

LAPLACE AT HOBART TOWN AND SYDNEY
TOWN IN 1831: THE HUMANISM OF A FRENCH
NAVAL CAPTAIN

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FIRST LOUIS TRIEBEL MEMORIAL LECTURE

delivered to

The Australian Academy of the Humanities

at its Seventeenth Annual General Meeting

at Hobart on 11 July 1986

The occasion for our gathering today is to honour the memory of a humble scholar, a man of great inspiration to students and colleagues, one whom we were privileged to know in the Academy and one who brought distinction to the University of Tasmania in the field of Modern Languages. During the tenure of his office as Professor of Modern Languages from 1943-1956, Louis Augustus Triebel¹ exalted the French presence in Van Diemen's land above all, and in Australia in general. His academic career commenced at University College, London where he specialised under the direction of Professor John George Robertson in the German Theatre of the Renaissance. He came to a deeper appreciation of the French mind during frequent visits to France and a sojourn at Grenoble University. In the First World War he saw action in Flanders. There is reason to believe that in both the pre-war and post war periods, his mentor's wife, Mrs Ethel Florence Robertson, née Richardson, better known as Henry Handel Richardson, could have influenced his decision to come to Australia. He emigrated to Sydney in 1926.

In the years of the Second World War Louis played host on numerous occasions to Free French visitors to Tasmania, and after the war, to French Antarctic explorers who used Hobart as their last port of call before sailing into the austral seas. I am sure many of the audience here today, can speak first-hand of those times. Louis's scholarly activities can be illustrated by his stream of publications about French visitors to Van Diemen's land in the colonial period. Papers, lectures and monographs bear eloquent testimony to his abiding interest in the subject.

When invited by the Council of the Academy to give the first Louis Triebel Memorial Lecture, I thought I should offer a topic with a theme germane to his interests and possibly to my own. One of my ancillary areas, neologisms, has led me to study the language of French explorers,² and of French visitors to Australia. In this framework, I have been preparing for publication a translation of the record left by one such navigator who had landed on these shores only six years after Governor Darling had declared Van Diemen's land to be independent of New South Wales.³ His reports are embedded in a four-volume narrative of his circumnavigation of the globe,⁴ and the Australian

¹ The obituary for Louis Augustus Triebel will be found on pp.135-9 in these *Proceedings*.

² See K. V. Sinclair, *French on the Outer Limits of Communication*, Townsville, 1981.

³ Cf. C. M. H. Clark, *A History of Australia*, Melbourne, 1968, II, p.159.

⁴ C. P. T. Laplace, *Voyage autour du monde par les mers de l'Inde et de Chine exécuté sur la corvette de l'Etat La Favorite pendant les années 1830, 1831 et 1832*, Paris, 1833-1835, 4 vols, an Album of 72 aquatints hand-coloured by Barthélémy Lauvergne, and two atlases containing hydrological and zoological matter. This work will henceforth be referred to as *Voyage*.

section does not appear to have attracted much attention in the academic community.⁵ A study of the literary nature of the naval captain's narrative may not only throw light on his art of composition but also constitute an appropriate memorial to Louis Triebel.⁶

One hundred and fifty-five years ago today, at about this hour, Captain Cyrille-Pierre Théodore Laplace⁷ in command of the twenty-four gun corvette *La Favorite* stepped ashore in Hobart Town. It was dusk on 11 July, 1831. The winter voyage from the Eastern Javanese port of Banyuwangy had taken 41 days, the course being set down the Indian Ocean to the Roaring Forties and then due East. The vessel arrived off Mewstone Rock on 8 July. The crossing had been a doleful one. Sixty of the crew succumbed to dysentery, and two died 'in the sight of Paradise', to quote the Captain. They were buried by a shore party on Bruny Island. He wrote: 'On that bleak island terrain, five thousand leagues from France, were laid to eternal rest the bodies of two shipmates whom death prevented . . . from landing on the hospitable shore we were soon to reach.'⁸

The corvette left Hobart Town on 7 August and took ten days to sail to Port Jackson. The sojourn in Sydney Town lasted some five weeks, so it was already Spring when the *Favorite* slipped out of the Heads into the Tasman on 21 September 1831, her destination being Valparaiso, by way of the Bay of Islands. The arrival and departure of the French Discovery Ship, as the warship was termed, were recorded in the 'Shipping Intelligence' columns of the New South Wales newspapers.⁹

⁵ Hardly at all on the pages where Laplace is mentioned by J. P. Faivre, *L'Expansion française dans le Pacifique 1800-1842*, Paris, 1935, pp.255, 261-3, 271-2. The visit to the Australian settlements is summarised by J. Dunmore, *French Explorers in the Pacific*, Oxford, 1965-69, II, pp.250-2.

⁶ I express my gratitude to Professors C. M. H. Clark and A. G. L. Shaw for comments that I have found constructive and helpful in the writing of this Lecture.

⁷ In the nineteenth century, especially in the newspapers, the tendency was to write the surname as two words La Place; the trend now is to employ one word only, Laplace, and this is the form used in this paper. He was born at sea in 1793, and joined the Navy as a cadet in 1809, rising through the command positions to reach the rank of Vice-Admiral in 1853. He died at Brest in 1875; see J. Brosse, *Great Voyages of Exploration*, Sydney, 1985, p.213.

⁸ *Voyage*, III, p.142.

⁹ *Sydney Gazette*, 6 August 1831, p.3 under the rubric *Van Diemen's Land News*: 'The French discovery ship *La Favorite*, the progress of whose voyage during the past 18 (*sic*) months since her departure from France, has from time to time been communicated to our readers, proceeds from hence, we learn, to Sydney . . .' Then, under *Shipping Intelligence* headings, the arrival of the *Favorite* in Sydney Town on 17 August 1831 is reported in the *Australian*, 19 August, p.3; *Sydney Gazette*, 18 August, p.2; *Sydney Herald*, 22 August, p.4; *Sydney Monitor*, 20 August, p.3. The departure on 21 September 1831 for South America was recorded in the *Australian*, 23 September, p.3; *Sydney Gazette*, 22 September, p.2; *Sydney Herald*, 26 September, p.4; and *Sydney Monitor*, 24 September, p.3.

It was not until Laplace had finally left New Zealand waters that his name was inscribed in the Annals of the Botany Bay colony. He was no longer the urbane French naval captain whom all had sought to entertain lavishly; rather, he had become a scurrilous commander. An article headed 'New Zealand' in a Saturday issue of the *Sydney Gazette* signals the beginning of the baleful imbroglio:

By the arrival of the *Fairy* from New Zealand we have received intelligence – which certainly has by no means surprised us – that the French ship *La Favorite*, from this port, arrived in the Bay of Islands on the 4th instant, fired a salute, hoisted the tricoloured flag and took possession of one of the islands, in the name of the King of France. Captain Laplace had made some considerable progress in the erection of a fort, prior to the departure of the *Fairy*. As we have already stated, we are not at all surprised at this proceeding on the part of the French Commander. The object of the French 'Discovery Ships', cruising in the South Seas during the past six years, has now been, and we anticipate will be made still more, apparent. It is to found Colonies in this part of the world . . .¹⁰

By the time the next issue of the newspaper appeared, on the Tuesday following, the theme is purged of its hysterically bellicose notes. Clearly, Saturday's verbal histrionics were not appreciated by pro-French elements in the colony. The editorial now adopts a conciliatory tone:

We stated on Saturday, that the *Fairy* had brought up news of the French having taken possession of one of the New Zealand Islands. We have since heard another version of the affair; namely, that certain repairs, etc., being required for the ship (*La Favorite*), Captain Laplace had pitched a tent upon an island convenient for the purpose; that upon an apex of the tent a tri-colored flag had been hoisted, simply as an ornament; and that a couple of guns had been placed before the encampment as a means of preventing opposition on the part of the natives. This certainly is a very probable story, though we by no means vouch for its truth. Nothing could be more natural than for the French to act in the manner described, while it would be equally natural for hasty observers to put a wrong construction upon their conduct . . .¹¹

A Despatch three days later, 4 November 1831, from Acting Governor Lindsay to the Colonial Office repeated the rumour and sought advice.¹² A sloop was sent to New Zealand and it reported that the apprehensions were unfounded. Reassurance of another kind was received by Governor Bourke in March 1832 from the Colonial Secretary. A letter was enclosed from the British Ambassador in Paris to Lord Palmerston in which the Ambassador stated: 'I had the opportunity of speaking last night on the subject with Admiral de Rigny, who answered my enquiries by saying that the *Favorite* sailed from France before the revolution of 1830, and that the Captain of that vessel had no instructions which could authorise him to take possession of New Zealand

¹⁰ *Sydney Gazette*, 29 October 1831, p.2.

¹¹ *Sydney Gazette*, 1 November 1831, p.2.

¹² *Historical Records of Australia*, Series I, XVI, p.442.

or to form there any establishment.¹³

How much more maligned could a God-fearing French naval captain be at a time when France and England were at peace? The sailing instructions issued to Laplace on 15 December 1829 by Baron d'Haussez, *Ministre de Marine*, are quite concise and exculpate him from the insinuations made by the press and the administrators of Botany Bay. Not only was he to sail the corvette *Favorite* around the world, eastbound from Toulon, via the Cape of Good Hope and Cape Horn back to Toulon, but he was to collect navigational data in select areas in South-East Asia, and to make enquiries at all ports of call about possibilities and opportunities for French trade. Natural History research was permitted, but 'ce genre d'exploration doit être tout à fait secondaire dans l'exécution de votre mission.'¹⁴

Faced with these demands for information and knowledge from his superiors, how will Laplace report on his return? Will he submit a log replete with statistics about the number of fathoms below the keel? Will the reader be borne away in a maelstrom of currents and swell in select latitudes? Will the nadirs and azimuths of the constellations adorn every description of a night sky? The answer is nearly always in the negative. The sections of his narrative that concern the Van Dieman's Land and Botany Bay settlements, or the voyages between ports of call are relatively uncluttered with scientific documentation and nautical memoranda.

If Laplace's journal is unlike those of the great discoverers in the Golden Age of French Exploration in the South Seas, such as Bruny d'Entrecasteaux, Nicolas Baudin, Louis Claude de Freycinet, Jules Dumont d'Urville or Hyacinthe de Bougainville, it is because the world had spun many times on its axis since they sailed from France. Sponsors, both State and private, have now different concerns while a few of the generation of French naval captains trained during the Empire and Restoration have literary pretensions. Laplace often gives pride of place to human drama rather than to scientific data. One believes on occasion, that it is a latter-day anthropologist who controls the destiny of the *Favorite* and its crew. This naval commander is a moral thinker to boot. But let him speak for himself: 'If the language of truth and desire to make known to my readers and the present state of the numerous distant lands visited by the *Favorite* cause stylistic blemishes to be excused . . . then I hope I have succeeded. I shall state what I have seen. I haven't read about the matter in any library nor have I consulted books. Discussions with educated persons and persons of high rank are the sole source of my information: . . . my aim, if not to instruct, is at least to rouse interest through reporting the truth.'¹⁵

His modest tone continues: 'I wanted to raise a monument to the memory of the labours of my fellow sailors. Although a more adroit hand than mine

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.578.

¹⁴ *Voyage*, I, pp.ix-xvi.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.i.

would have done the job better, it was while I was retelling the devotion to the State which the officers and crew of the *Favorite* showed on many occasions, and it was when evidence of their attachment to me in the midst of adversity caused me to break down emotionally, that I felt that no-one better than their Captain was qualified to speak about them to their fellow citizens.¹⁶

Laplace's *Voyage* bears the stamp of a fine analytical mind and of a person who has received a liberal education, to the point that he is fully cognizant with the keenly debated mercantile and social issues of the day in America, England, Europe and Australia. He offers numerous pertinent observations about the Penal Colony as a panacea for social problems. His concerns for the natives in both settlements are tempered by an awareness of two totally different solutions that both settlers and natives have reached about their interrelationships. The description of peoples and places are factual, perceptive and entertaining. His moralisations are pleasurable exercises for both himself and his readers. Moreover, he displays a propensity for *rêverie* that at times rivals the whimsy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Whether the subject of penal colonies was in his sailing instructions or not, Laplace makes capital of the Australian experiment to argue the case to his French compatriots that penal settlements are not the answer to France's social problems. To free France of three to four thousand convicts who live on hulks, by sending them to penal settlements, would not be offset by the cost to the nation in shipping, insurance, transport, supplies, and military garrisons. The second point is that between its penal colony and the metropolis, France does not possess sufficient trading posts to enable ships to load cargo and make the return journey commercially profitable. Lastly, France would be foolish to divest itself of such a potential labour force when too many marshes need draining, too many highways are in disrepair, too many canals are choked with refuse, and debts are mountain high.¹⁷

He suggests that French philanthropists give up their dreams of founding penal colonies which, in any case, are out of line with the French legal system. Moreover, finding suitable sites is too difficult and the nation's maritime trade is at an all-time low. These 'do-gooders' have a more important task, he believed. They needed to come up with ideas that would ensure that criminals were not put together, since constant contact with fellow-criminals makes them more felonious than ever. Then, something had to be done to prevent released criminals spreading their abominable ideas among the lower classes. To achieve these reforms, Laplace believes that France does not have to contest the ownership of southern lands, or pour out her wealth on distant and deserted beaches. The United States did not need convicts, a merchant navy and great treasure before it created a string of penitentiaries across the land.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.ii.

¹⁷ See *Voyage*, III, pp.174-6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.176-77.

There are about ten pages of Laplace's narrative devoted to this matter, and significantly, they are placed in the record before he commences the account of *Van Diemen's land*. One may surmise that his comments on the English convict settlements will be somehow tempered by his strong desire to discredit the penal colony as a solution for France's social ills. He even returns to the point in the course of the Hobart visit: 'Let's hope', he writes, 'that philanthropy will renounce its project for penal colonies, will abandon the principle of grouping all convicts in one place, and will adopt the principle generally considered today as the best, and one that has been followed in the United States and some Swiss cantons. By this, I mean the scattering of hardened criminals, so as to isolate them more easily from each other. In this way they are subject to the regime which alone until now has produced good results.'¹⁹

Laplace sees bad and good in the penal settlement concept. Sending male convicts far from their homeland has had a beneficial effect in some cases. 'Exile has not been absolutely barren', he observes, 'because many have returned to the path of virtue', but he sees the female convicts in a totally different light. The deported women retain 'few vestiges of the endearing qualities of their sex. Their sense of shame is extinguished, they are incorrigibly slothful and libertine, and given to depraved drunkenness'. He also learned while in the colony that when they were placed in service with families they were usually unsatisfactory. His description of the women convicts is just as morally horrific as that found in the commentaries and diaries of the colonists themselves. He writes 'In spite of the strictest surveillance and frequently-repeated punishment, the wretched women corrupt each other, and in the long run, prefer solitary confinement, continuous hard labour, and the immoral frequentation of their equals to the gentle and peaceful, but monotonous and steady life that awaits them as domestic helps.'²⁰

A parting shot is fired at the reformers, as he leaves the Women's Penitentiary in Hobart Town. 'All of you European philanthropists,' he exclaims, 'who believe that a change of hemisphere suffices to transform the shameless residents of our cities' vice districts into good responsible mothers, come to Van Diemen's Land, talk to the settlers, and visit this Penitentiary for deported women!'²¹

It would be wrong to suggest that Laplace is preoccupied with discrediting philanthropists. He can be just as observant and critical of other aspects of life in the two English settlements. He is demonstrably unwilling to take sides in contentious matters, and tries to walk a tightrope. This is particularly so once he has launched into his discourse about the natives. His interest is never patronising, nor does it pay lip service to the prevailing concept of the 'noble savage'. He endeavours to underscore their particular humanity, no matter how different or outrageous it may appear to an outsider such as himself.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.212.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.213-14

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp.234-5.

It is when commenting upon the activities of pardoned convicts in Hobart Town that Laplace commences his narrative about the problem of the blacks. He is aware that Arthur has been Governor of Van Diemen's land for seven years by the time the *Favorite* sailed up the Derwent.²² The Captain also reveals his knowledge of the man-hunt of the aborigines,²³ and that only a few hundred natives survive. He takes pains to explain this sorry state of the human condition, and begins with the convicts, the hardened and barbarous ones who had been given positions as shepherds on the outskirts of the settlements. These men deliberately ran foul of the hunting practices of the natives, and carried off their women, both young and old, to become their sexual partners or *de facto* spouses. I pass the word to Laplace: 'From this has developed a war of extermination, fatal mainly to the natives who, in the struggle against the firearms of their tyrants, have only spears made of heavy wood, hardened in fire. But they throw them with surprising skill and strength. They make up for any courage or physical strength they lack, by astuteness and unbelievable agility. Finally, they are cruel and bloodthirsty towards the weak or defenceless, and give them no quarter.'²⁴

Laplace illustrates the moral and physical qualities of the aborigines which bring so much tragedy into the lives of the 'frontier' whites:

These islanders whom the first European navigators described to us as treacherous and wicked men, and with intellectual faculties hardly superior to animal instinct, have changed considerably in the matter of intellect. Today, when they are roused by the thirst for vengeance or pillage, they display such intelligence and cunning that the settlers in the remotest dwellings near the forests and in whom fear engenders superstition, believe they are sorcerers. In actual fact, there is ostensibly something wondrous about the speed with which these natives, who are forever roaming the forests in pursuit of kangaroos, can cover prodigious distances. Often, several farms, although very far apart, are sacked in the same night by the same enemy.²⁵

When the homestead which they desire to pillage seems too extensive or too well-guarded to be attacked by ordinary means, that is, by surprise or sheer force under the cover of darkness, then they display truly diabolical patience and guile. In the newly-cleared areas that have been wrested from the forest, the tree trunks and thickest branches, which fire and axe have only partially destroyed, remain standing a long time in the plantations. Before they become completely rotten, they still assist the indigenous in their projects of vengeance on the whites. In spite of his anxious vigilance, the farmer often passes by these trunks without seeing the savages. The latter either blend in with the blackened branches, or imitate, in attitude and complete immobility, the branches hacked by axes. The natives wait, sometimes days on end, for the farmer to set off with his convicts for work in the fields. No sooner has he left than the blacks

²² *Ibid.*, p.196: 'The colony's splendour is due principally to the firm and enlightened administration of Governor Arthur who has governed it since 1824.'

²³ C. f. C. Turnbull, *Black War. The Extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines*, Melbourne, 1948.

²⁴ *Voyage*, III, pp.196-7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.197.

invade his farm and butcher his wife and children. They have already made off with their loot by the time the flames over the buildings alert the hapless colonist to the extent of his misfortune.²⁶

Laplace's account is interrupted by a philosophical pause. 'One wonders', he writes, 'if the English settlers had treated the natives better in the beginning, would they have turned it to their account much better?' He asks rhetorically: 'Is this race amenable to civilization? The masters of Van Diemen's Land claim No! It has to be admitted that the project of civilizing the race was abandoned only after fruitless attempts. Schools were opened near Hobart Town, exclusively for native children. They received very few pupils, and were soon empty. All that could be done to tempt the natives and to reconcile them with the whites was tried, but to no avail. Even native prisoners, caught when raiding farms, were spared on humanitarian grounds. Nothing could efface from this black race the memory of earlier atrocities, nor could its abhorrence of work be overcome. Prisoners set free recommenced their brigandage with more fury than beforehand.'²⁷

The aborigines around Sydney are portrayed in a different light. Not far from Parramatta, in the Nepean Valley, Laplace has an opportunity to meet a male native and his family. In a traditional pattern, they were there one minute and had melted into the bush in the next, without ever taking leave. The encounter took place while the Captain and his host were enjoying an *al fresco* lunch. He describes the man in quite vivid terms, alluding to the wild sunken eyes that 'made him appear like a beast of prey'. The woman was overcome with indifference when trinkets and presents were offered, and filled with the notorious docility that characterises her relationship with her spouse. However, when her husband came back with a live opossum plucked from its hiding-place in a tree, she despatched it with equal indifference, and tore the skin off the still-warm corpse before handing the trophy to the Captain.²⁸

Laplace comments upon the decimation of the natives by alcohol and epidemics. 'Unlike Van Diemen's Land', he wrote, 'British guns were not part of the devastation they suffered.' He mentions the attempts to civilize them, such as giving them a rudimentary education and teaching them the elements of agriculture. The apathy encountered is also noted, but he concludes his overview on a positive note. 'It is rare for them to raid plantations; rather, they fit in complacently with the settlers' wishes. In this way they obtain victuals, woollen blankets, rum and tobacco. They assist in recapturing escaped convicts and straying cattle, they furnish kangaroo and opossum hides and skins and act as trackers in the bush.'²⁹ Laplace is clearly the uninvolved reporter here for French readers back home in the gentlemen's clubs, the Natural History Museums, and the Naval Officers' Mess in Brest, Cherbourg, Paris, Toulon

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.197-8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.199-200.

²⁸ The full account of this episode can be read, *Ibid.*, 358-60.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.361.

and Marseilles. There is not one hint that there was any relevance of the fate of the natives in Van Diemen's Land and Botany Bay to conditions in France or its overseas settlements.

On the other hand, he indulges his philosophical bent on more than one occasion, and for the reader's delectation. The sights and sounds of Sydney Town stimulate a litany of reflections: 'The scholar who travels through the Roman countryside or in the sandy wastes of Egypt is going to have philosophical thoughts on the grandeur and decay of nations about whom we barely recall anything. Oh! How he would find sweeter thoughts and ones more practical for humanity at least, if he wandered through the capital of Australia, a populous city which rises majestically on the very site where not so long ago thick bush stood as a sinister mass. Instead of the palaces and mighty basilicas, under whose weight the very soil groans, and which cost the populace so much toil, without contributing to their happiness, the scholar would see very simple public buildings which were perfectly designed for the use of the citizens . . .'³⁰

Laplace is positively envious of the law and order in Hobart Town under Governor Arthur. 'A healthy rivalry was established between the administration and individuals. While homes were built as if by enchantment on all sides, bands of convicts supplied by the State endeavoured to make the streets ready and to lessen the inclines of the hillocks. In no time the town was endowed with the most-needed public buildings, and the number keeps increasing each year, not only because of the care of the leading administrators, but also through the munificence of the rich merchants, who show for their new homeland, at the expense even of their old one, a natural feeling of pride. Such are the fair fruits nurtured by liberty, by the equality of political rights and the division of property in this island which, barely known at the beginning of the century, now counts 25,000 inhabitants.'³¹

Beholding the waterfront activity in Hobart Town, with bales of goods and barrels of wine and whale oil entering and leaving the sheds, sets the Captain off again musing: 'This sight, it is true, holds nothing attractive for the traveller who would wish to discover on all sides the brilliant scenes our capital cities offer with each step he takes. But the sight pleases the philosophical observer who sees in trade the only certain means of ensuring the welfare of the lowest ranks of society. It gratifies too, the philosophical observer who prays that sovereigns will renounce the glory of conquest which is only won at the expense of the middle and lower classes. To these classes principally belong the brave soldiers whose blood flows in torrents on the fields of battle in the name of national honour. This honour is often badly understood or lightly invoked by men who share neither the soldiers' exhaustion nor their dangers . . .'³²

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.318-19.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.188. The figure is clearly for the whole of Tasmania and is inflated. About eighteen and a half thousand was the population in c. 1828, cf. W. D. Forsyth, *Governor Arthur's Convict System. Van Diemen's Land 1824-1836*, London, 1935, pp. 103-5.

³² *Voyage*, III, p.190.

Philosophical passages of this kind are numerous and they complement the moralised anecdote for which Laplace also has a penchant. All constitute a personal statement on the human condition. Behaviour is perceived as a function of a creature's situation or circumstance. Cannibalism among escapees from the Macquarie Harbour penal settlement serves to illustrate the point.

Settlers living on the edge of the great central forest apprehended in 1831, not long before Laplace landed, two nearly naked white men looking more like wild animals than members of the human species. Pieces of roasted flesh they were carrying on them and information reaching Hobart Town from Macquarie Harbour offered glimpses of the truth. Five convicts had escaped, but only these two arrived at the gallows. 'I saw these last two players of the hideous drama as they moved to their execution. They showed no remorse, and the impassive countenances struck horror in the hearts of the onlookers.'³³

There are stories of the human condition with happier endings. Laplace describes, first-hand again, the path back, trodden by a recidivist convict. This man's hardened heart melted when an official pointed out to him how his wife and children in England would have no support or protection once he was separated from them for ever. The convict burst into tears and promised to mend his ways. This actually happened . . . and, as Laplace retells, 'I saw this man working as a clerk in a public office, with a personality that all liked. He was totally trusted by his supervisors, who had granted him the favour of sending for his family to join him.' The moral the Captain draws is pointed for his French readers. 'A Single word of consolation breaks open the bound soul, penetrates it and snatches the wretched criminal from despair. Why couldn't similar means be employed in our prison hulks?'³⁴

Laplace's humanist concerns prompt the rehearsal of the tale of bushranger Walmsley, the terror of the County of Cumberland. 'He always protected women and children,' says the Captain, 'and often helped the needy . . . One day this leader of the bushrangers and two leading acolytes were resting at a remote inn; armed troops surrounded the place on a tip from the owner . . .' Walmsley was mortally wounded in the skirmish and brought back to Sydney to be exposed to public view like a victory trophy. An engraving was made from a portrait drawn at death. 'Yet this man had shown himself to be always generous, temperate and enterprising. In other circumstances, he would perhaps have brought honour to his country through his talents.'³⁵

The Frenchman has little humour, but he can be devastatingly ironic. He describes the Catholic Chapel rising in splendid isolation on the east side of Hyde Park in Sydney Town, an edifice that 'bears witness to the pride of a priest, who, in order to rival the Anglican ministers in importance and opulence,

³³ *Ibid.*, p.210.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.211-12.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.338-9. The bushranger's capture was reported in the *Sydney Gazette*, 6 January 1831, p.2.

has no shame in abusing his influence over wretched convicts who were Irish Papists, so that he could make them devote daily several hours of work and part of their wages for the erection of his Gothic masterpiece. But the work, in spite of his efforts, would still not be very far advanced, if the Protestants themselves, with a mind to teach the fanatical prelate a lesson, or perhaps to contribute to the embellishment of this part of Sydney, had not defrayed until now by annual collections, the major part of the costs.³⁶

Another striking feature of Laplace's writings is the ability to pictorialise a vista or a landscape for his readers. It is a skill that is derived from his orderly mind, his ability to analyse and an inner eye for detail. Standing at Fort Phillip in 1831, he describes a vibrant city: 'I beheld a splendid panorama. Behind me spread out the basin created by the mouth of the Parramatta River and the northern shore of Port Jackson. On the right I looked down into Darling Harbour whose perimeter was already dotted with dwellings. On the left rose the outline of Fort Macquarie and beyond lay Sydney Cove . . . If I looked due South, straight in front of me, towards the town, I could easily discern the developments made in that direction. Military hutments, which were on all sides where I stood, were gradually replaced with stone buildings which became better aligned where the terrain became less broken . . . I could see the almost parallel streets among which George Street was most noticeable because of its length . . .'³⁷

Here is a recollection of a first view of Hobart Town from shipboard in 1831: 'What a pleasing spectacle for the sailor, just liberated from the clutches of Storm Bay as he anchors for the first time in front of Hobart Town. Laplace's gaze wanders: 'On his left, the wild coastline he had followed since entering the Derwent, comes to an end in a gentle slope. The black-looking peaks give way to less uneven terrain. The stony and limestone surface has been prepared at some cost for large gardens which decorate the banks, and which denote the sites of future dwellings. Nearer the town is a small battery which overlooks the roadstead and this part of the cove where mud and rocks already disappear beneath wharves which one day will be crowded with lighters laden with merchandise from all over the world. A short distance from the battery, on top of a knoll and behind a garden whose fence was where our liberty boats often touched land, stood the pretty little house of the Port Captain. There,

³⁶ *Voyage*, III, p.321. The anecdote of the Protestant financial support is substantially true. The prelate in question was Rcv. John Joseph Therry. See J. Waldersee, 'Father Therry and the Financing of Old St. Mary's,' in P. O'Farrell (ed.), *St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney 1821-1971*, Sydney, 1971, pp.1-23. The chapel was destroyed by fire on 29 June 1865.

³⁷ *Voyage*, III, p.319. Views or plans of Sydney of this period help one to visualise better the prospect Laplace beheld from Fort Phillip. See Suzanne Mourot, *This Was Sydney. A Pictorial History from 1788 to the Present Time*, Sydney 1969, p.21 (plan of 1807); p.28 (plan of 1822); pp.34-5 (map of c. 1842); p.32 (view of the Barracks).

each day, the officers of the *Favorite* and myself were always made so welcome.³⁸

Laplace's tableaux are lyrically pleasing. Hardly anything dismantles the tranquillity, scars the beauty, sullies the tone, or detracts from a panorama. One chord, however, is often played: *rêverie*, tinged with melancholy. Standing one day near the same Port Captain's house, the Commander witnesses the arrival of a merchantman from the old world. 'I began musing to myself,' he writes. 'I forgot that the great ocean . . . whose waves swept up Storm Bay also washed over the South Pole. If I looked behind me I could glimpse Mount Wellington, clad in banksias and eucalypts. The sight of its plateau and its sadly uniform greenery reaching into every valley as far as the horizon, soon reminded me that I too was an exile five thousand leagues from my homeland.'³⁹

In many passages Laplace comes close to the style of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *rêveries* in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Let me quote from his description of an improvised station where whalers worked in stench and gore, flensing and boiling down whale carcasses. He visited it when on an excursion in D'Entrecasteaux Channel. 'Everything,' he wrote, 'in this wild spot made me and my fellow officers experience an undefinable feeling of disquiet and loneliness which became more pronounced when we climbed to the top of the island. Before us stretched the high seas flecked with foam and the indistinct horizon shrouded in thick fog. On the landward side, we were surrounded by tall eucalypts. Through the leaves we could make out the sorry-looking little whaler at its mooring in a creek near the beach, but hardly sheltered by the rocks. It was preparing to put to sea again. The rustling of the leaves as they were lashed by the rain and wind of the bad weather, and the muffled roar of the waves against the shore, were the only sounds to break the solitude of silence. We were totally under the same spell impossible to define, that grips a voyager when he beholds the spectacular wastes near the South Pole.'⁴⁰

It was perhaps appropriate that he should highlight the complete isolation and desolation of whaling. Other opinions he gives, but which I do not quote, suggest that he is opposed to the carnage, even though he recognizes the needs of society in his day for whale-oil and the by-products of whaling. But Laplace's

³⁸ *Voyage*, III, p.189. The description may be usefully compared with that penned by Augustus Prinsep shortly before Laplace's visit. See A. Prinsep, *The Journal of a Voyage from Calcutta to Van Diemen's Land, and Illustrations to Prinsep's Journal . . . from original sketches taken during the Years 1829 and 1830*, both London, 1833. I have consulted the facsimile ed. of 1981 by Melanie Publications. The views offer realistic panoramas of Hobart Town from many directions. The Mulgrave Battery site and environs are described on p.58. The Battery is point 10 on the lithograph 'Correct View' which accompanies G. W. Evans, *A Geographical, Historical and Topographical Description of Van Diemen's Land*, London, 1822 (consulted in the 1967 facsimile ed.).

³⁹ *Voyage*, III, p.193.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.220-1.

sensibilities are not always submerged in gloom.

On the way to New Town, things were very different. As the ride progresses, he is overcome by a vision of paradise, but the view was lost just as quickly: 'So many charming sights, so many buildings with their pretty exteriors, which all betokened people who were peaceful and virtuous, held me spellbound, as it were. I was about to tell myself that in the nineteenth century the earthly paradise was to be found in the southern lands when — and his suspense is well-timed — I suddenly caught sight of a chain-gang repairing the highway!'⁴¹

Apart from a subtle praise of law and order, which is his leit-motif while in Hobart Town, our French naval captain reveals a sense of timing, here towards the suspense, in the way he tells a story. One knows that what he says is perfectly true and one admires his appeal to old world concepts such as the association of peace and beauty with the Earthly Paradise.

The rêveries also occur in New South Wales. One such occasion is a visit he made to Sir John Jamison, a wealthy and influential land owner of the colony, renowned for many things pleasant and unpleasant.⁴² This time we recall his enviable reputation as a lavish host. Sir John entertained often at his large estate near Penrith, in the country house he named Regentville. Dinner has just concluded and Laplace goes outside to breathe the cool air. 'The peacefulness over the fields had great appeal to my soul,' he writes. 'Everything that my gaze beheld worked together to render my senses more dulcet and gentle. On all sides unfolded a spectacular prospect which the setting sun lit up with its last rays. From the level ground where Regentville stands I looked out over a countryside filled with the best that Southern France produces. Rows of peach trees in bloom looked all the world like snowballs against the dark green of the sturdy native trees that served as a shield for the plantation against the chilly southern winds.'

The sight of a mill on the property evokes images and sentiments of childhood: 'The evening breeze gently moved its large sails. I would have preferred that its walls were less white and their contours less defined, for then I would have been able to envisage more clearly the humble rustic village mill that was a friend of my childhood, and which even at an advanced age one cannot recall without feeling a wave of tenderness.'⁴³

The Captain enjoyed an adventitious pleasure tinged with melancholy, when his eyes beheld the celebrated vineyards that Sir John cultivated. 'My guide smiled at the surprise I displayed when I viewed the long rows of thick-leaved grape vines on the slopes below me. The vines were maintained perfectly straight by props, after the manner practised in our northern provinces. This memory of our fair France moved me in the way that only an exile can understand.'⁴⁴

Brief excerpts of this kind can never do justice to a Frenchman's patriotism,

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.233.

⁴² See G. P. Walsh, 'Sir John Jamison,' *A. D. B. 1788-1850*, II, pp.10-12.

⁴³ *Voyage*, III, p.333.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.348.

or to his narrative. They may, however, have begun to illumine the content and purpose of Captain Laplace's account of his visit to Hobart Town and Sydney Town. The mirror of life in the two settlements is held up to his own countrymen as a model and a social prospect that civilian officials and administrators of the new July Monarchy would do well to contemplate. This exceedingly literate French naval captain is to be remembered for his rêveries, his sensibilities, his philosophising and his compassion. Like a true humanist, he constantly draws his readers' attention to the welfare, values and dignity of Man, whatever the latitude, whatever the colour of the skin, whatever the circumstances. I should like to suggest in closing, that Louis Triebel also would have shared some of Laplace's interests and concerns.