages exposed themselves to shots by provocations from the beach just left; it was useless for them to brandish their assegais and to make more threatening gestures; not a single gun-shot was fired at them'.

Not a single shot fired in retaliation; the aggressors were overwhelmed with gifts! And still treacherous attacks were made from under cover. Vast tracts of bush were fired by the aborigines to scare off the expedition. One of the officers, Captain Hamelin, observed thirty-six natives marching along the shore in groups of five or six, each with one man carrying a bundle of assegais; and at the head of this little army one man with a burning poker in hand set fire to bushes hiding the ground. Other threatening parties were noticed on shore, and of the bush-fires Péron says that the ferocious inhabitants thus destroyed their ancient and venerable forests. Once more, with two companions, he advanced on a horde that retreated before them up a mountain whose slopes were burning—once more the natives melted away.

Péron quotes, with approval, the views of the botanist, Leschenault, on the hostile aboriginal attitude to all attempts at conciliation—'The latest attacks were made by the natives without our having in the slightest degree given any occasion for them; on the contrary, we had loaded them with gifts, and nothing in our bearing could have given them offence. I confess myself astounded, after the reports of so many instances of treachery and cruelty in all the voyages of discoveries, to hear rational people repeat the opinion that men living in a state of nature are in no wise evil and that they can be trusted and that they will not be aggressive unless they are excited by vengeance. Unfortunately, many have fallen victims to such vain sophistries. For my own part, I think that, in consequence of all that we could see, it would be impossible to be too mistrustful of men whose nature has not yet been refined by civilisation, and that prudence should be exercised in landing on shores inhabited by such men'.

On Bruni Island, Péron and others had one more relatively harmless chance encounter with a party of native women; their form and features were repulsive; many were covered with sores, two or three of the younger ones excepted. Again a French song rendered them friendly. One of them made a kindly effort to colour the naturalist's skin to her fancy, he submitting in the cause of science. A face to please her should be black; charcoal was the lady's substitute for science. He learnt that the white European skin was really a defect or deformity which must give place to the hue of charcoal or of red ochre. On the sudden reappearance of their men-folk, the women dropped the catch of crab-fish at their feet and cowered silently on the sand dunes at a distance from their men whose surliness promptly ended the hospitality towards the strangers.

prostituted during the revolution', nevertheless 'so full of enthusiasm and spirit'. He was impressed by the lively, merry children, and by the gentility and charm of a young woman, Ouré-Ouré, who showed him the use of burnt charcoal crushed in her hand for fard; it was like red ochre, an ornamental grease for hair and body. He examined the native granite knives, axes and points of assegais. The idyll ends abruptly when a shot is heard, fired by a hunting party of the expedition. Péron reflects on the privations and miseries of the state of nature, but concludes that the character of the women is less dependent than that of men on the influence of climate, on physical causes and the improvement of society. But their bodies were torn by bush and bramble; the bodies of the older women, he remarked later, were scarred with wounds, the result of bad treatment by their superior spouses.

Péron's subsequent meetings with the Tasmanian aborigines in 1802 caused him radically to revise his views on 'our good Diemenese'; he appears contented with his scientific observations, these including the determination of many Tasmanian tree species; giant eucalyptus, 180 feet in height and as much as 36 feet in circumference, are noted. Throughout his account he admired landscapes of mountains and glades; the Port of Swans charmed him. The fiercest Tasmanian aborigines were those of the islands in the Channel, particularly Isle Bruni and Isle Maria. In the original Péron, the evidence is clearly set out on pages 235-239. Anthropologists and historians have, to the best of my researches, overlooked it. I draw attention first to the Maurouard incident.

It will be noted that, as in all their native encounters, the Frenchmen loaded the aborigines with gifts. This, however, is the only aboriginal outrage recorded by Péron for which the white man attempted retaliation. It appears that in speed alone was he surpassed by the blacks. A few days later, in another part of the Channel, a native attack followed. Showers of stones fell on the same party, the assailants lying in ambush. More serious was the assault on one of the artists with the expedition, M. Petit, who with others, including Baudin, had meanwhile made contact with other islanders. I translate what Péron says—'I discovered on my return that on the morning of the 15th (January, 1802), the jolly-boat of the "Géographe" having gone to fish on Bruni Island, the natives had appeared in great numbers and that our ship-mates had given them many presents and spent the greater part of the day in their midst. Monsieur Maurouard, one of our cadets, eager to test for himself the much-vaunted strength of barbarous tribes, had suggested a wrestling match to one of the natives who appeared to be the strongest. The Tasmanian, having accepted the challenge, had seen himself thrown several times in succession by the French midshipman, and had been compelled to admit himself beaten. From then on till the time of leaving several hours later there had apparently been no weakening or change in the trustful and friendly character of the natives; however, although our friends had given them still more presents, so that suspicion was out of the question, at the very moment of reshipping, Monsieur Maurouard was suddenly hit on the shoulder by a long assegai thrown from behind the rocks nearby. This uncouth weapon had been hurled with such force that after glancing the whole length of the shoulder-plate, it had penetrated the flesh between shoulder and neck. The crew of the jolly-boat were exasperated by this barbarous and cowardly treachery and had sought vengeance upon the savages by pursuing them; but, already, all had disappeared amidst the rocks and undergrowth.

'Soon after our return the commander himself came back from a short excursion on the mainland (*i.e.*, of Tasmania). With him had been Captain Hamelin, Monsieur Leschenault (botanist), and Monsieur Petit (artist). These gentlemen had again encountered the natives, and this interview also was ended